

CHAPTER TEN

"Have you discovered exactly why Mr Muir came to see you, Mama? Did he speak to Barnes?" Christina paused from her activity at the writing desk and stared across the room to where her Mother was standing, thoughtful, looking at the fountain through the window.

"Yes," said Angela. "Did he have the courage to talk to Barnes? How odd to come all the way up here and then not have the guts to say what you have come to say! Perhaps he simply forget - it was too much for him, our presence - or he has a low intellect. These trades people are not all that clever, you know!"

"As I said at the time, I do not think for one moment that Mr Muir forgot a thing. I think that he remembered everything, including his manners, but being the gentleman that he is and finding you two here and Michael, he did not think it appropriate to raise a subject that he thought I might find distressing."

"I found *him* distressing," said Angela.

"What was the subject, then Mama?" asked Christina.

"It concerns a young married couple living in one of Mr Muir's houses. The wife has one child and is expecting another."

"I'd rather we did not talk of children so soon after lunch," said Angela.

"Mr Cross is terminally ill," said Helen ignoring her daughter, "partly as a result of being injured in one of the mines."

"Oh, Mama! Not another mining injury claim! They make them up, these people. Really they do!"

"Not this one, Christina," said her mother, solemnly. "Barnes has checked his case very carefully. Mr Cross was injured, something to do with some machinery, Barnes said. And as a result her was unable to continue working in the mine. He worked for a while on the Estate, but there was another accident some months ago and he has not worked since."

"Either he is accident prone or a malingerer," said Angela. "That is what Herr von Cerny would call him."

"I do not think that he is either," said Helen coldly. "And in this case the poor man is dying. My problem is what to do about his wife and children. She is sick, and has no-one to turn to."

"Have we to do something for her? Can these people not look after themselves?"

"You could send them both to Bromley," said Christina, returning to her work.

"That is an option that could be considered," said Helen a little more brightly. "I will seek Mr Bernstein's advice. In fact, I shall write to him this afternoon. And how is your writing coming along, my darling?"

"Oh, I am on chapter four now," said Christina. "The heroine has just escaped from the white slavers but has fallen back into the hands of the arch-villain who is about to pump her full of morphine! But he does not know that Bradley Ferguson, the hero, has been following them in disguise and is about to attempt to rescue her. Of course, in doing so he falls into the villain's trap!"

"It sounds perfectly dreadful," said her sister. "It will probably sell millions!"

It was late afternoon, and the sun had already dropped out of sight behind the wooded hill at the rear of Rose Cottage when Michael parked the diminutive, but ever willing, Austin at the end of the track that led to it. As he unloaded the surveying equipment and closed up the sun roof he felt a tinge of excitement and anticipation. They had made progress today towards completing what seemed already to him to be a very long and tedious undertaking. He had suggested to his assistant that if it was no more a matter than drawing lines on plans, perhaps they could dispense with the thankless task of taking levels and measurements. Anyone could see whether the land rose or went down hill and the drain pipes could follow accordingly. In any event, water would find its own level. It would be quicker, the scheme would be built sooner, and everyone could be happy. But Arthur Brown had indelicately muttered something about sections and had been smartly told that if that was the case, he,

Arthur Brown, could draw them.

There was more to excite Michael. He had looked closely at the maps in the builder's office and, although he was less than experienced in map reading, he had identified the location of Rose Cottage. It was shown at the end of a track, the one that he had just driven up. More of interest was the dotted line of a footpath that snaked from the end of the track, skirted the cottage, wound its way through woodland, alongside fields, and climbed up onto a dark green plateau against which was marked on the map the word "Ruins". It was the path that Christina had mentioned but he really wondered what she had been going on about. It looked to be no distance at all on the map. He could easily walk up there and be back at the cottage before dinner.

The path led him through woodland, around the edge of a large ploughed field, and across and up the side of a steep-sided, wooded, valley. In some places it was level. At other points he was confronted by a steep ascent. Although it was not wide, it was well defined. Clearly it was used regularly. Michael paid no attention to the wild roses and honeysuckle. Nor did he heed the late afternoon bird song which greeted his approach. Everything natural, from the bushes and trees that lined the way to the brambles that strove to cross it, everything was a potential, irritating, impediment to his progress.

And then, quite suddenly, at the end of a long climb, he was there. Dark in the low sun, the jagged shell of a large building filled the view before him. Ivy covered walls and grassy mounds scattered around bore witness to the presence of other structures and foundations which lay where they had been interred. For a moment he stood still and contemplated the scene. It was familiar, vaguely familiar. Had he dreamed of this place? Still full of anticipation, he advanced out of the shadows into the sunlight.

As he did, he was possessed by a feeling of peace and tranquillity quite unlike anything he had ever experienced before. It was, he thought, as if someone or some being had reached out and laid a benevolent calming hand upon his shoulder. "This is extraordinary," he said aloud.

Beyond the cluster of ruins he came to a gravel path and found the formal gardens that Christina had mentioned. They were neat, with trimmed hedges, weed-free flower beds, and closely cut lawns. He would have conceded that the flowers were pretty, colourful, and that there were pleasant fragrances. But no more. He was thinking of turning back and retracing his steps to examine the ruins more closely when, rounding a corner, he saw something which made his heart leap. Standing on a small bridge which spanned a leg of a large, lily-covered, lake, framed in the golden light of the sun, was the silhouette of a young woman.

She was clearly deep in thought and completely unaware of his approach. He was virtually at her side before she gave a start and stepped back and away from him.

Michael was almost rendered speechless. There was something about her, in her looks and poise, which made his heart race even quicker. "Please, do not go," he said, holding out a hand. "I think I know you."

"Know me?" He was struck and pained by the tone of horror, as if she found the thought of him knowing her detestable, even repulsive.

"I am sorry," he said gently. "I did not mean to scare or offend you. It is just that you appeared awfully familiar to me."

"Me? Familiar?"

"I think I must be mistaken."

"I think you are," she said sharply and took yet another pace backward.

"Isn't it really beautiful here?" he said, turning to lean on the handrail and survey the lake. And, quite suddenly, it did appear, to him, to be beautiful. The sky was a special hue of deep blue, the greens of the hedges were dark and crisp, and the lilies and flowers brighter than ever he had known them. Somewhere close, a bird serenaded them above the gentle industrious buzzing of insects. Below his feet he noticed, for the first time, the lazy progress of the Carp. "It is really beautiful. Have you been here before?"

"I often come here," she said with a distinct note of resentment and caution. "For the peace, the tranquillity, and the solitude."

"I was struck by how peaceful and tranquil it is," he sighed, looking first at her, then away, and devouring the view. "This is my first time. I am renting a small cottage on the Estate. I thought I might have a late afternoon walk and I stumbled across this." He wanted to add "and you" but there was something in her attitude and posture that made him cautious. She was like a beautiful and exotic wild bird which might be coaxed into his hands, but which would fly away for ever, if he made a wrong move. And he could not bear the thought that she would be lost for ever. Not now that he had found her.

She stepped back yet another pace and his instinct was to advance towards her, but he desisted because she did appear to be on the very brink of fleeing. "Yes," she said sadly, "it is beautiful here. I like to come here to be alone. I rarely see anyone here except, occasionally, one of the gardeners from the Estate. I have come to think of them as my gardens."

"May I then share them with you?" He would have liked to have been able to say "may I share you with them?" He detected the faintest hint of a smile and general relaxation in her posture.

"Of course," she said. "They aren't mine. I don't think they belong to any one person, unless its to the Monks, over there. I was just surprised to find someone, a stranger, you, here. But, you said you thought you knew me?"

"I am sorry. I had no intention of disturbing or upsetting you, or appearing to be forward. It was just - as I came upon this place and saw you here for the first time - it seemed like it was not the first time. There was something familiar, about the ruins, about you. I felt that I had known you for a very long time."

"And now?"

"I think I wish that I had known you for a very long time. I certainly would like to know you." They were risky words but they escaped, as words sometimes will, betraying his inner, true, feelings. He delivered them with such simple sincerity that she did not feel offended and turn on her heels and fly, but smiled slightly and bowed her head. "What beauty," thought Michael. "What grace and poise." The captivating line of her high cheek bone and her long neck as she lowered her head. Her slim and delicate body. Her sad, expressive, oval face. He feasted upon the vision.

"I am not someone who anyone would wish to know. I am wicked," she confessed. "I think I am cursed! I think you should best leave me."

These were not the words that Michael expected, or wished to hear. For a moment he was unable to think of anything to say. It was like trying to deal with someone who has internal pain. "Where does it hurt," he might ask. "All over," would be the answer. How was he to deal with this? "I thought something might be troubling you when I came up. You were clearly deep in thought, and I have disturbed it. Is there any way in which I can help?"

"No!" she replied unhesitatingly and looked away, across the lake, seeming to be uncertain whether to stay and continue talking to him, or whether to leave. Michael would have been content just to stand there, say nothing, only look at her. "Do you work on the Estate?" she asked suddenly.

"No, I do not."

"Then how do you come to be here?"

What should he reply? How should he answer? It was probably best to tell her the truth or, at least, some of it. "I think I said, I am renting one of the cottages on the Estate. I had to go up to Newington House this morning in connection with my business and whilst I was there I noticed the ruins on the horizon. So I thought that I would walk up and see just what they are."

"You were quite clever to find your way to them. Or did someone tell you?"

"To tell the truth, I looked at a map in the offices of one A G Muir and Company, builders of this parish."

"You know Angus Muir?" she asked, suddenly brighter.

"Why, yes. He has been very helpful to me."

"And Moira, his daughter?"

"Yes - I have met her. She struck me as a very nice young woman, although I am not sure what she thought about me."

“Moira is a good Christian and a kind hearted person. I am sure that she thought well of you. But what a small world it is! Fancy you knowing Moira! She is my best friend. I will ask her about you!”

“Please don't. I wouldn't want you to hear anything bad said against me.”

“Just fancy you knowing Angus Muir, and us meeting like this!” she mused. “I mean it is so unusual for me to meet anyone. Occasionally there's a gardener up here, but they mostly arrive outside their normal working hours. They look after the gardens for nothing, you know. They are not paid, although I think the plants come from the Estate.”

“I expect they have hundreds of them on the Estate, and can spare a few. It is very beautiful. Would you like to walk with me and show me around? Do you know its history and why it is still here?” When he took her arm she did not resist. He had never taken Christina's arm, but then he had discouraged her from walking with him. Slowly, step by step, she revealed the nature of the ruins to him, recounting their history. He stood with her in the remains of the chapel between the tall, bare, walls. They lingered in the refractory, strolled along the cloisters, paused in the dormitories, and ended at a grassy area where the Monks were buried. “Isn't it odd,” she said, “to think that they have lain there all this time, still, at rest and at peace, while the Monastery was dissolved, demolished, and used as a stone quarry for the Newington Estate. I wonder what they think of it all!”

“I am sure that they would approve of the gardens.”

“Yes, I think that they do. I see that as some kind of recompense for all the wrong that has been done to their Order and buildings. Imagine how they must have worked and toiled, to have brought all the stones up here. They could hardly have chosen anywhere around her that is more inaccessible.” As if to demonstrate her point, she led him along a gravel path to a gap in a low stone wall. Below, shrouded in the late afternoon haze, lay the town of Dover. Immediately before them the ground fell away steeply, so steeply that Michael wondered if the slope was surmountable. “I come up this way,” she told him.

“This is part of the Estate?”

“Beyond this wall, down there, yes. Right down to that first hedgerow. There's a fence there too, but I have a secret way through.”

“So this, the Monastery and the gardens, is like an oasis set in the vast Newington desert?”

“I think of it as a haven in a sad and wicked world, populated by wicked, un-trustful, people.”

“You are too hard on us,” he said, smiling.

She did not return his smile but looked searchingly at his face and into his eyes. “I do not think,” she said slowly, “that you are wicked.”

“Am I to be trusted?”

“I do not know,” she said cautiously. “And I must go now, anyway.”

“Must you?”

“If I do not, I will be late for dinner and my sister will be worried.”

“Can we meet again?”

“I don't know. I do come up here quite often so I expect we will bump into one-another.” And she was gone, scrambling down the hill. Michael watched her figure grow smaller and smaller until, by the hedgerow, she appeared to pause. He was sure that he saw her turn and wave. In any event, he waved to her. Then she was gone.

Michael dreamed that night. Whilst Felicity lay in bed, waiting for the stealth-like footsteps and reliving some of the moments of the time spent with this delightful young man who had suddenly appeared in her life, he slept and dreamed. The dreams were indistinct at first, just malformed shapes and blurred images, but gradually, maybe by chance, maybe by subconscious design, the dreams became focused and took on a familiar, recognisable, form. He was in the gardens at the Monastery. She was there, the girl of his dreams, the girl whose arm he had earlier taken. She was there, in his arms, warm, soft, trusting, loving. The Monks had, one by one, risen from their graves and were blessing their union. All was light, harmony, pure and eternal. Except there was a discordant note, a woman's voice, far away,

almost drowned by the chant, distant, from beyond the woods, reproaching, accusing, denouncing him and demanding vengeance.

He woke with a start. The room was pitch black. Outside, the night was still and silent. He did not even know her name, nor where she lived! But he did know someone who did! And it would not be at all hard to find an excuse for visiting Mr Muir again!

It was only then, as she lay in her bed, safe behind the bolted door, looking up at the star-less sky, that Felicity began to realise the enormity and the implications of what had happened at the church earlier in the day. Her recollections of the meeting with Michael were gradually eclipsed as memories of what had happened seeped back. No matter how much she tried to recall what had been said in the gardens, or picture the way he had taken her arm, like a true gentleman, it was Father Thomas she saw, animated, aroused, grappling, trying to kiss her. She was shocked, outraged, repulsed, yet a part of her, a wicked part of her, was pleased, excited, and flattered. Yet she was ashamed. Yes, ashamed that she could pervert and drag a good and righteous man down with her into her own bed of sin. Confused as her thoughts were, she resolved that she could not kneel before him again, bare her soul and confess, or look up into his face when she received communion. What ever else might happen to her, she could not go back to that church. Not whilst he was priest there. She was damned.

There was one course which beckoned to her. She could go to her other sanctuary, if only to get things clear in her mind and to be with God. What did it matter if it was no longer a church? Was the ground not still sacred, and there had been the vision! She would establish a shrine and devote herself to prayer. Rain or shine, she would make the pilgrimage, up the long climb, and kneel there, before the grassy altar, beside the ghosts of the Monks, to appeal to God. Only then might she find peace and repose, forgiveness and absolution.

That had been her plan, but there was now this new factor, this distraction, this interloper, this stranger who had come and threatened to violate the temple of which she was to be High Priestess! High Priestess? No, she would be no more than a humble supplicant, bowed, begging for pardon. Violate? No, he had not violated the temple. It was still intact and pure. In a way, he seemed to be as much a part of it as did she or the Monks. He would come again, she knew that. He would discover her, and they would share the gardens. They would be together, an Adam and Eve in a modern paradise. If there was violation, it was that perpetrated by Father Thomas against the doctrines of the Church, against Our Lord, against the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Saints and Martyrs, and against her.

But, then, how had it happened? How had it all come to pass? What was it he had said? She was a fine young woman who would attract the attention of many men. How was she to stop them? How was she to stop the moths which crowded to her candle? Get her hence to a nunnery? No! Her desire was to live amongst men, not women. She would be their Clara Bowe! And if her beauty was real and corrupted priests, so be it. She had been robbed of the Holy Communion and the inner tranquillity that brought to her soul. She had been abused. If men were now to suffer, so be it!

That was not what she desired. That was how it was to be. She could not go back to the Church and put her unquestioning trust in another male priest. In the one place where above all others she should have been safe, she had been defiled. Yet, even if that were the case, and were she to now go into voluntary exile, she would have to continue to fight the evil that sought to conquer her body and possess her immortal soul. And that was a battle that she wondered if she could ever win.

The morning sun was already bright and rising high in the eastern sky when Michael drew back the curtains of Rose Cottage and looked out onto a new world. He had hoped that by some miracle she might be there, coming up the path, or standing by the gate, or on the other side of the clematis laden fence. He had half prayed that a reason had been thrown in her path to cause her to come up the track, to visit the gardens by this route rather than the one she had showed him. A land-slip perhaps? Or could someone let loose a fierce, snorting, ground-stamping, bull on the grassy slopes? Even a notice to that effect down by the hole in the hedge through which she had disappeared from his sight, would suffice. Perhaps they had found the hole and put up a notice saying "Trespassers would be Prosecuted"? No, not

prosecuted, not one at least, one who was the fairest and most adorable creature in the whole wide World! She would be taken and led over a rose petal path to be incarcerated at Rose Cottage. Christina would punish him and condemn him for meeting her, for looking at her, for talking to her, for walking with her, and for thinking of her. He would be entombed too. She would be his Aida. Such would be their fate - bliss!

Arthur was there at the gate, waiting for him, eager to go. Once in the right location, Michael asked his assistant to set up the level, look through it, and write down what he saw. Michael was content to hang on to the staff and dream, inattentive and quite unresponsive to his assistant's pleas and directions.

When Michael suggested that they or, at the very least, Arthur should re-visit the builder's yard, he was met with unexpected enthusiasm. Arthur had given his mother his customary detailed account of the previous day's activities and had dwelt long upon the graces of the young Scottish beauty who, he declared, he thought he should make his wife. "This is all very sudden, Arthur," she said. "All too sudden. I do not think you should be rushing into anything."

"It's love at first sight, Mum!" he protested. "Just like at the pictures."

"And she feels the same way about you?"

"I am sure of it!"

"And, how do her father and mother feel? Have you sought their consent to approach their daughter?"

"I haven't spoken to them yet, not formally. But her father was there all the time."

"I trust that he was," she said sternly, setting down her iron on the range. "My goodness! Your dear father and I had known each other for two years before he asked my father for consent to seek my hand! And then I turned him down the first time!"

"But were you happier after he proposed than you were before?"

"Questions!" snapped Mrs Brown. "It is not a matter of happiness. Married life is a tender plant that needs a good deal more than happiness to nurture it. It has to be approached and cultivated with the greatest of care. And remember, act in haste, repent at leisure."

This conversation was still rattling around Arthur Brown's head when he cycled south to meet Michael. He had almost convinced himself that his mother was right and that he should be cautious. After all, if she really did like him, she would not go off with someone else. Perhaps there was someone else? She could be engaged for all he knew! It was better not to pursue her and run the risk of making a fool of himself. Yet, if she was the one, how else was he to get to now her, how else was either of them to get to know one another, if he did not actually go and see her again? Michael's suggestion that he should was manna from heaven.

"When you get there, there are a couple of questions I would like you to ask his daughter."

"His daughter?" Arthur's heart rose and fell almost in the same instant. Surely he did not have a rival right here, before him?

"Ask her - I need to know the name and address of her best friend."

"What if she asks me why you want to know?"

"Oh, tell her that you want to know. Oh, I don't know! Tell her - tell her that you want to write to her."

"But I have never met her!"

"You could pretend that you have - last night, in Canterbury. But she didn't give you her name and address. Something like that. You'll think of something."

Moira's reaction to the request was rather cool and disappointed Arthur when he made it. "You wish to know the name of my best friend and where she lives?" she asked sharply. "Why?"

Arthur felt a wave of panic creeping up from his toes. "Well," he blurted, "it is not for me. It's for a friend!"

"A friend!"

"He met her - your best friend - at least that's how she described herself - last night

and got on very well with her - liked her a lot - but he didn't get her name or address!"

"This friend of yours?"

"Yes. And now he wants to get in touch with her."

"I see!" said Moira crossly, and wrote down the details on a piece of paper.

"I hear that you met a young man last night." Felicity blushed in response to her best friend's half question, half accusation.

"He said he knew you," she said softly.

"Indeed he does! What did you think of him?"

"I thought he was very nice - a gentleman."

"So did I, up to a point. Not that I could say that for his colleague who was somewhat pompous and arrogant, and not very knowledgeable about his subject, even if he is funding his own pupillage."

"I haven't met the colleague," said Felicity, wondering why her best friend was just a little prickly.

"I am beginning to wonder about this one, now - the one you met. Do you know, he wanted to know your name and address, but he didn't have the courage to ask either of us for them outright? Instead he comes to me and pretends that he is asking on behalf of a friend! But I saw through him immediately! I mean, it's one of the oldest tricks in the book - to say that you are asking something on behalf of a friend."

"He asked for my name and address?" said Felicity, feeling flushed and confused. "Did you tell him?"

"Yes!" said Moira, quite vehemently. "I told him!"

"Oh!" Felicity could not decide whether she was annoyed or pleased by the revelation. There was no fundamental reason why she had not told the young man her name. Their conversation had not drifted around to the subject. No doubt it would have done had she not had to go home to dinner, be told how many times Father Thomas had called to see her that afternoon, and had to feign a headache and go up to her bedroom early in case he called again during the evening. She did not want him calling around at the house like Father Thomas, encountering Kurt and Debbie. Not that there was, on reflection, any reason why he might do this! Except he had asked for her address and Moira had provided it. Perhaps he was planning to write? About what? She would have to ensure that she was the first to the postman in case she did receive a letter from him. If she was not, Kurt would be bound to open it.

Felicity had gone to see Moira hoping that she would be able to talk to her about the previous day's occurrences, about Father Thomas, and about her encounter with this young man. She could no longer talk to the priest and she could not confide in Debbie. She certainly could not broach the subject with Kurt! That left only Moira amongst the circle of people she considered to be her close acquaintances. Yet in this, apart from Kurt, Moira had to be viewed as the lesser of all evils. She had not been entirely sympathetic or accommodating in the past, and now she appeared so hostile that Felicity returned home leaving unsaid all the delicate things she had planned to say, and would have said had circumstances been different.

"Father Thomas has called again," announced her sister as soon as she opened the door. "In fact he has called twice this morning! You haven't long missed him! He does seem very troubled and anxious to talk to you. What is it about?"

"Well, I am not anxious to see or talk to him! Not under any circumstances! And I have to go out again!"

"Again?" said Mrs Cerny, astonished.

"Yes! Right now!" It was not true. Her sole reason was to avoid meeting the priest in the hope that he would soon give up his pursuit and go back to the rest of his flock. Now Debbie was becoming suspicious. It was clearly in her mind to say something. Felicity concluded it would be best if she escaped before her sister started asking questions. She would set off over the fields and make the long climb. If the young man came to the gardens whilst she was there, she would see him. If he did not, she would not. It was as simple as that!

“Well, I think that we have made a good start. And Mr Muir has been most helpful,” announced Michael to the ladies gathered around the small table set for late afternoon tea on the West porch, the porch that he and Christina had crossed when she had taken him to see the view and he had first seen the ruins. Helen liked to take tea there on fine summer days, partly because it was bathed by the gentle rays of the Westward bound sun, partly so that they could admire the view of which Christina appeared so proud.

Michael had been given the place of honour that afternoon. From his seat he could sweep around much of the full panorama and, beside Christina's right ear, if he moved his head a little to one side, or she moved hers, he could pick out the outline of the ruins of the Monastery. He paid them so much attention that Christina would have been forgiven for thinking he had eyes only for her. That was not the case. Dare he say that he had been there?

“And, how are you coping with life at the cottage,” asked Helen. “I really think we are not doing enough for you. I am sure that more could be done to make your life comfortable.”

“Oh, no,” waved Michael. “That is not at all necessary. I am getting on very well.” This was not entirely true. Although Helen had ensured that the cottage was well provisioned, cleaned, and provided with clean linen on a daily basis, Michael found it difficult to cater for himself. The offer to go up to the House for meals had been made repeatedly and had been difficult to resist, but he had invariably declined. Sometimes he regretted both this and his decision to try and make his own way in the world. The regret was never so strong as when it came to the question of catering.

“You are managing your meals and everything?” asked Christina. “I have no intention of marrying a sickly weakling!” Michael thought that she had more than his interest at heart. Eating at the House would be only one short step away from staying at the House.

“I am trying,” he said. “I must make myself self-sufficient because it looks as if I will still be down here when you go back to London.”

“Oh!” said Christina. “But I thought you said everything had got off to a good start?”

“It has. There's a good deal more to do than I was originally led to believe.”

“You will be coming to London for your sister's Concert?” asked Helen. “We are all planning to go. And you could always come and stay here. At any time - after we have returned to London, for example.”

For a moment the ruins were out of sight, obstructed completely by Christina's head. It would take quite an effort, perhaps even a contortion, to bring them and all they had come to represent, fully back into his vision. “What? Me, alone in this palace?” he blurted.

“Palace?” cried Angela. “I have always thought of it as small and mean!”

“Comfortable and manageable are the words I would use,” said Helen, scowling slightly at Michael.

“You could always drop this pretence of being ordinary and poor, and without connection,” said Christina. “I really do not see the point of it.”

“We have been over this before,” said Helen wearily. “Tell me, Michael, Christina says that you have taken an interest to our ruins?” A pang of excitement ripped through Michael as the subject of the Monastery was suddenly legitimised. “One of my husband's ancestors, I think it was his great uncle, wrote a lengthy paper on them. It is in the library somewhere – really, it does require cataloguing!” she sighed. “That is something you could do Christina, or you Angela.”

“Me?” exclaimed Angela.

“I am too busy with my writing, Mama. If it is so important can we not hire some cheap, penniless, student? I am sure Michael has met plenty and could recommend any number.”

“Me?” said Michael, struggling to sound relaxed. “No, I don't think I could recommend anyone. But Christina did suggest that I might study the various histories that there are in the library.” He tried to sound interested, but the subject, related to the ruins, which now commanded his fascination was not to be found amongst the books in the library.

“Of course, I am incorrect to refer to it as our Monastery. It is not. The Monastery land and the gardens are owned by a trust of some antiquity.”

“Mark use to say that there was treasure buried there when we were young,” said Christina.

“Oh, there is a treasure to be found there,” thought Michael, “but not buried!”

“I understand,” he said, “that there is a tradition that the gardens are maintained by workers from the Estate?”

“You have been doing some research then, Michael! Yes, not long after the House was built, another of my husband's ancestors set out and established the gardens. It is said that there had been a serious outbreak of smallpox in the town, no doubt brought in by sailors. The people on the Estate prayed for deliverance and one young girl - her name was Mathilda Prentice - I know that because she is buried in the Chapel - who had gone up to the ruins to pray, saw a vision of the Virgin Mary who told her that the Monks had interceded behalf of everyone who lived on the Estate. Although the disease swept through and ravaged the local villages - I think it may have been transmitted as far as Faversham and Ashford - no-one, not one single, unfortunate soul on the Estate was affected. The gardens were established in thanksgiving and the Estate workers vowed that they would maintain them at their own cost and in their own time - a practice that has persisted to this day.”

“I do not believe a word of it!” exclaimed Angela.

“Oh, I do,” said Christina. “They say, Michael, that the gardens require very little maintenance and that no weeds grow there. Some say that the Monks creep out of their graves at night and remove every one of them!”

“I do not know about that,” said Helen sternly. “After the vision, it became a place for local pilgrimage and there was a shrine there for many, many years. But it was removed during the Commonwealth and never reinstated. However, it is also said that the gardens and the ruins have an exceptional atmosphere, a kind of magical quality. Have you visited them, Michael?”

“Er - no. We did talk of walking there but decided it might be too far.”

“It is the walking back,” said Christina.

“And the walking there!” added her sister.

“It is said that those who do find great inner peace and tranquillity. I prefer to attend my Chapel. You have been, Christina?”

“To the gardens? I went once with Mark and Nanny on a picnic. That was years ago and all I can remember about it was how hot it was and Mark carried off my parasol! I suppose I could try riding out there.”

“Well, I have not been there, nor do I intend to,” said Angela. “And I expect that you will be kept awake by the sound of the workers going there as the path runs right by Rose Cottage.”

“I haven't noticed anything yet,” said Michael weakly. A regular procession of estate workers past the cottage might frustrate his newly formed and cherished plans. He saw himself leading her down a petal-strewn path, her skirt pressed against her thighs by the breeze, her hair alight in the sun, hand in hand, laughing, joyous, down through the glades to the cottage. They would only have to meet someone on the path - “I will have a look in the library,” he said, looking at Christina.

Helen nodded her approval. “Now,” she said, rising to her feet, “I must write a note to Mr Muir on a distressing subject, but you young people, you may stay here.”

“I am not staying,” said Angela and moodily followed her mother back into the house.

Michael was conscious that Christina was examining him closely. “Are you all right?” she said as soon as they were alone.

“Yes,” he said impatiently. “I do feel a little tired. It is beastly exhausting, the hills, all this walking and surveying. Up and down we go, carrying all this heavy equipment.”

“I thought you had an assistant?”

“Oh, he is useless! And he cannot carry everything. We would be here for ever if I left it all to him. No,” he sighed, “I have to take on the major burden.”

“I thought there was something. You just seem different as if you have changed in some way. It is my writer's eye. I can detect these changes in people.”

“No - no. I feel just the same, just tired.”
If only that were true.

“Is it good news, Father?”

“Aye, Moira. I seem to recall you asking the same question not a few weeks ago. Well, on this occasion, it is. It is a note from Lady Newington, so I'll n' have another excuse to go and see her.”

“About Mrs Cross?”

“Aye. Barnes has been good to his word and she says he raised the whole matter with her. He's a good man Barnes, reliable, dependable. It is a shame there's not more like him in the world. I don't know what they would do without the likes of him.”

“What does she say?”

“Let me see. There, she is proposing that the husband should go into a Nursing Home at Bromley and that his wife and child can stay in the Hostel there so that they will be near him in his last days.”

“Oh, don't be so morbid, Father!”

“That's what she says, lassie.”

“Does she mean one of her hostels for destitute young women? I did not think that they allowed children. I thought that was one of the problems?”

“The letter gives the impression that she - Mrs Cross - may be offered a position at the Hostel.”

“Work? But she is expecting another child!”

“Aye, another bairn is on the way. But I am sure that Lady Newington has thought of that. And almost anything would be better than what she has now. Barnes is to go and see her and make the proposition.”

“I wonder if I should go as well. She might like a woman to be present.”

“Aye, you could. We would have to contact Barnes as the note does n' say when he is going to see her. He might have gone already.”

“And I must let Mrs Cerny and Felicity know. They will be delighted.”

“Aye, we could both go to see them. But there's more before we do. Lady Newington has offered to pay all the rent arrears.”

“You mentioned the rent arrears to her?” said Moira horrified.

“Och, no I did not. But she has offered just the same.”

“And we will not accept!”

“Why not, Moira?”

“It would not be right, Father,” she said sternly. “It would be like accepting charity and denying the benefit of the money to others.”

“I do not see that.”

“Let Lady Newington use her money for other charitable works. Not for us. We do not need her money! I would not take a penny!”

The statement was so emphatic that Angus studied his daughter carefully. Come to think of it, she had been unusually irritable throughout the day, although he could think of no reason why she should be so. Perhaps it was something he had done or said. Or not done or not said. Or perhaps it was Kurt - he would box his ears if he caught him upsetting his daughter. Or, then again, perhaps it was Felicity? He thought he had detected a wee strain in their relationship. Whatever it was, he had discovered that the best thing to do was to keep quiet, keep out of the way, and wait until it had blown over. This strategy had worked with his wife, and appeared to work with his daughter. However he had failed to perfect its application. “I saw those two surveyors today,” he said. “They were levelling down Crow Lane. I did wave to them but I don't think they realised it was me!”

Moira said nothing but grim-faced went into the kitchen, audibly ill-treated a few pots and pans, and started preparing vegetables. “I am still not convinced that they know what they are doing,” he called after her. “The fair haired one, the one from Canterbury, he seems to be fairly knowledgeable, but the other one, well - have you seen either of them today?”

“No,” she said coldly as she firmly sliced the top off of a large parsnip. “And I do not

want to. If I never see either of them again that will be too soon!"

"I thought you had taken a liking to one of them?"

"I had," she said bitterly. "But I have been usurped! By Phoebe, of all people! My best friend!"

Angus felt a sudden, unwelcomed, wave of concern. "Felicity? Och, I dinna believe it. She has no interest in men. She lives only for her dancing."

"That is what everyone thinks and what she would have everyone believe!"

"What do you mean, Moira?"

"I am not sure what I mean. I only know that he and Felicity were together last night."

"All night?" said Angus, horror-stricken.

"No, not all night. They must have met yesterday evening. And today he came to see me and asked where she lives and what her name is. Of all people, he asked me! He has not asked me where I live! Nor has he asked that of her about me!"

"Och, Moira, for a start he knows where he can find you, and your name. And you have no hold over him. I mean you have only met him once."

"That may be so, Father," she said miserably, "but it does come hard when someone you like is snapped up, right under your nose, and by your best friend!"

"That may be so, I grant you," he said, rising and going out to join her. "But if he is as fickle as you say, surely it is better to find out now, at the outset, rather than have you heart broken later on?"

"I suppose that is right, Father," she sobbed. "It doesn't make it any easier, all the same. But I suppose you are right!"

"I am, lassie," he said, feeling her head and stroking her hair. "I am."