Jilly Cooper

Emmy

Fall in love all over again
EMILY

JILLY COOPER
CHAPTER ONE

IF Nina hadnt bugged me, Id never have gone to Annie Richmonds party.
Cedric is beginning to take you for granted, she said, hurling clothes into a weekend case.
Cedric, I said crossly, is getting his career together. As soon as hes adopted as a candidate, well get married.
Because its better for candidates to have wives, said Nina. He shouldnnt leave you alone so much. Your first weekend back from holiday, looking a million and a half dollars - anyone else wouldnt be able to keep his hands off you - but old Seedcake just swans off to another political rally.
Im very happy about my relationship with Cedric. And thats mine, I snapped, removing a yellow shirt she was surreptitiously packing in one corner of her case. Cedric keeps me on the straight and narrow, I went on.
Hes turned you into a bore, said Nina. You used to be lovely company when you were playing fast and loose with half of London.
I want a sense of purpose in my life, I protested. I dont want to die in Chelsea with my knickers down.
Nina went to the mirror and started slapping Man-tan all over her face.
Where are you off to? I said.
Home. I dont want my mother fussing about me looking washed out - and tomorrow Im going out with an amazingly dishy new man. Now arent you jealous?
No, I lied. You just give up certain things when youre engaged.
Like fun. Just because Seedcakes put a ring on your finger, he thinks hes entitled to neglect you all the time. I think you ought to go to Annie Richmonds orgy; shes got this fantastically good-looking cousin coming. If he gave you a whirl, youd soon forget about Seedcake.
Dont call him that, I stormed. Anyway, Ive nothing in common with Annie Richmonds friends any more.
Nina laughed meaningly. You mean Cedric hasnt. She reminds him of your past and that come-hither look your eyes had once. Youre scared of going because you think you might fancy someone. If you were really hooked on Seedcake, you wouldnt be frightened to go.
I felt depressed after shed gone. Id done all the boring things like washing my hair, shaving my legs and doing my nails yesterday, in the hope that I might see Cedric tonight. After a few minutes moping I settled down to half-heartedly cleaning the flat, then washing the suntan-oil out of a few shirts.
I looked at Cedrics photograph beside my bed, thought how good-looking he was, then I read a book on Conservative policy. It was incredibly boring and nearly sent me to sleep. Cedric telephoned - as he said he would - on the dot of ten oclock.
How heavenly to hear you, darling, I said, overwhelmed with love. How are you?
Oh, full of beans, he said in his hooray, political voice, which meant there were people in the room. As he told me what a success the meeting had been and how well his speech had gone, I examined the diamond and sapphire ring he d given me.
Finally he said, What are you going to do with yourself all weekend?
Annie Richmonds throwing an orgy, I said lightly. As youre not here, I was thinking of going.
Cedric laughed heartily and disbelievingly. I thought youd grown out of that sort of party, he said. I must go darling. Ill ring you on Monday and well have dinner. Take care of yourself; and remember, no orgies. Theyre bad for my reputation.
I put the telephone down feeling extremely irritated. What was the point of spending ten days alone in the South of France - Cedric naturally couldnt get away - boring myself silly getting a suntan for his sake, when he wasnt around to appreciate it?
I looked out at the September evening - the dusk with its suggestion of autumn and nights drawing in and another year passing, sent shivers of excitement down my spine. I thought of sex and sin and all the men in the world Id never have the chance to get my hands on now.
It was such a long, long time since Id been to a good party. Cedric thought all my friends so frivolous and idiotic, hed scared them away.
I looked at his photograph again - short, fair hair, clear, blue eyes, a determined chin.
Life is earnest, life is real, I said to myself firmly. Cedric would hate me to go to Annie Richmonds orgy, so I wont go.
An hour later, feeling horribly guilty, I crept up the stairs to Annie Richmonds flat, having heard the roar of the party all the way down the street. Annie opened the door.
Emily, she cried joyfully, giving me a huge hug. I never dreamed youd come.
She was wearing a dress so cut out there was hardly any of it left. I was wearing a backless black dress, pretty low at the front and welded together with safety pins, as usual, which Id never dared show Cedric. Id put on weight since I last wore it and was falling out all over the place. I just hoped I looked a bit like Sophia Loren.

Annie looked at me with approval. Stripped for action thats more like the old Emily, she said, handing me a glass. Ive only just popped in for a quick drink, I said. Cedrics away.

I know, she smiled knowingly. Theres lots of talent in there, so go in and forage for yourself.

The next room was impossibly, clamorously full of good-looking people trying to shout each other down. I felt very nervous, so I drank my disgusting drink straight down, and quickly had another. I didnt know a soul, but then Annie turned over her friends so fast.

A handsome Australian in a red shirt came over and started to chat me up. His eyes smouldered under bushy black eyebrows.

I knew that look of old: I feel I know every inch of you already, so lets get on with it - it stated unequivocally.

Bloody awful row, he said. Pity I cant lip-read. He gazed at my mouth and then at my decolletage, which was descending fast. Any minute Id be topless. I gave it a tug.

The shivers of excitement which had assailed me in the flat overwhelmed me again. I squashed the feeling and started to shout to him about Cedric and his political career. He cant have heard much of what I was saying, but got the message and drifted off.

I was then collared by a kind of ancient mariness, a model with long red hair and skinny white hands, who went on and on about her split ends.

Suddenly there was a commotion by the door.

But Annie, said a mans voice, I thought I was coming to an orgy. Where are the wall-to-wall couples? The lovely girls in tiger skins?

Split Ends caught her breath. I, like everyone else, turned around. My jaw clanged - for standing in the doorway was one of the most sensationally attractive men I had ever seen. He was tall, with broadish shoulders, long black hair, restless dark eyes with a wicked gleam in them, and an arrogant sulky mouth. He oozed sexuality. He looked round the room, as cool and haughty as a prince, yet he had an explosive quality - Ive come out of the jungle and no ones going to tame me, he seemed to say. Every woman in the room was going mad with desire; me included. The only problem was a very beautiful dark girl dressed in what looked like a bikini entirely made of flowers, who was hanging possessively on his arm.

You promised me an orgy, Annie, he said, coldly. All I can see here is a debs tea-party.

Annie Richmond took him and the dark girl by the arm and hustled them towards the bar.

Itll start warming up soon, I could hear her saying. Theres a lot of fun people coming later.

I noticed she gave him a whole bottle of whisky to himself, while the rest of us had to make do with the revolting cough mixture.

Gradually the conversation started to soar and dip again. Whos that? everyone was asking.

I turned to Split Ends. Whos that? I said.

She looked at me incredulously. You mean to say you dont know?

A stockbroker with a pink face whose eyes were about level with my cleavage, came past and filled up our glasses.

Thats Rory Balniel, he said. Hes a bit of a menace.

Hes Annies cousin, said Split Ends, watering at the mouth, and quite the most evil man in London.

In what way? I asked.

Oh, getting drunk and breaking peoples hearts deliberately. Everything you can think of, and a lot more besides.

He looks like the leader of a Cossack horde, I said. What nationality is he?

Scottish, with foreign, I think French, on one side. His family own masses of land in the Highlands, but all the moneys tied up in trusts, and he cant get his hands on it. Hes been sent down from everywhere imaginable. He hit London about a month ago. I dont think hes been sober since.

Hes a bit of a menace, repeated the stockbroker, looking longingly at my cleavage.

Thats supposed to be a very good painter, said Split Ends.

The only thing hes been painting recently is the town red, said the stockbroker.

He treats women appallingly, said Split Ends. Has he treated you appallingly? I asked.

Not yet, she said with a sigh, but Im working on it.

I looked around again. Rory Balniel was leaning against the mantelpiece. Two girls who looked as though the head groom had been polishing and currycombing them for weeks, so sleek and patently glossy were they, were vying for his attention.

He filled up their glasses from the whisky bottle, then suddenly, he lifted his head, yawned slightly and looked in
my direction. I shot him a glance I hadn't used in months. One of pure naked come hithering sex. It didn't work. He looked away without interest.

Hard luck, said Split Ends, avidly drinking in this classic case of indifference at first sight. You're obviously not his type.

He's probably queer, I said crossly. Most Don Juans are latent homosexuals anyway.

Split Ends looked at me pityingly, then grabbed a plate of food from a nearby table.

I'm going to offer him a stuffed date, she said with a giggle, and wheeled across the room towards him.

I turned my back and talked to the stockbroker. It was a calculated gesture. If anything was likely to turn Rory Balniel on, it was my back - brown, smooth and bare from the nape of my neck almost to the base of my spinal column, unmarred by any bikini marks.

I imagined his dark, restless eyes ranging over me and thinking, That's the sort of girl who sunbathes without a bikini top. Mettlesome, ready for anything, even being treated appallingly by Rory Balniel.

But when I looked around, he was talking to Split Ends, and was still hemmed in by the masses.

Sexless beast, I decided; or perhaps it's my sex appeal that's slipping.

Cedric was right. These people were frivolous and uninteresting. The evening wore on. People were dancing in the next room, drinking a lot and necking a little. No one was actually orgying. I kept making up my mind to go home, but some instinctive lack of self-preservation made me stay. I felt jolted, uneasy and horribly aware of Rory Balniel. There was an unconscious glitter about him, a sinister stillness that set him apart from everyone else. One had to admit his force.

Split Ends and the girl he'd arrived with, who I discovered was called Tiffany (I bet she made it up), were still trying to engage his attention. He was laughing a lot at their jokes, but a little late on cue. As he filled his glass, his hand was quite steady. Only the glint in his eyes betrayed how much he'd drunk.

Annie Richmond went up to him and removed the bottle of whisky, Rory, love, I don't mean to nag.

Women always say that when they're about to nag, he said, taking the whisky back from her.

People were really getting uncorked now. Couples had disappeared into rooms, a beautiful African girl was dancing by herself. A fat man was telling filthy stories to an ugly American girl who had passed out on the floor.

The Australian in the red shirt, who had chatted me up earlier, turned out to be Split Ends boyfriend. He was not pleased at her paying so much attention to Rory Balniel and came strutting into the room wearing a Mickey Mouse mask, expecting everyone to laugh.

Where did you get that mask? said Rory Balniel.

Annie gave it to me.

You should wear it all the time. Every day. Always. To the office. It suits you. Gives your face a distinction it didn't have before.

Don't be stupid, said the Australian furiously, wrenching off the mask. He nearly tripped over the ugly American girl who was now snoring on the floor.

She ought to be moved, he said fussily.

She's quite happy, said Rory Balniel. I expect she needs sleep. Anyway, she gives the room a lived-in feeling.

She's giving people a bad impression of the party, said the Australian.

Not nearly so much as when she's awake, said Rory Balniel. He was trying to balance a glass on one of his fingers. His eyes had gone out of focus. He looked like a Siamese cat. The glass crashed to the floor.

Split Ends and Tiffany howled with laughter. A blonde, attracted by the tinkle of broken glass, came over and joined the group.

I hear you paint, she said, I'd love to sit for you sometime.

Rory Balniel looked over. But would you lie for me later, darling? That's the point.

He started to undo the buttons of Split Ends dress.

I say, said the pink-faced stockbroker. You can't do that here. Unfair to Annie. Know what I mean?

No, said Rory Balniel unpleasantly.

He had now undone all Split Ends buttons to reveal a very dirty bra.

Don't, she said crossly, trying to do them up again.

His dark face set into a mask of malice. If you throw yourself open to the public, sweetheart, you must expect people to want to see over you.

Split Ends flounced off.

Good riddance, said the blonde, snuggling up to him.

She's a silly cow, he said unemotionally, draining his drink.

What did you say? said the Australian, who was still smarting under the crack about the Mickey Mouse mask. Are you referring to my girlfriend?
I was referring to the silly cow, said Rory Balniel. I think she is a silly cow. Don't try to get tough with me, Kangaroo, or I'll throw you out of here, all the way to Kangaroo Country, and don't think I wouldn't. He picked up a wine bottle and deliberately smashed it on the edge of the mantelpiece and then, holding the neck of the bottle, brandished the jagged end in the Australian's face.

The Australian clenched his fists. Ill call the police, he said, half-heartedly.

What are you going to call the police? said Rory Balniel.

He picked up another glass from the mantelpiece, and deliberately smashed it on the floor.

The Australian puffed out his cheeks, and then beat a hasty retreat.

The two girls roared with laughter again, enjoying themselves hugely. Then they looked around for the next distraction.

He's absolutely poisonous, I decided. How does anyone put up with him?

Picking his way disapprovingly over the broken pieces of glass, the little stockbroker came over and asked me to dance.

I told you he was a menace, did I not? he asked in an undertone.

He then proceeded to make the most ferocious passes at me on the dance floor. I can never understand why little men are so lecherous. I suppose its more concentrated. Fortunately, one of my safety pins gave way and plunged into him, which cooled his ardour a bit. But two seconds later he was back on the attack.

A quarter of an hour later, black and blue and as mad as a wet hen, I returned to collect my bag. I was really leaving this time. I found Rory Balniel was sitting on the sofa - Tiffany and the blonde on either side of him. Both girls were fondling hands with each other across him, but were so tight, neither of them realized it.

Rory, darling, whispered the blonde.

Rory, angel, murmured Tiffany.

It looked so ridiculous I burst out laughing. He looked up and started to laugh too.

I think they're made for each other, he said. And extracting himself, got up and came over.

I leaned against the wall, partly because I was slewed, partly because my legs wouldn't hold me up. The impact of this man, close up, was absolutely faint-making.

Hullo, he said.

Hullo, I said. I've always been a wizard at repartee. He looked me over consideringly - and he was, undoubtedly, a man who knew how to look.

The drink has run out, he said, taking a final slug of whisky from the bottle.

He had very white, even teeth, but his fingers were quite heavily stained with nicotine.

What did you say your name was? he said. His voice had lost its earlier bitchy ring - it was soft and husky now.

I didn't, I said, but since you ask, its Emily.

Emily - pretty name, old-fashioned name. Are you an old-fashioned girl?

Depends what you mean by old-fashioned - prunes and prisms Victorian or Nell Gwyn?

He took my hand.

He's drunk, I said to myself firmly, trying not to faint with excitement.

You're like a little Renoir, he said.

Are those the outsize ones, all grapes and rippling with flesh? I said.

That's Rubens. Renoirs are soft and blonde and blue-eyed, with pink flesh tones. Its funny, he added, shooting me an X-certificate look, you're not my type at all, but you excite the hell out of me.

I remember looking down and seeing my fingers curling and clinging round his, and seeing the one with the longest nail digging itself into the centre of his palm, and being quite unable to stop myself.

Then suddenly I felt his fingers on my engagement ring.

I tried to jerk my hand away, but he held on to it, and examined the ring carefully.

Who gave that to you? he said.

Cedric, I said. My - er - fiancé. Its a terrible word, isn't it? I gave a miserable, insincere little giggle. Its a terrible ring, too, he said.

It cost a lot of money, I said defensively.

Why isn't he here?

I explained about Cedric being in Norfolk and furthering his political career.

How long have you been engaged?

Nearly eighteen months.

The smile Rory Balniel gave me wasn't at all pleasant. Does he make love on all three channels? he said.

I tried, but failed, to look affronted. He doesn't make love to me much at all, I muttered.

Rory Balniel was swinging the empty whisky bottle between finger and thumb.
He doesn't care about you at all, does he?
Cedric and I have a good thing going.
If you're mad about a girl, you don't let her out of your sight.
Instinctively my eyes slid to Tiffany, who was now sleeping peacefully, her head on the blonde girl's shoulder.
I'm not exactly mad about her, he said.
She's stunning looking, I said, wistfully.
He shrugged his shoulders.
Rolls-Royce body maybe, but Wandsworth mind.
I giggled again. Suddenly he bent his head and kissed my bare shoulder. I could feel the ripples of excitement all the way down to my toes. Any moment my dress, safety pins and all, was going to burst into flames. I could have died with excitement.
I took a deep breath. I've got a bottle of whisky at home, I said.
Well, let's blow then, he said.
CHAPTER TWO

I WASN’T proud of my behaviour. I knew I was treating Cedric abominably, but then I’d never before in my life seen such a distilled essence of temptation as Rory Balniel. And, like Oscar Wilde, I’ve always been able to resist anything except temptation.

We wandered along the Kings Road, trying to find a taxi, and giggling a great deal as we tried out all the baths sitting outside the bath shop. Then we passed an art gallery. Rory peered moodily through the window at the paintings.

Look at that crap, he said. There but for the gracelessness of God go I, the greatest genius of the twentieth century - which reminds me, I’ve got to see a man about my painting at eleven tomorrow. You’d better set your alarm clock when we get home.

Presumptuous, I thought. Does he think I’ll succumb so easily?

Rory suddenly saw a taxi and flagged it down. We kissed all the way home.

God - I was enjoying myself. I’d never felt a millionth of that raging, abandoned glory the whole time I’d known Cedric, but it was all tearing along much too fast. I was back-sliding at the speed of light into my dreadful old pre-Cedric ways, and all the dreadful old unrespectable things were going to happen to me. The downward path is easy, but there’s no turning back.

Stop the taxi, I wanted to scream. Let me out, take me to Liverpool Street, I’ve got to catch a fast train back to East Anglia, back to Cedric and sanity. You’ll pay for this later, Emily. You’ll be sorry; yes, you will!

No one could have guessed from the ecstatic, passionate, writhing form in Rory’s arms that any sort of moral battle was raging inside me. I’ll say goodbye to him firmly at the door, I told myself. Then when we got to the door I thought: Ill just give him a very quick drink to be sociable and then out he goes.

No sooner had I got to the flat, and given him some whisky, than I rushed off to the bathroom, cleaned my teeth and emptied half a bottle of Nina’s scent over myself. I then went and removed the Georgette Heyer from beside my bed, and replaced it with a couple of intellectual French novels.

I went into the drawing-room.

Where did you learn to mix whisky like this? he said.

I’m precocious, I said lightly, because of my unhappy childhood.

Tell me about your unhappy childhood.

I was violated by a budgerigar at the age of two. It coloured my whole life.

What colour?

Emerald green.

That’s a nice colour to have your life coloured.

That sort of patter got him across the room. I sat down on the sofa; he sat beside me.

Well? he said, smiling at me but making no move.

I hunted round nervously for something to say. Er, when do you do your painting?

Keep still, he said, you’ve got something in your hair.

I never knew if I had or I hadn’t. But he removed whatever it was and then, unsmilingly, he came closer and kissed me.

After a bit, I had a pang of conscience and tried to push him away.

You’re a funny little girl, he said, but I like you, I really do.

Ill make some coffee, I muttered. Really, I am engaged to Cedric and he wouldn’t approve at all.

Shut up, he said gently. This time he moved in slowly and deliberately. I had plenty of time to move away, but instead I found myself leaning forward. With his free hand he began to stroke my face, then my neck. No, wait!

Stop! I said to myself, but I couldn’t move.

Oh, baby, he said huskily. We’re going to be so good together.

The last thing I remember thinking was that Cedric’s photograph should certainly have been turned to the wall.

It was halfway through the morning when I woke up. The sun was shining through the spaces in the drawn curtain; my skull was pounding and I was lying under the bedclothes, realizing something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I saw Rory lying fast asleep beside me, with deep shadows under his eyes. He was dreadfully pale, and when he breathed I could see how near the skin his rib-cage was.

I tried to gather my thoughts around my pounding skull. All I could think was what a stupid thing to have done - the first night I’d met him.
I looked at the clock. It was half past ten, and I remembered about waking him up to see a man about some paintings. I got up and washed. My face looked all blotchy, like garlic sausages, so I slapped on some casual-looking make-up. Then I threw about two hundred Alka-Seltzers into a glass and got back into bed.

I think he was still drunk when I woke him up. He got up and drew the curtains, then groped for a cigarette.

What happened last night?
Oh, Rory, I wailed. Don’t you remember anything?

Well, I remember my childhood. Much of it spent among the sheep in Scotland. And being sacked from Harrow, and being sent down from Oxford. I remember coming South to sell some paintings. After that, it becomes a little blurred.

We were at Annie Richmond’s party, I said. So we were.

And we both had quite a bit to drink and then we came back here.

Well, well, well, he said, getting into the crumpled bed. And did we?

Oh, God! Can you remember that?

Was I or did I perform adequately? He didn’t seem embarrassed, only curious.

You were absolutely sensational, that’s what makes it so awful, I said and, rolling over, I buried my face in the pillow and burst into tears.

He stroked my hair, but I went on sobbing. I’m not usually like this. I don’t just pick up men at parties and leap into bed with them on the first night. At least, not recently, I wailed. And you better step on it, you’ve got to see that man about your paintings at eleven o’clock.

So I have. Slowly he clambered out of bed and started to get dressed. I was shot through with misery, but I tried to make a joke of the situation.

Dont think it hasn’t been marvellous, because it hasn’t, I said with a deliberate sniff.

He laughed, and when he had dressed and cut himself shaving on Nina’s pink plastic razor, he came back into the bedroom and said, Don’t forget me, will you? Or our night of passion.

I put a pillow over my face. I bet you say that to all the girls you lay so expertly and can’t remember the next morning, I said.

See you, he said. Then he was gone.

I went through every kind of hell wondering if he’d come back. I castigated myself for the insanity of going to Annie Richmond’s party, for letting Rory make love to me which, despite his not remembering anything about it, had been an utterly intoxicating experience which would spoil me for Cedric for evermore.

The telephone rang three times, each time for Nina, and each time the caller got his head bitten off for not being Rory. At four o’clock, realizing he wasn’t coming back, I got up, had a bath, cried for an hour and then poured myself a large whisky. Really, I was acquiring a lot of bad habits. I’d be eating between meals soon!

At six o’clock the doorbell rang. Keep calm, I told myself. Play it cool. It’s bound to be the milkman, or some Salvation Army lady after loot.

But it was Rory, swaying in the doorway and looking green. I’ve just been sick in a window-box, he said.

I laughed, trying to keep the joy out of my face. Come in, I said.

He headed straight for the whisky. May I have a drink? he said. My hang-over ought to go down in medical history. Childbirth has nothing on it.

He had the most awful shakes.

There’s a reason for all this drinking, he went on. But at the moment, I’m glad to say, I can’t remember what it is. I really oughtn’t to have come back - I’m afraid I’ve run out of money.

I’ve always wanted to keep a man, I said. Stick with me, baby, and you’ll be up to your ears in race-horses.

It’s not as bad as that. I got on well at the Art Gallery.

Did he like your paintings? I said.

He nodded. He’s going to give me an exhibition in the spring.

But that’s wonderful, I said. You’ll be famous.

I know. He peered in the mirror, pushing a lock of black hair out of his eyes. I don’t think it suits me. I feel terrible.

You ought to eat something, I said.

You’re sweet. I wish I had a little sister like you - God, how maudlin can one get?

In fact he was very ill all night and most of the next day; delirious and with a raging temperature, pouring with sweat, clinging to me, muttering incoherently and shaking like a puppy. On Sunday night, however, he felt better. Suddenly, picking up Cedric’s photograph, he threw it out of the window.

That wasn’t very friendly, I said, listening to the tinkle of broken glass.

When is he coming back?
Tomorrow. Cedrics very good to me. He keeps me on the rails. Before I met him, it was one layabout after another.

The restless dark eyes travelled over me. Thats because youre a giver, Emily, and you hate hurting people. You slept with all those men because you couldnt say no rather than because you wanted to say yes.

Oh, not always. Anyway, there werent that many of them - in single figures, that is.

If I rang you up and asked you out, he went on undeterred, even if you didnt fancy me, youd say yes because you couldnt bear to upset me. Then youd send me a cable at the last moment, or get one of your mates to ring up and say you were dying of food poisoning.

How do you know? I said sulkily.

I know, he said, and pulled me into his arms. The electric currents were rippling all over me again. Youre ill, I protested.

Not that ill, he said.

Im bored with living in sin, he said, a couple of hours later. Lets get married.

I looked at him incredulously, reeling from the shock.

Youd better send Cedric a telegram immediately, he said. I dont want him hanging around being a bloody nuisance to us.

Did you say you wanted to marry me? I whispered. You cant want to marry me. I mean, what about all those girls after you? You could marry anyone. Why me?

Im kinky that way, he said. Ill try anything once.

But where will we live? I said, bewildered.

In Scotland. Ive got a place up there. Im much nicer in Scotland, London does frightful things to me - and Im due to inherit a bit of money shortly, so we wont starve.

But but I stammered. I really wanted him to take me in his arms and say he loved me to distraction, but then the telephone rang.

Rory picked it up. Hullo, who that? Oh, Cedric. A slightly malicious gleam came into his eyes. We havent met. My names Balniel, Rory Balniel. How was the political rally? Oh, well thats splendid. You deserve some compensation because Im afraid Emily has just agreed to marry me - and shell be dispensing with your disservices from now on.

Oh, no, I protested. Poor Cedric.

I could hear him spluttering away on the other end of the telephone.

Well Im afraid youve lost your deposit on this one, said Rory, and put down the receiver.

Cedric will be very, very angry, I said in awe.
CHAPTER THREE

CEDRIC wasnt the only one who was angry. Annie Richmond was livid, too.
You cant marry Rory, hes never been faithful to anyone for more than five minutes. Hes immoral and dreadfully
spoil. He even used to cheat at conkers when he was a little boy!

Nina was even more discouraging. Genuine concern for me combined - when shed actually met Rory in the flesh -
with overwhelming envy.
I know hes lovely to look at, but hes an absolute devil. Youre batting out of your league. Cedric was far more
suitable.

It was you in the first place, I said crossly, who was so against Cedric, and hustled me off to Annie Richmonds
party.
I never dreamed youd go to these extremes. Where are you going to live?

In the Highlands, on an island. It sounds too romantic for words.

Nina sighed. It is not romantic living on an island. What will you do, except talk to sheep and go mad while he
slaps paint on canvases all day? You wont hold him in a million years. Youll be thoroughly miserable, and then
come and snivel all over me. The only thing a whirlwind courtship does is blow dust in everyones eyes.

I didnt care. I was hanging from chandeliers, swinging round lamp-posts. I was so deranged with love I didnt
know what to do with myself. I felt I was drowning and I didnt want anyone to save me.

Another aspect that delighted me was the being married part of the whole thing. Id never been cut out for a career
and the thought that I could chuck in my nine-to-five job and spend the rest of my life looking after Rory filled me
with joy. I had fantasies of greeting him at the door, after a hard day at his studio, a beautiful child hanging on each
hand.

Three days later, Rory and I were married at Chelsea Register Office. I had been to see the Renoirs at the Tate,
and wore a Laura Ashley dress and a black breton on the back of my head. Even Nina admitted I looked good.

Rory was waiting when we arrived, smoking and gazing moodily at the road. It was the first time Id seen him in a
suit - pale grey velvet with a black shirt.

Isnt he the most beautiful thing youve ever seen! I said rapturously.

Yes, said Nina. It isnt too late to change your mind.

He smiled when he saw us, then his narrowed eyes fixed coldly on my hat. Tearing it from my head, he threw it
on the ground and kicked it into the Kings Road, where a milk van ran over it.

Dont you ever dare wear a hat again, he said, ruffling my hair.

Then he took my hand and led me into the Register Office.

Afterwards we had a party and drank champagne, and flew to Paris for our honeymoon. When we arrived at our
hotel - which was pretty, with shutters, vines and pink geraniums, overlooking the Seine - Rory ordered more
champagne.

He was in a strange, wild mood. I wondered how much hed drunk before he got to the Register Office. I very
much wanted him to pounce on me and ravish me at once. I suddenly felt apprehensive, lost and very much alone.

I went off and had a bath. Isnt that what all brides do? All my things were new - sponge bag, flannel, talcum
powder, toothbrush. Even my name was new - Emily Balniel.

I said it over and over to myself as I lay in the bath, with the water not too hot so I wouldnt emerge like a lobster.

I rubbed scented bath oil into every inch of my body and put on a new white negligée, fantastically expensive and
pretty and virginal. I went into the bedroom, and waited for Rors gasp of approval. It never came. He was on the
telephone, his face ashen.

Hullo, he was saying. Hullo, yes, its me all right. I know its been a long time. Where am I? In Paris, at the
Reconnaissance. Do you remember the Reconnaissance, darling? I just wanted to tell you that I got married this
afternoon, so that makes us level again, doesnt it? And, with a ghastly expression of triumph on his face, he dropped
the telephone back in its cradle.Who were you ringing? I asked.

He looked at me for a minute as though I were a stranger. There was the same sinister stillness, the lurking danger
that I had been so aware of the first night I met him.

Who was it? I asked again.

Mind your own business, he snarled. Just because Ive married you, it doesnt give you the right to question all my
movements.

I felt as though hed hit me. For a minute we stared at each other, bristling with hostility. Then he pulled himself
together, apologized for jumping down my throat - and began to kiss me almost frenziedly.
When I woke up, in the middle of the night, I found him standing by the window, smoking a cigarette. He had his back to me but there was something infinitely despairing about the hunched set of his shoulders.

With a sick feeling of fear, I wondered why he had felt it necessary to ring up a woman on the first night of his honeymoon, and taunt her with the fact that he’d just got married.

Marriage, as I discovered on my honeymoon, may be a bed of roses, but there are plenty of thorns lying around.

Not that I found myself loving Rory any the less; rather the reverse, but he was not easy to live with. To begin with, I never knew what mood he was going to be in. There were the prolonged black glooms, followed by sudden firework bursts of affection, followed by an abstracted fit when he would sit for hours watching the sun on the plane trees outside our window. There were also the sudden, uncontrollable rages - in a smart French restaurant he had picked up a dish of potato puree, and hurled it at a passing fly!

I also had to get used to everyone looking at Rory rather than at me; and that was another thing about marriage. I couldn’t spend hours tarting myself up to compete with all those svelte French women. If Rory suddenly decided he wanted to go out, it was straight out of bed, into the shower and what the hell do you want to bother with make-up for?

I found being with him day in, day out, slightly claustrophobic. There wasn’t a moment to shave my armpits or touch up the roots of my hair. He did quite a lot of work. I was longing for him to sketch me, and kept sweeping my hair back for him to admire the beauty of my bone structure, but he was far more interested in drawing old men and women with wrinkled faces in cafés. The drawings were amazingly good.
CHAPTER FOUR

WE were sitting in bed one afternoon after one of those heavy French lunches, when suddenly there was a pounding on the door.
Who the hells that? I asked.
A chambermaid gone berserk and unable to contain herself, said Rory, and shouted something very impolite in French.
The pounding went on.
Perhaps its the flics, said Rory, getting out of bed and putting on his trousers. Through a haze of alcohol, I looked at his tousled black hair and broad brown shoulders.
Swearing, he unlocked the door. A beautiful woman stood there.
Chéri, she cried ecstatically. Bébé, I knew you were ere. The man on the desk was so discreet. He refuse to admit it. And flinging her arms round Rorys neck, she kissed him on both cheeks.
I think you are ver unkind, she went on reproachfully in a strong French accent, sloping off and getting married without a word to anyone. I mean, think of the wedding presents you missed.
Rory looked half exasperated, half amused.
Im afraid this is my mother, he said.
Oh gosh, I squeaked. How fright I mean, how lovely. How do you do?
It was a fine way to meet ones mother-in-law for the first time; sitting up in bed, wearing nothing but a crumpled sheet and a bright smile.
This is Emily, said Rory.
Rorys mother rushed across the room and hugged me.
But you are so pretty, she said. This pleases me very much. I keep telling Rory to find a nice wife and settle down. I know you will make im appy, and he will start behaving beautifully.
Ill try, I faltered.
She was stunning looking - lush, opulent, exotic, with huge dark blue eyes, hair dyed the most terrific shade of strawberry blonde, the most marvellous legs and lots of jewellery. It was easy to see from where Rory got his traffic-stopping looks.
One of her eyelids was made up with brilliant violet eye-shadow, the other smeared with emerald green.
I have just been to Dior for a fitting. I tried out their new make-up, its a very pretty shade of green, no?
Wheres Buster? asked Rory.
Coming later, she said. Hes having a drink with some friends.
Hes lying, said Rory. He couldnt possibly have a friend.
Rorys mother giggled. Now, chéri, you must not be naughty. Buster is my second usband, she explained to me. Rorys father, Hector, was my first.
When I marry Buster, Rory say to me, "Youre getting better at choosing husbands, maman, but not much".
Rorys mother suddenly gave a shriek. Ah! Mon Dieu, I remember the taxi is still waiting downstairs. We ave run out of money. We knew you would have some, Rory, youre so rich now. Could you ring down and get the manager to pay the taxi?
Rory looked at her with intense irritation, then he laughed, picked up the telephone and gabbled away in French.
Ask im to send up some champagne, said Rorys mother. At least two bottles, I want to drink my new daughter-in-laws health. You must call me Coco, she said.
I caught Rorys eye and tried not to giggle. Everything was getting out of hand.
Later, when the champagne arrived, Rory said, Why have you run out of money? Pa didnt leave you badly off.
Of course he didnt, darling, it was just that we had to have central heating for the castle, or wed have frozen to death.
And a sauna bath, and a flagellation room? said Rory.
Of course, darling, Buster as been used to the best, and hes been shooting four or five times a week and thatall adds up. Everythings in such a muddle, we cant decide whether we want to spend the winter in Irasa. She turned to me. I hope youre going to like our island, chéri, those Highland winters can be very terrible, and its so boring seeing the same old people all the time, and all those sheep. Thats what Bustlers seeing his friend about.
What? said Rory.
Buying this aeroplane. He thinks he can get it cheap. Then we can all escape to London, or Paris, or the Riviera when we feel like it.
Rory raised his eyes to heaven.
He does need it, darling, said Coco, almost pleadingly.
Who told you we were here?
Marina did. She telephoned me in Cannes to tell me the news.
The bitch, said Rory.
Whos Marina? I asked.
Marina Maclean, said Coco. At least, she was. Now shes Marina Buchanan. Shes just married Hamish Buchanan, whos very rich and more than twice her age. She lives on the Island too. I saw her just before we left, Rory. She didnt look very happy. Sort of feverish; shes spending a fortune on clothes and jewellery.
Thats what comes of trying to marry ones grandfather, said Rory unemotionally.
Hamish looks terrible too, said Coco. Hes suddenly gone all hip, growing his hair, not eating meat, and dancing in the modern way - trying to keep up with Marina, I suppose. He looks twenty years older. Oh well, its no use wasting sympathy on Marina. Shes made her bed.
And now shes about to lie in someone elses, said Rory.
Oh look, here comes Buster.
I should like to get dressed, I said plaintively. Oh, nobody dresses for Buster, said Rory.
Buster Macpherson, when he arrived, turned out to be the kind of man my mother would have gone mad for. He had well-brushed blond hair and blue eyes that let out a perpetual sparkle. He looked like the hero in a boys comic. He showed a lot of film-star teeth.
He was absolutely not my type. He had none of Rorys explosive feline grace, but he obviously exerted considerable fascination over Coco who, although she didnt look a day over thirty-five, must have been nearing fifty, and a good ten years older than Buster.
Congratulations, you chaps, said Buster. He peered through the gloom at me under my sheet.
May I kiss the bride? he asked.
No, said Rory. Youd better watch Buster, hes going through the change of life.
Buster shot him an unfriendly look, helped himself to a large glass of champagne and sat down.
Ah, honeymoons, honeymoons, he said, shaking his head.
Did you buy that aeroplane? asked Rory.
I think so, said Buster.
Coco gave a crow of delight.
Where are you going to land it? asked Rory. In the High Street?
No, said Coco. Weve got a little runway on the island now. I knew I had something to tell you, darling, Finn Maclean is back.
Rorys eyes narrowed.
The hell he is. Whats he poking his nose into now?
Hes thrown up his smart Harley Street practice and come back to Irasa as Medical Officer overseeing all the islands, said Buster. Hes persuaded the Scottish Medical Board to build him a cottage hospital in the old church hall and buy him an aeroplane so he can hop from island to island.
Our own flying doctor, said Rory. Why the hell has he come back?
I think he wanted to get out of London, said Buster. His marriage broke up.
Not surprised, said Rory. No woman in her right senses could stand him.
Finn Maclean is Marinas elder brother, Coco explained to me. Rory and he dont get on, you understand. He never got on with Rorys father either - he kept complaining about the poorness of the tenants.
Hes an arrogant sod, said Rory. You wont like him.
I rather like him, mused Coco. He does not have the bedroom manner, but he is all man.
Life on Irasa, I decided, certainly wasnt going to be dull. The unpredictable Marina running rings round her ancient husband; Rory feuding with Finn Maclean, who was all man; plus Buster and Coco, a knockabout comedy act in themselves.
This is a nice hotel, said Coco meditatively, trying on some of my scent. Can you get Buster and me a room here, Rory?
No I cant, said Rory. I happen to be on my honeymoon, and Id like to get on with it without your assistance.
CHAPTER FIVE

AFTER a fortnight, Rory started getting restless and decided to return to England. We stopped in London and booked in at the Ritz. I must say I did enjoy being rich - it was such bliss not having to look at the prices on the menu.

We were in the middle of dinner, I lingering over a crepe suzette because it was so delicious and Rory halfway through his second bottle of wine, gazing moodily out at Green Park, where the yellow leaves whirled and eddied away from the wet black branches of the plane trees.

Suddenly he summoned a waiter:
I want my bill, he said, adding to me, finish up that revolting pudding, were going home tonight.
But were booked in here, I protested.
Doesn't matter. If we hurry, we can catch the sleeper.
But its Friday night, I said, well never get a bed.
Want to bet? said Rory.

We tore across London in a taxi, fortunately the streets were deserted, and reached Euston station just five minutes before the train was due to pull out.
Youll never get on, said the man at the booking office, its fully booked.
What did I tell you, I grumbled. Well have to sleep in a cattle truck.

Stop whining, said Rory. His eyes roved round the station. Suddenly they lit on one of those motorized trolleys that carry parcels round stations and are always running one over on the platform. It was coming towards us.
Stepping forward, Rory flagged it down.
The driver was so surprised he screeched to a halt and watched in amazement as Rory piled our suitcases on.
What the bleeding hell do you think youre doing, mate? he said.
Drive us up Platform 5 to the first class sleeper for Glasgow, said Rory.
You want me to do what? asked the driver.
Go on, said Rory icily, well miss the train if you dont hurry.
He climbed on and pulled me up beside him.
We cant, I whispered in horror, well get arrested.
Shut up, snarled Rory. Go on, he added to the driver, we havent got all bloody day.

There was something about Rorys manner, a combination of arrogance and an expectation that everyone was going to do exactly what he wanted, that made it almost impossible to oppose him. Grumbling that hed get the sack for this, the driver set off.

Cant you go any faster? asked Rory coldly. The driver eyed the fiver in Rorys hand.
You wont get a penny of this, said Rory, unless we catch that train.

We gathered speed and amazingly stormed through the barrier unopposed and up the platform. Train doors were being slammed as we reached the sleeper.

Put the luggage on the train, said Rory to the driver, and strolled over to the attendant who was giving his lists a last-minute check. I edged away, terrified there was going to be a scene. Im afraid were booked solid, sir, I heard the attendant say.

Didnt the Ritz ring through? said Rory, his voice taking on that carrying, bitchy, upper-class ring. Afraid not, sir, I heard the attendant say.

Bloody disgrace. Cant rely on anyone these days. Expect your side slipped up, one of your staff must have forgotten to pass on the message.

The attendant quailed before Rorys steely gaze. He took off his peak cap and scratched his head.
Well, what are you going to do about it? said Rory. Im on my way back from my honeymoon, my wife is quite exhausted. We booked a sleeper and now youre trying to tell me youve given it away.

As the attendant looked in my direction, I edged further away, trying to merge into a slot machine. I really dont know what to say, sir.

If you value your job, said Rory, youd better do something about it.
Two minutes later an enraged middle-aged couple in pyjamas were being shunted into a carriage down the train.
Im awfully sorry, sir, the attendant was saying.

You might have thanked him, I said, sitting down on the bed, and admiring the splendour of our first-class compartment.

One doesnt thank peasants, said Rory, pulling off his tie.
CHAPTER SIX

WE drove towards the ferry which was to carry us to Irasa. I glanced at Rory hunched over the wheel, demons at his back, the beautiful face sullen with bad temper. His black mood had been coming on for several hours now.

At last we reached the ferry. Under a grey and black sky a mountainous sea came hurtling towards us, thundering, moaning and screaming, and dirty with flying foam.

Hello, Mr. Balniel, said the man on the gate. I wish you'd brought some better weather. It's been raining six weeks in Irasa, even the seagulls are wearing souwesters.

On the boat the sky darkened noticeably, the temperature dropped and the gulls were blown sideways like pieces of rag in the wind.

I'm not sure Scotland's quite me, I later thought disloyally, as we bumped along one-track roads with occasional glimpses of sulky-looking sea.

On our left a huge forbidding castle lowered out of the mist.

Nice little weekend cottage, I said.

That's where Buster and Coco live, said Rory. This is us.

I suppose it had once been a rather large lodge to the castle - a grey stone two-storey house, hung with creeper, surrounded by a wild, forsaken garden.

I started to quote Swinburne, but Rory shot me such a look.

I shut up.

I decided not to make any flash remarks, either, about being carried over the threshold. Rory was extraordinarily tense, as though he was expecting something horrible.

He certainly got it. I've never seen such shambles inside a house: broken bottles, knocked-down lamps and tables, glasses strewn all over the floor, dust everywhere, thick cobwebs. The bedrooms looked as though someone had used them as ashtrays, the fridge like a primeval forest, and someone had written Goodbye forever in lipstick on the mirror.

The house consisted of a huge studio, a drawing-room almost entirely lined with books, two bedrooms upstairs, a kitchen and a bathroom; all were in absolute chaos.

Oh God, said Rory, I left a message with my mother to get someone to clean the place up.

Its all right, I said faintly, it'll only take a few hundred years to put to rights.

I'm not having you whisking around like Snow White, snapped Rory. We'll sleep at the castle tonight. I'll get someone to come in tomorrow.

I looked out of the bedroom window. The view was sensational. The house grew out of a two-hundred and fifty foot cliff which dropped straight down to the sea.

I hope we don't fall out too often, I joked weakly, then I saw a cellophane packet of flowers on the bed. Oh look, I said, someone remembered us. Then I shivered with horror as I realized it was a funeral wreath of lilies. Inside the envelope, on a black-edged card, was written Welcome home, darlings. How beastly, I said in a trembling voice.

Who could have done that?

Rory picked up the card. Some joker who's got it in for me.

But that's horrible.

And quite unimportant, he said, tearing up the card. He opened the window and threw the wreath out, so it spun round and round and crashed on the rocks below.

Startled I looked into his face, which glowed suddenly with some malice I couldn't place.

Come here, he said softly.

He pulled me against him, pushing my head down on his shoulder, one hand tracing my arm, the other moving over my body. Then he smiled and closed his long fingers round my wrist where the pulse pounded.

Poor little baby, he whispered. He could always do this to me. Let's go next door, and he pulled me into the dusty spare room with the huge window on to the road and began to kiss me.

Shouldn't we draw the curtains? I muttered. They can see us from the road.

So what? he murmured.

Suddenly I heard a scrunched of wheels on the road outside. Swinging round I saw a blue Porsche flash by. In the driving seat was a red-headed girl who gazed in at us, a mixture of despair and hatred in her huge, haunted eyes.

I enjoyed staying at the castle, living in baronial comfort, and making the acquaintance of Rory's black labrador Walter Scott, who had been living with Busters gamekeeper while he had been away. He was a charming dog, sleek, amiable, incurably greedy and not as well trained as Rory would have liked.

After a few days we went back to live in Rory's house (very pretty it looked, after it had been cleaned up) and began marriage proper.

I didn't find it easy. I was determined to be one of those wonderful little homemakers putting feminine touches
everywhere but, as Rory remarked, the only feminine touches I added were dripping pants and stockings, and mascara on his towel.

I tried to cook, too. I once cooked moussaka, and we didn’t eat until one o’clock in the morning. But Rory, who was used to Cocos French expertise, was not impressed.

I also took hours over the washing. There weren’t any launderettes in Inveraray, and then it lay around for days in pillowcases waiting to be ironed; and Rory never seemed to have clean underpants when he needed them.

After a couple of weeks he said, quite gently, Look, housework obviously isn’t your métier - I’m not sure what is. I’ve hired a char, four days a week, and she can do the ironing and washing as well.

I felt humiliated but enormously relieved.

The char, Mrs. Mackie, turned out to be a mixed blessing. She was wonderful at cleaning, but a terrible gossip, and obviously irritated Rory out of his mind. As soon as she arrived he used to disappear into the mountains to paint, and she and I sat round drinking cider and talking.

I’ve got a wicked bad leg, she said one morning. I shall have to go and see Dr. Maclean.

Finn Maclean? I said.

She nodded.

What’s his sister Marina like?

She’s no right in the head, although I shouldn’t say it. The old Macleans never had any money. Dr. Maclean, her father, was a gud doctor, but he dinna know about saving. Marina married this old man for his riches, and its dancing him into his grave she is. Perhaps now young Dr. Macleans come back hell keep her in order.

Whys he come back when he was doing so well in London?

She shrugged. Inveraray has an enchantment. They all come back in the end.
IRASA - Island of the Blessed, or of the Cursed. I could understand why none of them could escape its spell, and why only here could Rory find the real inspiration for his painting.

The countryside took your breath away; it was as though the autumn was pulling out all the stops before succumbing to the harshness of the Highland winter. Bracken singed the entire hillsides the colour of a red setter, the turning horse chestnuts blazed yellow, the acacias pale acid green.

With Rory painting all day, Walter Scott and I had plenty of time to wander about and explore. The island was fringed with wooded points like a starfish. Out of the ten or so big houses, on one point lived Rory and me, on another Buster and Coco, on another Finn Maclean and on yet another Marina and Hamish. The islanders white cottages were dotted between.

One afternoon in late October, I walked down to Penlorren, the islands tiny capital.

Penlorren was a strange sleepy little town, exquisitely pretty, like a northern St. Tropez. Wooded hills ringed the bay, but the main street was an arc of coloured houses, dark green, pink, white and duck-egg blue. In the boats the fishermen were sorting their slippery silver catch into boxes.

As I walked about I was aware of being watched. Suddenly I looked round and there was the blue Porsche parked by the side of the road: the same red-headed girl was watching me with great undefended eyes. I smiled at her, but she started up the car and stormed down the main street, scattering villagers.

Whos that? I asked a nearby fisherman, and somehow knew he was going to answer, Marina Maclean.

Id forgotten to get any potatoes and I went back to the main store. Three old biddies were having a yap, they didnt hear me come in.

Did you see Rory Balniels wee bride? said one.
Pur lassie, so bonny, said the second. She might as well have married the divil.
Therell be trouble ahead, said the third. Now young Dr. Macleans back again.

Then they suddenly saw me, coughed, and started taking a great deal of interest in a sack of turnips.
CHAPTER EIGHT

THE feeling of unease I'd had since the first night of my honeymoon grew stronger. Another fortnight passed. I had to stop fooling myself that our marriage was going well.

I was so besotted with Rory I wanted to touch him all the time; not just bed touching, but holding hands and lying tucked into his back at night like two spoons in a silver box. But Rory seemed to have no desire to come near me, except when he made love to me, which was getting less and less often.

I tried to kid myself he was worrying about work. I knew about geniuses, secretive, more temperamental, of finer grain than ordinary mortals, and more easily upset.

I tried to talk to him about painting, but he said I didn't understand what he was doing and, anyway, talking about it ruined it.

I was in the kitchen one morning. I had learned to be quiet when work was going badly, the clatter of a pan could drive him mad. He wandered in yawning, rubbing a hand through his hair, looking so handsome with his sleepy, sulky face, I felt my stomach tighten.

Do you want some coffee?

Yes, please.

Feeling more like a normal wife, I went into the kitchen, started percolating coffee, and sighed inwardly for the days when Nina and I had lived on Nescafé. I thought of the beautiful, haunted girl in the blue Porsche.

I keep seeing Marina Buchanan, I said.

Rory looked at me. So?

Not to speak to, I stammered. She's terribly beautiful. Shall we ask them to dinner?

I'm sure they'd enjoy your cooking.

I bit my lip. I didn't want a row.

I'm sorry about my cooking. I am trying.

Sure you are, extremely trying.

Rory, please, what's the matter? What have I done? You haven't laid a finger on me for at least four days.

You can count up to five? That is encouraging, said Rory acidly.

Most newly weds are at it all the time, I said.

We might be, if you were less unimaginative in bed. I'm surprised all your exes didn't expect something a bit more exciting.

I jumped back as though he'd hit me. Sometimes there was a destructive force about Rory.

God, you bastard, I whispered. If you were a bit more encouraging, I might be less imaginative. And if I'm no good in bed, why the hell didn't you say so in the beginning?

I was probably too drunk to notice, he said. I hate you, I screamed.

I stormed out of the room, rushed upstairs and threw myself on the bed, bursting into tears. Five minutes later I heard a door slam and his car driving off down the road.

I cried for hours. He's only doing it to hurt me, I kept saying, trying to reassure myself. I got up, washed my face and wondered what to do next.

I thumbed through a magazine. You could have pulled corks with the model's hair. I liked music but you couldn't listen to records all day. I supposed I could put on a deeply felt hat and go for a walk.

I sat up, dismayed: I realized I was bored. No one was more aware than I that boredom was a mark of inadequacy. People with inner resources didn't get bored. No; as Rory had discovered, I'd got hidden shallows. I went to the fridge and ate half a tin of potato salad.

There was a knock on the door. Delighted, I leapt to my feet and rushed to open it. There stood Marina Buchanan, quivering with nerves as if even now she might turn and run. She was lovely, if haunted, in a red coat and long black boots, her shining Titian hair blowing in the wind like a shampoo commercial. Her mouth was large and drooping, her face deadly pale, and there were huge blue shadows underneath her extraordinary eyes. I understood everything my mother had told me about Garbo. I wished I hadn't eaten that potato salad.

Hello, she said. I'm Marina Buchanan.

I know, I said, I'm Emily Balniel.

I know, she said, Coco sent me a postcard suggesting we should get together.

Oh, how lovely, I said. Come in and have some coffee or something.

How nice it looks, she said, gazing in admiration at the drawing-room.

Let's have a drink, not coffee, I said. I know one shouldn't at this hour of the morning, but its such a celebration
having someone to talk to.

We had the most tremendous gossip. She didn't seem haunted any more, just slightly malicious and very funny. She adored Coco, she said, but couldn't stand Buster. She wasn't very complimentary about her husband either.

He's terrific between the balance sheets, so it means I can have everything I want, but I'm getting a bit fed up playing Tinker, Tailor with the caviar

I giggled.

Where's Rory? she said.

Out painting.

She looked at me closely. You look tired. Has Rory been giving you a hard time?

Of course not, I said firmly.

Don't get sore, I'm not being critical, just realistic. Rory's divine-looking, he exudes sex-appeal the way other men breathe out carbon dioxide, and he's got terrific qualities. She paused as if trying to think what they were. But he can be difficult. Where other people make scenes, Rory makes three-act plays. When he's upset he takes it out on other people, he always has. My brother, Finn, is difficult, but in a more predictable way, and he's not spoilt like Rory, or bitchy either. Rory's always trying to send Finn up, but it doesn't work because Finn couldn't care less. And although Rory's always had everything, somehow Finn makes him feel inadequate. They hate each other's guts, you know, she added in satisfaction. There's bound to be fireworks - the island isn't big enough for both of them.

She got up and wandered round the room. I looked at that wild, unstable loveliness, and wondered what had possessed her to marry an old man when she could have had anyone.

Why don't you both come to dinner on Thursday? I said.

That'd be lovely, but you should ask Rory first. At that moment Rory walked in.

Hello, Rory, she said softly, and then when he didn't answer immediately, she went rattling on.

It would be nice if you could learn to say hello sometimes, Rory. With six months practice you might even learn to say, "It's a lovely day".

I steeled myself, wondering what sort of mood he was in now, but he turned round, then came over and kissed me on the mouth, quite hard.

Hello, baby, have you missed me?

Oh yes, I said, snuggling against him, feeling weak with relief.

Then he looked across at Marina, and ice crept into his voice. Hello, Mrs. Buchanan, how's marriage? Still making Hamish while the sun shines?

I giggled. We've been having a lovely gossip. I asked Marina and Hamish to dinner here on Thursday.
CHAPTER NINE

I WAS determined the dinner party would be a success. For the next three days I cooked, polished and panicked, determined Rory should be proud of me. On the afternoon of the day they were coming, I was well ahead; the house gleamed like a telly ad, all the food was done. The only thing we needed was lots of flowers. There were none in the garden, but Id noticed some gorgeous roses in a garden down the road. I set off, still in my nightie - flimsy and black. Id been so busy I hadnt even bothered to get dressed.

It was a warm day for the time of year, the wet grass felt delicious beneath my bare feet. I ran past ancient fruit trees and overgrown shruberies, and started to pick great armfuls of roses.

I was just bending over, tearing off one huge red rose with my teeth, when I heard a furious voice behind me. What the hell do you think youre doing?

I jumped out of my skin and spun round, aghast, the rose in my teeth like Carmen. A man towered over me. He must have been in his early thirties, he had dark red hair curling over his collar, a battered, freckled, high-complexioned face, a square jaw, a broken nose, and angry hazel eyes. His face was seamed with tiredness, his mouth set in an ugly line - but it was still a powerful, compelling, unforgettable face.

Dont you realize this is private property?

Then I twigged. This must be Finn Maclean. I stared at him, fascinated. It was not often one came face to face with a legend.

Didnt you know you were trespassing?

Yes, I did. Im terribly sorry, but no ones ever picked any flowers here before. It seems such a waste to leave them. I didnt know youd turn up.

Evidently, he said, taking in my extreme state of undress. Who are you, anyway? he asked.

Emily, I muttered. Emily Balniel.

For a second there was a flicker of emotion other than anger in his face. Was it pity or contempt?

Id have thought Rory was rich enough to afford his own roses. I suppose youve picked up all his habits of doing and taking exactly what you like?

No, I havent, and you can keep your rotten roses, I said, and threw the whole lot at his feet.
ALTHOUGH I was seething with rage, I didn’t mention the incident to Rory when I got back; he was in too bad a temper. I started tidying the drawing-room.

I wish you wouldn’t hum nervously when you do things, he said. Stop fiddling with those leaves, too, they look awful enough as it is.

You only notice them because Marinas coming.

I went into the kitchen and slammed the door. First Finn, now Rory. I thought I was going to cry, but it would only make my eyes red, so I took a large swig of cooking wine instead. Then I suddenly realized I hadn’t put out any napkins, and had to rush upstairs, pull them out of the laundry basket and iron them on the carpet.

Maddeningly, Marina and Hamish arrived twenty minutes early, so I had no time to tart myself up. I wondered if Marina did it deliberately. She looked staggering in a slinky, backless blue dress which matched her eyes. But even I was unprepared for Hamish. He must have been close on sixty, with nudging eyes, an avid grin and yellow teeth. But he got himself up like an out-of-date raver: thinning grey locks clustering over his forehead and down his back, sideboards laddering his wrinkled cheeks, a white chamois leather smock, lots of beads and jeans several sizes too small for him. He looked like an awful old goat. Rory, who looked devastating in a grey satin shirt, couldn’t stop laughing.

Marina, darling, what have you done to him? he said in an undertone. He looks like an octogenarian ton-up boy.

Ive made an old man very hippy, said Marina, and giggled.

Dont you like his smock? A touch of white is so flattering close to the face when you reach a certain age.

They were convulsed with mirth. I think I would have been shocked by their malice if Hamish hadn’t been so awful, lecherous and pleased with himself.

We all drank a great deal before dinner.

Im thinking of growing a beard, Hamish said.

I dont like beards on boys or girls, said Marina. Are you still taking singing lessons? Rory asked Marina.

I drive over to Edinburgh once a fortnight. Its a long way, but worth it. I usually stay the night. It gives Hamish a break.

To get up to mischief, said Hamish, giving me a wink that nearly dislocated his eyelid.

No one really noticed the dinner, not even when one of my false eyelashes fell in the soup. Marina ate nothing; Hamish was obviously frightened his trousers were going to split. Rory never ate much, anyway. I cleared the plates and served each course; I might have been a waitress. Walter Scott was having a field day finishing up in the kitchen.

There were strange undercurrents. I felt as though I was watching a suspense story on television where I’d missed the beginning and couldn’t quite work out what was going on. Hamish rubbed his skinny leg against mine. Any moment he’d get a fork stuck into it.

After dinner Marina turned on the gramophone. She and Hamish danced. Hamish looked absurd, flailing about like a scarecrow in a gale. Marina moved like a maenad, her red hair flying, her face transformed by the soft light. Rory sat watching her, his face expressionless. He had been drinking heavily all evening.

Finally she flopped down beside him on the sofa.

Did you ever finish that water-colour of the harbour?

He nodded. Its in the studio.

May I come and see it?

They went next door.

Hamish looked dreadful now, grey and exhausted. He went off to the loo and I wandered into the studio to see the painting they were talking about.

Suddenly, I froze with horror. They hadn’t bothered to turn on the studio light, and were standing near the window in the moonlight.

Marina stood there vibrating, a foot away from Rory; her face glowed like a pale flame. She was all fire and ice.

Why did you marry her? Her voice dropped an octave.

Oh come on, Rory said, lets say I wasn’t wanted any more.

To punish me, to put me on the rack. You can’t believe I married Hamish for anything but his money, but she’s something entirely different.

She turned on her heel and was coming towards me; it was as though I was frozen in some terrible nightmare. Marina, wait, I heard Rory say.
Oh go to hell, she said, but the longing and ache in her voice were quite unmistakable.
She didn’t see me as she came into the drawing-room. Hamish, I want to go home, she snapped.
Her face was turned away from him, only I could see it was wet with tears. Rory didn’t even bother to come out
and say goodbye to them. I went back into the studio, my legs would hardly hold me up.
Rory turned round, the lustre of his black eyes startling against the pallor of his face.
Rory, I said, I think we ought to have things out.
I’ve nothing to have out, nothing.
I realized he’d reached that pitch of drunkenness about to explode into violence, but I didn’t care.
What’s going on between you and Marina? Why was she hanging around when we arrived? It was she who sent
the wreath, wasn’t it? And her whom you rang up the first night of our honeymoon? I want to know what it’s all
about.
Nothing, nothing. We were brought up together, that’s all. Anyway, he snarled, you asked her to dinner. Now get
out of my way. He pushed me aside. I’m going to sleep in the spare room, and don’t come crawling into my bed in the
middle of the night.
CHAPTER ELEVEN

I DIDNT sleep at all. I lay trembling with panic, clutching Walter Scotts solid body, my mind reeling from possibility to possibility. At dawn I tried to be rational. Rory and Marina had probably been childhood sweethearts, and hed been piqued when she married Hamish. After all, it was me hed married.

Next morning I came down, washed up, and tried to be brave about my hangover.

What would please Rory most? I decided to clean out his studio.

He came down at midday. He looked terrible. He must have been hangover down to his toes, but, glass in hand, he was making a nice recovery. I was standing on a ladder dusting a shelf.

Hello, darling, I said, brightly.

What are you doing?

Dusting.

Again? Women think they can cure everything with a bucket of water and a scrubbing brush.

Please dont lets quarrel. Im sorry for the things I said. I didnt mean them. I couldnt bear another night like last night.

You can always leave, he said brutally.

I dont want to leave. I love you.

His face softened. Do you now? Well come down off that stupid ladder then, and, catching my ankles, he ran his hands slowly up my legs.

Ill just dust this last folder, I said, steadying myself on the shelf.

Put that down, said Rory, his voice suddenly icy. Startled, I swayed on my high ladder.

I said put it down.

Purely out of nerves, I let the folder slip from my hands and crash to the floor. Hastily I scrambled down and knelt to pick it up.

Rory reached it at the same time as me, his hand on my arm like a vice.

Ow, I yelped.

Leave it, he snarled, but it was too late.

Spilling out of the folder were the most beautiful drawings. The naked model smiling that secret, come-hither smile was unmistakably Marina.

We looked at the paintings scattered round our feet. Marina in her lush beauty mocked me a hundred times over.

Well? I said.

Its your fault. I told you not to touch that file.

Theyre very good, very life-like indeed, I said slowly, trying to keep my voice from trembling. Im sure you didnt paint these from imagination.

Of course I didnt. I wanted to do some nudes last summer, and there are only a limited number of people on the island wholl take their clothes off. You can hardly see Buster or Hamish stripping down to the buff and sitting around for hours on end. Anyway, as Ive said before, its damn all to do with you what I did before I was married.

Or what you do after youre married, I said bitterly. Rory drained his drink and poured himself another one.

Rory, I said slowly, this is important. Do you love me at all?

Rory looked bored. Depends how you define love. How could I explain that he was the most beautiful man Id ever seen, that my tongue suddenly got stuck in my throat when I saw the set of his shoulders, that I spent all day wanting him.

Oh Rory, I said, appalled. Cant you try and be a bit more loving?

Why? he said, logically.

Why did you marry me then?

He looked at me reflectively, Im beginning to wonder.

I gave a gasp. God, he could be vicious.

What shall we do about it, then? I said.

Do? he exploded. Do let me work, thats enough for me.

But not enough for me, I screamed, and brushed blindly past him.

Where are you going? he said.

Out.

Well, for Gods sake come back in a less destructive mood.

And so our marriage began to deteriorate. It wasnt helped by the rain which started to fall the next day, and
continued for weeks. Rory passed the time in painting, I in sulking, then in trying to win Rory round, then in sulking again.

I suppose I was pretty disagreeable myself, I complained steadily about the weather and how bored I was. At first I made an attempt to stop myself, then I didnt try to stop myself, then I found I couldnt. Emily - the fishwife.

That crack about being lousy in bed had gone home too. I wrote off to London for a sexy black cut-out nightie, and a book on how to undress in front of your husband. It showed you how to swing your bra round like a football rattle, and slide your pants off in one go.

I tried it on Rory one evening, but he merely raised his eyebrows and asked me if Id been at the gin. As the weeks passed, he didnt lay a finger on me. I was desperately unhappy and cried a great deal when he wasnt around. I kept telling myself that when hed assembled enough canvases for the exhibition wed be like a couple of love birds, but I didnt really believe it.

I spent most of my time corrupting Walter Scott. Rory was a great believer that dogs should be treated like dogs and kept outside. I kept bringing him in and feeding him in between meals and cuddling him - I needed a few allies.

Gradually Walter invaded the house. He started off sleeping in the kitchen, then moved to the foot of the stairs, then to the landing outside our bedroom. At dawn he would steal in and try to climb on our bed. Invariably Rory, who was a light sleeper, would wake up and throw him out.

Walter Scott suffers from being an only dog, he was fond of saying.
Blood is thicker than Walter, I said.
Nothing is thicker than Walter, said Rory.
CHAPTER TWELVE

IN November, later than expected, Coco and Buster came back.

Buster brought his new private plane, which he landed perilously on the sward outside the castle, terrifying the life out of the islanders and the local sheep, and nearly depositing himself, three labradors, gun cases, rod boxes and several hundred tons of pigskin luggage, in the sea.

Pity, said Rory. Never mind, therell be plenty of other opportunities. In the old days he used to come up by train from Euston and take the dogs to lamp-posts as the train waited interminably at Crewe.

Coco arrived in rip-roaring form and swept Rory and me into a round of gaiety, meeting people on the island and the mainland. It was a frightful strain trying to keep up the appearance that I was blissfully happy.

A few days later, Marina and Hamish asked us back to dinner. I was amazed and irritated to discover she was a very good cook, and had decorated Hamishs huge, stark house with a wild elegance I could never achieve in a million years of poring over House and Garden.

The drawing-room had grey silk walls and flame-red curtains, and I felt sure, had been chosen to compliment Marinas colouring.

Oh its lovely, I said wistfully, you ought to go into interior decorating. Emilys an inferior decorator, said Rory.

In my attempt to make our bedroom more feminine, Id started painting it but had got bored in the middle. The colour, too, was disastrous. It looked all right on the chart but once on the wall turned out an appalling E-K directory pink.

I felt very overdressed that evening, too. Trying to compete with Marina, Id put on a see-through blouse and a long skirt. Marina of course was wearing jeans.

There was another couple to dinner - Deidre and Calen Macdonald. She was a commanding, big-boned woman with a ringing voice. He had a handsome, dissipated face, roving grey eyes, and had obviously married her for her money. He turned out to be a shootingfriend of Busters and made an absolute dead set at me.

I cant claim to be a gentleman, but Ive always preferred blondes, he said cornering me on the sofa as soon as we were introduced, and you really are gorgeous.

The intensity with which he gazed at my see-through blouse threw me off balance - I folded my arms firmly to cover up what I could. 4 Er - do you do anything for a living, Id said, casting around for something to say.

Good god, no. I realized very early on that I was quite incapable of supporting myself, so I married old Deidre instead; shes a pretty full time job, but I do get the odd afternoon off while shes sitting on committees. How about you?

Ive only been married seven weeks, I said firmly.

So disillusion hasnt set in yet. Pretty tricky customer Rory, Id admire you if you can handle him. He runs rings round poor Buster. Is he still drinking too much?

Hardly at all, Id said, out of the corner of my eye watching Rory go to Marinas sidetable, and help himself to a second very large glass of whisky.

Very loyal and proper, said Calen. I must say you really are extremely attractive, I wish youd stop sitting with your arms folded like a rugger player so I could appreciate you properly. Promise me that if you ever decide to be unfaithful to Rory, I can have first refusal.

I tried to look disapproving, but after Rorys indifference of the past few weeks, it was such heaven to be chatted up. I was sure Marina had invited Calen on purpose. But although he flirted outrageously with me all evening, I felt terribly depressed that Rory wasnt betraying a spark of jealousy.

As the weeks passed, we often encountered Marina and Hamish at parties. Marina and Rory so studiously avoided each other that I wondered if they were meeting on the sly.

Occasionally I saw her loathsome brother, Finn Maclean, driving round the island, obviously far too preoccupied with building his beastly hospital to waste time on parties.

In December, Coco slipped down some steps at the castle after a boozy evening and sprained her ankle. Next day she rang up, saying she was bored, would I come over and see her. On my way I drove into Penlorren to find her some nice escapist novel from the bookshop.

Having parked my car in the main street, I started browsing through some romances. Oh dear, the lovely things that happened to those heroines. Why didnt Rory feel like that about me?

Finally, I heard a cough behind me. The owner wanting to shut up shop.
Hastily I bought the book and wandered dreamily into the main street, through the mist and rain. A man was standing by my car. There was something heroic about the way he stood, the massive breadth of the shoulders, the hair curling over the collar of his battered sheepskin coat like Michelangelos David.

Instinctively, I unhitched the long lock of hair from behind my ear and let it fall seductively over my eyes. Then I realized the man was Finn Maclean, and he was blazingly angry.

Is this your car?

Yes, at least, its Rorys.

Cant you read?

He seized my arm and swung me round to face a notice on a garage door. It said, Doctors car, please leave free.

Oh, I said. Well, in London, people often put notices like that on their garage doors even if theyre not doctors, just to keep people away.

This is not London, he snapped, and in terms of the most blistering invective, proceeded to tell me exactly what he thought of Londoners who came to live in the country, and me in particular, and didnt I realize that people could be dying because people like me parked their cars in places like this. Finally I got fed up.

It strikes me, I said, that while youve been rabbiting on and on about my criminal irresponsibility, at least twenty more people could have died. Admittedly, a few of them may have been Chinese. In fact, if all the people who died while people like you were blowing their cool all over the islands were laid end to end

Dont be fatuous, snapped Finn. Theres obviously no point in trying to get anything through to you. Youd better move your car.

Of course, the beastly thing wouldnt start. Eventually I remembered to let out the clutch, and it shot forward in a series of agonizing jerks.

Louse, swine, monster, I muttered to myself, as I drove to the castle. No wonder Rory and he cant stand each other.
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I FOUND Coco lying in bed looking beautiful as always, but very tired. Someone had brought her some lilies, and she buried her face in them. Her nose was bright yellow with pollen. She was obviously in considerable pain, but greeted me with her usual zest.

Help yourself to a drink, chéri, and get me one. Buster has gone shooting. Every day now he shoot, pop, pop, bang, bang. I find it very boring. I ave live in Scotland nearly thirty years, and still I do not find the plus-four sexy. Admittedly, Buster ave very good legs. A seagull excruciated on his coat just as he was leaving He was very angry.

I giggled. Coco could always cheer me up. We gossiped for half an hour, then I reverted to the subject I could never ignore for long, even though it crucified me to talk about it.

Have you seen Marina? I asked.

Coco raised her eyes to heaven.

Yes I ave. Thats a marriage going on the rocks. We had dinner with them the other night, she and Hamish. I gave her a lecture. I said "You are not making Hamish happy like Emily is making my Rory happy". (I winced at that bit.) And Marina laugh in my face. Sometimes I think she is a bit touchy in her head. She is so different from her brother, Finn. Hes so kind and down-to-earth, and such a wonderful doctor.

That moment a maid banged on the door.

Dr. Macleans here, madam, she said.

Show him in, said Coco, excitedly.

Oh Clod, he was as mad as a boiled squirrel last time I saw him, I said.

But Coco wanst listening, she was too busy combing her hair and spraying on scent.

In marched Finn Maclean.

Talk of the devil, said Coco in delight.

I was just singing your praises to Emily, telling her what a wonderful doctor you were - so kind and understanding. I shouldnt think anything rattles you, does it, Finn?

No, I said acidly, I should think its always Dr. Maclean who does the rattling.

Finn turned round and saw me. His face hardened slightly. Oh its you, he said.

I didnt know you knew Emily, said Coco. Isnt she pretty? And so good for Rory.

Im sure theyre ideally matched, said Finn.

The sarcasm was entirely lost on Coco, who beamed at us both.

Lets have a look at your ankle, Finn said.

Coco stretched out one of her beautiful, smooth, brown legs. The ankle was very black and swollen. Although Finn handled it with amazing delicacy, she drew her breath in.

Sore is it? he said gently.

She nodded, catching her lip.

Poor old thing. Never mind, youve still got one perfect ankle, he said, getting up. No reason why the other shouldnt be as right as rain in a few weeks.

Whats right about rain? I said gloomily, looking out of the window.

Still, Id like to X-ray it, Finn went on, ignoring me. Ill send an ambulance to pick you up later. Itll jolt you less than a car.

I must go, I said. Ive got to cook Rorys supper.

Finn will give you a lift, said Coco.

Ive got a car, I said quickly.

It was very cold outside and I shivered: I didnt want to leave the cosy warmth of the castle for one of Rorys black moods. Finn Maclean got something out of the pocket of his overcoat.

I should have thought it was a bit early on in your marriage to escape into tripe like this, he said, handing it to me. It was the romantic novel Id intended to give Coco.
Cocos ankle was X-rayed, bound up and she was ordered to rest it. Just before Christmas, however, Maisie Downleesh (one of Cocos friends) decided to give a ball to celebrate her daughter Dineys engagement. We were all invited.

There is something about the idea of a ball that lifts the spirits, however low one is. I suppose its the excitement; buying a new dress, new make-up, a new hairstyle and settling down in front of the mirror in an attempt to magic oneself into the most glamorous girl in the room. In the past, a ball had offered all the excitement of the unknown, opportunity knocking. This time, I hoped, it would be a chance to make myself beautiful enough to win back Rory.

The ball was being held at the Downleeshs castle on the mainland. Coco, Buster, Rory and I were all to stay there. In the morning I took the car across the ferry and ove to Edinburgh to buy a new dress. In the afternoon I had to pick up a couple who were coming to the dance from London, then drive back and pick up Rory from the Irasa Ferry, and then drive on to the Downleeshs.

I was determined that a new me was going to emerge, so gorgeous that every Laird would be mad with desire for me. I spent a frenzied morning rushing from shop to shop. Eventually in a back street I tracked down a gloriously tarty, pale pink dress, skin tight over the bottom, slashed at the front and plunging back and front.

It had been reduced in a sale because there was a slight mark on the navel, and because, the assistant said with a sniff, there was no call for that sort of garment in Edinburgh.

I tried it on; it was wildly sexy.

A little tight over the barkside, dont ye thenk, said the assistant, who was keen to steer me into black velvet at three times the price.

Thats just how I like it, I said.

It was a bit long too, so I went and bought new six-inch high shoes, and then went to the hairdressers and had a pink rinse put on my hair. I never do things by three-quarters. All in all it was a bit of a rush getting to the airport.

The Frayns were waiting when I arrived - I recognized them a mile off. He was one of those braying chin-less telegraph poles in a dung-coloured tweed jacket. She was a typical ex-deb, with flat ears from permanently wearing a headscarf, and a very long right arm from lugging suitcases to Paddington every weekend to go home to Mummy. She had blue eyes, mouse hair and one of those pink and white complexions that nothing, not rough winds nor drinking and dancing till dawn, can destroy. They were also nauseatingly besotted with one another. Every sentence began Charles thinks or Fiona thinks. And they kept roaring with laughter at each others jokes, like hyenas. She also had that terrible complacency that often overtakes newly married women and stems from relief at having hooked a man, and being uncritically adored by him.

She was quite nice about me being late, but there was a lot of talk about stopping at a telephone box on the dot of 6.30 to ring up Nanny and find out how little Caroline was getting on; and did I think wed get there in time to change?

Its the first time Ive been separated from Caroline, she said. I do hope Nanny can cope.

She sat in the front beside me, he sat in the back; they held hands all the time. Why didnt they get in the back and neck?

It was a bitterly cold day. Stripped, black trees were etched on the skyline. The heavy brown sky was full of snow. Shaggy forelocked heads of the cows tossed in the gloom as they cropped the sparse turf. Just before we reached the ferry to pick up Rory and Walter Scott, it started snowing in earnest. I had hoped Rory and I could have a truce for the evening - but I was an hour late which didnt improve his temper.

Fiona, who had evidently known Rory as a child, went into a flurry of whats happened to old so and so, and who did so and so marry.

Rory answered her in monosyllables; he had snow melting in his hair and paint on his hands.

Too awful, she went on. Did you know Annie Richmonds father threw himself under a taxi in the rush hour in Knightsbridge?

Lucky to find one at that hour, said Rory, looking broodingly at the snowflakes swarming like great bees on the windscreen.

I giggled. Rory looked at me, and then noticed my hair.

Jesus, he said under his breath.

Do you like it? I said nervously.

No, he said and turned up the wireless full blast to drown Fionas chatter.
Suddenly she gave a scream.
Oh look, there's a telephone box. Could you stop a minute, Rory, so I can telephone Nanny.
Rory raised his eyes to heaven.
She got out of the car and, giving little shrieks, ran through the snow. Through the glass of the telephone box I could see her smiling fatuously, forcing lop pieces into the telephone box. Rory didn't reply to Charles desultory questions about shooting. His nails were so bitten that his drumming fingers made little sound on the dashboard.
A quarter of an hour later, Fiona returned.
Well? said Charles.
Shes fine, but shes missing us, she said. She brought up most of her lunch but shes just had two rusks and finished all her bottle, so Nanny thinks shes recovered.
Rory scurled off through the snow, his hands clenched on the wheel.
What b-awful weather, said Fiona, looking out of the window. You really must start a family very soon, Emily, she went on. It gives a completely new dimension to ones life. I think ones awfully selfish really until one has children.
Parents, said Rory, should always be seen and not heard.
Punctuated by giggles and murmurs of Oh Charles from the back, we finally reached the turrets and gables and great blackened keep of Downleesh Castle. The windows threw shafts of light on to the snow which was gathering thickly on the surrounding fir trees and yews. The usual cavalcade of terriers and labradors came pouring out of the house to welcome us. Walter Scott was dragged off protesting by a footman to be given his dinner in the kitchen.
In the dark panelled hall, great banks of holly were piled round the suits of armour, the spears and the banners. We had a drink before going upstairs. Diney, Lady Downleesh's daughter, who just got engaged, fell on Fiona's neck and they both started yapping about weddings and babies.

We were taken to our bedroom down long, draughty passages to the West Tower. In spite of a fire in the grate, it was bitterly cold.

I found when I got there that my suitcase had been unpacked and all my clothes laid out neatly on the mildewed fourposter, including an old bone of Walter Scott's and a half-eaten bar of chocolate I had stuffed into my suitcase at the last moment. On the walls were pictures of gun-dogs coming out of the bracken, their mouths full of feathers.

I missed Walter. Sometimes in those awful long silences I had with Rory I found it a relief to jabber away to him.
Can he come upstairs? I said.
No, said Rory.

In the bookshelves was a book called A Modern Guide to Pig Husbandry. Perhaps I should read it, I said, it might give me some advice about being married to a pig.

Across the passage were the unspeakable Frayns. They had already hogged the bathroom, and judging from the sound of splashing and giggling, it wasn't just a bath they were having. I realized I was jealous of their happiness and involvement. I wanted Rory to start every sentence Emily says and roar with laughter at my jokes.

I took ages over dressing, painting my face as carefully as Rory painted any of his pictures. My pink dress looked pretty sensational; I put a ruby brooch Coco had given me over the mark on the navel. It was certainly tight, too, everyone would be able to see my goose-pimples, but on the whole I was pleased with the result - it was definitely one of my on days. The only problem was that when I put on my new tights, the crotch only came up to the middle of my thighs. I gave them a tug and they split irrevocably, leaving a large hole, so I had to make do with bare legs.

I was just trying to give myself a better cleavage with Sellotape when Rory announced that he was ready. Even I, though, was unprepared for his beauty, dressed up in a dark green velvet doublet with white lace at the throat and wrists and the dark green and blue kilt of the Balniels. Pale and haughty, his eyes glittering with bad temper, he looked like something out of Kidnapped; Alan Breck Stuart or young Lochinvar coming out of the West.

Oh, I sighed, You do look lovely.
Rory grimaced and tugged at the frills at his neck. I feel like Kenneth McKellar, he said.
Never mind, you've got exactly the right hips to wear a pleated skirt, I said.
Rory put a long tartan muffler thing on the dressing-table. This is for you, he said.

I'm not thinking of going out in this weather, I said.

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I'm not thinking of going out in this weather, I said.
You wear it indoors, he said, draping it diagonally across my shoulders, like this, and pin it here.
But whatever for? I moaned.
Its the Balniel tartan, he said evenly. Married women are supposed to wear their husbands tartan.
But it completely covers up my cleavage.
Just as well, you're not at some orgy in Chelsea now, said Rory.
Do I really have to, its a bit Hooray for me.
Very sulkily I arranged it; somehow tartan didn't go with skintight pink satin, and brooches on the navel.
I wanted to fiddle with my hair and make-up a few minutes longer, but Rory was sitting on the bed, staring at me coldly, making me nervous.

"Why don't you go on down?" I said.

"I'll wait here," he said.

I combed a few pink tendrils over my shoulders. "What made you go crazy with the cochineal?" said Rory.

"I thought I ought to change my image," I said, sourly. "My old one didn't seem to be getting me very far." Downstairs in the huge drawing-room people were having drinks. The host and hostess stood near the door repeating the same words of welcome to new arrivals. Looking round I realized I looked better than most of the women but infinitely more tarty. Most of them were big, raw-boned deb types in very covered-up clothes, the occasional mottled purple arms were the nearest they got to décolletage. Very tall, aristocratic men in kilts stood talking in haw haw voices about getting their lochs drained and burning their grouse moors. Fishes in glass cases, and mounted stags heads stared glassily down from the walls.

Fiona and Charles were standing near the door. She was wearing a blue dress and absolutely no eye makeup. What a pretty dress, I said, with desperate insincerity.

"Yes, everyone likes it," she said, blue is Charles favourite colour.

Charles was gaping at my pink hair, his mouth even more open than usual. Fiona started trying to bring Rory out about his painting.

"Do you do all that funny abstract stuff?" she said. No, said Rory.

Some young man - he had a beard actually - painted my sister Sarah. She sat for two hours and all he had drawn after all that time were three figs and a milk bottle.

She gave a tinkle of laughter. Rory looked at her stonily.

Charles paints quite beautifully too, I feel its such a shame his job in the City is so demanding he doesn't have time to take painting up as a hobby - like you, Rory.

Rory does not paint as a hobby, I said furiously, its his profession. But I spoke to deaf ears, Rory had turned on his heel and gone off to get himself a drink. Charles and Fiona were suddenly shrieking at a couple who had just come into the room.

I was extremely pleased therefore that the next moment Calen Macdonald bore down on me and kissed first my hand, then my cheek, then both my bare shoulders.

I was just saying to Buster I wished I could see more of you, he said, pulling down my tartan sash and peering at my cleavage, and now I have. I must say that dress is very fetching, pink looks like bare flesh if one shuts ones eyes.

"Where's Deidre?" I said.

"Oh, she's stalking in Inverness."

I giggled.

So I've got the whole evening off and I'm going to devote it entirely to you.

Two matrons with red-veined faces stopped discussing herbaceous borders and looked at us frostily.

At that moment a voice shouted Emily! and there was Coco, dripping with sapphires as big as gulls eggs, wearing a glorious midnight blue dress. She was lying like Madame Recamiers on a red brocade sofa, surrounded by admirers.

Rory sat at her feet.

"I didn't see you, I said, going over and kissing her. You look very nice, doesn't she, Rory, said Coco. A bit prawn cocktail, said Rory.

I bit my lip.

"I think she looks tremendous," said Buster giving me a warm look. In the pink, I might say, he laughed heartily.

The room was filling up, Buster and Calen were joined by some ancient general, and they were soon busy recounting to each other the number of creatures they had slaughtered in the last week.

Grouses, and twelve bores, and twenty bores, and million bores, thats all men can think about up here, said Coco. She began talking to me about shoes.

There was a sudden stir and a whisper ran through the room. The old general straightened his tie and smoothed his moustache.

What a beautiful girl, he said.

A swift flush mounted to Rory's pale cheeks. With a sinking heart, without turning my head, I knew it must be Marina.

"Hello, everyone," she said, coming over and kissing Coco, hows your poor leg, darling.

She was wearing a pale grey chiffon dress, smothered in two huge pale grey feather boas. With her flaming red hair it made one think of beech woods in autumn against a cloudy sky. I noticed she had no truck with Hamish's tartan across her bosom. I supposed it was Rory's tartan she was after. Sadly I realized that if I spent a million years
on my face and clothes, I would never be as beautiful as Marina. Hamish, all done up in black velvet and frills, looked awful.

Mutton dressed as cutlet, said Rory to Marina under his breath. Even worse was to come. Following her into the room came Finn Maclean in a dinner jacket, with a sleek brunette.

Oh God, said Rory, here comes the virgin surgeon. Diney, he added, turning to the daughter of the house, what the hell is Doctor Finlay doing here?

He was absolutely wonderful about Mummy's ulcer, said Diney, her eyes shining.

Probably gave it to her in the first place, said Rory. Well, I must say, I think he's rather super myself, said Diney.

I'm surprised at you, said Rory, one really shouldn't know one's doctor socially.

Finn came up to Coco.

How's it feeling? he said.

Much better, said Coco.

May be, but there must be no dancing on it, he said firmly.

Whose that with him? I whispered to Calen MacDonald.

I think she's one of his nurses, said Calen.

Shes pretty, I said.

Not my type, said Calen, and started whispering sweet everythings into my ear. I, however, was much more interested in seeing how Rory and Finn reacted to each other.

Look, Rory, said Coco, here's Finn.

Rory, just lighting a cigarette, paused, eyeing Finn without any friendliness.

Finn nodded coldly, Hello, Rory, he said.

Good evening, Doctor, said Rory - he smiled but his eyes were cold, his face as pale as marble. There was an awkward pause.

Isn't it nice Finn's back for good, said Coco brightly to the assembled company.

Not for my good, he isn't, said Rory.

This is Frances, said Finn, ignoring him and introducing the sleek brunette. She works at the hospital.

Oh, a staff outing, drawled Rory, what fun. Did you come here by charabanc with a crate of beer, or is it part of the S.R.N. syllabus - a dazzling night of dancing and passion in the arms of Doctor Maclean?

Only for very privileged nurses, said Frances, smiling at Finn.

Im surprised you've been able to drag him away from delivering babies and darning up appendices, said Rory.

Frances was obviously uncertain how to take Rory. Dr. Maclean certainly doesn't allow himself enough free time, she said warmly.

Quite so, said Rory, his eyes lighting up with malicious amusement. He's an example to us all. I gather that's the reason your marriage came unstuck, Finn. I heard your ex-wife couldn't cope with the short hours, or was it your double bedside manner up to scratch? However, he smiled at Frances, you seem to be consoling yourself very nicely.

I turned away in embarrassment; if only he wouldn't be so poisonous. Rory grabbed my arm.

You haven't met Emily, have you, Finn?

Yes he has, I said quickly. Oh? Rory raised an eyebrow.

We met at Cocos one day, I said, when Finn came to see her about her ankle. Rory held out his glass to a passing waiter to fill up.

Are you still trying to paint? Finn said.

He's got an exhibition in London in April, I said hotly.

Doesn't really need one, said Finn. He's been making an exhibition of himself for years, and taking Frances by the arm, crossed the room to talk to his host.

Scintillating as ever, said Rory, but his hand shook as he lit one cigarette from another.

Do you like dancing reels, Emily? said Marina.

If I have enough to drink, I said, draining my glass, I reel automatically.

We went in to dinner.

The leathery, sneering faces of ancestors looked down from the walls. The candlelight flickered on the gleaming panelling, the suits of armour, the long polished table with its shining silver and glasses, and on the pearly white shoulders of Marina.

I hope there's a huge flower arrangement in front of me so I don't have to sit staring at Doctor Maclean, said Rory.

I was horrified to see that he and Marina were sitting next to each other on the opposite side of the table. I was next to Calen, who ran his fingers all over my bare back when he pushed my chair in. And now the bad news. On my other side was six feet four inches of Titian-haired disapproval - Finn Maclean.
Hello, Finn, said Calen, how are things, have you met this steaming girl?

Doctor Maclean isn't one of my fans, I said.

Maybe not, said Calen, but he's tall enough to see right down your front, unless I rearrange that sash.

That's better, don't want to give you blood pressure, do we Finn? Always get swollen heads, these quacks, think all the nurses and women patients are nuts about them.

I laughed, Finn didn't.

It must be exciting, running your own hospital, I said to him. He was about to answer when someone shoved a steaming great soup ladle between us. Great fun running your own hospital, I went on. Then it was his turn to help himself to soup.

What's the disease people suffer most often from round here? I asked.

Verbal diarrhoea, muttered Calen.

I was just warming to my subject, asking Finn all the right questions about the hospital and the operations he would perform there, when Calen lifted up the curtain of hair hanging over my left ear and whispered: Christ, I want to take you to bed.

I started to laugh in mid-sentence, then blushed:

I'm awfully sorry, I said to Finn, it's just something Calen said.

Finn obviously thought we were too silly for words and turned his huge back on me and started talking to the girl on his right.

Footmen moved round the table, the clatter of plates mingled with the clink of knives and glasses and the hum of various animated conversations. Lady Downleesh sat at the end of the table, a large imposing woman who must once have been handsome. Only Marina and Rory sat mutely side by side, talking little, eating less. They appeared to see and hear nothing of what was going on around them. Suddenly I felt panicky. They were probably playing footy-footy. I imagined their cloven hoofs entwined. Calen and Finn were temporarily occupied with other conversations. I dropped my napkin and dived under the table to retrieve it. It was very dark. I hoped my eyes would soon become accustomed to it, but they didn't; not enough carrots when I was a child I suppose. I couldn't see which were Rory's or Marina's legs. I grabbed someone's ankle, but it was much too fat for Marina's and twitched convulsively - cheap thrill!!! All the same, I couldn't stay here for ever exciting dowagers. I surfaced again.

Are you all right, Mrs. Balniel? said Lady Downleesh, looking somewhat startled.

Fine, I squeaked, absolutely marvellous soup.

Everyone waiting for you to finish yours, said Finn in an undertone.

Oh I have, I said, I've got a tiny appetite, I never eat between males.

Finn didn't laugh. Pompous old stuffed shirt. Everyone started to talk about fishing as the soup plates were moved.

You're not a bit alike, I said, you and Marina. He shot me a wary glance.

In what way?

Well, she's so wild and you're so well controlled. I can't see you as a medical student putting stuffed gorillas in college scarves down Matron's bed.

He gave me one of those big on-off smiles he must use all the time for keeping people at a polite distance. I was working too hard for that.

Are all the people in this room your patients? I asked. Must be funny to look round a table and know what every single woman looks like with her clothes off.

Galen does anyway, said Finn. What do you do with yourself all day?

Not a lot, I'm not very good at housework. I read and grumble, sometimes I even bite my nails.

You ought to get a job, give you something to do, he went on. What did you do before you met Rory?

Oh, I mistyped letters in several offices, and I did a bit of modelling when I got thin enough, and then I got engaged to an M.P. I don't think I would have been much of an asset to him, and then Rory came along.

It's a full moon tonight, said a horse-faced blonde sitting opposite us. I wonder if the ghost'll walk tonight. Who's sleeping in the west wing?

The Frayns, said Diney Downleesh, lowering her voice, and Rory and his new wife.

What ghost? I whispered nervously to Calen.

Calen laughed. Oh, its nothing. There was a Downleesh younger son a couple of centuries ago, who fell in love with his elder brothers wife. The wife evidently had a soft spot for him as well. One night, when her husband was away, she invited the younger brother into her bedroom. He was just hot-footing along the West Tower where she was sleeping (all tartoed up in his white dressing-gown), when the husband came back, and picking a dirk off the wall, he stabbed him. The younger brother is supposed to stalk the passage when there's a full moon, trying to avenge himself through all eternity for not getting his oats.

How creepy, I said with a shiver.
Ill take care of you, said Calen, putting his hand on my thigh and encountering bare flesh.

Christ, he said.

My only pair of tights split, I said.

Finn Maclean pretended not to notice. Calen filled my glass over and over again.

Eventually we finished dinner and the ball began. The host and hostess stood at the edge of the long gallery welcoming latecomers. Every time the front door opened you could feel a blast of icy air from outside. It was terribly cold in these big houses. The only way to keep warm was to stand near one of the huge log fires that were burning in each room, then two minutes later you were bright scarlet in the face. I could see exactly why Burns said his love was like a red rose.

Rory came up to me. What was Finn Maclean talking to you about? he said suspiciously.

He was stressing the importance of getting one’s teeth into something, I said.

If he got his teeth into me, Id go straight off and have a rabies jab, said Rory.

On with the dance, I said. Let Emily be unconfined.

Come on, Rory, said Diney Downleesh, coming over to us, we need two more people to make up an eightsome over there.

We couldn’t really refuse.

Dum-diddy Dum-diddy Dum-diddy-diddy went the accordions. The men gave strange, unearthly wails, like a train not stopping at a station. We circled to the left, we circled to the right.

Wrong way, hissed Rory, as we swung into the grand chain. When it was my turn in the middle, I made an even worse hash of it, setting to all the wrong people and doing U-turns instead of figures of eight, and whooping a lot. For Christ’s sake stop capering around like the White Heather Club, said Rory under his breath. Women don’t put their hands up, or click their fingers, or whoop.

The next dance, thank God, was an ordinary one. I danced it with Buster, who squeezed me so hard, I thought I’d shoot out of my dress like toothpaste.

Why don’t any of them look as though they’re enjoying themselves? I said.

You can never tell until they fall on the floor, said Buster.

On the other side of the room Marina was dancing with Hamish. She looked so gloriously beautiful and he so yellow and old and decayed I was suddenly reminded of Mary Queen of Scots dancing and dancing her ancient husband into his grave.

The evening wore on. I was short of partners. I danced every dance.

A piper came on, well primed with whisky, and assaulted our ear-drums for a couple of reels. My reputation as a reel-wrecker was growing. I messed up Hamilton House and then the Duke and Duchess of Perth, and then the Sixteensome. On the surface I must have appeared rather like a loose horse in the National, potentially dangerous, thoroughly enjoying myself and quite out of control. But through a haze of alcohol and misery I was aware of two things, Rory’s complete indifference to my behaviour and Finn Maclean’s disapproval. Both made me behave even worse.

I danced a great deal with Calen. I came into my own when they stopped doing those silly reels.

Did your wife dance professionally? I heard a disapproving dowager say to Rory, as I came off the floor after a gruelling Charleston. Calen and I went into the drawing-room for yet another drink. I put my glass down on a gleaming walnut table. When I picked it up two minutes later, there was a large ring on the table.

Oh God, I said, how awful.

Looks better that way, said Calen, looks more lived in somehow. He led me back on to the floor. The music was slow and dreamy now.

You are the promised breath of springtime, sang Calen laying his handsome face against mine. I snuggled up against him for a few laps round the floor, and then I escaped to the loo. Big-boned girls stood around talking about Harrods and their coming-out dances. Really, I thought as I gazed in the mirror, I look very loose indeed. Tight dress, loose morals, I suppose.

I wandered along the long gallery so I could watch the people on the floor. A double line of dancers were engaged with serious faces in executing a reel. Marina and Rory faced one another, expressionless. God they danced beautifully. I was reminded of Lochinvar again: So stately his form and so lovely her face That never a hall such a galliard did grace.

And the brides - maidsens whispered, Twere better by far To have matched our fair cousin with young Lochinvar.

Oh dear, I thought in misery. In this case young Lochinvar seems to have missed the boat, arriving too late and finding his love married to Hamish.

The dance ended. The couples clapped and spilled out into the hall. If only Rory would come and look for me. But it looked as though I’d have to wait for Ladies Excuse Me before I had a chance to dance with him again.
I heard footsteps behind me. I felt two hands go round my waist, I turned hopefully, but it was Calen.

"Ive got a bottle, he said, Lets go and drink it somewhere more secluded. He dropped a kiss on to my shoulder and led me downstairs along a long passage into a conservatory.

Chinese lanterns, hanging round the walls, lit up the huge tropical plants. The scent of azaleas, hyacinths and white chrysanthemums mingled voluptuously with the Arpçge Id poured all over myself. The sound of the band reached us faintly from the hall.

You are the promised breath of springtime, sang Calen, taking me in his arms.

"There isnt any mistletoe, I said.

"We dont need it, said Calen, his grey, dissipated eyes gazing into mine.

Youre rotten to the core, I thought. Mad, bad and dangerous to know. Bed from the neck upwards, and not at all good for Emily. Not that Rory was doing much good for me either.

"God, I want you, said Calen undoing the top button of my dress. He bent his head and kissed the top of my cleavage, and slowly kissed his way up my neck and chin to my mouth.

I didn’t feel anything really, except a desire to slake my loneliness. God, it was a practised kiss. I thought of all those hundreds of women he must have seduced. Hands travelled over my bare back, pressing into every crevasse.

Suddenly a light flicked on in the library next door.

Calen, said a voice, youre wanted on the telephone.

Go to hell, said Calen, burying his face in my neck, dont be a bloody spoilsport, Finn.

Over Calens head, our eyes met. Its Deiche, Finn said.

Oh God, sighed Calen, reluctantly he let me go. You see before you the most henpecked husband in the Highlands. Goodnight, you dream of bliss. He kissed me on the cheek and walked somewhat unsteadily out of the conservatory. Finn and I glared at each other.

You are beyond the pale, I snapped, beyond a whole dairyful of pales. Why do you have to rush around rotting up peoples sex lives, I thought you were a doctor, not a vicar. I lurched slightly without Calen to hold me up.

"You wont get Rory back that way, said Finn. Getting drunk and going to bed with Calen doesnt solve anything.

"Oh it does, it does, I said with a sigh, it gets you through the next half an hour - and half an hour can be an eternity in Scotland.

We went into the hall which was fortunately deserted. What about your friend Frances Nightingale, I said, swinging back and forth on an heraldic leopard that reared up the bottom of the banisters. Isnt she missing you?

Thats my problem, he said.

Look, I said, Im not usually as silly as this. Its a pity youre not as good at mending broken hearts as broken bones.

I suggest, said Finn, you go straight up to bed without making a fool of yourself any further. Take three Alka-Seltzers before you go to sleep, youll feel much better in the morning. Come on. He moved forward to take me upstairs, but I broke away.

Go and jump in the loch, I snarled, and ran away from him up the stairs. I fell into bed, preparing to cry myself to sleep, but I must have flaked out almost immediately.

In the middle of the night, it seemed, I woke up. I didnt know where I was, it was pitch black in the room. The fire had gone out. Where the hell was I? Then I remembered - Downleesh Castle. I put out a hand - groping for Rory. He wasnt there, I was alone in the huge four-poster. Suddenly the room seemed to go unnaturally cold, the wind was blowing a blizzard outside, the snow still falling heavily. As the windows rattled and banged and the doors and stairs creaked, it was like being on board ship. Then I felt my hair standing on end as I remembered the ghost in the white dressing-gown that walked when the moon was full. I gave a sob at the thought of him creeping down those long, musty passages towards me. I was trembling all over. Getting out of bed, I ran my hands along the wall, hysterically groping for a light switch. I couldnt find one. The room grew even colder. Suddenly I gave a gasp of terror as the curtain blew in, and I realized to my horror the window was open. I leapt back into bed. Where the hell was Rory? How could he leave me like this? Suddenly my blood froze as, very, very gently, I heard the door creaking. It stopped, then creaked again, and, very, very gradually, it began to open. I couldnt move, my voice was strangled in my dry throat, my heart pounding.

Oh God, I croaked, oh, please no! I tried desperately to scream as one does in a nightmare, but no sound came out.

Slowly the door opened wider. The curtains billowed again in the through draught from the window, and the light
from the snow revealed a ghostly figure wrapped in white, gold hair gleaming. It suddenly turned and looked in my
direction, and slowly crept towards the bed. Panic overwhelmed me, I was going to be murdered.

Someone was screaming horribly, echoing on and on through the house. The next minute I realized it was me.
The room was flooded with light and there was Buster, standing in the doorway, looking very discomfited in a
white silk dressing-gown. I went on screaming.

Emily, my God, said Buster. Im so sorry, pet. For Christs sake stop making that frightful row. I got into the wrong
bedroom, must have got the wrong wing for that matter.

I stopped screaming and burst into noisy, hysterical sobs. Next minute Finn Maclean barged in, still wearing black
trousers and his white evening shirt.

What the hells going on? he said.

He was followed by the Frayns. She had tied her hair up with a blue bow.

Heres Rory? I sobbed, where is he? Im sorry, Buster, I thought you were the ghost. I was so frightened. My
breath was coming in great strangled gasps. Buster patted my shoulder gingerly.

There, there, poor Emily, he said. Got my wings muddled, he added to Finn. She thought I was the Downleesh
ghost.

Im not surprised after all the liquor she shipped, said Finn. Ill go and get something to calm her down.

Once I started crying I couldnt stop.

Do try and pull yourself together, Emily, said Fiona. Oughtnt you to slap her face or something? she said as Finn
came back with a couple of pills and a glass of water.

Get these down you, he said, gently.

I dont need them, I sobbed, then gave another scream as Rory walked in through the curtains, snowflakes thick on
his hair and his shoulders.

What a lot of people in my wifes bedroom, he said blandly, looking round the room. I didnt know you were
entertaining, Emily. You do keep extraordinary hours. A muscle was going in his cheek, he looked ghastly.

Where have you been? I said, trying and failing to stop crying.

Having a quiet cigarette on the battlements, said Rory. Pondering whether there was life after birth. Hello, Buster,
I didnt see you, how nice of you to drop in on Emily. Does my mother know youre here?

She was quite hysterical, said Fiona, reprovingly.

Im not surprised, said Rory, with all these people in here. He came over and patted me on the shoulder, There,
there, lovie, pack it in now, everythings all right.

I thought Buster was a ghost, I explained, feeling terribly silly. I could only see his dressing-gown and his hair.

You what? For a minute Rory looked at Buster incredulously, and then he leant against the wall and started to
shake with laughter.

I got into the wrong wing, said Buster, looking very discomfited. Perfectly natural mistake in these old houses,
thought I was going into my own bedroom.

Rory sniffed, still laughing. I didnt know ghosts reeked of after-shave. Really, Buster, next time you go bed-
hopping, you should take an A-Z. Just think if you ended up in our hostess room. He looked round the room. Well,
if youve all finished, Id quite like to go to bed.

Finn Maclean glared at Rory for a second and then stalked out of the room, followed by Buster followed by the
Frayns.

What an extraordinary couple, I could hear her saying, do you think they could be a bit mad?

Still laughing, Rory started pulling off his tie. There was a knock on the door.

Probably Buster wondering if hes forgotten some, one, said Rory. Sure enough, Buster stood on the threshold.

Rory, dear boy, just like a word with you.

Knowing you, ill be several words, said Rory.

Dont say anything to your mother about this, will you? I heard Buster saying in a low voice. Shes been under a lot
of strain with her ankle, just taken a sleeping pill, wouldnt want to upset her.

Youre an old goat, Buster, said Rory. But your secret is safe with Emily and me. I cant, alas, vouch for Doctor
Maclean, who is the soul of indiscretion, or for that appalling couple we gave a lift to.

Goodness, I said after he gone. Do you think he was being unfaithful to Coco?

Probably, said Rory. He and my mother trust each other just about as far as they can throw each other, which
always seems a good basis for marriage.

But whose bedroom was he trying to get into? I asked.

Probably taking pot-luck, said Rory.

Marinas perhaps, I said, then could have bitten my tongue off.

Marina left hours ago, she and Hamish arent staying here, said Rory. They were having the most frightful row
when they left. They should lay off arguing occasionally, a short rest would re-charge their batteries for starting again.

So he hadn't been with Marina. Instead he'd been on the battlements by himself in a blizzard, driven by what extremes of despair. Somehow that seemed even worse. He got into bed, put his arms round me and kissed me on the forehead. I could never understand his changes of mood.

Sorry you were frightened by Buster, he said, and the next moment he was asleep. I lay awake for a long time. Towards dawn he rolled over and caught hold of me, groaning. Oh my darling, my little love. I realized he was asleep and, with a sick agony, that it certainly wasn't me he was talking to.
FOR the first time I dreaded Christmas. At home it had been our own, cozy, womb-like festival, but with Rory there wasn't likely to be peace on earth, or goodwill towards men. Half-heartedly I chose a fir tree from the plantation behind our house and set it in a tub, put holly on the walls, strung a bit of mistletoe from the drawing-room light.

On Christmas Eve I went into Penlorren to do last-minute shopping and buy some little presents for Rory's stocking. I left Rory cleaning his gun for the shoot Buster had arranged for Boxing Day.

When I got back, weighed down with parcels, there was a car parked outside the gate. I let myself in and was just about to shout I was back, when I heard raised voices from the studio. I tiptoed closer so I could distinguish them. One was like rough sand with a pronounced Scottish accent, the other aristocratic, drawling, silken with menace. Through the door I could see Finn and Rory facing each other, like a huge lion and a sleek, slim, black panther, obviously in the middle of a blazing row. Neither of them heard me.

Well, Doctor? said Rory, the words dripping with insolence. Why are you hounding me like this?

Because I've got several things I want to say to you.

Well, don't say them now, Emily'll be back any moment.

I don't know what devilish game you're up to this time, said Finn, but you'd better stop playing cat and mouse with my sister. Leave her alone, you've done enough damage.

I felt my throat go dry. I held on to the door handle for support.

Marina's over twenty-one. Surely she's old enough to take care of herself, said Rory.

You know she can't, thundered Finn. You of all people must know how near the edge she is. Don't you ever think of Hamish?

Not if I can help it, said Rory in a bored voice. Or Emily?

Leave Emily out of it. She's my problem. You should really visit us more often, Finn. You're like a breath of fresh air.

You damned little rat, roared Finn. You're going to carry on as before, aren't you?

Well, things are slightly more complicated now, but on the whole, Doctor, you've got a pretty clear view of things.

You know I can put the police on you, don't you? said Finn.

Suddenly Rory lost his temper. He went as white as a sheet, his black eyes blazed. You wouldn't dare, he hissed. Your family would come out of it as badly as mine.

I don't care.

Their faces were almost touching in their rage.

Then Rory's control seemed to desert him. He sprang at Finn, howling abuse, his fingers round Finns throat.

At one moment it seemed as though Finn was going to be murdered. The next, Rory had gone down before a crashing blow on the jaw, and Finn was standing over him, fists clenched, about to kick Rory's head in.

No! I screamed. No! Don't touch him.

Finn swung round, his yellow eyes blazing. Then he looked down at Rory.

That's only the beginning, Rory, he said. I won't be so gentle with you next time.

And he was gone.

Are you all right? I said.

Fine, he said. I do love Christmas, don't you? It brings out those delightful histrionic qualities latent in all of us.

I didn't laugh.

I suppose you're going to tell me he was talking nonsense, I said, that there wasn't any truth in his accusations.

Rory poured himself a drink and downed it in one, then he banged the glass down.

What do you think, Emily? That's what matters.

I don't think anything, I said, biting my lip to stop myself crying. I just know you haven't made love to me for nearly three months and its driving me crazy. Then Finn comes here and says all these things, and they seem to add up.

Rory picked up the gun from the table and examined it. So, you're not getting your ration, he said softly. Put that thing away, I said nervously.

Does it frighten you? Poor, frustrated Emily. He lifted the gun, his finger on the trigger.

Don't! I screamed.

He aimed the gun upwards. There was a muted explosion, the crash of a light bulb, and the studio was in darkness. The next minute a wedge of muscle and flesh hurled itself against me, knocking the breath out of my body,
pinioning me to the carpet. Then Rorys mouth ground against mine with such intensity our teeth clashed. I struggled helplessly like a fly against a wall, trying to push him away.

No, Rory, no, I shrieked.

You wanted it, he swore. Youre bloody well going to get it.

It was over in a few seconds. I lay on the floor, rocking from side to side, my hands over my mouth. My ribs felt as though theyd crack with agony from the dry sobs I couldnt utter.

Rory flicked on the side light and shone it in my face. Thats what you wanted, wasnt it? You dont seem pleased.

I gazed at him dumbly, I could feel the tears welling out of my eyes.

You hate my guts, dont you? I whispered.

Its your lack of guts, I hate, he said.

Then, suddenly, he put his arms round me and pulled me against him. I jerked my head away.

Oh, Emily, Emily, he muttered, Im so miserable, and Ive made you miserable, too. Forgive me, I dont know what gets into me.

Running a dry tongue over my lips and tasting the blood congealing there, I digested this outburst. I should have tried to comfort him, to find out what drove him to these black, uncontrollable rages. But I didnt feel up to it. Without a word, I shook him off, got to my feet, and walked out of the room, banging the door shut.
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

LOOKING back on a time of intense unhappiness, one fortunately remembers very little. Our marriage was into injury time. Somehow we got through Christmas and the next month; hardly speaking, licking our wounds, yet still putting up a front to the outside world. Over and over I made plans to leave, but could never quite bring myself to. In spite of everything I still loved Rory.

February brought snow, turning the island into a place of magic.

Cocos ankle recovered and she decided to give a birthday party for Buster.

Rory went to Glasgow for the night to stock up with paint, but was due back at lunchtime on the day of the party.

I went to sleep and had the most terrible nightmare about Marina and Rory, lying tangled in each others arms, asleep on the floor. I woke up in floods of tears, with the moon in my eyes and the screaming horrors in my mind. I groped for Rory beside me, and then remembered he wasnt there. I was too frightened to go back to sleep again. I got up and cleaned the house from top to toe (my charwoman had been off for several weeks with rheumatism), and spent hours cooking Rory a gorgeous lunch to welcome him home. Then I went out and bought two bottles of really good wine. From now on I decided I was going to make a last effort to save my marriage.

At twelve o'clock the telephone rang. It was Rory. He was still in Glasgow. Hed be back later, in time for Cocos party.

Why bother to come back home at all? I said, and slammed down the telephone, all my good resolutions gone to pot. How the hell was I to fill in the time until he got back? I refused to cry. I decided to drive into Penlorren and buy Buster a present.

Two miles from home I suddenly realized Id come out without my purse, and decided to turn round and get it. The road was icy and inches deep in snow. My U-turn was disastrously unsuccessful. The next thing, I was stuck across the road, the wheels whirring up snow every time I pressed the accelerator.

Suddenly, round the corner, a dark blue car came hurtling towards me at breakneck speed. It was upon me, it must crash into me. There was no stopping it.

It was all over in a flash. The dark blue car swung miraculously to the right, its mudguard only scraping the front of my car, and came to a halt in a little ditch just beyond.

Trust my luck. It was my old enemy Finn Maclean who got out of the car, all red hair and lowered black brows, jaw corners and narrow, infuriated eyes. What the blazes do you think he began, then he realized it was me, took a deep breath and said, God, I might have known.

He looked me over in a way that made me feel very small, and hot and uncomfortable.

I couldnt help it, I blurted out, still shaking from shock.

Thats what Im complaining of, he said wearily. Im sure you couldnt help it, only an imbecile would have attempted to turn a car round here.

Ive said Im sorry, I said, colouring hotly. Anyway, you were driving much too fast and my car skidded. No one could have moved it.

Get out, said Finn brusquely.

I got out. He got in and turned the car immediately. Then he got out and held the door open for me.

Its quite easy, he said, infuriatingly. You were just using too much choke.

It was the last straw. I got into the car, just looked at him and burst into tears; then, crashing the gears, I roared off home. God knows how I got back without the whole countryside swimming with tears.

I dont know how long I cried, but long enough to make me look as ugly as sin. Then I noticed the potted plant Coco had given me for Christmas. It looked limp and dejected.

Needs a bit of love and attention, like me, I said dismally, and getting up, I got a watering can and gave it some water.

Then I remembered someone had once told me if you watered rush mats it brought out the green. I heard a step. I must have left the door open. Hoping by some miracle it might be Rory, I looked up. It was Finn Maclean.

Dont you come cat-footing in here, I snarled.

Then I realized how stupid it must look, me standing there watering carpets in the middle of the drawing-room.

Im not quite off my rocker, I said weakly. Its meant to bring out the green in the rushes.

Finn began to laugh.

Whenever I see you youre either tearing up roses with your teeth, trying to block the traffic, or watering carpets. How come youre such a nutcase?

I dont know, I muttered. I think I was dropped as an adult.
Youre going to water the whole floor in a minute, he said, taking the watering can away from me.
For a minute he looked at me consideringly. Aware how puffy and red my eyes were, I gazed at my feet. Then he said, I came to apologize for biting your head off this morning. I was tired, I hadnt been to bed. Still, it was no excuse, and Im sorry.
I was so surprised I sat down on the sofa.
Thats all right, I said, I had a lousy night too, otherwise I wouldnt have cried.
Whereas Rory?
In Glasgow.
Im going over to Mullin this afternoon to see a patient, why dont you come too?
I get sick on planes, I said quickly.
You cant land a plane there. Im taking the speedboat. Ill pick you up in half an hour. We neednt talk if we dont want to.
IT was a beautiful day: the sun shone and the hills glittered like mountains of salt against an arctic blue sky. The gloom was still on me as we ploughed over the dark green water, but I found it easier to endure, particularly when I found Finn and I could talk or not talk, with a reasonable amount of ease. When we moored and I leapt on to the landing-stage, he caught me, and his hands were steady and reassuring like a man used to handling women.

As we walked up the mountainside to a little grey farmhouse, the bracken glittered white like ostrich feathers of purest glass, snow sparkled an inch on every leaf, icicles hung four feet deep. Suddenly, an old woman, her arm in plaster, came running out of an outhouse beside the farm.

"Doctor!" she screamed, thank God yeve come, its me wee cow.

"Careful, youll slip," said Finn, taking her good arm. "Whats the matter with her?"

"Shes started calving and things dinna look too well. Angus went to the mainland for help, but hes not back yet. Ill have a look at her," said Finn, going into the outhouse.

"A terrified, moaning, threshing cow was lying in the corner."

"Easy now," said Finn soothingly, and went up to her. He had a look then called, "Shes pretty far gone, Bridget."

The old woman promptly started crying and wailing that it was their only cow.

"Go back to the house, Finn told her, Ill do what I can. Youll only be a hindrance with that arm. Come on, he added to me, you can help."

"I cant, I squeaked. I dont know anything about cows. Shall I take the boat back to the island and get help?"

"Its too late," said Finn, rolling up his sleeves. "As he spoke, another spasm of pain convulsed the cow. Oh, all right, I said sulkily. Tell me what to do."

"Hold these," said Finn, and when I say "Pull", pull hard.

"Gawd," I muttered. "What a way to spend Thursday. On the trampled straw, by lamplight, we worked together, Finn giving the directions, trying to spare me as much as possible, yet twice unable to save me getting knocked down in the filthy straw."

"We didnt talk. Our task was too grim and too desperate. I realized he combined immense physical strength with gentleness. He knew how to be kind. The tortured animal trusted him. I found a strange satisfaction in doing what he told me."

"At last, filthy, reeking and utterly exhausted, we stared at each other across the two animals. A thin, long-legged calf lay on the straw, its mother languidly licking its face."

"Oh, isnt it sweet! I said, tears pricking my eyelids."

Finn brushed the sweat off his face with a sleeve."

"Well done," he said. I felt as though hed given me the Nobel Prize. "Come inside and have a wash. Bridgetll give us a cup of tea."

On the boat home he said, "You look absolutely whacked."

"It isnt often I spend the afternoon playing midwife to a cow, I said."

"Come along to the surgery tomorrow, he said. Id like to have a look at you."

"I blushed, absurdly flattered at his concern."

"Hows the hospital going? I asked."

"Fine. Three wards completed already."

"You must be run off your feet."

"He shrugged his shoulders. Ive got a new intern starting next week whichll help."

"Whats he like?"

"Its a she."

"Oh, I said, momentarily nonplussed. Whats she like?"

"Very attractive. I chose her myself."

"For yourself?"

"Bit early to tell. Im a romantic, I suppose. All part of the Celtic hang-up. I dont think the man-woman thing should be conducted on a rabbit level."

The lights were coming on in Penlorren now, pale in the fading light. I felt stupidly displeased at the thought of some glamorous woman doctor working with Finn. I saw her with slim ankles, and not a hair out of place, white coat open to show an ample cashmere bosom.

"What happened to your marriage? I asked."

"My wife liked having a Harley Street husband, and giving little dinner parties in the suburbs with candlelight and
sparkling wine.

Oh dear, I said, giggling. Not quite your forté?

On the contrary, I look very good by candlelight. It was my fault as much as hers. She was beautiful, capable and absolutely bored me to death. I married her without really knowing her. Most people dont love human beings anyway. They just love an idealized picture in their heads.

I looked at his face, softened now. Ireve never liked red hair, but Finns was very dark and thick and grew beautifully close to his head. Ireve never liked freckles either, or broken noses, but he had extraordinary eyes, yellow, flecked, with thick black lashes, and his mouth, now it wasnt set in its usual hard line, was beautiful. The wind was blowing his trousers against his hard, muscular legs. He was in great shape, too. In spite of his size, he moved about the boat like a cat.

Are you coming to Cocos party tonight? I asked.

I might, he said. Depends whats up at the hospital.

Please come, I said, then blushed. I mean, if youre not too busy.
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RORY was in the bath when I got back, wearing my bath cap but still managing to look absurdly handsome. Come in, he said. Im indecent. Where have you been?
Out and about, I said. Can I have that bath after you?
I went into the bedroom. I didnt want to tell him about Finn.
He followed me, dripping from the bath.
Wheres my white silk shirt? he asked.
Oh, er, Im glad you asked that question.
Is this it? he said pulling a crumpled pink rag of a shirt out of the pillowcase of washing on the bed. Well, it could be, I said.
God, said Rory. He went on pulling crumpled pink shirts out like a conjurer whipping out coloured handkerchiefs. How do you manage it? he asked.
I left one of my red silk scarves in the machine by mistake, I said, miserably.
Next time you want to do some dyeing, just count me out, he said, and starting to get dressed, he put both feet into one leg of his underpants and fell over, which did not improve his temper.
How was Edinburgh? I said, knowing that Marina had her singing lesson there once a fortnight.
He paused a second too long. Ive been to Glasgow, he said, evenly.
Rubbed raw with rancour, we arrived at the party. It was a dazzling affair, all the locals done up to the eyeballs in wool tweed. I was wearing about a quarter as much clothing as everyone else.
Pretty as a picture, said Buster, coming and squeezing me.
Happy Birthday, said Rory. I thought of buying you a book, Buster, but I knew youd already got one.
I heard someone laugh behind us. It was Marina, looking ravishing in a high-necked, amber wool dress with long sleeves. Id forgotten about her being so beautiful. Since Christmas, she had become, in my tortured imagination, a sort of man-eating gorgon, with snakes writhing in her hair and corpses strewn about her feet. She smiled into Rorys eyes and went over to say hello to Coco.
Even the high-necked dress couldnt conceal two dark bruises under her chin.
Shes got love bites all over her neck, I hissed at Rory out of the corner of my mouth.
I suppose you recognize the teeth marks, he hissed back.
Well, they couldnt be Hamishs, I said. He hasnt got any teeth left.
E-m-ilee, said Rory quietly, youve got very bitchy since I married you.
You were bitchy before I married you! I snapped. It must be catching.
The party was a roaring success.
Everyone drank a great deal too much. I was sitting on the sofa with Rory several hours later, when Marina came up and sat down beside us.
Hello darlings. Ive decided to give up Hamish for Lent. Do you think Elizabeths dress quite comes off? she added, pointing at a fat blonde.
It will do later in the evening, if I know Elizabeth, said Rory.
Buster came up and filled up our drinks.
Hello, Emily, he said. You look a bit bleak. Not having words with Rory, I hope.
Rory and I dont have words any more, we just have silences, I said, getting somewhat unsteadily to my feet.
Come back, said Rory. Buster wants to look down your dress.
But I fled out of the room, falling over Busters Labrador who took it in extremely bad part. Why didnt Finn come? Every time the doorbell rang I hoped it was him. People were dancing in the dining-room now. I talked for hours to some dreary laird with a haw-haw voice and a come heather look in his eye.
Hamish came up to us. He looked greyer and more haggard than ever, but his eyes had lost none of their goatish gleam.
Emily, he said, I havent talked to you all evening. Come and dance.
How could I refuse? On the dance floor, Rory and Marina were swaying very respectably, two feet apart. It was just the way they were looking at each other, like souls in torment.
Just like lovebirds, arent they? said Hamish bitterly.
I looked at him startled.
On second thoughts, he said, its time you and I had a little chat.
He led me into a study off the hall, and shut the door. My heart was thumping unpleasantly.
What do you want? I said.
Just to talk. Doesn't that little ménage upset you?
What ménage? I said quickly.
My lovely wife and your handsome husband. We've each been dealt a marked card, darling. Neither of them gives a damn about us.
I don't want to listen, I said, going towards the door.
But you must, he said, catching my arm, his face suddenly alight with malevolence. It's quite a story. When Marina married me six months ago, I was foolish enough to think she cared for me. But, within weeks, I realized she only wanted me for my money.
If she was after money, I said, why didn't she marry Rory? He's just as rich as you are.
Just as rich, said Hamish. But Rory, if you remember, only inherited his money after he married you. That was one of the conditions of Rory's father, Hectors, will. Rory wouldn't get a bean until he was safely married.
Then why didn't he marry Marina?
That was another condition of the will. Hector made another condition that if he married Marina, he wouldn't get a penny. It would all go to charity. So he married you to get his hands on the cash.
I felt myself go icy cold.
But I don't understand, I whispered. That doesn't sound like Rory at all. If he really wanted to marry Marina, he wouldn't have cared a damn about not inheriting the money. He could easily have got a job, or earned money from his painting, if he'd wanted to.
Oh, my poor child, said Hamish mockingly. What a lot you've got to learn. Can you understand that it's not possible for Rory ever to marry Marina, money or no money?
Why not? I said.
Because they're brother and sister.
What! I gasped in horror. They can't be.
I'm afraid so. Hector, laird of the island, Lord Lieutenant, pillar of respectability on the surface, was an old ram on the side. Like claiming droit de seigneur and all that. He was very keen on Marinas mother for a long time. I'm afraid the result was Marina.
I felt as though I was going to faint.
Brother and sister, I whispered again.
Well, half-brother and sister. Hardly a healthy union. Particularly as there's always been a strong strain of insanity in Hector's family. But it doesn't seem to deter them, does it?
How long have they known? I muttered.
Only about a year. There's always been a blood feud between the Balnies and the Macleans, as you know. So when Rory and Marina fell in love, they didn't exactly broadcast the fact, until one night Rory got drunk and had a row with Hector (they never really got on) and told him he was going to marry Marina. Hector nearly burst a gut. The next day he told Rory the truth, and that under no circumstances could he marry Marina. Rory went berserk with rage. The shock killed Hector. He died that night of a heart attack. But the will still stood.
My God, I said, dully.
So Marina married me in a fit of despair, Hamish went on. And Rory went south and married you, which drove Marina mad with jealousy. And now, as you see, they're up to their old tricks.
My brain was reeling. I felt as if I'd been kicked in the gut. Marina and Rory, brother and sister: Byron and Augusta Leigh, star-crossed lovers, a union so fatally seductive because it was impossible.
Oh, poor Rory, I breathed, now I understand. Oh, poor, poor Rory.
Poor you and me, breathed Hamish in my ear.
He was standing very close to me, one hand fondling my wrist, his eyes fixed on my face in a greedy way. I could feel the warmth of his body, his hand stealing up my bare arm, his hot breath on my shoulder.
You mustn't be shy of me, little Emily, he said caressingly, slipping his arm round my waist. I think you're very pretty, even if Rory doesn't. Why don't we console one another?
No! I screamed. No, no, no! Go away, you revolting old man. Don't touch me!
I leapt to my feet, ran across the room, wrenched open the door and went slap into Finn Maclean.
Hello, he said. I've been looking for you. Then he looked at me more closely. Hey, what's the matter?
Nothing, everything, I sobbed, and shoving him violently aside, I fled past him. I ran out into the garden. It had been snowing again, the drive was virginally white in the pale moonlight. All was deathly silent. The snow lay soft and tender on the lawn. Crying great, heaving sobs, I ran to the edge of the cliffs. The sea stretched out, opaque, black and star-powdered. The lighthouse flashed like a blue gem, the rocks gleamed evilly two hundred feet below.
Oh, Rory, I sobbed. I can't go on, I can't go on. But as I took a step forward, my arm was caught in a vice-like grip.
Dont be a bloody little fool, said a voice. Nothings that important.
It was Finn.
Let me go, I sobbed. I want to die.
He held on to my arm and finally I collapsed against him.
Oh, Finn, I sobbed. What am I going to do?
He held me for a minute, then, putting an arm round my shoulders, he half carried me across the snow to the stables where Buster kept his horses.
I collapsed on to a pile of hay, still sobbing bitterly. Finn let me cry; he just sat there stroking my shoulders.
Finally I gulped. Its not true, is it, Marina and Rory both being Hectors children?
Finn paused, his hand tightening on my shoulder, then he said, It is, Im afraid.
Oh, God, I said. Why didnt anyone tell me?
No one knew except me and Rory and Marina. Marina must have told Hamish. Even Coco doesnt know about it.
How long have you known? I said dully.
As long as I can remember. I got back from school early one afternoon. I heard laughter coming from the bedroom and went in and found my mother in bed with Hector. My father was away at the time. I ran and hid in the woods. My father came home that night and sent out a search party. When they found me, my father thrashed me for worrying my mother. I never told him the truth. I suppose kids have a sort of honour even at that age. But I never forgave Hector, and he never forgave me for discovering what an old fraud he was.
So you always knew Rory and Marina were brother and sister?
He nodded. About a year ago, I came back from London for a weekend and discovered, to my horror, theyd fallen in love and were thinking of getting married. I tried to stop Marina, but shed got the bit between her teeth by then, so I went to Hector and told him hed got to tell Rory the truth.
Not a very pretty story, is it? I said.
Thats why Ive been behaving like a policeman, trying to keep them apart, said Finn. With insanity on both sides and a blood tie between them, it would be absolutely fatal if Rory got Marina pregnant.
I sat numbly, trying to take it all in. Finn was holding me in his arms now, stroking my hair, soothing me like a child. I felt the hardness of his body, the gentleness of his hands. It was so long since Id been in a mans arms. Ive always said I have no sense of timing.
His mouth was so near to mine. Almost instinctively, I put my face up and kissed him. The next moment he was kissing me back.
Heavens, I said, wriggling away, absolutely appalled. Im terribly sorry.
Dont be, he said softly. Its one of the nicest surprises Ive ever had, and he kissed me again. This time it was a kiss that meant business. I tried to be frigid and unyielding, but could feel the warm waves of lust coasting all over me. I felt my body go weak. I was torn between desire and utter exhaustion.
Strange things happen in stables, I muttered weakly. One moment Im a midwife, next moment Im bowling towards adultery. Talk about My Tart Is In The Highlands.
Finn smiled, got up and pulled me to my feet. Come on, Im taking you home.
Please dont, I said.
Listen, he said. I never meant this to happen when I brought you in here. I want you very much, but I think now is neither the time nor the place. Youre slightly drunk and youre suffering from severe shock. Im not going to let you do anything you might regret in the morning.
He drove me home. Outside the house he burrowed in his bag and produced a couple of sleeping pills.
Take them tonight, immediately you get in, and come and see me at the surgery tomorrow at eleven. Then we can talk things over.
When I got in I hardly had the strength to undress. I fell, rather than got, into bed, pulled the sheets like a curtain over my head and dropped into a deep sleep.
CHARTER NINETEEN I WOKE up next morning feeling ghastly, went straight to the loo and was violently sick. I had a blinding headache, took four Alka-Seltzers and was sick again. Rory was still fast asleep.
I tiptoed around the bedroom getting my clothes on. I only just managed to make it to Finns surgery.
There was only one woman in there when I arrived. Finn came out. He looked tired, but he smiled at me reassuringly.
Ill just see Mrs. Cameron first, he said. She wont take long.
I gazed unseeingly at magazines and wondered why I was feeling quite so awful. Finns receptionist eyed me with interest.
Mrs. Balniel looking like a road accident, she must have been thinking.
Mrs. Cameron came out, thanking Finn effusively, and I went into his surgery.
It was large, and rather untidy, and amazingly comforting. Finn shut the door and leant against it. Then he came across the room and kissed me. It was a different kiss from last night. That was alcohol and pent-up emotion. This was slow, measured, tender, and left me just as weak with lust.

Arent we doing fearful things to the Hippocratic Oath? I said, flopping on to a chair.
I couldnt give a damn. You arent my patient yet, though you ought to be, you look terrible!
Thanks, I said.
And infinitely desirable. Nothing a few weeks away from Rory wouldnt cure.
I was as sick as a dog all morning, I said. Nerves and booze, I suppose.
Ill tell Miss Bates to shove off, then Ill give you a going over.
Youd better wipe that lipstick off first, I said. Finn laughed.
He wasnt laughing half an hour later.
Youre pregnant, he said.
I was stunned by the news. But I cant be pregnant! I gasped. Rory hasnt laid a finger on me for months. Then I remembered. Oh, God, I said.
Whats the matter? asked Finn.
After that row on Christmas Eve when you knocked Rory over, he was so mad with rage, he sort of raped me.
That must have been it, said Finn.
My brain was whirling. Me - pregnant with Rorys child! What sort of chance would a baby have with Rory not loving me, and me fancying Finn absolutely rotten all of a sudden? I had a nightmare vision of Rory and me shouting at each other across the babys cot, of the baby crying all day, and Rory going spare because he couldnt work.

Oh, heavens, I said shakily.
Finn went to a cupboard in the corner of the room and got out a bottle of brandy and two glasses. Wed better have a drink, he said.
As I watched him fill the glasses, I was filled with a ridiculous mawkish sadness. Ill never be able to memorize every freckle on his face now, I thought, or see the grey hairs gradually take the fire out of that red mane.
He put a glass beside me, then took hold of my frozen hands. His were warm and strong and comforting; I felt an irresistible urge to collapse in tears on his shoulder.
Its a hell of a mess, he said gently, but it doesnt matter, well sort something out.
Can we? I asked dolefully.
Look, he went on. You and Rory are washed up.
Anyone can see that. Do you want to keep the baby? I thought for a minute. Yes I do. Very much.
That means youll stay with Rory?
What else can I do? I said bitterly. Im signed up for this gig and Ive got to play.
You can move in with me.
The room reeled. For a moment all I could think of was the blissful sanctity of Finn taking care of me.
Oh, Finn, I said, the tears welling up in my eyes, Id drive you round the twist.
I wouldnt think so. We can always try.
But what about the baby?
He shrugged his shoulders.
Its Rorys, I said, taking a slug of my brandy and nearly choking. Youd hate that, youd keep seeing all the things you hate about Rory in its character. And your reputation on the island would be absolutely ruined - your worst enemys wife shacking up with you, and pregnant to boot.
My reputation can take it, said Finn.
Is it because you want to score off Rory by taking me away from him? I blurted out.
It was a terrible thing to say. Rory would have certainly hit me for it, but Finn merely looked at me consideringly.
I dont know, he said. I thought about that for a long time last night, after Id dropped you off. Of course theres an element of truth. I dont have any compunction about taking you away from Rory. I know hes made you miserable and unhappy. But even if you were married to my best friend, I dont think it would make any difference. Id still want you. Its one of the unattractive things about loving someone - one just suspends all moral values. Then his face softened. But there are an awful lot of attractive things about it. Come here.

No, I said desperately. Please, no.
He held out his hands. Why not? I want you.
Its very kind of you to suggest it, but I couldnt.
Kind of me! What the hell are you talking about?
I know why youre asking me. Its from motives of chivalry. Marinas your sister and you feel guilty about the way
she and Rory have fouled up my life.

Finn drained his glass. Emily, will you please stop talking nonsense! I'm the least chivalrous person alive. I never do anything to please anyone except myself. I know that's not true. You took me sailing yesterday.

Look, said Finn, I took you sailing yesterday because I thought you needed a break. Now I realize I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you - pulling up my roses with your teeth - in a black see-through nightie.

Oh, I felt myself blushing furiously. How kind of you to put it like that.

And you don't believe a word of it?

No, you've never have asked me to move in with you. If I hadn't been pregnant. I searched feverishly for a tissue and mopped my eyes.

Of course I wouldn't, said Finn. I'd have taken it more slowly.

You can't want to move in with someone you've known such a short time, T said.

He had taken a step forward, but he checked himself at that. I see, he said.

I gave my eyes a final wipe.

I'm sorry. I don't mean to keep crying - it's the shock of the baby, and finding out about Rory and Marina last night. And, besides, I'd be hopeless for you - I mean long-term. I don't have the right face for greeting patients, and I'd forget to pass on messages about cardiacs and things.

We can still go on seeing each other.

No, I said. When you're pregnant you can't go around carrying on with other people. I mean it turns you into a sort of nun, having a baby.

Finn laughed, but bitterly. You know, do you? From your quarter of an hour's experience. You'll still have to come in for check-ups. If you don't want to see me, I suppose Jackie Barrett can look after you.

Who's she?

My new intern.

Oh, God, I minded about her. I minded like hell. I fought back the tears. I didn't dare kiss Finn, or I might have broken down.

Goodbye and thank you, I said.

Finn looked suddenly tired and defeated. All right, go back to Rory if you want to, but remember I'm here. You've only to pick up a telephone and I'll come and take you away.
WHICH wasnt a very good basis for trying to rebuild a marriage. When I got home, I was all screwed up to tell Rory about the baby, but he was so immersed in slapping blue paint on a huge canvas, absolutely lost to the world, that I funked it and so, having not told him, I found it more and more difficult.

In fact, he was so obsessed with work for the next few weeks, he hardly noticed me at all.

I thought endlessly about the baby. No more staying in the cinema to see the film once again - got to get home to the baby-sitter. No more running away to sea. I thought of dirty nappies and sleepless nights, and maternity bras, and getting bigger and heavier, and less attractive to Rory.

But somehow, I felt excited too. Growing inside was something that, when it arrived, would really need me. Something I could love totally and unashamedly, as I wanted to love Rory, as circumstances had stopped me loving Finn.

I kept wanting to tell Rory. I bought a bottle of champagne, and day after day took it out of its hiding place at the back of a drawer, then funked it and put it away.

I made a concerted attempt to win Rory over sexually, but it had been God, Im tired, for days now. As soon as I got into bed, hed switch off his light, turn his back on me, and pretend to be asleep.

And Id lie beside him, tears sliding into my hair, listening to the sea washing on the rocks below and thinking of Finn, who was probably still working, going out to deliver a baby or soothing a restless patient. His harsh, beautifully ugly face would swim before my eyes, and I would wonder how much longer I could hold out.

I went to every party on the island too, in the hope that I might see him, but he never turned up. Which meant I drank too much and was even sicker the morning after.

I did see Miss Barrett, the new intern, though. I couldnt resist having a gawp. I went in for a check-up and had a great shock. She was naturally blonde, and slim - one of those women who look marvellous without make-up - deep, subtle, competent, able to keep her mouth shut. The antithesis of me.

Did I imagine, too, an added warmth in her voice when she talked about Finn? Dr. Maclean likes things done this way. Dr. Maclean doesnt approve of pregnant women putting on too much weight. Dr. Maclean recommends these vitamin pills.

And Dr. Maclean recommends me, I wanted to shout at her. Hes mine, and trespassers will be very much prosecuted.

The weeks passed. Slowly I sank into despair. I could hardly bring myself to get up in the morning and get dressed. One Sunday morning, however, when I was trying to keep down some toast and marmalade, I suddenly caught Rory looking at me.

You look awful, he said. What are you trying to turn yourself into?

Then followed a ten-minute tongue lashing about my general attitude towards him and everyone else on the island. I was lazy, childish, stubborn, stupid and un-co-operative. Why didnt I do something instead of slopping round all day?

What do you think I should be doing? Going to evening classes, exchanging meaningful glances over the basket-work and all that? I said.

Maybe; you could go out more, see people. Buster offered you his horses anytime you wanted to ride. Anything but this plastic tomb youve sealed yourself into.

Is that about it? I asked in a frozen voice.

Yes, thats it. Im sorry I had to be rough. I didnt mean to hit so hard. It just came out that way.

I got up without looking at him and dragged myself upstairs. He was right. One look at myself in the mirror sent me yelping to the bathroom to wash my hair.

Then I rang Buster and asked if I could come and ride with him that afternoon. Rory was absurdly pleased and even rubbed my hair dry for me.

Buster and I rode up the lower slopes through beech trees between mossy rocks. Walter Scott ran about, snorting and chasing rabbits. Finally we reached the top.

Hospitals finished now, said Buster, pointing his whip at the new building on the right. Finns got it up jolly fast. Have you been inside?

I shook my head.

Busters voice - the usual mixture of sex, gin and a dash of bitters - flowed on. Have you seen Finns new popsy?
I stiffened. Popsy?

Dr. Barrett, went on Buster. Shes an absolute smasher. Took my lumbago to see her last week - can hardly keep my hands off her.

Are she and Finn having a walk-out? I asked.

Why do you think he brought her up here? said Buster, as though it were a matter of course. Finn isnt daft.

Black gloom overwhelmed me as I rode back down the hill. Finn in love with someone else. That left Rory and me, didnt it?

I think Ill go straight home now, I said.

Isnt Rory taking us out to dinner? asked Buster. He is, I said, but theres something I want to tell him first. And I want to change too.

We stabled the horses, and as I drove back home I decided now was the time to tell Rory about the baby.

Well have to face the music together, mate, I said to the child inside me. Maybe hell surprise us and be delighted after all.

I went into the house and tiptoed upstairs to get the champagne. The bedroom door was open.

And I caught them red-handed.
MARTHA and Rory in bed. For a second all I could think was how beautiful they looked on my dark blue sheets - her glorious mass of red hair cascading all over the pillows. Just like a Hollywood film. Two people too beautiful for real life.

Then I screamed and they looked round. Marina recovered from the shock first.

"I'm sorry, Emily," she said. "But you had to know sometime.

"Oh, I've known, I said. I've known for ages, and I've known too about your being brother and sister. That rocked them.

"I mean, it's nice your keeping it in the family, I went on, but that sort of thing is rather frowned on in the prayer book and by the law, I should think.

I ran out of the room, locked myself in the loo and started to cry. After a few minutes someone came and rattled on the door.

"Go away!" I screamed. "Use the other loo. This one's engaged.

"Em, it's me. Marina's gone. For God's sake come out. I want to help you.

"Help me?" I felt my tears escalating into hysterical laughter. "Help me? What can you do to help me?

"Let me in, or I'll break the door down.

"No!" I screamed. "No! No!" There was a silence, and then an explosion.

I screamed again. The door was swinging and Rory was standing in the doorway, a smoking gun in his hand. He shot the lock out.

"Now, come out!" he said, grabbing my arm and dragging me into the bedroom. Walter Scott sat whimpering in the corner.

I know why you married me, I hissed. Just to release the cash from Hector's will, to give you a front of respectability so you could carry on with Marina, your dear little sister.

"Rory was trembling. Who told you all this?" he said. "Hamish did, I said.

"He's a swine, said Rory.

"He's unhappy, I said. He didn't want anyone to be left out. He certainly hasn't behaved any worse than you.

"When you're desperate, you suspend any kind of morality," Rory said, echoing Finns words of two months before.

Then he told me, quietly and without any emotion, that when he first met me, he'd been very attracted to me, had thought I was so gentle, loving and understanding, that we might even make a go of it. He said he had intended, had tried desperately hard, to break it off with Marina, but had failed to do so. And there was nothing he could plead by way of excuse or justification. Volcanoes of invective and abuse kept boiling up inside me, and sinking down again.

It was his detachment that paralysed my powers of speech. But for the cold, fixed shadows in his eyes, and his deathly pallor, he seemed his normal self.

"Marina and I do realize we're social pariahs, in the wilderness for good and all. She's upset, of course, because she can't have my children.

"She's upset, I breathed. "Oh, boy, do I feel sympathy for her. I suppose it's more exciting, doing it here in our bed. It's much more exotic than turning on ten miles away where I couldn't possibly catch you.

"He looked at me. "Did I imagine there was a flicker of despair in his eyes.

"Then he said the fatal words.

"I'm sorry, Em.

"Get out, I hissed. "Get out! Get out.

"He stood irresolute for a minute.

"I don't want to spend another minute under the same roof as you, I said.

"I suppose that was the cue he wanted. Within two minutes he'd thrown his things into a suitcase and Walter and he were gone.

Whimpering with terror, I rushed to the telephone.

I recognized Jackie Barret's voice immediately. There was music in the background.

"Can I speak to Dr. Maclean?" I said.

"Just a minute. How cool and off-hand she sounded. "Is it urgent?" He very tied up at the moment.

"Yes it is. Very urgent.

"Who's that speaking?

Its personal.

"Finn, darling," she said, and I could just imagine her turning up her palms in a gesture of helplessness. "I'm afraid its
I slammed down the receiver.
Rory gone. Finn obviously taken care of by Dr. Barrett. That left the baby and me.
Youre the only thing Ive got now, I said numbly.
It wouldnt take me long to pack my suitcase, either, If I hurried I could catch the seven oclock ferry. I rang for a taxi.
When the doorbell rang I pinched Rorys dark glasses to hide my swollen eyes, gathered up my two suitcases and walked to the top of the stairs. I suppose I must have missed the top step. The next moment I was falling. The pain was something Id never known or could ever have imagined. Then blackness mercifully descended and extinguished me like a candle.
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THROUGH a haze of pain, I kept dreaming of Marina and Rory in bed together, writhing like snakes on those navy-blue sheets.

Then I heard a familiar voice saying, The doses have been exceptionally strong, but her reflexes are much better.

A woman's voice said, Its unlikely well get a peep out of her for twenty-four hours.

Painfully, battling with nausea, I opened my eyes and there, miraculously, was Finn standing at the end of the bed talking to a nurse.

The image of Rory and Marina floated back in front of me, and I screamed.

Finn moved like lightning.

Darling Emily. Emily, its me.

I went on screaming and yelling incoherently. He had his arms round me. Ill deal with her, he said. The nurse melted away.

I sat rigid. I remember everything that happened, I said.

Its Finn, Emily darling.

I stopped screaming and collapsed against him. Oh, Finn! Help me!

Youve had a bad dream.

I remember everything. My lips began to tremble. You promise not to do anything to find Rory? Not anything!

Dont worry, he reassured me.

He persuaded me to lie back on the pillows, but kept a firm grip on my hand.

Dont go away, I whispered.

Im staying right here.

I thought you didnt want me any more, and then I found Rory and Marina

Steady, darling, dont think about it. Youre going to get better.

But I saw them in bed together! I saw them!

The edge of the cliff began to crumble. I started to scream and lash about. The nurse came back with a hypodermic syringe. I tried to struggle, but Finn held me still. Whatever it was they gave me worked instantly.

Next time I surfaced, I was calmer. I was in a bright, beige, sunny room. A fat nurse was arranging some daffodils in a blue vase. There were flowers everywhere. Is this a funeral parlour? I asked.

She rushed over and started fumbling with my wrist. Where am I?

In hospital.

Good old hospital. With hot and cold housemen in every bedroom.

Ill get Dr. Maclean, she said, and belted off. I heard mutterings in the passage about still being delirious. Finn walked into the room.

Jump in, Doctor, I said, well be delirious together. It sounds as though shes recovered, Finn said to the nurse.

He was one of those rewarding men who can betray emotion in public. His yellow eyes were filled with tears as he looked down at me.

Hello, baby.

Hello, I said.

Dont try to talk.

I missed you, I said, I missed you horribly.

He smiled. I suppose you must have. You talked enough in your sleep. He looked absolutely grey with tiredness.

The dope theyd given me had removed every vestige of my self-control. I do love you, I said. Youve got such a lovely face.

They kept me under gradually reduced sedation for the first forty-eight hours, bringing me back to earth slowly. I cant remember when the baby drifted back into my consciousness, but I remember suddenly saying to Finn in panic, The baby? Its all right, isnt it?

He took my hand. Im afraid yuu lost it. We tried to save it, darling, you must believe that.

I felt gripped by a piercing sadness. Then I said, Wheres Rory?

Hes fine.

I said: Wheres Rory? Tell me the truth, Finn.

The yellow eyes flickered for a moment. He hasnt come back. He must be on the mainland somewhere.

With Marina?

He nodded. I presume so. She disappeared the night you fell down the stairs. Neither of them has been seen since.
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

I LAY in my hospital bed for I dont know how many days, dully watching the beauty of the Highland spring. Among this building of nests and mating of birds and animals, I felt alien and outcast. I ached for the baby I had lost. A brisk, bossy nurse looked after me, Nurse McKellen. She had come-to-bedpan eyes, and tried to fill me up with pills and pretty revolting food.

Couldnt I have a nurse with a sense of humour? I asked Finn.

Not on the Health Service, he said.

I longed inordinately for his visits. He used to pop in during the mornings or late in the evenings after visiting hours and just sit holding my hand and telling me about his day, or letting me rave on about Rory and the baby, if I felt like it.

Once, when Jackie Barrett came in, he didnet even let go of my hand.

Shes getting better, he told her.

Good, she said crisply. You gave us all a fright, she added to me.

I thought I detected a few chips of ice in her blue eyes. I though you were having an affaire with her, I said after shed gone.

Finn looked surprised.

She answered the telephone the night I rang, and sounded awfully proprietorial.

She had no need to, said Finn. We were only watching some medical programme on television.

After that I felt much happier. I slept a lot. Finn still wouldnt allow me any visitors and I didnt want any. But at the back of my mind was a great deal of dread and expectation. I didnt have to wait long.

Two days later I was lying in bed half asleep. Suddenly there was a commotion outside and a familiar voice saying impatiently, Where is she? Immediately I was awake and drenched with sweat, my pulses pounding.

Dont be so bloody stupid, continued the voice. Im her husband!

Then Nurse McKellens voice, anxious and flustered. Im sorry, Dr. Macleans orders are that she has no visitors.

Then Ill go through the wards waking every patient till I find her.

You dinna understand, sir, Mrs. Balniels been verra ill. She had severe concussion and internal haemorrhage as well, and shes been very depressed since she regained consciousness, learning about losing the baby, poor wee lassie.

The what? Rorys voice was like the crack of a whip. What did you say?

Since she lost the bairn. You must have been disappointed too, sir?

Then Rors voice hissing through his teeth. Where is she, damn you?

And Nurse McKellens high-pitched shriek. Dont you lay your hands on me, young man! All right, Mrs. Balniels in there, but Ill no answer for Dr. Maclean when he comes back.

I heard a quick step outside. A moment later the door was flung open and in strode Rory. So there you are.

Hello, Rory, I croaked.

He was beside the bed, black eyes blazing, his face deathly pale against the black fur of his coat.

Whats this about a baby? he demanded. Is it true? I nodded.

How long had you known?

About two months.

Why the hell didnt you tell me?

I tried to, I said miserably. I wanted to so badly. I just didnt feel up to it.

And you threw me out without even letting me know of its existence!

I didnt think youd be interested.

Not interested in my own child?

Mr. Balniel. It was Nurse McKellen again, her starched bosom heaving. We musnt disturb Mrs. Balniel.

Rory didnt turn his head.

Get out, you fat bitch, he said.

Then, when she didnt he turned on her. One look at the murderous expression on his face and she scarpered. How did it happen? he asked.

I was wearing your dark glasses. I must have missed the top step of the stairs and conked out when I hit the bottom.

I suppose you dont remember anything about it? he said.

Not much, I said slowly, but I remember very vividly what happened before.
Rory side-stepped the issue. Why the hell couldn’t you have told me about the baby before? he said. It was criminally irresponsible of you, I hope you realize that?

I knew you were in love with Marina, I said feebly. If I’d told you about the baby you’d have thought I was trying to trap you.

That’s the most fatuous remark I’ve ever heard, snapped Rory. I suppose it was my child?

I burst into tears. At that moment Finn walked in. He was livid. You could feel the hatred sizzling between the two men like summer lightning.

What’s going on? Finn said to Nurse McKellen. Make him go away, I sobbed.

Leave her alone, thundered Finn. Get out of here. Do you want her to have a complete relapse?

She’s my wife, said Rory, I’m entitled to stay with her.

Not if you’re going to make her ill. Look at her. Finn sat down on the bed and put his arms round me. There love, it’s all right.

I can’t take any more, I sobbed into Finns shoulder. Please make him go away.

Finn looked up. Rory was ashen, his fists clenched. Now are you going to get out? said Finn.

Rory walked out, slamming the door behind him.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NEXT day Finn flew round the island to visit his patients, and Rory rolled up at visiting time. He looked tired, sulky, unshaven, but still illogically handsome.
Oh, please, I prayed, dont let me fall under his spell again.
He brought with him a huge bunch of lilies-of-the valley, two tins of pâté de foie gras, a pornographic novel and a bottle of Lucozade.
"The meat paste is from my mother, he said. Buster sent the piece of porn. He said he enjoyed it, which is no great recommendation. They all send love.
Then he handed me the Lucozade bottle.
This should get you through the long evenings. Its whisky and water actually, but if you keep the top on I defy even Dr. Maclean to tell the difference.
I giggled. How did you get in here? I said. I should have thought Finn would have put bloodhounds on the gates.
I batted my eyelashes at a rather formidable blonde called Dr. Barrett. She said I could see you for a quarter of an hour.
That figures, I said.
How are you? I asked.
Im fine, said Rory.
Whos looking after you? I said, then blushed furiously I mean I didnt mean to pry.
No ones looking after me, he said.
I was dying to ask where Marina was, but suddenly I felt exhausted, like a hostess at the end of a party when no ones enjoyed themselves.
You dont have to stay, I said. Its awfully boring visiting people in hospital.
Sick of me already, are you?
I looked up and he was staring at me, as if for the first time. He went on staring until I dropped my eyes in embarrassment.
He got up to go. Ill come back tomorrow, he said. Im sorry about the baby.
Then he did the strangest thing. He leant forward and did up the four undone buttons of my nightie.
I dont want Maclean looking at your tits, he said.
He turned up every day after that. Neither of us mentioned Marina. I was surprised how nice he could be - not mocking, not bored, but I found his visits a terrible strain. If Finn knew about them, he didnt say anything.
One day, a week later, a heavily pregnant girl was rushed into the room next door to have her baby. She was very young and frightened, and her husband looked even younger and more scared. But their tenderness for one another made me suddenly realize what I had lost.
When Finn came in later in his overcoat, just off on his rounds, he found me in tears.
He understood at once. Is it the girl next door? he said.
I nodded miserably. Its just triggered off memories, I said.
Dont be unhappy, he said, taking my hands. Theres years ahead for you to have babies.
The door clicked. I turned, startled. Rory was standing in the doorway, looking distinctly menacing. To my chagrin I felt a blush stealing up my cheeks. I snatched my hands away from Finns.
I thought you werent coming till later, I stammered. So I notice, he snapped. I trust Im not intruding?
I pulled myself together. Not at all. Finns just off on his rounds.
Im quite happy to stay here if you think youll need protection, Finn said.
Rory set his teeth and strolled into the middle of the room. A muscle was pounding in his cheek.
Before he could speak, I said quickly, Im able to take care of myself, thanks.
Rory watched Finn frowningly until he was out of the room. If you dont want me to put a bullet through him, youd better not hold his hands. Understand?
Perfectly, I said. But quite honestly, youre being fatuous. Only jealousy could merit such rage, and as you self-confessedly dont love me, why the hell should you be jealous?
I believe in protecting my own property, said Rory. Why were you holding his hands, anyway?
He was comforting me. I was miserable about the baby.
Rory held out his hands. Ill hold them instead.
I shook my head. There was such a curious lump in my throat which made it impossible for me to say anything.
Oh, have it your own way, he snapped. If you prefer Finn to me
He prowled up and down the room.
What a horrible place this is, he said. Its time you came home.
Back came the devils, the imps, the hissing demons.
I cant, I yelped. Ive been very ill. Im not ready to go home yet. Finn says Im not strong enough.
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

LATER that evening I tried to read Busters pornographic novel while the little girl had her baby next door. I held my ears to blot out her screams, and the voice of her husband trying to reassure her. Finally, I heard the lusty yelling of the new-born baby.

Later, going out to the loo, I saw the husband outside the room, tears pouring down his face.

Is she all right? I asked.

He nodded. Shes wonderful, and the babys fine. A wee boy. Were going to call him Finn after Dr. Maclean.

How would you like some whisky? I said.

I wouldna say no to a drop.

I took him back to my room and got out the Lucozade bottle. An hour later we were sitting on my bed as tight as two ticks, laughing immoderately over passages in Busters novel. It was Nurse McKellen who discovered us. She was absolutely appalled.

I escaped to the loo, giggling feebly. I felt very peculiar. At least Ive got some colour in my cheeks, I said, looking at my flushed, wild-eyed face in the mirror.

Outside, I found Finn. I looked down the passage. There was no one there.

Hello, darling, I whispered.

What have you been up to? he said. Nurse McKellens spreading terrifying tales of drunken orgies. I giggled and collapsed against him.

You have been drinking, he said.

On the emptiest stomach in the Western Isles, I said, and its gone right down to my toes. Ive been celebrating the birth of little Finn the second, and reading porn. So I feel fantastically sexy.

Finn tried to look disapproving, and then laughed. I wound my arms round his neck and kissed him. After a minutes hesitation, he kissed me back, long and hard, until the blood was drumming in my head and I thought I was going to faint.

Wow, do I feel sexy, I murmured.

How the hell do you think I feel? he said.

A telephone shrilled in the next room.

Id better answer that, he said. Ill deal with you later.

The whole thing was getting too much for me. With a sigh I forced myself to look at him. Id never seen him so cold with rage.

Youre coming home tonight, before you get up to any more tricks, he said.

That moment Finn came out of the side door. I thought theyd have a right old set to, but I was wrong. Finn had other things on his mind now.

A petrol ships blown up outside the harbour, he said. Theyre bringing the survivors back in the lifeboats. Most of them are likely to have second or third degree burns.

So youll be needing all the beds you can get, said Rory.

Yes, we will, said Dr. Barrett, coming down the hall. Ill take Emily home then, said Rory.

Thats an excellent idea, said Dr. Barrett warmly - the scheming cow.

Finn looked as though he was about to protest, then thought better of it. If you can take her to the castle, he said, where theres someone to look after her. See that she rests as much as possible.

Of course, said Rory. Do you need any help?

Ill ring you if we do, but most of the poor bastards will have had it.

The ambulance is leaving, Finn, said Jackie Barrett, going towards the stairs.

Just coming, said Finn. He looked at me as though he wanted to say something, but I could feel him sliding away,
both mentally and physically.

Ill ring tomorrow and see how you're getting on, he said. Then he was gone.
I felt overwhelmed with desolation and fear.

And now, Emily dear, said Rory softly, I think its time you came home.

We didn't speak on the way back from the hospital, but as the castle loomed into view, Rory shot straight past it.

Finn said you were to take me to the castle, I bleated.

You're coming home, snapped Rory, where I can keep an eye on you.

You can't force me to stay with you.

I can - even if I have to strap you to the bed.

Go directly to jail, I chanted. Do not pass go, do not collect £200.

I steeled myself for chaos when we got home. But the house looked marvellous. Someone had obviously been having a massive blitz. Rory steered me into the studio. The canvases had all been stacked neatly into one corner, a huge log fire blazed, and the smell of wood smoke mingled exotically with the scent of a big bowl of blue hyacinths on the windowsill.

Anyone would think you were expecting company, I said.

I was, said Rory grimly. You. I came to the hospital to collect you.

Oh, very masterful, I said, collapsing on to the divan in the corner.

Rory poured himself a good mahogany-coloured whisky.

I'd like one, too, I said.

You've had enough, he said.

He leant against the mantelpiece, a long wooden lath in his hands. The murderous look had left his face, but in his half-closed eyes was a gleam which alarmed me more.

Now, he said. Just how long have you been having an a ff aire with Dr. Maclean?

I haven't, I said.

Don't lie to me, he thundered.

A ff aires begin below the waist, I protested. All Finn has done is kiss me - three times to be exact.

You counted them?

Yes I did! Because they mattered.

And where did all this restraint take place?

Finn looked after me the night I found out you and Marina were brother and sister. But the next day, as soon as I discovered I was pregnant, we stopped seeing each other. Tonight I'd been at the whisky and Busters porny novel, so when I met Finn in the passage, I suddenly fancied him rotten.

There was a crack - Rory had snapped the lath in his hands. He was silent for a minute, his face strangely dead, then he threw the broken sticks on the fire. You're nothing better than a tart, he said.

I don't want to be better than a tart, I said. Men seem to rather like them.

Well its got to stop, said Rory.

You have the temerity I said.

Temerity, interrupted Rory.

I'll say temerity if I like. You have the terem or whatever its called to carry on with Marina behind my back, and then kick up a dog-in-the-manger rumpus, just because I seek a little consolation from Finn. You're only livid because you hate Finn, not because you care a scrap for me.

Shut up, said Rory. You're drunk - you'd better go up to bed.

No! I shrieked. I can't do it.

Do what?

Sleep in that bed. Not after seeing you and Marina I get nightmares night after night I couldn't sleep there, I couldn't! My voice was rising hysterically.

Rory caught my arm. Stop it, Em! You're behaving like a child.

Let me go! I screamed. I hate you. I hate you! After that I said every terrible thing I could think of, and then started hysterically beating my fists against his chest. Finally, he was reduced to slapping me across the face, and I collapsed, sobbing, on the divan.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

I AWOKE next morning with an awful head. I lay for a moment with my eyes closed. Slowly, painfully, I pieced together the happenings of the night before. I looked around me, wincing. I was in the studio.

Then, suddenly, I remembered Rory had hit me. The louse, I muttered, getting unsteadily to my feet. In the mirror above the fire, I examined my face. Not a bruise in sight - how infuriating. My eyes lit on Rorys oil paints on a nearby table. Why shouldnt I paint in a black eye myself?

Soon I was busy slapping on blue and crimson paint - now a touch of yellow. Rory wasnt the only artist round here. Within five minutes I looked exactly like Henry Cooper after a few brisk rounds with Cassius Clay. Hearing a step outside, I hurriedly jumped into bed.

Rory came in, carrying a glass of orange juice.

Awake, are you? he said. How are you feeling?

Not very good, I quavered.

Dont deserve to, after all that liquor you shipped. Then he caught sight of the bruise.

Heavens! Where did that come from?

I think you must have hit me, I said in a martyred voice. I dont remember much about it - it must have been quite a blow. But I cant really believe you would have thumped me on my first night home - me being so weak and all. Perhaps I bumped into a door.

Rory looked as discomfited as Ive ever seen him. You were hysterical, he said. It was the only way to shut you up. Im sorry, Em. Does it hurt?

Agony, I said, closing my eyes. A flood of vindictiveness warmed my blood.

Lets have a look, he said.

Dont come near me, I hissed.

He put a hand under my chin and forced my face up. Poor Em, he said shaking his head. What a brute I am.

You should be more careful in future, I said.

I will, I will, he said getting to his feet. He looked the picture of contrition. And next time dont add so much ochre. Bruises dont usually go yellow till the second day.

I opened my mouth, shut it again, and started to giggle. I giggled till the tears, and the bruise, ran down my cheeks, until Rory started laughing too.

After that I slept for most of the day. When I woke up, Rory was painting and it was dark outside. What time is it?

About six.

Six oclock - suddenly I wondered what had happened to Finn.

Did anyone ring? I asked.

Rory had his back to me. There was a pause, then he said nastily, Your boyfriend did telephone about half an hour ago. I told him you were asleep. Im just going down to the village for some cigarettes, he added. Dont start getting out of bed, or making a bolt for it. Id track you down in no time, and if you put me to the bother, you wouldnt find me in a very nice mood.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

As soon as he'd gone, I leapt out of bed and rang the hospital. Finn sounded relieved to hear me, but somehow detached.
Are you okay, darling?
Im fine, I lied.
Rory said you were asleep.
I was - but, oh, Finn, hes as touchy as gunpowder. I do need you - cant you come over later?
I cant, lovie, some of those poor sods from the petrol tanker are in pretty bad shape.
Oh, God. Why did Finn always make me feel slightly ignoble? What a horrible, self-centred little bitch I am. Id forgotten all about them.
I hadnt forgotten about you, said Finn, then someone said something in the background. Look, darling, Ive got to go. Ill try and come and see you tomorrow.
The receiver clicked. At that moment Rory walked through the front door and stood in the doorway looking murderous.
Have you gone quite mad? he said softly. Standing in a howling draught when youre supposed to be in bed? Who were you talking to?
Coco. I was just letting her know Im home.
She happens to be in London, said Rory acidly.
He walked towards me, put his hands on my shoulders, and gazed down at me for a minute. The fury seemed to die out of his eyes.
Look, he said, you think youre hung up on Finn, but he isnt the answer for you. Hes married to his work, always has been. Hes a man with no nonsense about him, and for a minute his face softened. And youre a chick with an awful lot of nonsense about you, Em. Now go and get into bed and Ill bring you something to eat.
I went back to bed and thought about Finn - but at the back of my mind, like an insistent tune, the thought kept repeating itself: if Finn had really loved me, hed never have let me leave the hospital. Hed have whisked me back to his flat. Rory didnt love me at all, he loved Marina but even so, hed been utterly single-minded about getting me home and keeping me there. I felt very confused and uncertain of my feelings. I wanted my mother.
Next morning the telephone rang. That was your Doctor friend, said Rory when hed put the receiver down. Hes coming round to see you in half an hour. He went back to his easel rummaging Noisily about for a tube of burnt sienna that hed mislaid. Finally he gave up looking and poured himself a drink and started painting.
I was dying to go and tart up for Finn. Surreptitiously I levered myself out of bed.
Where are you going? said Rory, without turning round.
To the loo, I said.
Again? said Rory. Youve just been.
Ive got a bit of an upset stomach, I said, sliding towards the door.
I should have thought it was hardly necessary, then, to take your bag with you, said Rory.
Oh, I said, blushing and putting my bag on the table.
In the bathroom there was nothing to do my face with. I washed and took the shine off my nose with some of Rors talcum powder, and tidied my hair with Walter Scotts brush. I got back into bed. Rory was still painting ferociously. Very cautiously I eased my bag off the table and just as cautiously opened it. Of course, my bottle of Arpčge was at the bottom. Id scrambled my way down there, managed to unscrew the top, and was just about to empty some over my wrists when Rory turned round and my bag, plus all its contents and the unstoppered scent bottle, fell with an appalling crash to the floor.
Rory was not amused. We were in the middle of a full-dress row when Finn rang the doorbell. Rory went to let him in. I shoved the bag and all its contents under the bed. The whole room stank of scent like a brothel.
Finn came in, looking boot-faced, but he smiled when he saw me. Rory went and stood with his back to the fire, his eyes moving from Finn to me.
All right, Rory, I wont be long, said Finn dismissively, and picked up my wrist.
Ill stay if you dont mind, said Rory.
Well I do, I snapped. I feel like a biology lesson surrounded by medical students with you both in here.
Ill turn my back if you like, said Rory, but keep your thieving hands off her, Doctor, and he gazed out of the window, whistling Mozart.
How are you feeling? said Finn gently. Are you eating all right?
Like a horse, said Rory.
I am not, I snapped. I grabbed Finns hand.
No need to feel Finns pulse, Emily, said Rory. Oh shut up, I said.
Finn was a bit like a dignified cart-horse with a couple of mongrels rowing between his legs.
Its not fair, I said to Rory afterwards. Look at the way you and Marina carry on.
Were not talking about me and Marina, said Rory, his eyes glittering with strain and exasperation. Walter Scott was noisily eating a coat-hanger in the corner.
Walter thinks your behaviour is appalling, I said, and he knows all about dogs in the manger.
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

A WEEK went by. I corrected the proofs of the catalogue for Rory's exhibition. He was painting frantically; wild, swirling, self-absorbed canvases of savage intensity: babies with no arms or legs, feeling their way into life; the agonized features of women giving birth. They were ghastly, hideous paintings but of staggering power. For the first time it occurred to me that Rory might have minded my losing the baby.

He was like a mine-field: one would inadvertently tread on him and he would explode and smoulder for hours. He was always worse after the times Finn came to see me.

Each time I found Finn increasingly more remote. I couldn't even talk to him because Rory stayed in the room all the time, scowling. It was horribly embarrassing.

Then one night I woke up to find Rory standing by the bed. The fire was dying in the grate. Outside the window the sea gleamed like a python.

W-whats the matter? I said nervously.

Ive finished the last painting.
I sat up sleepily. How clever you are. Have you been working all night?
- - - He nodded. There were great black smudges under his eyes.
You must be exhausted.
A bit. I thought we ought to celebrate.
He poured champagne into two glasses.
What time is it? I said.
About five-thirty.
I took a gulp of champagne. It was icy cold and utterly delicious.
We ought to be sitting on a bench in a rose garden, after a Common Ball, I said with a giggle. You in an evening shirt all covered in my lipstick, and me in a bra-strap dinner frock and a string of pearls.
He laughed and sat down on the bed. Suddenly I was as jumpy as a cat in his presence - it was as if I were a virgin and he and I had never been to bed together.

He leaned forward and brushed a strand of hair back from my forehead - and it happened. Shocks, rockets, warning bells, the lot, and I knew, blindly, that the old magic was working and I was utterly hooked on him again.

Emily the pushover - lying in the gutter with a lion standing over her.
Rory, however, seemed unaware of the chemical change that had taken place in me.
Oughtnt you to get some sleep? I said.
Ive got to pack up the canvases, he said. Busters taking them down to London in his plane. Then he said, not looking at me, Hes giving me a lift to Edinburgh.

Panic swept over me. It was Thursday, Marinas singing lesson day. Oh, God, oh, God, Rory was obviously going to meet her.

What are you going to Edinburgh for? I said in a frozen voice.
To see an American about an exhibition in New York. And a couple of press boys want to talk to me about the London exhibition.
When are you coming back? I said.
Tonight. My mothers giving a party for my aunt. Shes arriving from Paris this evening - youre invited. I think you should come. Theyre pretty amazing, my aunt and my mother, when they get together. Its do you good to get out.
I lay back in bed trying to stop myself crying. Rory bent over and kissed me on the forehead.
Try and get some more sleep, he said.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

MRS. MACKIE, our daily woman, came to look after me while he was away. Her gossiping nearly drove me insane. I washed my hair and shut myself away in the studio to get away from her.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door.

Someone to see you, said Mrs. Mackie.

And Marina walked in.

I felt weak with relief, as though a great thorn had been pulled out of my side. So Rory hadn't gone to Edinburgh to see her. I wanted to fling my arms round her neck.

Hello, I said, grinning from ear to ear.

She seemed shattered by the warmth of my reception. Are you going to Cocos party tonight? Hamish wants to, but Im not sure if I can face it.

Oh, I am, I said, suddenly feeling I wanted to sing from the rooftops. It should be a giggle - if Cocos sisters anything like her.

Marina looked terrible. Her eyes were hidden behind huge amber sunglasses, her face chalky. She looked like someone who was shaking off gastric flu.

Are you all right? I said suddenly, feeling sorry for her.

Not very, she said. Im suffering from a broken heart. Can I have a drink?

I gave her a huge slug of Rorys whisky. She looked at the golden liquid for a minute, then said: Has Rory said anything about me?

I shook my head.

Oh, God. She put her head in her hands. Ive spent days and days waiting for the Master to ring, but the Master did not ring. He obviously doesnt wish to avail himself of the service.

Are you still well, crazy about him?

Of course I am, she screamed, her eyes suddenly wild. And hes crazy about me. Nothing will ever cure that.

I didnt flinch - I was making great strides in self-control these days.

Hes crazy about me, but he feels guilty about you losing the baby. He thinks youve had a lousy deal, so hes got to grit his teeth and try and make a go of it.

Charming, I said, combing and combing my wet hair. She took off her dark glasses. Her eyes were suddenly alight with malevolence.

Look, you dont love Rory a millionth as much as I do. You wouldnt be playing around with Finn if you did. Finns crazy about you, and hes a much better proposition than Rory is, hes straight and utterly dependable. Youre not tricky enough for Rory, he needs someone who can play him at his own game. You drive him round the bend.

Its absolutely mutual, I said acidly.

All youve got to do is go to Finn, said Marina.

Why doesnt he come and take me away? I said. Hes got a car.

Because hes had a rough time; hes had one broken marriage, and when he wanted you to leave Rory before you wouldnt go. He wants you to come of your own free will.

How idealistic, I said, sulkily. For someone who throws his weight around as much as Finn does, hes very diffident when it comes to sex.

He doesnt want to go through hell again, hes got the hospital to consider, and if you dont hurry, Dr. Barrett will snap him up. Anyway, cant you realize that if Rory wasnt my brother, hed drop you like a hot coal?

Suddenly her face crumpled and she burst into tears. I cant stand Hamish any more, she sobbed. You dont know what its like waking up to that awful old face on the pillow every morning.

I turned away with a sense of utter weariness. I felt as though I'd been struggling for hours up a hill, and just as I reached the top, my hold had given way and I was pitching headlong into darkness.

After shed gone, I told Mrs. Mackie to go home. I couldnt stand her chatter any more.

Half an hour later, Finns car drew up outside. I watched him get out and lock it. What the hell did he have to lock it for round here, I thought irritably. There was no one to pinch any dangerous drugs, except a few sheep.

Go away, I said miserably to Finn, refusing to open the door.

Five minutes, he said. What for? I said. I dont like unfinished business.

Is there unfinished business?

Come on, stop messing about, let me in.
Oh all right, I said, sulkily, opening the door. He followed me into the drawing-room.
Do you want a drink? I said.

No, I want you, he ran his hands through his hair, I havent been able to get you on your own since Rory took over.
He looked almost as bad as Marina. Deep lines were entrenched around his mouth and his eyes. He seemed to have aged ten years in as many days.

You havent tried very hard, I said.
Ive been run off my feet - two men from the petrol ship died last night, another early this morning.
Oh Im so sorry, I said horrified, did they suffer a lot?
Yep, said Finn. It hasnt been very pleasant at the hospital - in fact its been hell.
Did you get any extra help from the mainland? I said.
Ive got another doctor arriving this evening - at least itll give Jackie a break, shes been marvellous.
Im sure she has, I said. Oh dear, shes far more suitable for you than I am.

Maybe she is, said Finn, but it happens to be you that I love. You certainly need more looking after than she does; what the hell are you wandering about with bare feet and wet hair for? He picked up a towel. Come on, Ill dry it for you.

No, itll go all fluffy. Finn took no notice. Christ, he rubbed hard.
I wont have any scalp left, I grumbled.

After that, the inevitable happened and I ended up in his arms, and I must confess that I did like kissing him very much. It was one of the great all-time pleasures, like smoked salmon and Brahms second piano concerto. Then I started getting nervous that Rory might walk in, so I wriggled out of his grasp.

Who told you Rory was away? I said.
Marina did.

She has been busy, I said. She was here earlier telling me how much she and Rory still love each other, and how noble Rory had been coming back to me.

Rory, said Finn, kicking a log on the fire, has never done anything noble in his life. This little display of territorial imperative is sheer bloody-mindedness because he doesnt want me to get you. Its only me hes jealous about. Did he ever give a damn when Calen Macdonald made a pass at you?

No, I said, plunging back into the depths of gloom. Why dont you leave him? You know how much I want you to.

The downward path is easy, I said, but theres no turning back. When your dear, scheming sister was telling me how mad Rory is about her, it hurt me so much I couldnt speak, but when she started dropping dark hints about you and Doctor Barrett, it irritated me but it didnt tear me in pieces at all Q. E. D. I love Rory, not you. I suddenly felt a great sense of loss. Im wildly attracted to you, physically, I said, I expect I always will be, but Im stuck with loving Rory.

Even if he doesnt love you?
I nodded. I played my last card:
The only way it might work is if we went away together, away from Irasa, and Rory and Marina, and all those associations - but that would mean your leaving the hospital.
Darling, I cant abandon it at this stage, said Finn. You know I cant.

I could see the pain starting in his eyes. I went over and put my arms round his neck, breathing in his strong, male solidarity.

Oh Finn, I whispered, Im so sorry its not you.
CHAPTER THIRTY

ALL in all I didn't feel in a very festive state for Cocos party. Numb misery would have just about summed it up. Rory had noticed my red eyes when he got home, and demanded to know what was the matter. I refused to tell him, and he'd got extremely bad tempered.

I was wearing a very sexy red dress, but in my current condition I felt about as sexy as a pillar-box.

At least it matches your eyes, said Rory.

Cocos party was the usual noisy success, but everyone seemed even more anxious to get drunk than usual. My sister arrives later, Coco told me. She says she is bringing me a surprise. I think I am too old to be surprised by anything, but perhaps it will be something that amuses Buster.

Marina was wearing a beautiful white dress: everything about her shimmered and glimmered softly as though the material had been woven of candle beams. But inside it she looked like a stricken masquerader. Hamish was there, too, looking dreadfully old and ill. I hadn't seen him since the night he told me Rory and Marina were brother and sister.

Rory was drinking steadily and talking to Buster about fishing - Buster was in a very good temper, having landed a huge salmon that afternoon.

I was being the death and soul of the party.

About ten oclock, after supper, a crowd of us were in a little room off the hall, playing roulette. Rory was winning, Hamish was losing heavily. Buster was still talking about his salmon. Amazing fish, the salmon, he said, placing four chips on Rouge. They live for years in salt water, and then always come back to the same freshwater spot to breed.

Not surprising, said Marina, and she looked at Rory and laughed. As you'd know, Buster, if you'd ever suffered the agony of making love in salt water.

I really thought the bugger had got away, said Buster, not listening at all.

Not surprising, said Rory, if he saw you hauling on the other end of the line.

Then, just as there was a pause in play, and Buster was raking in counters, Hamish looked at Rory.

I hope you've been keeping a pretty close guard on your wife lately, he said.

Rory stopped in the middle of lighting a cigarette. Shut up, Hamish, I snapped.

Hush, darling, Rory put his hand on my arm. Hamish is about to explain himself.

All I'm saying, said Hamish, flashing his false teeth evilly, is that patients often fall in love with their doctors, and its nice to know I'm not the only cuckold in Irasa.

His words brought an uneasy silence.

Belt up, Hamish, said Buster. You don't know what you're saying.

Oh, I do, Buster, old chap. All I'm saying to Rory is that next time he goes to Edinburgh, and my wife disappears to join him, he should realize that while he's away, pretty Mrs. Balniel will be amusing herself with Dr. Maclean.

That's not true, I squeaked.

Are you going to take that back? said Rory through clenched teeth.

No, dear boy, I'm not. Your wife is as big a whore He got no further. Rory had chucked his drink into Hamish's face.

And that's a waste of good whisky, he said.

Hamish, whisky dripping from his face, made a lunge at Rory.

Buster pulled him off.

The doorbell rang noisily, bringing us back to our senses.

Buster, Rory, shrieked Coco from the hall, I think it must be Marcelle.

Excuse me, said Buster, and hurried out.

Hamish wiped the whisky off his face. I dared not look at Rory or Marina.

The next minute, Coco swept into the room with her sister, Marcelle.

We all tried to act normally and everyone kissed everyone on both cheeks. Marcelle was not as pretty as Coco, younger and brassier, but pretty high voltage all the same.

She said, with a touch of malice: I've brought you, your surprise, chérie. He's putting the car away and feeling a little shy, too.

Why don't you go and get him, Buster? said Coco. Buster trotted out obediently.

Who can it be? said Coco excitedly. I have so many skeletons in the wardrobe.

Id had my share of surprises, too. I was still shaking from Hamish's accusations. I sat down on the sofa. The next
moment Buster came through the door. For once hed lost his superb indolence. He looked shattered. He went up to Coco.

Darling, he whispered. This is going to be something of a shock.

I hope its a nice one, said Coco, patting her curls and arranging her breasts in the low-cut black dress. Someone else stood behind Buster in the door, a tall thin figure.

Alerted by everyones faces, Buster swung round.

For Christs sake, he snapped. I told you to wait.

I watched, fascinated, as the man came through the door. He had unruly black hair streaked with grey, high cheek bones, formidable, contemptuous black eyes above grey pouches, and a haughty thin-lipped mouth. He was dressed theatrically in a black cloak with a gold earring hanging from one ear. He looked around slowly, taking everyone in. He must have been at least fifty - but he was still sensationally attractive. And I knew positively that Id met him somewhere before.

There was a pause, then Coco turned as white as a sheet. Alexei, she said in a frozen tone. Then she gave a strange little laugh that was almost a sob, and running towards him, flung her arms round his neck.

The odd thing was the silence. Everyone in the room looked stunned.

Youre still very beautiful, Coco, Alexei said softly. How did I ever let you go?

Coco seemed to recover herself.

I was not rich enough for you, she said unromantically.

You havent been properly introduced to my husband, have you, Alexei? said Coco. Alexei was a great boyfriend of mine before I married Hector, she said.

So it seems, said Buster.

I seem to have stumbled on a little family gathering, said the stranger with amusement.

Oh, where had I seen that arrogant, equivocal smile before?

You must also meet my son, Rory, said Coco. Rory got to his feet.

Very carefully, they looked each other up and down. I looked from Rory to the stranger. The resemblance was unmistakable.

Did you say Alexei was a boyfriend of yours before you married my father, or afterwards? Rory said softly.

Coco shrugged her shoulders, Well, a bit of both, darling.

Alexei turned to Rory. Your mother and I were very much in love but, alas, we neither of us had any money, so she married Hector, and I, alas, martyred in the arms of

A fat American heiress, said Coco.

Then Rory started to laugh. He got a drink and raised it to Hectors portrait, kilted and bristling, over the fire. So the old bastard wasnt my father after all, he said, and turning to Alexei, I do hope you dont expect me to call you Daddy?

Coco smiled. You do not mind, chérie?

Rory shook his head. As long as his references are all right.

Alexei grinned in genuine amusement. Oh, theyre extremely good, my dear. Im Russian; white, of course, and can trace my ancestry back to centuries before Peter the Great.

His glance wandered in my direction. He had exactly the same way of stripping off all ones clothes that Rory had.

This is Rorys wife, said Coco.

Alexei sighed and bowed over my hand. What a pity, he said, I suppose that puts her out of bounds?

I wouldnt let that worry you, I said in a shaking voice. Incest has never deterred anyone in this house. Ill never understand any of them, I thought hopelessly. Only Marina was beginning to generate a fitting amount of emotion.

The next moment she had rushed up to Rory and flung her arms round his neck.

Dont you see, darling? she cried wildly. That lets you and me off the hook.

The room swam before me
CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE next moment I blacked out. I remember coming to and seeing a sea of faces and hearing Rory shouting at everyone to get out of the way and give me some air.

She looks terrible, said Coco. Are you all right, mon ange?

She got up too soon, said Buster.

She ought to see someone, said Coco.

I can see at least ten people already, I joked feebly. Shall I call Finn? said Marina.

No, snapped Rory, thats the last thing she needs, and picking me up, he carried me upstairs.

Youll rupture yourself, I grumbled, as he stumbled on the top step. Thank God Id lost some weight in hospital.

Rory kicked the door of the best guest room open. A fire was blazing in the grate. The purple-flowered sheets of the bed were turned down. The scent of freesias filled the room.

But its all ready for Marcelle, I said feebly.

She can sleep somewhere else, said Rory, depositing me on the bed. He started to undo the zip of my dress.

Ill do it, I stammered, leaping away. He looked at me, frowning.

Do you hate me so much you cant even bear me to touch you?

No - I mean

What do you mean? The tension was unbearable. I cant explain. He shrugged his shoulders.

All right, if thats the way you want it. Ill get you a couple of my mothers sleeping pills.

I sat down on the bed, burying my face in my hands. I felt sick. How could I explain to him that I couldnt bear him to touch me because if he did, Id only collapse, gibbering with lust, telling him I couldnt live without him, that I loved him - all the things he hated.

Cocos sleeping pills must have been very strong. It was mid-day when I woke up. The sun was streaming through the curtains, everything was quiet, except for a persistent thrush, and the occasional click of Buster hitting a captive golf-ball in the garden.

The fire had been re-lit in the grate. The scent of freesias was stronger than ever. Walter Scott lay sprawled across my feet. It was such a pretty room. For a moment I wallowed in the voluptuous euphoria created by the sleeping pills, then, bit by bit, the events of the last night came filtering back. Cocos sister arriving and then that glorious Russian turning out to be Roros father, and Rory not being Marinas brother after all, and there being nothing now to stop them getting married - and having hordes of ravishing black-eyed, red-haired children or ravishing blue-eyed, black-haired children. Oh, God, God, God, I writhed on the pillow - a bad business paid only with agony.

What the hell was I to do next? The last month had been difficult certainly, Rory and I living together with no sex, but at least wed had a few laughs, and I felt somehow that even if he didnt love me in the white-hot way he loved Marina, he was making very real efforts to make a go of it. Then Marinas words of yesterday came back to me: If he werent my brother, hed drop you like a hot coal.

I lay feeling suicidal for a bit, then got up and drew back the curtains. It was a marvellous day, the sea sparkling, the larches waving their pale green branches against an angelically blue sky. I felt the sun warming my hair and smoothing away the marks of the sheets on my skin.

Buster, hearing the curtains draw, looked up. I moved out of range and examined my body in the mirror. The only advantage about being miserable is you do lose weight. For a minute I forgot my gloom and admired my flat stomach and my ribs, then I sucked in my cheeks, and putting on a haughty models face, stood up on my toes.

Very nice, said a voice at the door, youll make the gatefold of Playboy yet. It was Rory. I gave a squeak of embarrassment and grabbed a towel to cover myself. Dont, he said, shutting the door. He looked extremely pleased with himself. I wondered, with a flash of despair, if hed spent the night celebrating with Marina.

You look better, he said, coming towards me. I backed away.

Oh for Gods sake, Em, stop behaving like a frightened horse.

He was wearing a dark blue sweater, and an old pair of paint-stained jeans; his hair was ruffled by the wind:he looked so unspeakably handsome, I felt my entrails go liquid. I lowered my eyes in case he read the absolutely blatant desire there. I wanted him so much I had to turn away and jump back into bed, pulling the sheets up to my neck.

Thats a good girl, said Rory. It seems a pity to get up on such a lovely day.

Where is everyone? I asked.

Wandering around the house in various stages of undress, groaning about their hangovers. He sat down on the bed and lit a cigarette. Do you still feel sick, does the smoke worry you?
I shook my head in surprise, fancy Rory bothering to ask that.

How are you getting on, adjusting to your new - er - father? I baulked on the word.

Rory grinned. I quite like him, but hes an old phoney; hes already tried to borrow money off me, but then my mother always did have frightful taste in men. Im very glad he didnt bring me up, Id have been cooling my heels in Broadmoor by now.

Is he as grand as he makes out? I said.

I dont think so, he looks degenerate enough, but I dont believe those claims about tracing his ancestry back to Peter the Great. It does appear in fact that Ive been born on the wrong side of an awful lot of blankets. Do you mind having an illegitimate husband?

Do you mind? I said cagily.

Not at all, I never understood how Hector could be related to me anyway. His favourite painter was Peter Scott. Theres only one slight problem now to tax the ingenuity of the family solicitor. Have I any right any more to Hectors money?

Are you worried about it?

Not particularly, I quite like the thought of starving in a garret. He shot me a glance under his eyelashes, How about you?

I havent tried it, I said carefully. Hows your mother taking it?

Medium. I think shes a bit put out. Buster and Alexei have taken to each other like drakes to water, great bounders think alike I suppose. Alexei, like all foreigners, has a great reverence for English upper-class institutions. His ambition, like Busters, is to murder as much wild-life as he can. Hes so heart-broken the grouse shooting season is over that Buster has promised to take him pigeon shooting this afternoon.

Are you going? I said.

I might - for a laugh. So my Mother is rather irritated about the whole thing. Shes not gaining an ex-lover, shes losing a husband. Alexei is between marriages at the moment, I think he and Buster might do very well together.

But hes old enough to be Busters father, I said.

Probably is, if I know that lot, said Rory. I burst out laughing. Rory took my hand. You havent laughed much lately, Em. I think we ought to have a talk.

I snatched my hand away, People always say that, I said in a trembling voice, when theyre about to say something awful.

Ive made you very unhappy since I married you, havent I? said Rory. Im sorry, you must have had a pretty bloody six months.

Panic swept over me. Come on, he said in an exaggeratedly gentle voice, come here. He held out his arms to me.

No, I said desperately, no, no, no.

I knew exactly what he was about to say, that hed made me so unhappy I obviously didnt want to stay married to him any longer, so why didnt we have an amicable divorce? If he touched me, I knew Id cry. Is it that bad? he said.

I nodded, biting my lip.

I gather Finn Maclean was round to see you yesterday, he said in a flat voice. Are you still hooked on him - come on, I want the truth.

I felt defeated, my eyes filled with tears. There was a knock on the door. Go away, howled Rory. In walked Finn.

My God, exploded Rory, why the hell cant you ever leave us alone? What do you mean by barging in here, who the hell asked you?

She happens to be a patient of mine.

Among other things, said Rory. Shes perfectly all right.

She looks it, said Finn. He bent down to stroke Walter Scott who thumped his tail noisily on the floor.

And stop sucking up to my dog, snarled Rory.

Oh, please, I said, leave Finn and me for a few minutes.

Finn scowled at both of us. All right, he said, going towards the door, but if you put a finger wrong, Finn, Ill report you to the medical council and get you struck off the register. And he slammed the door so hard, all the windows rattled.

Finn raised an eyebrow. What was that little tantrum in aid of?

He was trying to give me the sack, I said miserably. And you interrupted him. Youve heard that his real fathers turned up?

Finn nodded.

So theres nothing to stop Rory and Marina now.
Its not going to be as easy as that, theres Hamish to be considered. I doubt if hell give Marina a divorce.

Its funny, I said, feeling very ashamed of myself, none of us ever thinks of Hamish, do we?

Finn gave me some tranquillizers. Look, he said, Im off to a conference in Glasgow this afternoon. Id cancel it, but Ive got to speak. Im not too happy about the current situation. Marinas in a highly overwrought state. So, obviously, is Rory, and Im worried about Hamish. I want you to stay in bed today. Ill be staying at the Kings Hotel tonight, dont hesitate to ring me if you need me. Heres the telephone number. He dropped a kiss on the top of my head. Dont look so miserable, little one, things will sort themselves out.

Knocking back tranquillizers like Smarties, I decided to disregard Finns advice and get up. When I finally made it downstairs, I found a noisy and drunken lunch had just finished. The debris of wine glasses, napkins and cigar butts still lay on the dining-room table. Buster was bustling about organizing his pigeon shoot. I went into the kitchen and opened a tin of Pedigree Chum for Walter. Then wandered into the drawing-room where I found Alexei well entrenched, chewing on a large cigar, drinking port and reading a book called The Grouse in Health and in Disease.

Ah, my enchanting daughter-in-law, he said, getting to his feet and kissing my hand with a flourish. Oh God, I hoped my fingers didnt smell of Pedigree Chum. Come and sit down, he patted a rather small space on the sofa beside him, and tell me about yourself.

Predictably I coulndnt think of anything to say, but Alexei had obviously had enough to drink for it not to matter a scrap.

Coco tells me you lost a baby recently - I am so sorry - you must have been very disappointed. You must have another one - as soon as youre strong again. You and Rory would have beautiful children. It was not a subject I cared to dwell on.

Do you have lots of children yourself? I said.

Yes, I think so, several that I know about and several that I probably dont, but none, I think, as talented as Rory. I have been looking at his paintings this morning. I am proud of my new son, he is a very good-looking boy, I think.

Yes, he is, I said wistfully.

And not unlike me, I think, said Alexei with satisfaction. He got up. I must go and change for the shooting.

But its still dark in a couple of hours, I said.

We wait till dusk and catch the pigeons as they come home to roost, he said.

Poor things, I said. Wheres Rory?

Gone to fetch his gun. Hamish is coming too. Suddenly, in spite of the centrally heated fug of the house, I felt icy cold. I didnt like the idea of that cast of characters going shooting.

Alexei went up to change. I turned on the television and watched a steeplechase. It all looked so bright green and innocent one couldnt really believe those horses falling at the fences were really hurting themselves.

A few minutes later, Rory arrived with Walter Scott. Who told you to get up? he asked angrily. You look frightful.

I thought I might come and watch you all shooting, I said.

Absolutely not, snapped Rory. Youre supposed to rest - according to your doctor. Go back upstairs at once.

At that moment Buster walked in, looking ludicrously like a French tart in rubber thigh boots and an extraordinary hat with a veil.

Times getting on, Rory, he said, we ought to take up our positions at least an hour before dusk.

Is he getting married to Alexei already? I said.

Rory laughed: Its supposed to stop the pigeons seeing his face when they fly over - a pity he doesnt wear it all the time. Come on, he whistled to Walter Scott.

Rory, I said. He turned in the doorway. Be careful, I said.

Dont worry, he said. Its all gun and no fear. I met Coco coming down the stairs.

"Ullo Bébé, how are you, I am fed up. I ope the presence of Alexei would make Buster jealous, and spend less time on his horrible bloody sports, but it only makes im worse. I like to have a good sleep in the afternoon, but what is the point if there is no one to sleep with you? So Marcellle and I decided to go over to the mainland. You will be all right, mon ange?"

Of course, I said.

I tried to sleep but I was in much too uptight a state. I heard voices outside and crept to the window to see them go off. Poor Hamish looked iller than ever. Alexei was laughing at some joke of Busters. Walter Scott, who was thoroughly over-excited by the whole proceedings, suddenly decided to mount Hamishs red setter bitch. Hamish went mad and rushed over and started kicking Walter in the ribs in a frenzy. Walter started howling and Rory turned on Hamish in fury. I coulndnt hear what he was saying, but Hamish went absolutely spare with rage. I could see the white of his knuckles as his hands clenched on his gun. Then Buster came over and said something and they all set off, their boots ringing on the drive.
They crossed the burn and took the narrow, winding path up to the pine woods. I thought of the pigeons coming home after a long day to face the music: tomorrow they would be strung up as corpses in the larder, their destination pigeon pie.

I took more tranquillizers and tried to sleep, but it was impossible. I tried to read, Coco had left some magazines by the bed. I read my horoscope, which was lousy. Rorys horoscope said he was going to have a good week for romance, blast him, but should be careful of unforeseen danger towards the weekend. I should never have let him go shooting.

An explosion of guns in the distance made me jump nervously. Then I heard a crunch of wheels on the gravel and looked out of the window again. It was Marina, Miss Machiavelli herself. She parked her blue car in front of the house and switched off the engine, then combed her hair, powdered her nose, and put on more scent - the conniving bitch. God, how I hated her.

She got out of the car, fragile in a huge sheepskin coat and brown boots, her red hair streaming in the breeze, and set off down the track the guns had taken.

No wonder Rory had been so insistent about my staying in bed and keeping out of his way. Drawn by some terrible fascination to see what they were getting up to, I got up, put on an old sheepskin coat of Cocos and set off after her.

The guns popped in the distance, like some far-off firework party. It was getting dark, the fir trees beetled darkly, a rabbit scuttled over the dead leaves frightening the life out of me. The sweat was rising on my forehead, my breath coming in great gasps. I ran on, ducking to avoid overhanging branches. There was the ADDERS - PLEASE KEEP OUT sign Buster had put up to frighten off tourists. I could hear voices now; the colour was going out of the woods; in the distance the sea was darkening to gun metal.

Suddenly I rounded a corner and, to my relief, saw Busters gamekeeper, then Marinas red hair, and the guns strung out in a ring; Buster still wearing that ludicrous veil, Alexei next to him, then Rory, then Hamish, with Marina standing between them, but slightly behind. She was lighting one cigarette from another. I hoped they wouldnt see me, then I stepped on a twig and she and Rory looked round. He looked absolutely furious. Buster smiled at me, waving and indicating to me to stay quiet. Walter Scott sat beside Rory, quivering with excitement, trying to look grown up. Marina tiptoed back and stood beside me. On closer inspection she didnt look so hot, her skin pale and mottled, her eyes sunken and bloodshot. Even so, there was plenty of the old dash about her.

I thought you were at deaths door, she said. Its been quite exciting, Alexei has already tried to shoot a couple of sheep and nearly killed Hamish - I wish hed tried harder.

What are they waiting for? I asked.

The pigeons, she said, theyre late back. I had the most cataclysmic row with Hamish last night, she said, lowering her voice. I ended up throwing most of the silver at him. We started at four olock in the morning and went on till just before he came out. This is halftime, I ought to be sucking oranges and thinking what to do in the second half. He said I behaved atrociously last night, she went on, her eyes glittering wildly, and that he absolutely refuses to divorce me. Has Rory spoken to you? she said, suddenly tense.

He tried to this morning, I hissed, but your dear brother walked in in the middle.

The trouble is, whispered Marina, that Rory feels frightfully guilty about you because everythings worked out for him, now he can marry me. If you wentoff with Finn it would make things much easier for everyone.

I dont want to go off with Finn, I said, my voice rising. What the hell do you think youre doing, riding roughshod over everyones lives, dont you ever think that Hamish and I might have feelings?

Marina turned her great headlamp eyes on me: Id never hang around being a bore to a man who couldnt stand me - Ive got too much pride, you obviously havent.

Shut up you two, said Buster.

We were silent but the whole forest must have heard my heart thudding.

Then suddenly the pigeons came sailing over into view over the pine tops, and with a deafening crash the guns went off. It was like being in the middle of a thunderstorm, except that the sky was raining pigeons. The deafening fusillade lasted about three minutes.

Some of the birds escaped unscathed, others came down directly. The guns charged about looking for booty. Dogs circled, cursed by their masters. Alexei stood proudly with two birds in each hand. There were congratulations and verdicts. Walter Scott rushed grinning up to me, his mouth full of feathers.

Must be some more in here, said Buster, disappearing into the undergrowth. A minute later his great red face appeared and he said in a low voice, Rory, come here a minute. Rory, followed by Walter Scott, went into the undergrowth.

There was a pause, then Rory came out, his face ashen in the half light, shaking like a leaf.

Whats the matter, darling? Marina ran forward. Whats happened?
Its Hamish, said Rory. Theres been an accident. Im afraid hes blown his brains out. His face suddenly worked like a small boy about to cry. Dont look, Marina, its horrible.

Marina gave a scream and rushed into the wood after Buster. Rory disappeared to the right: next moment I heard the sound of retching.

Marina emerged a minute later, her eyes mad with hysteria. There you see, she screamed at me, Rory killed him, he killed him for me, because he thought Hamish wasnt going to let me go. Now who do you think Rory loves?

Dont be bloody silly, Marina, said Buster, coming out of the copse. Of course Rory didnt kill him, poor old boy obviously did himself in.

Rory, having regained his composure, had returned. I didnt Marina, he said, as she ran forward and collapsed in his arms. I swear I didnt.

Well, its my fault then, she sobbed. I told Hamish to do it, I told him how much I loathed and hated him, how much he disgusted me. I goaded him into it. Oh, Rory, Rory, Ill never forgive myself.

I turned away. I couldnt bear the infinitely tender way he was holding her in his arms, stroking her hair, and telling her everything would be all right. Suddenly there was an unearthly wailing: everyone jumped nervously, then we realized it was Hamishs red setter howling with misery.

She was the only one, said Rory, who gave a damn for the poor old bugger.
I CANT really remember much of getting back.
Rory took me home; he was in a terrible state, shaking like a leaf. He came in and poured a stiff whisky and
downed it in one gulp.
Look, I must go to her.
I nodded mechanically. Yes, of course you must.
Im frightened this will unhinge her; I feel sort of responsible, do you understand?
Yes, I do.
Do you want to come too?
I looked at him for the last time, taking in the brown fur rug on the sofa, the yellow cushions, the gold of his
corduroy jacket, his dark hair and deadly pale face, the smell of turpentine, the utter despair in my heart. I shook my
head, Id rather stay here.
I wont be long, he said, and was gone.
So Hamish had loved Marina after all. What was it that Marina had said that afternoon - that shed never hang
around being a bore to a man who couldnt stand her.
So the game had ended that never should have begun. Im not a noble character, but I know when Im licked.
For the second time in two months I packed my suitcase. I had no thought of going to Finn. Finn fancied me, but
he didnt really love me. Not as Rory understood love. And now I couldnt have Rory, I didnt want second best.
I left a note.
Darling, Hamish has set you and Marina free, now Im going to do the same. Please be happy and dont try and find
me.
Emily.
Mist swathed the Irasa hills, the lochs lay about them like steel and silver medallions in the moonlight. A small,
chill wind whispered among the heather. I walked the narrow track that twisted down the hill to the ferry. I caught
the last boat of the day. There was scarcely anyone on it. I stood on deck, and watched the castle and everything I
loved in the world getting dimmer and dimmer until they vanished in a mist of tears.
I shall never remember how I got through the next ten days. I went to ground in a shabby London hotel bedroom.
I couldnt eat, I couldnt sleep. I just lay dry-eyed on my bed like a wounded animal, shocked by incredulous grief and
horror.
I toyed with the idea of going to see my parents, or ringing up Nina, but I couldnt bear the expressions of
sympathy, then the whispering, and later, the I told you sos, and We always knew he was a bad lot, and much later -
the Pull yourself togethers. Sooner or later I knew I would have to face up to life, but I hadnt got the courage to get
in touch with them yet, nor could I face the bitter disappointment I would feel if Rory hadnt rung them and tried to
contact me.
But why should he contact me? He must be blissfully happy now with Marina. The idea of them together rose
black and churning. Sometimes I thought I was going mad. Even my unconscious played tricks on me. Every night I
dreamed of Rory and woke up in tears. In the street I saw lean, dark, tall men and, heart thumping, would charge
forward, shrinking away in horror when I realized it wasnt him.
I hoped I would find it easier as the days went by, but it got much worse. What I hadnt anticipated was going slap
into the infinitely bosky lushness of a late London spring. Everything was far further on than it was in Scotland.
Outside my bedroom window the new lime green leaves of the plane trees swung like little cherubs wings, ice-cream
pink cherry trees were dropping their blossom on the long grass. Huge velvety purple irises and bluebells filled the
Chelsea gardens. Everywhere, too, there was an atmosphere of sexiness, of sap rising, of pretty girls walking the
streets in their new summer dresses, of men whistling at them, of lovers entwined in the park, everything geared to
ram home my loss to me.
Hes gone, hes gone, and when thou knowest this thou knowest how dry a cinder this world is.
The day of the opening of Rorys exhibition came and went. With heroic self-control, I stuck to the hotel and didnt
hang around in the coffee bar opposite in the hope of getting a glimpse of him. I couldnt face the anguish of seeing
him with Marina.
But next- morning I dragged myself up and went out and bought the papers, and crept back to the hotel to read
them. The reviews were very mixed: some of the critics loathed the paintings, some adored them, but everyone
agreed that a da7.zling new talent had arrived. There were also several pictures of Rory looking sulky and arrogant,
and impossibly handsome. The Nureyev of the Art world, the gossip columns called him.
I cried half the morning, trying to decide what to do; then the manager presented me with my weekly bill, and I realized I could only just pay it. Next week I should have to get a job.

I had a bath and washed my hair. I looked frightful, like one of those women that wait for the bodies at the pit head - even make-up didn’t help much. I can’t even make any money as a tart now, I said dismally - I’d have to pay them.

When I got to Bond Street, I felt giddy. It struck me I hadn’t eaten for days. I went into a coffee bar and ordered an omelette, but when it arrived I took one bite and thought I was going to throw up. Chucking down a pound I fled into the street. Four doors down, I went up the steps of the agency that used to find me work in the old days. How well I remembered that grey-carpeted, grey-walled, potted-plant world that I hoped I’d abandoned for ever. I started to sweat and tremble.

Audrey Kennaway, the principal, agreed to see me. She greeted me in an immaculate, utterly awful primrose yellow dress and jacket. Her heavily made-up eyes swept over me.

Well, Emily, she said in cooing tones, it’s nice to see you. How are you enjoying your new jet set life? Are you on your way to Newmarket or the Cannes Film Festival?

Actually, neither, I’m looking for a job, I blurted out.

A job? She raised eyebrows plucked to the edge of extinction. Surely not, but I thought your handsome husband was doing so well, he had such a success in the papers this morning. Her red-nailed fingers drummed on the table.

Thats all over, I muttered. It didn’t work out.

I’m sorry, she said. I’m not surprised, I could see her thinking, she’s let herself go so much. Her manner had become distinctly chillier.

There’s not a lot of work about at the moment, people are laying off staff everywhere, she went on.

Oh dear, I said feebly. In my day, they were always laying on them.

Audrey Kennaway smiled coolly.

You’ll have to smarten yourself up a bit, she said.

I know, I know, I said. I haven’t been very well. I used to type a bit, do you remember? I went on. And when I was thin, you sometimes got me television commercials or a bit of modelling. I’m much thinner than that now.

I don’t think I could find you anything in that field at the moment. Let’s see if there’s any filing clerk work. Her long red talons started moving through the cards in a box on her desk. I felt great tears filling my eyes. I struggled to control myself for a minute, then leapt to my feet.

I’m sorry, I said, I couldn’t do a filing job. I can’t even file my nails without setting my teeth on edge. It’s a mistake for me to have come here. I’m quite right, I couldn’t hold a job down at the moment. I can’t hold down anything.

Bursting into tears, I fled out of the office, down the stairs into the sunshine. Two streets away was Rory’s gallery. Gradually, as though pulled by some invisible hand, I was drawn towards it. I went into a chemist to buy some dark glasses with my last pound. They weren’t much help, they hid my red eyes but the tears kept trickling underneath.

Slowly I edged down Grafton Street. No. 212, here it was; my knees were knocking together, my throat dry.

There was one of Rory’s paintings of the Irasa coast in the window. Two fat women were looking at it.

I don’t go for this modern stuff, said one.

I entered the gallery, my heart pounding. Then, with a thud of disappointment, I realized Rory wasn’t there. I looked around, the paintings looked superb, and so many already had red sold stickers on them. By the desk an American was writing out a cheque to a chinless wonder.

I wandered round the room, proud yet bitterly resentful that people should be able to buy something that was so much a part of Rory.

The chinless wonder, having ditched the American, wandered over.

Can I help? he said.

I was just looking round, I said. You seem to have sold a lot.

We did awfully well yesterday, and we sold four more this morning - not, I may add, he whispered darkly, through any assistance on the artist’s part.

What do you mean? I said, startled.

The chinless wonder smoothed his pale gold hair.

Well, he’s talented, I admit, but quite frankly, he’s an ugly customer. Doesn’t give a damn about the show being a success.

He put stickers on two more paintings.

Always thought the fellow was pretty cold-blooded, he went on. Didn’t seem to care about anything, but he certainly cut up at the moment. Apparently his wife left him. Can’t say I blame her. Only been married six months. He’s absolutely devastated. I mean, he was a dead loss at the private view on Thursday. I’d lined up a host of press boys to meet him, and he wouldn’t speak to any of them. Just hung around the door, hoping she might turn up.
I leant against the wall for support.
D-did you say his wife has just left him? I said slowly. Are you sure its his wife hes cut up about?
Certain, said the chinless wonder. Ill show you a picture of her.

We moved into a second room, where I steeled myself to confront one of Rorys beautiful voluptuous nude paintings of Marina.

There she is, he said, pointing to a small oil opposite the window. I felt my knees go weak, my throat dry - because it was a painting of me in jeans and an old sweater, looking incredibly sad. I never knew that Rory had painted it. Tears stung my eyelids.

Are you sure thats the one? I whispered.

Thats her, said the chinless wonder. I mean its a great painting, but shes not a patch on that gorgeous redhead he was always painting in the nude. Still, I suppose theres no accounting for tastes. I say, are you feeling all right? Would you like to sit down?

Then he looked at the painting - and at me.

I say, he said, absolutely appalled, how frightfully rude of me. That painting - its you, isnt it? I really didnt mean to be rude.

You havent been, I said, half laughing, half crying. Its the nicest, nicest thing anyones ever said to me in my life. Do you possibly know where hes staying?
I RAN towards the tube station, rocked by conflicting emotions. It was the rush hour. As I battled with the crowds, I tried to calm the turmoil raging inside me. It couldn’t be true, it couldn’t be true. Then suddenly, as I reached the bottom of the steps, I was absolutely knocked sideways by an ecstatic, whining, black heap leaping up and licking my face, its tail going in a frenzy.

Walter, I sobbed, flinging my arms round his neck. Oh Walter, where’s your master? I looked up and there was Rory.

Come here, you bloody dog, he was shouting from the other side of the crowd. His slit eyes were restless, ranging from one person to another, sliding towards me. Then, as if drawn by the violence of my longing, they fastened on me, and I saw him start in recognition.

I tried to call his name, but the words were strangled in my throat.

Emily, he yelled.

The next moment he was fighting his way through the crowd.

Oh, Emily, Emily, darling, he said. Don’t ever run away again.

And pinning me against the wall, hunching his shoulders against the pressure of the crowd, he began to kiss me greedily, angrily, as tears of love and happiness streaked my face.

After a few minutes I drew away, gasping for breath.

We can’t stay here, said Rory, and dragged me in my tearful blindness, muttering incoherently, out into the street and across the road to his hotel, where he kissed me all the way up in the lift, utterly oblivious of the lift man. Walter Scott jumped about trying to lick my hands.

What the bloody hell, said Rory, as he slammed the bedroom door behind us, do you mean by running away like that? That sounded more like the old Rory. I’ve had the most frightful ten days of my life. And poor Walter, he went on, how do you think he’s enjoyed being the victim of a broken home?

I didn’t think you loved me, I said, collapsing on to the bed.

Jes-us, said Rory, I tried to tell you enough times. Did I wear myself out trying to fend off that smug bastard Finn Maclean? I nearly put a bullet through him that night I found him kissing you in the corridor at the hospital. And I’ve been driven absolutely insane with jealousy these last few weeks, having him rolling up to the house all hours of the day, acting as though he owned you.

I played it as cool as I could when you came back from hospital. I didn’t want to rush things, but whenever I tried to talk things over and explain how I felt, you leapt away from me like a frightened horse.

I thought you were trying to tell me you couldn’t live without Marina. That you were only staying with me because you felt guilty.

Christ no, that’s all over, it was over that night you caught us in bed together, and threw me out. We went to Edinburgh, but it was hell, actually living with her; she got on my nerves so much I wanted to wring her neck, yacking away all the time, and never letting me think. All I could think of, actually, was you, and what a sod I’d been to you.

Then my prodigal father turned up, and I discovered I wasn’t even related to Marina, and there was no reason why I shouldn’t marry her, particularly now poor old Hamish has kicked the bucket. I realized the only person in the world I wanted to be married to was you.

But, I said, blushing crimson with pleasure, that day you all went shooting, Marina said you’d been trying to talk to me that morning to ask me for a divorce.

The truth was never one of Marinas strong points, said Rory. She knew I was going to talk to you, we sat up half the night discussing the situation after you’d gone to bed. She said you were still crazy about Finn, and that I should let you go. I said sod that for a lark.

He came and sat on the bed and pulled me into his arms. You’re not still keen on him, are you? He’s so pompous and self-righteous and such a bore. I was scared stiff, when you pushed off, that you’d gone to him. I borrowed Busters plane that night and landed it in a park in Glasgow - there’s been a bit of a row about that - and routed him out of his hotel bed. He was pretty angry.

I bet he was, I said in awe. Did you really?

I really did, said Rory. And I wonder just how much longer I am going to have to go on trying to convince you that I love you. I shouldn’t think it’s ever happened before in Irasa - someone falling helplessly, ludicrously in love with their own wife, after they’ve married them. I felt myself blushing even more, and gazed down at my hands.

For God’s sake, Em darling, look at me.
I picked up his hand and pressed it to my cheek.

Ive been so unhappy, I said, then, in the gallery, I saw the painting you did of me. They said it was the only one you wouldnt sell.

I couldn bloody well find you, said Rory. Ive been telephoning your mother and Nina for news every five minutes since you left.

Oh my God, I said, I didnt ring them in case you hadnt. I looked up and he was smiling at me and with a jolt I realized it was the first time hed smiled without mockery; and close-up, how wan and heavy-eyed he looked, as though he hadnt slept for weeks.

You have missed me, I said in amazement. I really do believe you love me after all.

And now Ill prove it to you, said Rory triumphantly, starting to slide down the zip of my dress.

I was terribly out of practice, I muttered, suddenly shy. I havent done it for ages.

Dont worry, its like riding a bicycle or swimming, you never really lose the art. Get off, Walter, he said, pushing a protesting Walter Scott on to the floor. This is one party youre not invited to.

As his lips touched mine, we both began to tremble. A feeling of reckless happiness overwhelmed me. I felt his heart beating against mine and his kisses becoming more and more fierce, and the sounds of the traffic outside grew dim as they gave way to the pounding in my ears.

By the time wed finished it was dark outside.

God, that was lovely, I sighed, we should do it more often.

We will, said Rory, all day and all night for ever. Darling, he said, looking suddenly worried, do you think youll be able to put up with my absolutely bloody nature for the next sixty years?

I might, I said, if you compensate from time to time with performances like the one Ive just experienced.

Rory laughed softly and rubbed the back of my neck. He lit a cigarette and lay down in the bed, puffing me into the crook of his arm.

Rory, I said a few minutes later, I know its a terrible thing to say at a time like this, but Im starving.

So am I, he said.

Shall we go out?

No, I might want you between courses, which wouldnt do in a restaurant. Ill send down for something.

Later, as he was opening a bottle of champagne, he said, Darling, do you mind awfully if we dont live in Irasa any more?

Do I mind? I said incredulously, of course I dont.

Im bored with painting sheep and rocks, he said. I want to paint you in the sun and give you half a dozen babies to look after to stop you having thoughts about pushing off and leaving me any more.

But you love Irasa.

Its lost its charms, said Rory. I dont want you within a million miles of Finn Maclean for a start and Marinas a bloody troublemaker, and Ive had enough of my mother and Buster for a few years, and lastly my new father is still there - house guestating.

What does he find to do all day? I said. Is he still in love with Buster?

Yes. Theyre both addicted to whisky and highly-coloured reminiscences, but Alexei now seems to have other fish to fry. In the old days when Marina wanted to bug me she always used to say what she wanted was an older man. Well, Hamish was a bit too old, but Alexei looks a bit like me, and when I left he was making a marvellous job comforting her in her bereavement.

My goodness, I said, staggered, how extraordinary. You dont mean?

Well, not yet. Marina fancies herself in black far too much to give it up for at least a year, but I think now that shes so rich, and Alexei is so poor, its very much on the cards.

Youre not jealous? I said anxiously.

Not at all. He bent over and kissed me. But I really dont fancy Marina as a stepmother.
THE END

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