

CHAPTER TWELVE

“How is your love life going?” Michael asked Arthur as soon as he saw him.

The assistant was stood, leaning against his bicycle outside the gate to the cottage, clearly preoccupied with his thoughts and reacting, when he saw Michael's approach, in a manner that was less than that expected of an assistant. “Love life?” he asked, dully.

“With the vivacious young Miss Muir. The girl who has really got IT!”

“Not very well,” the assistant groaned. It was true. He had dwelled on her throughout Saturday. He had moped about to such an extent that his mother had told him that he should cycle down to Dover on Sunday to see her, if he really felt that bad about her. “I hope that she is worth it,” his mother added.

This was less than helpful advice because he did not know where she lived. She was hardly likely to be at the builder's yard on a Sunday. No self-respecting Christian would. “You never know,” said his mother.

He might not know where the Muirs lived, but he did know where her best friend lived. After all, she had told him in response to his request. So, after spending a tormented night tossing, turning, and thinking what he might say, he resolved that he would cycle to Dover, come rain or shine, and visit Felicity's house. There he would ask for Moira's address. Then he would cycle around to see her. He would say that he was out on his bicycle for the day and happened to be passing.

Arthur set off full of hope, optimism and high spirits. Halfway to Dover he ran into a storm and although he sought shelter at the earliest possible moment, he was soaked. The skies were once again blue when he reached Dover and rested a pedal against the kerb outside Mrs Cerny's house. However, it was a damp, bedraggled, young man whom Mrs Cerny found on her doorstep. “I am sorry to trouble you,” he said. “I was wondering if I might see Felicity.”

Deborah's reaction was rather sharp. She nursed an inane suspicion of all young men who call upon young girls at their homes, unannounced and without invitation. It would show upon occasions. “She is not in,” she said crossly and started to close the door.

Arthur instinctively held out his hand. “You might be able to help me, then. I really wanted to know the home address of Mr Muir, the builder. I know where his yard is, but that is of no help on a Sunday.”

Mrs Cerny's heart might have so hardened that she would have denied him even this. Had he referred to seeing Moira, there was little doubt that she would have sent him on his way empty handed. But he had referred to Angus, and it might be something important. It was her duty to help. So she not only gave him the address, she gave him careful directions.

His heart lighter, and humming a tune made popular by the Paul Whiteman Band, Arthur embarked on the short ride to the Muirs' residence. To his delight, it was Moira who opened the door. “Well?” she said sharply.

“Oh, hello,” he said sheepishly. “I was passing and I thought I'd call and see how you were. I went to your friend's house - .”

“Felicity's?”

“Yes - but she was out.”

“What utter cheek!” she exclaimed, and slammed the door shut, leaving Arthur on the door step contemplating the exterior brown paint and the stained glass.

“You were a wee bit hard on that young man, Moira,” said her father from the window as the bicycle disappeared from sight.

“He deserved it! He is a cad - an utter rotter! He wheedles Felicity's address out of me, pretending that it is for someone else. Then he turns up and loiters around outside her house - he did! You said you saw him! And now, when he calls on her and finds that she is out, he comes around here! The cheek of it!”

“Some of what you say may well be true, but that was n' the young man outside Deborah's house the other evening. It was the other one.”

“You mean that they are both laying siege to her? I do not believe it! I - oh my Lord!

What have I done?"

"Och, you'll be too late by now. He'll be long gone on his way back to Canterbury."

It was true. When she ran out into the street and looked, Arthur Brown was no longer anywhere to be seen.

"Things are not going at all well," he said in response to Michael's question. "I cycled down to see her yesterday and she slammed the door in my face."

"You must have upset her in some way."

"If I have, I don't know how. And if she will not talk to me, I am not going to find out what I have done. Could you talk to her?"

For a brief moment Michael felt compassion for his assistant, but it soon passed. After all, he had troubles of his own. "I don't think I would help very much if I did. It might make matters worst. I expect it will blow over. These things usually do." That was the kind of thing people said. He had heard it said in the cinema, and read it in novels. He expected that Christina was, at that very minute, writing dialogue which expressed similar sentiments. Unless she was entertaining von Cerny!

"Von Cerny? Me invite him? You must be joking!"

Michael was taken aback by Christina's vehemence. "But, he said he was coming - that he had been invited - and I thought - ."

"That I had invited him? Goodness no! It was Angela and it is perfectly beastly of her. I will have to suffer him strutting around and fawning all over me. You will have to come to stay at the house and protect me! Yes, that's it! And we will have Mark and Natacha down, too! We can make a party of it. I will speak to Mama."

"I don't think I should come and stay."

"Why ever not?"

"Well, for a start, no one on the Estate knows who I really am. It will look a little odd."

"I know, Angela knows, Matthews knows and, for that matter, so does von Cerny. It can hardly be the World's best kept secret!"

"Your mother said that Matthews would not tell a soul," he protested.

"I know, but she is just a servant and servants gossip. I doubt if Angela will tell anyone. She would worry about what people down here would say if it became common knowledge that her future brother-in-law is an articulated pupil and involved in sewage! But the secret has to come out some day. You cannot remain anonymous for ever, no matter how romantic it may appear."

Michael had not considered it to be romantic. The idea of not canvassing his family's position, wealth and influence to the world in which he found himself had been based on one criterion - if no-one knew, what ever he accomplished would be the result of his own effort and not his family's name. Whilst he remained working in a London office it had seemed to be something that would be quite simple to put into effect and maintain. He would arrive at normal office times, do his work, attend meetings, draw sections, wave back to the tracers, what ever was required of him, and at the end of the working day, melt into the crowd. Unless someone followed him home, no-one would know he came from Belgravia. It was true he had given his home address, but he had written down only the house number, road and postal code, and this had not provoked any reaction. He had not reckoned on finding himself sent to carry out this survey and work amongst people who knew him, amongst people who were, or would be, his family. So far no-one who worked on the Estate knew who he was. He had carried this pretence with him from London and he was not prepared to readily abandon it. Yet, Christina was right. He could not keep his secret and remain incognito for ever. It would eventually reach the ears of Mr Hiller and his assistant. How would they react? Would Mr Hiller say that he always suspected that he was a cut above the rest and it showed that breeding will out? Would Arthur hold him in awe? This was all very fine, but there was an additional complication. He had not told Felicity. He had told her about his family, but nothing material, nothing substantial. He had even tapped her sympathy and understanding

when he admitted - for it was true, was it not - that he had borrowed money for his pupillage. Although she did not, in principle, approve of incurring debt, she had nodded sympathetically when he said it was the only course open to him. How would she now react if he told her the truth?

“You tell first - about your family,” he said. It was their third meeting and he was determined to discover the truth about the blond young man who had been so familiar. As she considered the question, Felicity had pointed one of her pretty feet and aimed it down the hill.

“There is little to tell,” she said.

“There is even less to say about mine!”

“Well, I think I told you I live with my elder sister, Deborah, except I call her Debbie and she calls me Phoebe.”

“Phoebe?”

“Don't ask me why. It is a nickname which goes back to when I was a babe in arms. My full name is Felicity Joyce.”

“And I am Michael Quentin. It sounds rather grand, doesn't it?”

“It does. Did your family like Scott?”

“Not that I know,” he replied, not really understanding the question.

“Anyway, I have mentioned Debbie. Her son, Kurt, also lives with us. He works for Angus Muir.”

“He has blond hair?”

“Yes, that's right. You have met him?”

“In the yard,” he said, with some relief.

“He is half-Austrian. Debbie married an aristocrat, but left him some time after Kurt was born. I must admit that I really know very little about what happened, and Debbie doesn't like talking about it, so I do not ask.”

Michael enjoyed recounting these facts to himself. The dialogue would change slightly every time he recalled it, but the essential fact that the young man who had so brutishly taken her by the waist was her nephew remained. “My father works in a bank,” he told her. “I have a step-mother who is half French and half Greek, and one sister who is learning to play the piano.”

“Is she good?”

“Very good!”

“Debbie says that I am good, too, at dancing that is.”

“Perhaps I could be invited up for dinner one evening - to meet your guests?”

“One evening? Why only one?”

“I have to work in the evening. There's the day's figures to check, the next day's work to plan, and sections to be drawn.”

“Surely some of that could wait?”

“Not if you want me to go back with you to London at the end of the Summer. We are running late as it is.” He waited for Christina to say something about them having been there only a few days - how on earth could they already be running late? She did not.

“Very well!” she said tersely. “I will make the arrangements, but if he is staying more than a week I shall expect you on at least two evenings!”

The subject was then dropped.

“We thought we would go for a walk and come and visit you. It seemed such a nice day.”

“You were lucky to catch me,” said Michael, looking around. “Is von Cerny with you?”

“Goodness, no. He went off into Dover. He said he had some business there,” said Mark.

“This beautiful,” said Natacha, “and, look! I have rose petals all in my hair! Do smell them. Mark is the culprit.”

“A small liberty with your roses,” apologised her escort.

“They are not mine and there are plenty so I do not think Lady Newington will miss a few.”

“Lady Newington?” laughed Mark. “You could refer to her as Helen. You will be calling her mother, soon! As for the roses, come to think of it, I have some interest in them. But I am hardly a culprit unless you count it as a vain attempt to paint the lily!”

“I am sorry,” said Michael, quite bewildered. “I am forgetting my manners. Do come in to my - your - cottage. We can sit in the garden.”

The garden at Rose Cottage was small and mostly laid to grass which sloped away from the small paved area at the rear of the cottage and terminated suddenly in woodland. They sat at some garden furniture that Michael had found in a shed and placed under one of the apple trees.

“Oh, this is really lovely,” said Natacha. “It is so different to Belgravia. It is idyllic. I would love to own somewhere like this!”

“Then you may have it. I will make a present of it to you!”

“Not just yet,” said Michael, “I happen to be living here.” He was also wondering what Felicity would say if she were there.

“And you are very fortunate to be doing so,” said Natacha. “It is so peaceful, so tranquil! I am surprised that you ever go off and do any work. I think I would just sit here and soak in the atmosphere.”

“Speaking of work, Michael, how is the famous survey coming along?”

“Quite well, quite well,” Michael repeated. He did not tell them about some of the problems which had manifested themselves, like the growing number of sets of levels which did not match up. There were places where, once he had summoned up his courage and plotted the results, there was an inexplicable five foot step in the road surface which clearly was not evident then they went out to check it. These were setbacks that Michael and his assistant kept to themselves. Mr Hiller had visited them, had been shown the sections which were capable of being shown, and had expressed qualified approval. When he said he thought the survey was not progressing as quickly as he thought it should, Michael had said that it was early days and cited the description used by Mr Muir and which he had carefully memorised for such occasions. “It is very difficult terrain,” he said.

“I suppose it is,” said Mr Hiller.

The truth was that it was more than difficult terrain. There were other distractions, factors that affected their work. Both now had reasons for ceasing work mid-afternoon. Michael would announce that he was going to work out the day's results and plot some sections. This was true, to some degree, but the calculations and section plotting were laboured over in the light of an oil lamp late in the evening. In the afternoon he preferred the walk up the path to meet Felicity. Arthur, for his part, had no objection to ending the working day early. Miss Muir had suddenly changed her attitude to him and, whereas he would have been exaggerating if he said she greeted him with open arms, he was permitted to call in daily at the yard, “on his way home”, as he described it.

“Christina says she is struggling,” said Mark.

“Struggling? What on earth with? Not our friend?”

“Her writing - the novel. I think that she has found that typing is like playing the piano. It is far more difficult than it looks and it takes a lot of practice before you get any results.”

“People do learn,” said Natacha.

“Chris won't want to have to take the trouble to learn. Her vision is set firmly on the main objective, getting herself into print. Having to type it all out is just an impediment - it gets in the way.”

“I suppose it is essential,” said Michael, slightly relieved by the picture of Christina stuck at the typewriter rather than paying court to the Austrian. “Could she not leave it in manuscript, to eliminate the drudgery?” Survey books and sections drifted through his mind. They were a convenient excuse for breaking off the survey in the afternoon, but still it was a task he found odious. Perhaps he could get his assistant to plot them. There were also

logistical difficulties - where would he do them? And when? And if he did, he would find out about the large inconsistencies. "Will Christina get her book into print?"

"Paul has more or less promised that he will publish it, but it will have to be in type."

"He will publish it even if it has no political slant?"

"Even if it is not what one would describe as correct? Well, Paul's father's business does publish ordinary bourgeois works as well as political tracts. Have you read any of it, the novel?"

"Not a single word. I am not even sure what it is about. I think it is some kind of romantic adventure."

"That is the trouble with writing," said Mark. "You have to shut yourself away from the world and no-one knows what you are doing."

"Unlike music," said Michael, "whence you can hear every fluffed or missed note, even the tiniest of errors."

"Oh!" exclaimed Natacha. "I do not know how you manage to hear missed notes, Michael, but it is true of composers and, of course, artists. Did you know how obsessively secretive he is, this friend of yours? He has been sketching and painting for months and I have not seen a thing!"

"Except the portrait! You have seen the portrait! You have the portrait!"

"Except the portrait."

"It is a fine work," said Michael, "but none of us can comment upon what Christina is writing. I mean, it could be dreadful - ."

"Oh, Michael!"

"And I thought that Paul had asked her for something political."

"I think she did that," said Mark.

"And Jenny Forbes asked her to write a play - ."

"Jenny Forbes? Have you heard about her?"

"It is awful," whispered Natacha.

"Heard about her? I am completely cut off down here. I don't hear a thing. World War Two could break out and I would not know."

"Someone went up to her in the street, a complete stranger, and sprayed acid in her face. They say she was lucky not to lose the sight of one eye, but she will be scarred for life."

"It is really dreadful!"

"Sprayed acid? Who would do a thing like that, and why? And to Jenny of all people?"

"The police say they suspect it was because of her connections with Paul - the work of fascists. That's the theory, but no-one has been arrested."

"Lots of horrible things are happening," said Natacha, "both here and abroad. There are accounts in the newspapers every day. Sophie says it is no longer safe to go out."

"It is perfectly safe here," said Michael, looking around. "Unless you are a poacher."

"Oh we do not plan to start poaching," said Mark. "We were thinking of walking on up to the ruins. Have you been up to see them? The ones that can be seen from Newington? I haven't been there for years! You will like it Natacha."

"I think the path, such as it is, is totally overgrown and there are some wicked brambles. They'll tear your dress if you are not careful, Natacha. And there are terrible nettles head high, not to mention styles and ditches that have to be leapt! I did try the path once, but I turned back!"

"Surely the Estate workers still go up there to look after the gardens?"

"I think one or two do. I expect they are made of sterner stuff than the likes of you and I."

"And I," laughed Natacha. "Michael makes it sound like something from the Sleeping Beauty. I can just picture her lying peacefully there, amongst the ruins, beautiful, sleeping, waiting for her lover to come - ."

"And Michael turned back!"

"I did. Perhaps I should try again and be more persistent?"

"Perhaps this is far enough for today at least," said Natacha. "It has been quite a walk

here and we still have to walk back.”

“I could take you in the Austin. You could squeeze in the back, Nat. What do you think?” Michael was relieved that they appeared to be reconsidering their original proposal to walk up to the ruins. He thought that if he could persuade them to accept a lift back to the house there was little chance of their minds changing. He felt intensely jealous of the gardens. Perhaps he was prepared to share his Eden with the workers as they were essential to its maintenance, but no-one else, other than his Eve, not even his sister and his best friend. The gardens were intended for him and Felicity to dwell in. Any alien presence would corrupt their magic and it was his duty to protect them and prevent this happening.

“I think we could manage to walk back,” said Mark. “That is, if it is acceptable to you, Natacha?”

“Of course,” she said lightly.

“And how are you getting on with Herr von Cerny?” If they were not going to travel in the car, perhaps a change of subject would assist?

“I have been asked - no, instructed - to play in Vienna!” said Natacha. “But although he can be a perfectly charming man, I find him more than a little frightening.”

“I think he is a fascist,” said Mark, stubbornly.

“Oh Mark! Surely not?”

“I think he is,” he repeated. “It is just little things that he says and the way he has reacted from time to time. I have no doubt that he is anti-semitic and against communism.”

“Who isn't?” laughed Michael.

“You may joke, but these people are dangerous, vicious, thugs, Look what happened to Jenny!”

“I wouldn't have thought our Austrian,” said Michael, finding himself in the strange position of defending the man he considered as his principal enemy, “no matter how bad he may be, had anything to do with that. What ever we say about him, I cannot see him going around spraying acid in peoples' faces.”

“Maybe not, but he could get someone to do it for him. Someone has to give the orders. I am sure he would be capable of doing that!”

“Oh! Do stop it, you two! Here we are, sat in this heavenly place, and all you do is talk about politics and violence. It is very bad of you, both of you!”

“Well, one last word,” said Mark. “You will have chance to judge for yourself at dinner. You are instructed to come!”

“Mark! Tell me, Michael, where is this assistant of yours? If you do not produce him, we will begin to doubt his existence.”

“Oh, he is real enough. So real, in fact, that he has gone to have his lunch. And you only found me here because I wanted to check some figures. Look, if he does appear, neither of you know me! Do remember that. You are just visitors to the House out on a walk.”

All right,” sighed Mark. “We will play your game, will we not, Natacha?”

“Of course - we do not know him.”

“Who?”

“I am really not sure.”

“And, there was a mention of lunch,” said Mark. “Perhaps we had better start back. Now, do not forget, although we do not know you and have never met you, we have given you Chrissie's instructions. You are to come to dinner tonight. I will help you out with your wardrobe. She said that she has had enough fending off the enemy and that she is in need of assistance herself. I trust I can tell her that you will be there?”

“I will be there,” said Michael.

Despite her position and beauty, Lady Newington was something of a recluse when it came to matters of Society. She did not believe in bringing her daughters out, describing it as a degrading parading of unattached daughters who appeared to be surplus to their family's requirements. She rarely accepted an invitation to dinner, indeed for a hostess to receive an acceptance from her was something of a coup. And she rarely sent out invitations herself. When she did decide to hold a dinner party, it was to be informal. Men were not expected to

dress, but some chose to and, as a result and to her disappointment, all did. In conducting these rare and, consequently, popular occasions, Helen did observe all other social niceties, except one. After mourning the loss of her beloved husband, she avoided the search for a suitable bachelor who could take her arm and lead her to the dinner table. Instead, although her daughters and all the other lady guests might be paired off, she went in alone and sat at the head facing an empty chair. It never did other than made her feel sad, and it was uncharitably sometimes said that was why she neither went to dinner parties nor held them.

Summoning Michael to the event helped the pairings as he could take Christina in, Angela could accompany the Austrian, and Mark would be permitted to take Natacha's arm. Helen had expressed surprise that Natacha had been allowed to come down, but Mr Bernstein's response to her letter had been prompt and, as was customary with his letters, to the point. It was, he thought, and admirable idea. She would benefit from a short break and, as for Mark, he was sure that his daughter would place her career before any form of liaison. Helen should have nothing to fear. Even so, she did feel that she should counsel her son on the way he conducted himself.

"I have been with her almost daily these last few months," protested Mark.

"I am only concerned that her career should come first and that she should suffer no detraction. I would like your word that you will not - how shall I put it?"

"I will not make any advances towards her? Really, Mother, you do me no justice. If I had wanted to express my feelings for her do you not think I have had opportunity enough? I love her to the point of distraction; far too much to dally with her feelings, or say or do anything that might interfere with her career. She longs to be a great pianist - that is all she lives for. I could not do anything, not a single thing, which would threaten that."

"Even if it means sacrificing your love for her? I know, Mark, how you feel about her. I am not blind to these matters."

"I will treat her honourably, as if she were another sister. I give you my word. I would rather die before I did something that might deter her from her path. Perhaps one day, when she is established and famous, things may be different. However, for the present, you have my word."

"And you have your own career to follow. When will you be ready for the exhibition?"

"Not long now. Not at all long."

"This is a very fine house, Lady Helen," said the architect. "I find it very well maintained and appointed. It has a pleasant, civilised, atmosphere."

"I thought you might like to have it pulled down and replaced with iron and concrete," said Christina, coldly.

"I? No, no, Fraulein. You have me all wrong. I am for the preservation of cultural heritage. Why, we are building whole villages either in a traditional rustic style or one based on Teutonic legend. Tradition and culture, these are everything, ja?"

"I had never thought of Newington as being either cultural or traditional," said Christina. "I see it as just our home."

"One of them," said Angela.

"Ah, but there you make my point for me. It is, of course, your home. But it is also an expression of culture. It is a shame that your government does not see - how do you say - eye to eye with the Osterreich. We have much in common as nations."

"And much that is not in common," said Mark.

"Ah, that is just your Anglo-Saxon sympathies. This mantle that you cling to, of acting as the World's asylum. But that role has passed across the Atlantic. Let the Americans offer sanctuary to the World's flotsam and jetsam. We here in Europe have a larger destiny to fulfil, an exciting future to shape. We will build a new order, a better World, based upon family values and purity of race."

"You see yourself as other than a communist?" asked Natacha, looking across the table at Mark.

"Bolsheviks!" spat the Austrian. "They are no better than dogs. They are the biggest

threat the World faces. Everyone will be subjugated to the State. There will be no individualism, no family, no freedom, no possession. A communist state is no better than a slave state. Everyone will be the slave of the State. That is something we cannot tolerate.”

“But is not what you preach likely to be the same in practice?”

“Nien, never! That is a common misconception, mere left-wing propaganda. We stand for traditional national values, not the so-called internationalism. We stand for the superiority and purity of the Germanic peoples of which the Anglo-Saxon is one. We are to the Bolsheviks as are cheese to chalk. This communism, it is an intellectual trick, an illusion, which will not succeed! You will see. What we build will last!”

Michael listened, but felt untouched by the argument, uninvolved. Germany, Austria and Russia were distant places. His concerns lay much closer to hand. As he listened to Mark challenging the Architect, it seemed to him that, although she appeared loath to express an opinion, Christina and, to a degree, Natacha, shared his outlook. Angela appeared to take the Austrian's side against her brother. Helen said little, but she did praise traditional family values, which isolated her son and made him all the more determined. They might have come to blows had Natacha, becoming disturbed by the direction the discussion was taking, not dropped a bombshell of a different kind.

“I hear,” she said to Christina, “you are thinking of engaging a secretary to help you with your writing?”

“Yes” she said, dully. “There's the possibility of using a girl from the town who is able to take shorthand as well as type. That would mean I could dictate everything instead of having to write it out in full. Her father is the local builder. What is his name, Mama?”

“His name is Muir, Darling,” said Helen patiently. “And his daughter's name is Moira.”

“Moira Muir,” said Christina, brightly. “That's it! Rolls of the tongue, doesn't it? Moira Muir - quite a good name for a heroine?”

“Better than Natacha Bernstein? What do you think, Michael?” asked Mark.

Michael was not listening. He knew it was there. He could hear it ticking, but he could not reach out and defuse it. It was a short while before the device detonated and Michael recognised a new threat which was more dangerous and immediate than anything that was animating Mark. If Felicity had talked to Moira about him, and he was sure that having asked his assistant to ask for her address, the matter was sure to be common parlance between the two of them, it was but a short step to Moira mentioning it to Christina. She would not say anything out of malice or intent. It would be quite innocent, a casual remark, but it would be disastrous. Suddenly, for no apparent reason, he found himself thinking of Jenny Forbes. “I know Miss Muir,” he said, trying to appear calm.

“Do you?” said Christina, suddenly possessed with unconcealed curiosity. “Of course! You met her father here!”

“Mr Muir came to see me about an unfortunate case of a woman whose husband is dying,” said Helen.

“Except the man totally omitted to mention the subject!” observed Angela. “He was so overawed he forgot all about it! That is the kind of creature he is and I dare say his daughter is no better!”

“In fairness, I must say he has been helpful to me,” said Michael. “He has not told me anything that I would not have eventually found out for myself, but he has saved me time.”

“And still you are behind programme?” asked Christina, with a note of annoyance.

“Ah, ja, the survey,” said von Cerny, knowingly.

“What did you think of his daughter?” said Natacha.

“I do not know. She did not appear to like me for a start.”

“That's a black mark against her for a start!” said Natacha.

“I don't know,” said Angela. “She sounds quite perceptive!”

“And my assistant appears to be completely besotted with her. He cannot keep his mind on his work! I gather that she does quite a lot of work for her father, looking after the business, paperwork, and that kind of thing. I am not sure that she would have the time to act as a secretary and I'm not sure she would be suitable. Don't you think you need someone who

is older, more reliable?"

"Like a governess?" said Christina, acidly. "No, I sometimes think it would be nice to have a companion of my own age." She caught Angela's eye and added, "a female companion, someone I could talk to and confide in. Somebody I would not have to be afraid of."

"You have me, Darling," said Helen.

"She would have to be someone of your class and intellectual equal," Angela said stiffly. "It doesn't sound as if this builder's creature would be suitable."

"As I have said before, all the reports I have of the girl have been good," said Helen, waving dismissively at her oldest daughter.

"I can see why you might need a secretary, but not a companion," said Michael thinking that if Miss Muir became her confidante it was only a matter of time before she lit the fuse that led inexorably to the powder keg on which he had placed himself. "What would be the point of engaging a local girl if you had to leave her behind when you return to Town? I doubt that Miss Muir would be able to up and leave her father."

"I cannot see any reason why a secretary should not also be a companion, and who is to say what Miss Muir may or may not be willing to do other than Miss Muir herself?"

"I still do not think that she would be suitable as either a secretary or companion," said Michael stubbornly.

Christina stared at him. The question in her eyes appeared to be on the tip of her tongue. Michael had little doubt that had they been alone she would have voiced her suspicions. "I have not made up my mind in principle yet," she said. "I will have to act soon. I am over a third of the way through in manuscript!"

"And you have not told us what this novel you are writing is about," said the architect.

Michael was pleased to see the conversation drift in a less potentially dangerous direction and was careful not to say anything for the remainder of the evening that might have provoked a return to it. As it was, Christina appeared to be withdrawn and preoccupied with something throughout the evening, and that was something of a relief to him. No doubt she had her novel on her mind, but Michael knew that he could not leave it there. If she went ahead with her plan, sooner or later something would be said. He would talk to Mark, work on him. As the elder brother, as the nominal head of the house, he should be able to prevail on his younger sister and head off an approach to Miss Muir.

Either Michael's argument, or Mark's influence over his younger sister, must have been weak and less than persuasive because three days later Moira received a note from Christina. It said, quite simply, that she was a writer of fictional novels who was looking for a secretary to take dictation and type up manuscripts. Her name had been suggested. Moira handed it to her father who read it. "Was it you, father, who suggested this?"

"Och, no. I dinna know about it. It's as much a surprise to me as it is to you. The most I have ever done was to tell Barnes that I had sent you to a secretarial college."

"What should I do about it?"

"That's for you to decide, Moira."

"But you can advise me."

"Well, if you do want my advice, I suggest that you go and see Lady Christina and find out what it is all about."

"I could," she said pensively, dwelling on the words of the note. "There is nothing here about pay."

"I am sure that you would be paid. It would n' be a lot, though lassie. There are stories about the Estate losing money and her Ladyship being hard pressed, not that I give them any credence, you know."

"We could use some more money coming in," she said brightly.

"Aye," sighed Angus, "but I dinna see that as a reason why my daughter should have to take a paid position. What I mean is, you could decide to go and work for Lady Christina if it is your wish, but nay because we need the money. Any income is incidental and, in any

case, it is yours to keep and save or spend as you see fit. I dinna feel that comfortable about all the unpaid work you do here, for the business!”

“Of course, there's that to be considered as well.”

“I could get someone in.”

“And then you would have to pay them and we would be worse off. That is not a very appealing prospect.”

“But it might allow you to do something that you wanted to do, and be paid for it.”

“Who said that I wanted to do it? I am quite happy here, helping with the business and looking after you. Someone has to!”

A knowing look spread across Angus Muir's face, a look that Moira did not completely understand. “There is your young man to consider as well,” he said.

“Arthur? Why? He's amusing, but no more.”

“That is nay the way he sees it. Have you not seen it in his eyes? He is devoted to you.”

“Oh! I expect that is no more than a passing infatuation. I have done nothing to encourage him.”

“On the contrary,” said her father to himself.

“I wonder what kind of books she writes. Have you ever seen anything of hers?”

“I canna say that I have. Perhaps she writes under an assumed name? There is only one way to find out. You had better go up to the House and see her.”

“So I must,” said Moira.