

CHAPTER NINE

Natacha had, indeed, been to Mark's studio whilst he was preparing for her portrait, although he would not permit her to see any of the sketches. Perhaps he would let her have a glimpse at some time in the future, after her Concert, maybe, but only if he judged his work to be of equal merit to hers. "Can I not be the judge of that?" she asked.

"Oh, no," he said from behind a canvas. "You sit in judgement so far as music is concerned, but I shall be the arbiter of visual art."

"And the work for your exhibition?"

"Coming along," he said vaguely. "Coming along."

"May I not see some of that?"

"All in good time," he replied. "All in good time."

Mark spent much of his day at the side of the piano, almost covering every practice session. Indeed, his attendance became so regular and predictable that Natacha was sometimes reluctant to start were he not there. "You will have to be sat in the Concert Hall in a place where I can see you," she told him.

"May I sit at your side and turn your music?"

"I do not intend to have music."

"Oh! Then may I stand in the wings?"

"I am not sure whether they have wings in the Royal Albert Hall. No, it is best that you sit with the family, just so long as I know that you are there, and that I can see you."

"I expect that can be arranged."

Natacha was sketched incessantly. He continued to seek to capture her every mood omitting no nuance or expression, breaking off only to wind the gramophone or change the records which reproduced the orchestral parts of the Concerto. He was assiduous in his care, ensuring that there was not the slightest drop in pitch or change of tempo. Together, they learned the piece by heart. It was their piece of music. They shared it. Mark said that they would always share it.

Miss Crotchet tentatively would praise her, then criticise her, but the incidence of the latter gradually grew less and less as Natacha refined her already technically sound performance and gradually approached her concept of artistic perfection. If a practice was good, Miss Crotchet would tell her so, declare that she was her best pupil and that, notwithstanding that she was a woman, Natacha had an outstanding future before her. Then, quite suddenly, some weeks before the night of the concert, Schumann was put away. "We will get 'im out, I think, three or four days before the night," the tutor said.

"Won't you forget it?" asked Mark.

"No, no!" exclaimed Miss Crotchet, greeting his question with elaborate gestures. "Now she 'as learnt it, she will not forget it. Not my Natacha! There 'ave been so very few successful woman pianists. Some 'ave not the strength, some 'ave not the breadth of hand, the stretch, to tackle the more demanding works. Some, they 'ave not the temperament and they become too emotional, or they are too cold and reserved. Some fail because they form emotional ties to men which distracts them. Many fail purely because they are women."

"We must not let that happen to you," said Mark.

"No!" agreed Miss Crotchet as Natacha blushed.

Although Natacha was dependent upon Mark's attendance at her practice, she never thought of asking herself why. She did not analyse why it was she liked to slip out of the house, quietly and, she thought, unnoticed, and make her way to the studio. Sophie soon realised what was happening and suggested that she should accompany her. When she raised the matter she encountered stubborn resistance from her step-daughter and no support from her husband. Natacha continued to visit Mark, alone.

"Vot do you think you will be wearing for zis portrait?" Sophie asked. It was her way of confirming that her step-daughter would be wearing something.

"When he starts the main work, I think I would wear the crimson one," said Natacha,

laying emphasis on the colour as if this was wicked in some way. "The colour suits me."

"It is a long time starting, this painting."

"That is the way he works. That is the way all great artists work. Months of preparation, sketches, studies. He will start when he is ready."

And, although Natacha saw Mark almost on a daily basis, she took no interest in his life outside of his art. She had no knowledge of, nor interest in, his political views or sympathies. She was blissfully unaware of the upheavals in Germany and Spain, or the faint but persistent tremors in the Balkans. Across the world, Japanese forces might be sweeping across the mainland of China or Italian forces driving south in Africa. Natacha was oblivious of all this. The music was an enveloping cocoon from which she was preparing to emerge in a few weeks - a papillon. Nor did Mark once raise the subject of politics, or tell her of the frequent visits made by Paul Durrant, and others, who had used part of the studio as a temporary base following the attack on the Pimlico offices. He did not mention Jenny Forbes who, having publicised her photographic session now beseeched Mark to paint her. And even had he agreed to do so, Natacha would have shown little interest.

"Do you find it lonely without your family being around?" she asked after Helen and her daughters had left for Newington.

"I keep myself occupied," he replied, "in between your visits here and my visits to you."

"Painting? Work for the exhibition?"

"Painting and sketching."

Natacha looked around the studio. As was customary, all the canvasses were turned to the wall. "Then these are not all blanks?"

"Not all." His impish smile appeared around the edge of the canvas before him.

"Can I not see them, then?"

"No. No-one is to see them until I am ready. But this exhibition - it will be sensational. There will have never been one like it!"

"May I not just turn one and have a peek?"

"No! Remember Bluebeard's wife."

"But, not even me?"

"Least of all you!"

She looked at the backs of the canvasses again and tried to picture what might be there - what Mark might have painted sat in his studio. Landscapes and seascapes? Other models? Abstracts? Roofs?

"Are you a modern painter? Do you paint in a modern style? Like Picasso or Dahli?"

"No. I am a traditionalist. I am a neo-Pre-Raphaelite. You will see in due course. Everyone will see."

"And be amazed?"

"And be amazed!"

"Does anyone else, other than me, come to your studio?" she asked one afternoon.

"Mother has been, once, with Christina."

"No-one else?"

"A friend or two. I did not show any of them anything, if that is what you are wondering."

"Not Michael?"

Mark gave a short contemptuous laugh. "He was due to come, but he went and got this job, and his time is no longer his own. It belongs to someone else. And he has now gallivanted off to Kent and is no doubt living it up on the Estate! I am sure that is why my family have gone down there early this year, to ensure that something is left and that there aren't sewers being laid everywhere!"

"Are you going to? To join them?"

"No, not unless you are able to come, too."

She felt her heart beat rise lightly as colour flooded her cheeks. Mark saw it and busied himself with the contents of his palette.

"I couldn't," she murmured, seemingly being unable to believe what she was saying.

"We have a Blunther."

"Not before the Concert - perhaps after?"

"Why not? You have worked so hard. You deserve a short break. I tell you what, I will get Mother to write to your father. I'll write to her today. You don't mind?"

"No," said Natacha, hesitantly. "I think it will be all right after the concert."

Mark's letter arrived at Newington on the same day that Mr Muir had made his visit to see Helen. In fact he had passed the postman in the drive and stopped to talk to him, asking him if he had seen Mr Barnes on his round. The letter was brought, on a silver tray, to Helen by Matthews, and read aloud to her daughters. "If he is going to invite someone," said Angela petulantly, "so shall I!"

"I am not so sure that it is a good idea for Mark and Natacha to both come down. There's Michael to think about, and Natacha's reputation. I will have to speak to Mr Bernstein about it."

"I cannot see anything amiss, Mama," said Christina. "In fact, I think it is nice idea, even if Michael's sister is somewhat dull. Mark thinks the world of her and it will be pleasant for him."

"Oh, dear!" said Helen. "I do hope that Mark is not becoming seriously involved with her. That would never do."

"Why ever not, Mama? If I can be wedded to Michael, why could not Mark wed Natacha?"

"I do not think your consequence follows the premise. I believe that Mr Bernstein may have other plans for his daughter. In addition, there's her career to consider."

"I am sure that musicians can marry just as much as novelists."

"Would-be novelists," inserted Angela. "Now, who shall I invite?"

Lady Newington waved a disapproving finger at her daughter. "No-one should invite anyone. I will write to Mr Bernstein. There is time, as Natacha will not be able to come until after the Concert even if he does permit her. In fact, I will do it straight away."

"And I shall go into the garden and be bored out of my wits there," announced Angela.

Christina made her way to her bedroom. On a small writing desk stood a brand new, gleaming, typewriter. It had been delivered yesterday, and she had spent an hour dabbling away at it and untangling the keys. This part of writing a novel presented a difficult obstacle. She had asked Paul whether she could present him with a hand written text. He had suggested that she might engage someone to type it as she progressed. That would mean sharing her secrets with another as she wrote the book. So, yesterday Mr Barnes had been despatched to Canterbury with instructions to purchase the best available typewriter. Even this expensive one had a propensity to misspell words, but she had slowly typed out two paragraphs of the first chapter. That had occupied her the best part of an hour and she had concluded that writing and typing the rest of her first novel, if she advanced at this rate, could take her over ten years. It was not helpful to have the keyboard set out in such an awkward way that she could not find any of the keys she required, but Barnes said that all the top quality machines he saw were the same.

She was unaccustomed to feeling desperate. She thought it would be so easy. If Natacha could play the piano, why could she not type? "Natacha has taken lessons and practices for hours every day," Helen told her. Very well. If that was what it took, she would take typing lessons.

"I do not want to have to go to one of those dreadful colleges, Mama," she said.

"I am sure that will not be necessary, my darling. We can find a tutor to come to the house. I am sure that all you need is someone to put you right. The rest is practice."

"It must be a woman," insisted Christina. "I do not wish to be taught by a man."

"Of course, my darling. It is a shame they did not include typing in the syllabus at

Miss Mackenzie's."

"We were not being taught to be secretaries."

"Of course, just the same. I will ask Barnes to find someone."

Barnes was asked and he, in turn, asked Angus Muir when the two of them met later that day. Angus did not know anyone who gave individual tuition, but he mentioned that his daughter had learned to type at the secretarial college he had sent her to. "She can do shorthand and book keeping as well," he added.

These facts were relayed to Christina later the same day. "I do not require a book-keeper," she announced, "but someone who could take shorthand might be useful."

"Could you not make notes in the morning and dictate what you want to write to Miss Muir in the afternoon?" asked her mother. "She could then type it up next morning when you were doing the next set of notes. Oh, Darling, I know that you said you did not want to confide in anyone, not even me. But it could be an ideal situation, and you might be able to complete your novel this summer before we return to Town. Think about it."

"I will Mama," said Christina, "I will."

"Do you mean to say, Father, that you went all the way up to Newington House, to see Lady Newington, actually saw Lady Newington, and yet you did not raise the matter of Mr and Mrs Cross with her? Why did you not? What on earth did you talk about?"

Angus Muir stopped chewing and stared across the table at his daughter. Ordinarily he would have reacted angrily and sternly to his daughter's outburst. Ordinarily he would have brought down a firm, metaphoric, parental hand. But, Moira looked prettier when she was angry, and was so like her mother. She had sat there once, in the same chair, eyes inflamed, cheeks flushed, remonstrating with him over his relaxed attitude to his brother's demands. He had told her that it was only money and he had greater regret over losing a brother than he did over dividing the assets of their business. Now he found solace and a perverse enjoyment in occasionally provoking his daughter and watching her when she was thus provoked, as now. "Och, lassie," he said softly. "It is only a wee matter that'll keep."

"Oh Father!" she cried, becoming quite animated. "You cannot have been listening to us the other evening! You really cannot! It is not a matter that can wait! Mr Cross is seriously ill and his wife is not at all well, herself. And there's the baby, and another on the way. It is really very urgent!"

"Tell me again, what exactly did the doctor say?"

Moira gasped with exasperation. "He said that there was nothing he could do at all for Mr Cross, except try to make him comfortable. And he said that Mrs Cross would follow him to the grave shortly, given the state of the house and her malnutrition, if nothing was done for her. Those were his exact words! And the little boy cried all the time we were there. We ought to be prepared to do something, as Christians and as landlords."

"They dinna pay a penny in rent, Moira."

"Oh, Father! How can you say that? Why, the other evening you seemed to be as concerned as I!"

"And so I was, lassie. But when I went in to see Lady Helen this morning she was n' alone. Her daughters were there and the engineer who has come down to survey the Newington-Braham scheme. I did n' think it was a matter that could rightly be taken up afore the lot of them, especially with that Lady Angela there. In any event, I felt that Lady Helen would not appreciate me raising the question of compensation for injuries suffered in a mine in which her family has a controlling interest in front of the engineer. It could have sounded like moral blackmail, and would n' have helped the case if I'd received a negative response. So I did n' say a thing about it."

"Oh! What on earth will Mrs Cerny and Phoebe say?"

"I dare say that they will understand. Now, you have n' asked about the young engineer, the surveyor."

"Is he important?" she asked impatiently.

"He is a fine young man. I have offered to go over the scheme with him - to point out local features and the general topography. It could save him a great deal of time, his being a

stranger here. I'm telling you this in case he turns up at the yard. So that you dinna send him away with a flea in his ear if I'm no there!"

"I wouldn't do that," she said more calmly. "What is his name?"

"To tell the truth, I canna recall it. But I can tell you this. There was something vaguely familiar about his face. I could n' place him, but I'm sure I have seen him somewhere before!"

Moira shrugged. "If he turns up I will entertain him, or Kurt may if he is there!"

"Aye. I will have to have words with that young man."

"And I will have to report our progress, or lack of it, to his mother and Phoebe," Moira added, sadly.

"Well, it is not all lack of progress. After I left Lady Helen and her daughters I went in search of Jack Barnes."

"I though you said that it would be useless talking to him?"

"Aye, I did, but I had a wee word with him none the less. I said that I'd seen her Ladyship and that she'd agreed that I could raise the matter with him in the first place. And that is what I did. He said he would check the facts and then report to Lady Helen, probably tomorrow or the day after. So, my trip up to the House was not entirely wasted.

Moira stared intensely at her father, then smiled. "I do believe you have been teasing me," she said. "It may not be all that we hoped for, but I think that Mrs Cerny and Phoebe will be happy!"

It had not long stopped raining and the sun had barely emerged from behind the last of the fleeing clouds when Michael, assisted by his assistant, took the large step off the precipice and "started" the survey. There was no formal launch, no champagne and ribbons, nor any flag-waving crowds. As the raindrops clung to the leaves of the roses and a sweet scent permeated the air, he carried the large box which housed the surveyor's level out to the Austin. Arthur brought the tripod and staff.

To some like Mr Hiller or the other partners, who might adopt a tighter, more accurate, use of words and more care in their application, "started" might have been considered misleading. Michael considered he had "started" when the equipment was carried out of the cottage rather than in. So he announced to the struggling assistant, "Let's get started!"

The first difficulty was deciding just where to set up the level and start. As might be the case with political opponents who would spend days discussing the shape of the table at which they were to hold discussions, this was no easy matter. Michael had looked at the maps that Mr Hiller had shown him, but they conveyed little. However, he told his assistant that he had thought about it and, as it was easier to walk down hills rather than up, they should start at the top and work down. Perversely, Arthur had an entirely different view. They should start at the lowest point and work up. Then at least they would know the level from which they were working, or at least that was what he said. And what ever they did first, walk uphill or downhill, they had to reverse anyway. There would be a lot of walking, Michael concluded. "How about a compromise?" he suggested. "We could start in the middle!" That was assuming that they could decide where the middle was. It was a difficult decision, and occupied the best part of the first morning.

"Some of the levelling has already been done," observed the assistant, pointing at the plans. "I suppose we ought to verify the ground levels, though."

"Ah! That's where the whatyemaycallit comes in?" Michael had collected the whatyemaycallit from Canterbury. It resided in a large, dark, wooden box and was expensively heavy. When he looked inside, he found what appeared to him, a short, fat, telescope mounted on three knurled discs which could be "twiddled". However, when he lifted this impressive object from the box and held it up to his eye, everything appeared to be upside down. Clearly it was defective, although Mr Hiller thought not when it was pointed out to him. At least it could be accommodated easily in the Austin which was more than could be attributed to some of the other items Mr Hiller indicated he should take. There were a number of brightly painted poles, a tripod, and a long thin rectangular box which could be extended

like a telescope to make it even longer. This last object was also brightly painted with lines and hieroglyphics. Mr Hiller had insisted on him taking all these objects, and a few more beside, ignoring Michael's protestations that some of them could not be fitted into the car unless the sun roof was pulled back and they protruded through it. That was fine, except he could not then shut the roof should it rain, and the day was already overcast.

Once back at the cottage, Michael had stood the whatyemaycallit on the kitchen table and knelt down to peer through it. The garden was inverted. Mr Hiller had also said something about it being level. It was not. Even when he held it up so that the axis was horizontal, the garden was still up side down and he was beginning to feel dizzy.

"And we ought to do a traverse in these locations where we will be going through fields."

The assistant was just trying to be clever. "A traverse, eh?" said Michael. "I'm sure that you have done one before?"

"Only a couple," said Arthur sheepishly.

"Good! It will be further practice for you!"

"But first we should walk the route."

"Walk - the - route," repeated Michael slowly. "The route of what?"

"The sewers. To determine the natural lie of the land."

"Gravity sewers?" asked Michael, recalling that this description had been used by someone in the London office. "A Mr Muir has offered to show me the lie of the land."

"Angus Muir, the builder? That is probably an offer which is worth taking up before we do anything else."

"Good! That is exactly what I thought. Perhaps we could do that after lunch?" Michael was beginning to warm to his assistant who seemed to be resourceful and who knew the right terminology. "And talking of lunch, we must make some arrangements. There must be a public hostelry around here."

"A what?"

"A public house." Michael was already feeling hungry despite having eaten not an hour earlier. He had been deprived of his normal leisurely breakfast and was suffering the effects.

"Actually, I brought some sandwiches," said the assistant. "If that is all right? We could share them."

Michael should have been prepared for this. He had joined the ladies at the House for dinner the previous evening and he knew that, had he so requested, a hamper would have been prepared and delivered daily to the door of the cottage. But he had omitted to ask. Instead he had said that it had been a lovely dinner, but that he should be independent and did not want to make a habit of eating at the House. He was now questioning the wisdom of that declaration. "I don't think I ought to do that," he said. "We'll try and find a public house today, for me at least. Then I will try to make some regular arrangement for myself."

"I could ask my Mum if she would make some for you as well."

"Would you?" asked Michael, hastily, but not enthusiastically. "I would have to reimburse her, though, especially if it is on a regular basis."

"I don't think my Mum would take money."

"That's as maybe," said Michael, "but I understand times are hard."

Arthur Brown did not respond initially, but studied closely the quality of his companion's clothes and shoes, and the car. "You're an artiled pupil?" he said.

"Ye - s," said Michael, suspiciously

"I am not," said the assistant with a note of authority that Michael did not like. "I am an engineering assistant and I draw a salary, which is something you may not get. I think I might be better off than you, or than you think. What does your father do for a living?"

"He works in a bank," said Michael, turning over the maps and making it appear that he was examining them. "He does make me a kind of allowance."

"Then it does appear that I may be better off than you?" Michael did not answer. All this talk about money was uncouth, although he had unwittingly raised the subject and it now was difficult to extract himself.

"I will ask her this evening," volunteered Arthur. Michael shrugged his shoulders. He had not seen his assistant's sandwiches. He expected that they would be coarse, thickly cut, not gentle and likely trimmed as he was accustomed to. He had this vision of Mrs Brown hacking away at a loaf in a dim subterranean kitchen. To refuse now would appear ungrateful, and if they turned out to be edible, it would solve one problem.

"Good!" he said. "That is settled. Now shall we set up the whole of the whatyemaycallit, just to check it over and practice, you know."

"Does your surveyor drive an Austin Seven with a tripod and staff sticking out through the roof? If he does he has just come into the yard! Oh, doesn't it look comical?" Moira's announcement provoked the desired effect, as she heard her father clattering down the stairs from the store. "There are two of them!" she added as the occupants emerged, looked around, and then regarded the dark clouds swelling above them with apprehension.

"Can I help you?" A blond haired youth emerged from behind a pile of bricks and addressed Michael who said that he had come to see Mr Muir at his invitation, if he was there. "He's in the office," Kurt replied, gesticulated, and disappeared again.

"What is it about this place? Everyone I encounter I think I have met before!" Michael confided in his assistant. "I have definitely seen him somewhere before. I know I have!"

"I can't say that I have," responded Arthur, opening the door to the office but ensuring that Michael went in first.

His entry coincided with Angus arriving at the bottom of the stairs. "I am pleased that you could come," he said brightly. "Do come in and meet Moira - she will make us a nice wee pot of tea, if that is all right with the two of you."

"I am a little worried about the weather," said Michael, peering outside.

"Ay, it might rain. An' it might not. Do y' want to bring in your surveying equipment and shut the car roof?" It seemed a good idea so Arthur was sent out to recover the staff and tripod and to close up the car. "An absolute bugbear for a builder," Angus said. "Changeable weather," he added in response to Michael's puzzled expression. "You never know whether to lay men off or not."

Michael's heart leapt when he saw Moira. He immediately recognised her as the young woman he had talked to in Mr Fishwick's outer office a few weeks earlier. To his slight relief she gave no indication that she had recognised him, but he remained in fear that suddenly she might. And he felt that her attitude towards him was cool, in marked contrast to her treatment of his assistant when he came in.

"Do you know Miss Muir?" he asked him when they were alone. "Have you met her before?"

"No. But she's a nice girl, isn't she?" said Arthur.

"I suppose so," Michael replied, holding her up against the girl who waited for him at night.

"That is the young man who we met in London when we went up to arrange the loan," Moira later told her father.

"Really? Och, I thought there was something familiar about his face when I met him up at the House."

"He said that he had business there - in London. I do not understand why he should turn up here, carrying out a survey, if he is a money lender or financier."

"Och, no, Moira. I dinna think he's either of those."

"Why was he there, then?"

"Perhaps to borrow money like the rest of us. Him, for his pupillage, us for the business."

"Oh! Perhaps I have done him a disservice, but I do not think that I liked him just the same. He seemed pompous and affected. Not like his assistant. I like him!"

"Yes. I noticed you were busy talking to him whilst I was going over the maps with

our surveyor.”

Indeed, that had been the case. Mr Muir had opened up a map on which, he explained, high areas of land were shown in one range of colours, and low areas in another, and had pointed out the villages covered by the scheme, including Newington. To Michael's annoyance, instead of attending and assisting, his assistant had engaged the builder's daughter in a distracting whispered conversation, loud enough for Michael to hear that they were discussing something, but not loud enough for him to hear what it was. Mr Muir pointed out valleys and inclines, describing where, in his view, sewers should or should not go. He selected a bright green area for the location of the Works. “It needs to be as far as you can make it from the houses, but not so far away that you canna use gravity to feed it. Of course you'll n' be able to connect Newington House without pumping.”

“Oh, does Lady Newington know?”

“Och, I imagine so. It's probably one of the reasons why she's so opposed to the scheme.”

“Is she?”

“Aye. She will have to pay for a facility that she canna use. You could always suggest, of course, that she has a small modern treatment plant built on the Estate. I dare say it'll be a darned sight better than the cesspits.”

Now there was a word that made Michael cringe. It sounded far worse than “sewage” or “cistern”. Perhaps if he was really brave, he could try it on Angela? “D'ye want to go out with me and visit some of the localities?” added the builder.

“Only if you have the time,” said Michael, trying to attract his assistant's attention but finding that he was too deeply engrossed in his conversation with the builder's daughter.

“What did you talk about, then?”

“Lots of things. He told me that he is an engineering assistant and that he hopes to get some qualifications. He goes to night school in Canterbury. I would say that he is more inclined to be interested in the practical aspects rather than the theory, though we talked about the Cathedral, about music, and dancing. It seems that we share a lot of interests. And he asked me if I would like to go dancing with him.”

“When?”

“He didn't say,” Moira sighed. “He said that he was looking for an answer in principle. That is how he put it. I said that I would have to think about it, but he does appear to be a pleasant young man.”

“I dare say so, but - .”

“And he lives with his widowed mother. His father died during the Great War. He would have been very young then. It must have been a struggle.”

“Ah, it is.”

Michael thought it would be preferable to strike whilst the iron was hot, at least whilst the builder was available and prepared to assist. It also gave him a valid reason for taking possession again of his assistant. So they agreed that the remainder of the afternoon would be devoted to a tour of the area covered by the scheme, and Arthur was directed to come along and make notes of everything the builder said. Angus said it would be preferable if he drove as he knew every road and byway. Some were so narrow that not even two wee Austins might pass one another. Others were so steep that no wee Austin would ascend them, nor be able to stop if progressing down in the opposite direction.

Michael soon began to wonder if, in reality, he was being taken on a tour of the builder's past work. “We built that extension - there!” pointed Mr Muir. “And re-built that chimney - fitted that bay window - you should have seen the state of the one we removed, och there was nothing but the glass and putty holding it a'gether - built that bungalow.” Later he realised that his impression was not entirely representative of the trip because Arthur produced copious notes of possible routes, house connections, even points at which there would have to be a change in direction and Mr Muir announced there would have to be a manhole. Michael hummed to himself, “with a manhole here, and a manhole there - .” The

result, however, was that Michael and his assistant were able to spend the next couple of days drawing lines on the plans, deciding where the survey should actually be carried out, and what they thought needed to be surveyed.

Felicity left the Confessional, head bowed, slowly shuffling one foot before the other. She had been quite frank before Father Thomas. At her last visit, her courage had failed her but now, for the first time, she had poured forth her thoughts, her desires, her fears, and her inclinations. It had sounded terrible. She had listened to her voice in horror. It was as if she had been possessed by all the demons in Hell, as if she had harboured and nurtured every vice on Earth. She was wicked, unbelievably wicked, and it was the voice of her wickedness that had spoken.

She had no conscious intention of confessing all these things. They, the dreadful words and admissions they bore, had just flowed out and, once started, she knew of no way to stem the flood. One admission followed another, until they were piled high around her, trapping her in the small confined space. Interred in her own wickedness!

Father Thomas remained silent throughout this crimson torrent. She thought she might have heard him gasp once or twice. No doubt he was scandalised, mortified, beyond belief. That one of his carefully herded flock, one to whom he was suggesting only a matter of weeks earlier that she should bundle up her purity and consider taking holy orders, could turn out to be so wicked! To the core, she thought.

Now it was out. The dark stain that had oozed from her heart and obliterated her soul had emerged and was corruptibly visible here, in the confessional. "Is there any more, my child?" he asked when she had ceased to talk. "Have you anything further to confess?"

"No, Father," she said softly.

"Nothing? You are quite sure of that?"

"Yes, Father," she whispered, waiting for the blow to fall. She expected damnation, excommunication at the very least. Could anyone ever before have been so wicked and made such a confession? Could anyone ever have expressed such carnal - oh, how she hated this awful word - desires?

Clearly Father Thomas who, after all, knew far more than she did about the World and its sinners, thought so as she considered the penance he gave her to be exceedingly light. She felt disappointed that she had not been dealt with more severely and, in her vanity, she immediately resolved to double it. As she made her way down the aisle and to her favourite pew, she upped the stakes and trebled the penance.

Mary stood before her, crowned with a halo of blue stars, the infant Jesus in her arms. Her robe was brown and paint was beginning to flake from the pink of her cheeks, adding to the sadness she portrayed as she looked down on the fallen. "I know," Felicity whispered, looking up. "It is so hard. For me it is so hard, to be pure in thought and deed. Others find it easy. Moira and Deborah, they have no stain of sin. But there are others, beasts like Kurt - save me from becoming one of them, Mary. Save me from falling into the same pit as Kurt has. Make me pure in thought and heart, like Moira and Deborah, and Father Thomas."

Mary remained impassive, but a tiny pulse in Felicity's heart, tingling through her body, informed her that she had been heard and understood. She bowed her head again and, clutching her rosary, started her penance. She was half conscious of a rustle in the Church, somewhere behind her, a sound like cloth rubbing and a soft step, but she did not become aware of Father Thomas until he sat beside her. When he laid his hand on her arm she flinched and he withdrew. When he next touched her she was possessed by an excitement and fear far beyond her wildest imagination.