

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Michael faced the most awful dilemma. The more he thought about it the worse it became. The worse it became, the more he thought about it. It was not just that Christina might engage Moira as a secretary and find out about his meetings with Felicity. They were innocent enough, after all, he reassured himself. The most they did was talk, sit or walk. The most he had ever done, the pinnacle of his affair so far, was to take her hand. That was, surely, more serious than taking her arm? He did not know how he would face termination of their meetings, but this was not where the problem ended. No, this was not the end of it at all! The problem had the potential to run farther and unravel his whole life.

There was the question of what Christina would do. Something told him it would not be pleasant, not for him, not for Felicity. Whatever revenge she took, or retribution she handed out, she would be bound to tell her mother, and she would go to see his father. He would terminate his arrangements for credit at the bank and, in one toppling of the dominoes, his career would be ruined before it had really begun!

Of course, what was true in one direction was also true in the other. If Miss Muir started to work at the House, it would only be a matter of time before she learned of his true identity and connections, and imparted this information to Felicity. If that happened he had no doubt it would impair, even end, their brief relationship. He would be exposed for what he was, not the penniless pupil who had to borrow to pay for his indentures, but the son of, as far as he knew, one of the richest men in the Country. Most young women, faced with these facts, would throw their arms around his neck and propose marriage. Not Felicity, not she. She would look upon it as deceit, a betrayal of her trust. She would not wish to see him anymore.

It seemed to be a question of which disaster struck first. Should he go to see her? What would she say if he told her the truth? Would it be better coming from his lips rather than her best friend's? It could not but harm their relationship. How could she see him as an equal if he told her he was not? No, he could not risk it.

The more he thought about what he might say to Felicity, the more he yearned to be by her side. He longer to see her beauty, to inhale her simplicity, innocence and purity. If only they could be together, each day, every day. Just that, no survey, no Christina, no ballet, just the two of them, dwelling, timeless, in the garden, together for ever, never to part.

It was all so foolish! How did he know what she felt about him? She had never given the slightest hint that her feelings amounted to anything more than friendship. Yet, if she said "go" or "come", he would. No, she had not given him any encouragement, but she had submitted gracefully and modestly to his tentative advance. Why should he not believe that the feelings that tormented him so whilst they were apart were not mutual?

The damage was done, he told himself. That they had met, whether by chance or fate. That they had walked, looked, and taken each other's hand. These were historical facts which would be chronicled in any account of their love. He could not change that. Nor could he silence Miss Muir if, in her innocence, she revealed the matter to Christina. For a moment he thought of Mr Fishwick's offer to Christina to sort out any problems she encountered and applied dark thoughts to Miss Muir, but crippling, disfigurement, or murder was not the answer.

Could he go to see Miss Muir and lay his cards on the table before her? Could he tell her every detail and beseech her not to reveal the details to Christina, or Felicity, or to anyone? It would sound like a fairy tale on one hand, and like a request for her to engage in an intrigue on the other. No, Miss Muir did not appear to be the kind of person who would practice deceit. Then, she did not appear to like him so was unlikely to be prepared to do him a favour. Would she do it for Felicity?

He lay awake long into the night, listening to the clock relentlessly ticking on and announcing, with a melancholic chime, every half and full hour that passed as his nemesis approached. He started to invent reasons which might be put to Miss Muir and which might entice her to remain silent. She would not do that to help him, but she might do it for her best friend. His ideas were quite fanciful and outrageous to begin with, but gradually they became

more prosaic. Clearly she would discount the suggestion that Christina was a communist agent or an international spy or a member of the Mafia. Michael's inspiration was on the wane when he hit on the idea of telling Miss Muir that Felicity had asked him to not publicise his meetings because she was going to be sponsored, and a condition was that she had no liaisons with the opposite sex. That was why they met in such a remote and lonely location. Why should she not tell anyone connected with Newington House, especially Christina? Why, because the wealthy sponsor, the person who would send Felicity to the Paris Conservatoire and launch her on a dazzling career, was Lady Newington!

It still sounded far-fetched and was in need of refinement, but it was the germ of an idea from which a sound rescue plan might grow. And it was enough for him to find release from the torment and go to sleep.

Next morning the idea did not appear quite so attractive as it had at three-fifteen that morning. Nevertheless, it would have to be implemented as he was unable to think of anything better. "How are things with Miss Muir?" he asked as soon as his assistant appeared.

"Fine! Her father has invited me to tea on Saturday! How about her friend - and you?"

"Oh, there's a potential problem. I may have to stop meeting her."

"Why? Has she found another boyfriend?"

"No! It's to do with her ballet. It seems that Lady Newington is considering taking her on as her protégée. She would send her to Paris and things like that. There's one snag. Lady Newington insists that girls like Felicity are unattached. If she found out that we have been meeting, she would withdraw her support. That would be that! All over!"

"You mean she cannot have a boyfriend?"

"Lady Newington would not sponsor her if she did have, or would withdraw the support if she found out. She says her protégées must be celibate."

"Like priests?"

"Like priests."

"What will you do?"

"We have to talk it over. But in the meantime we will have to be very careful."

Arthur lapsed into thought for a short while. "I had better tell Moira and her father, as he goes up to the House or the Estate regularly and meets all kinds of people. He could easily let it slip if he does not know. And, did I tell you? Moira has been offered a job there!"

"She is going to be a protégée as well?"

"No, thank goodness! At least, I hope not! I will be in the same boat as you if she is."

"Let us both hope that she is not, then."

"I cannot say that I am pleased to see you," said Deborah Cerny, showing her visitor into the front room which was kept for Sundays and occasions such as the one which now presented itself to her.

"I am come in response to your letter. I must say that I was surprised to receive it. And Kurt? Is he here?"

"He is at work, and Felicity is out. We are alone."

"Ah, alone!" A strange light appeared in the Austrian's eyes as he sat down in one of the armchairs. "And what is it you want of me?"

Deborah did not sit but walked to the window, wringing her hands as she looked out. "As I said in my letter, I want a copy of the divorce papers. I want to know I am free."

"And why?"

"There is another man. Not that he has said anything as yet, but I can sense it. I can see it in his eyes, hear it in his voice. I want to be able to answer him when he asks."

The Austrian closed his eyes and smiled. "Another man, eh? Ah, Rosenska, I am not surprised at this. Did he see you dance? There were many men then, yet you chose me. You are still a very attractive woman. You have lost little of your looks and your figure, well - . No, I am not surprised that there is another man. Why do you not come back to Germany with me?"

She shook her head. "We are no longer married and I would not make the same

mistake twice.”

“And what would you say if I tell you that there were no divorce papers, that there never was a divorce and that we are still married? What if I were to remind you that we are alone and that you are still a beautiful woman, and I wished now to enjoy my conjugal rights?”

“I would not believe you!”

“You know that I am not one to stop when it comes to a matter of claiming what I consider to be my rights!”

“I know that you are one who does not need legitimate rights to pursue your so-called claims.”

“Fine words! But you are not frightened or excited, maybe, by my presence?”

“No, I am not,” said Deborah resolutely, turning to face him. “There was a time when I thought I loved you. Then came a time when I was afraid of you, but not now. Not anymore! The most of what I am afraid of is what you, and those like you, stand for. Why can you not leave ordinary people alone?”

“I did not come here to debate politics. And I am not to take advantage of you here so you need not fear for your safety. I, too, have my eyes on someone, an English woman.”

“Then I pity her. Why an English woman?”

“Insurance, for the future. We have our supporters and aides here. Some are open about it. Others work silently behind the scenes. Many are already in positions of influence and there will be a time in the not too distant future when this country will rise up and seek new leaders. I - We shall be waiting.”

“I cannot believe it could happen here.”

Herr Cerny laughed. “Do sit down, Deborah. Of course it can happen here. It will happen! The days of democracy are numbered and a new Order is coming to take its place. And we shall be ready. The lists are already being prepared.”

“Lists?”

“Lists of those who are enemies of the State, lists of undesirables, of the undeserving, and of those of the wrong blood. Do not worry, your name, and that of your sister, will be on the right list. There will be some honour in being the ex-wife of Herr von Cerny!”

“Ex-wife?”

“Ja! I have been teasing a little, you know. I have brought the papers here which give you your freedom. However, before I hand them to you, I want something in return.”

“What?”

“Kurt - my son!”

“Never!”

“Do not be foolish Deborah. You cannot hold onto him for ever. In a matter of months he will be of age and be able to chose for himself.”

“Why do you want to take him from me?”

“He should come back with me. I am a person of some importance and influence in both Austria and Germany and, as my son, there are things for him to learn, a position for him to take. It important that he starts now, time is against us all.”

“I cannot let him go.”

“Should he not be the judge of that? Come now, Deborah. I could fight this in the courts. I am confident that I would win. I would wish to avoid such an action. I need Kurt back in Austria, now.”

She sank slowly in the chair and stared at the floor. “What shall I do?” she whispered. “What shall I do?”

“What is it?” he snarled. “Is it money? If that is all it is, here is a cheque for five hundred pounds. Be rich, Deborah, be rich beyond your wildest dreams. This will pay to send your talented sister to the Paris Conservatoire, or would you rather she came to Berlin? You know that Kurt has designs upon her? Ja, he tells me everything. So, why are you holding back? Are you trying to protect him from me and the Movement? If you are, already you are too late. He is already a member and an activist. If he stays in this country he will be arrested and sent to prison! For his sake, let he come back with me. And I am offering you the

freedom you seek in return. Is this such a large price?"

"Does he know?" she asked weakly.

"Of course he knows. I told him months ago."

"He has never mentioned it to me."

"Should he? After you betrayed him?"

"I wanted him to grow up a normal, ordinary, Englishman."

"Bah! You do not understand, do you? He has the Aryan blood flowing through his veins. He must come with me, now! This is the price, Deborah. Your freedom for your son. Take it now, before you possibly lose both. I am doing you a great favour as I only have to crack my fingers and he will come. But we can make it painless and easy. No words, no fuss, no lawsuits, just an agreement. Here are the papers and the cheque. Do you agree?"

He laid the papers in her lap. Her eyes fell on the swastika embossed in the upper right hand corner. For a moment her impulse was to throw them back in his face as she had the love letters she had discovered before she left him and returned to England. But she did not. Clutching them tight to her stomach she rose unsteadily to her feet. "You had better go," she whispered. "Before Felicity returns."

"Ah, Felicity. I have heard so much from Kurt about this delightful young and talented creature. I wonder if I should stay and meet her and see if she is all that she is said to be."

"Stay away from Felicity, Ludwig, I warn you."

"And if I do not?"

"I would kill you before I let you touch a hair on her body."

He laughed. "I do believe you are serious! Do not be so melodramatic, Deborah. And do not fear. Much as I might be attracted by your sister, I have bigger fish to land. And, Kurt? We have an agreement?"

"I suppose so," she murmured.

"Then there is no more to be said. You have the papers. I have Kurt. I shall send for him shortly. I wish you good morning!" he said with a small bow.

Deborah stood with her back to the front door for several minutes, as if to bar his re-entry. He did not return, although she did look out, up and down the road, of the bay window when she went back into the front room. On the chair were the papers and the cheque. He had it prepared! He must have written it before he came with the intention of giving it to her! She knew it would be enough to start her sister off in Paris. Indeed, put alongside that which she had already saved, there might be sufficient for her to complete the prescribed course. It would be so simple to take it down to the savings bank and pay it in. There would be some eyebrows raised at such a sum! She would be able to consider herself comparatively well off. Yet there was a price to be paid. The money was tainted and her sister's career would be launched with an un-erasable stain upon it. There was only one thing she could do. Shaking her head, she took up the cheque and tore it into tiny pieces, dropping these in the grate.

Arthur's understanding of Moira's prospects was not strictly accurate. She had dwelt on, and pondered over, the content of the note from Christina as there were many things to be considered before ever she went up to the House. For a start she was not convinced that she wanted to become engaged to work for someone. She was content to assist her father, to keep the company books, to make up wage packets, to order and receive goods and materials, to type up estimates and statements, and to deal with customers, such as there were. These were duties she had been brought up with, duties which she considered a simple extension of her normal domestic tasks. She had never considered that she might have a life without them, and now to work for another, for money, for a stranger, and for one of the landed gentry!

"She is probably dreadfully spoilt and haughty," she told her father. "She will be impossible to work with!"

"Lady Christina? I think you are condemning her before you meet her. Och, she's nothing like the Lady Angela. Now, if you were talking about her, I would be inclined to agree. No one has a good word to say about her, I am afraid!"

"And is she really a lady?"

“To tell the truth, everyone refers to her that way, but I have heard it whispered that the title actually goes to the son and that the daughters are title-less. Och, Moira, I would have thought that you would find her a normal, young, woman, and that is what matters.”

“You want me to take the position?”

“No, no. I want you to make up your mind free of misconceptions or worries about your family ties. At least you should either go and see her, or send her an answer.”

That was true, but there were the ties, as her father had described them. How simple it would be just to write a note thanking her Ladyship, if that was how she should address her, but declining. Yet there was something in the prospect of working for a writer that Moira found exciting. However, no matter how long she romanced over this possibility, she came back to the ties her father mentioned and her duties that arose from them. Who would look after the office and her father if not she? Would this new person, whoever she might be, clean, sew, cook, and look after the pair of them? Or go dancing with the pleasant Mr Brown? Well, she had no tie to Mr Brown, nor any duty, but the prospect of going dancing with him was also exciting.

On the other hand, she could take shorthand and could type, quickly and accurately. And there was the matter of the pay to consider. “If I went there, the work will probably be very dull,” she said perversely. “What kind of books does she write?”

“I think I told you that I dinna know, but I would n' think it would necessarily be dull.”

“And what about you, Father, and the business, when I am not here to look after you?”

“Och, I have told you that you n' to worry about it, or me. I'll survive, and it is not as if you would be going to the other ends of the Earth! You canna be tied to me and the business all your life. There may come a time when you may wish to get married.”

“Oh, Father!” she exclaimed. “I do not think so. My duty is to be here and look after you.” He shook his head and she smiled. “I know,” she said, “we have been over this. Right, I will make up my mind!”

It was a finely balanced judgement, and had her father been less than neutral in his position and given her doubts the slightest degree of support, she would not have written the note to Christina that she did.

Christina received her in the library. “Is it the first time you have been to Newington House?” she asked.

“My father brought me once when I was a little girl and he was carrying out some work on the stables. They are at the back, aren't they? I recall a water tower and huge, long, lofts. I do not remember much else, and certainly very little about the house. It is quite breathtaking!”

“My mother takes great care over its preservation and conservation. I think she sees it as her life's work - to maintain the House in all its perfection.”

“I can see that she does. In a way it is a shame that it is all shut away from members of the public. I am sure there are hundreds of people who would love to come and see it.”

Christina smiled. “It is our home. And you are right about the stables and the lofts. They are very large, though I do not venture around there all that often. Angela is the rider although I occasionally mount up, you know. I believe that you father has, in fact, carried out a great amount of work here for my mother.”

“Ah,” thought Moira, “she is putting me in my subservient place. I shall belong below stairs.”

“Yes, I believe her has,” she said coldly.

“Mama speaks very highly of the quality of his work.”

“He is prepared to try his hand at most things, and usually succeeds.”

“Well, I am trying my hand at writing,” said Christina. “Except, I find that I am frightfully slow when typing and I am constantly making beastly errors. So, I thought, I should look for someone to assist - to do the typing and, possibly, take dictation. Mama says that is a task for a secretary, although I would prefer to think of you as a companion. What do

you think?"

Moira was a little taken aback. It seemed to be assumed from the outset that she was proficient enough to do the job and had already said "yes"!

"I can type and take shorthand, so I could assist there, but a companion - do you mean someone living in?"

"Not necessarily. I mean that I would prefer to have someone who could assist me with the writing, be critical - gently critical, you know - discuss the issues and plot, rather than just be an employee. Of course, you will be paid. Let me tell you what I have done so far. Here - it is my first novel and I am not expecting to create some literary masterpiece. I have a publisher who is prepared to print it providing the book is not absolutely awful. So I am aiming to write something fast and racy, something that will make me a name."

Moira nodded politely and looked at the notebooks, flicking over the pages. They were written in a small, neat, legible hand with a minimum of alteration or correction. "Do you plan to go back over what you have already written, to edit it? It would be better to do that before it is typed up."

"I had hoped not to, or that any amendments are few and far between. But can you read it, to type from it in the first place?"

"Perfectly," said Moira. "My problem, really, is that I do have other commitments. I look after my father, my mother having died some years ago. I also help run the business which means that I could not devote all my time to your work. However, I could offer to type it up straight from your notebooks, more or less as you write it, once we have caught up, if I could take them away with me - one at a time, of course. I am afraid that it would not include dictation and would not offer much in the way of companionship, but it would get the novel typed. How much do you write a day?"

"Oh, well, companionship is something that might develop. As for writing, I really do not know," smiled Christina. "I think it varies and some days I write nothing. It depends on how I feel."

"If you do not mind me saying, we were told at college that writers should try and get through a set amount each day, just to keep to the discipline. Of course, writers like Dickens and Trollope had deadlines to meet."

"I do not think that I am aspiring to be a Dickens or a Trollope, or a Bronte for that matter. It sounds like hard work, but perhaps I could try writing regularly instead of when I feel that way inclined."

"Try setting yourself a quota."

"Oh dear," laughed Christina. "You are beginning to sound like a governess!"

"I am sorry. I did not mean to."

"Please do not worry. I appreciate the advice. I am determined to succeed! I feel that writing is my vocation just as my brother feels that Art is his."

"Would you be happy for me to take the notebooks home with me?"

"I do not see why not," said Christina, picking them up as if she feared that her secretary was going to bear them all off there and then. "I am sure that you will take great care of them. Why do we not try it and see how it works out? Here, this is the first. I will, of course, reimburse you for all the paper and typewriter ribbon. Let me see - what else is there I have to tell you? Paul, my publisher, gave me a note which I have somewhere."

"This is a very impressive collection," said Moira, looking around at the packed shelves. "I do like books. Do you mind if I have a closer look?"

"No, no - not at all," said Christina from the depths of the writing desk. "My great grandfather was quite a collector and I believe some of the volumes in here are quite rare. Everything needs cataloguing. No-one is really sure what there is. Of course we have the classics - Scott, Macaulay, Austin, Hardy. You will find sets of all their published works. I have even read some of them! I think there's even some Woolf! But, as I said, I am not intending to write that kind of book." I want to write something with a much wider appeal."

"Not detective novels? I have read some Edgar Wallace and father allowed me to read a Leslie Charteris novel once."

"Not detective novels as such, but something like that genre. I would call them

romantic thrillers - you will see! Goodness, there's the possibility that you will not like it! Will you still be able to type it if you do not?"

"As long as it is not offensive or blasphemous."

"I do not think you will find it offensive, unless you are very prudish. You are not, are you?"

"I don't think so."

"And it is not blasphemous. At least, not to a Christian. Ah! Here it is! Paul has asked for it to be single sided, double spaced, with numbered pages, fully punctuated and correctly spelt. Correctly spelt, indeed! It seems we must do all the work of the publisher as well as write it!"

"I would not see any of that as a problem and I can make a carbon copy for you to keep."

"Good," exclaimed Christina. "Then you take the first notebook and see how you get on with it. Exciting, is it not?" She placed the notebook in Moira's hands and clasped them shut. "Now that the business of the day is over, I shall ring for tea and we can talk. You must tell me all about yourself. I am sure that we will become good friends."

Over tea and scones Moira talked and Christina listened. "I also know Felicity Lightfoot," she announced.

"Who?"

"Felicity Lightfoot. She is my best friend."

Christina lowered the cup from her mouth. "You say that as if I should know her. Who is she? Is she connected?"

"Connected, no. I understand that she is Lady Newington's protégée."

"Mother's protégée?" cried Christian, laughing. "A protégée! Oh, how delightful! What does she do, this Miss Lightfoot? Do not say that she is another writer!"

"She is a ballet dancer," said Moira, puzzled. "She is described by those in the know as being very gifted."

"A ballet dancer? I did not know that Mama had any real interest in ballet, leave alone having a budding ballerina as a protégée."

"Perhaps I am wrong, or my informant was. I did not hear it from Felicity herself."

"Yes, I imagine it is an error. Shall we go and ask Mama now? You ought to meet her."

"I ought to be getting home, really, and making a start on this!" said Moira, conscious that she had placed at least one foot in the wrong place, and that there was no knowing how many more incorrectly guided steps she might take.

"How odd you are! Most people leap at the opportunity to meet Mama! But I shall not take offence at your reluctance. I expect we would find Angela there with her, anyway. What was your friend's name again?"

"Felicity Lightfoot."

"No," said Christina emphatically. "I have never heard of her."

"She was not at all how I expected her to be," Moira told her father upon arriving back at the office. "She was very friendly and not the least haughty or la-de-da. Of course, she speaks perfectly, though I think I spotted a number of contractions. And she writes well."

"You looked at some of her published work?"

"It is her first novel."

"I see," he said knowingly.

"No, Father. I know what you are thinking, but it is not like that. It is not the kind of book I would choose to read, but what I have read is really quite good. She writes very vividly. I think she has real talent."

"Och. Now you are a literary expert? What did you agree?"

"I have agreed that I will type up the work from her longhand. It may take a while to catch up, but we should reach a point where I am typing one day that which she has drafted the previous. I will have to go up to see daily her whilst she is at the House."

"And when she goes back to London?"

“She will send the manuscripts to me weekly, by car. The driver will take back the typed copies. We thought that this would be the best arrangement. The post is good, but imagine if a parcel was lost! All that work!”

“And how do you feel about it, lassie? Now that you have talked to her and been able to think about it? Are you happy to do it?”

“I think I am. I think that I am quite excited at the prospect of actually being involved in producing a book and being paid for it. And the arrangement that we have come to, if it works out, is the best I could have hoped for. I can quite easily fit all my present jobs around the typing.”

“I have been wondering if I can get someone in to help. I am sure Mrs Cerny would know of someone.”

“Father! I would not hear of it!” protested Moira. “Apart from the fact that we cannot afford it, you must let me try to cope in the first. If I find it is too much, then perhaps we could talk about it again.”

“We will see how it works out then. If it seems too much for you, I will talk to Deborah. And you are not to use any of the money for the housekeeping. It is yours to keep.”

“Oh, Father, I could not. I know how hard times are and that you have had to borrow all that money. You must allow me to contribute - to my keep if nothing else.”

“Och, no, Moira.”

“Why ever not?”

“For a whole variety of reasons. If you would n' hear of me having someone in, I would n' hear of us using the money you have earned. In addition, it may turn out to be a mere flash in the pan. If we come to depend upon it and it stops, what then? No, you put it in the bank or in one of those friendly societies.”

Moira pulled a face and opened the note book. “Well,” she said resolutely. “There is no time like the present to start. Incidentally, there was something else that came up in conversation. Lady Christina had never heard of Felicity.”

“Is that surprising?”

“I would have thought that if Felicity was being helped by her mother, she would have known about it.”

“Oh, I don't know. I believe that Lady Newington is involved in all kinds of charitable and good works. I would n' have thought that she would have discussed them all with her daughters.”

“That is a possibility, Father. There is another - that it is not true! Has Mrs Cerny mentioned it?”

“No, Deborah has said nothing to me, but there might be any number of reasons why she has n'.”

“One of which might be that she does not know about it!” said Moira, typing. “Chapter One”.

“You mean that your young man may have it wrong?”

“Indeed he may.”

“Och, but why?”

“I do not know, but I shall find out!” she said with determination.

When Moira later that afternoon pondered on the day's events and the task she had taken upon herself, her thoughts centred on the question of her friend and her sponsorship. There was no doubt that she had clearly understood what Arthur had said. She also thought that he believed what he told her. He did not appear to have an ounce of guile in his body. There seemed no point in cross examining him, but the story had to have started somewhere. It seemed that it could only have come from Felicity herself, but why? Why would she say such a thing if it were not true? Then, Felicity had said some strange things and had revealed a side of her that Moira had never suspected existed. And then, she had suddenly stopped going to church! After all these years of attending what Moira thought was an unhealthy number of times a week, she, a devout Catholic, had ceased! She, who had praised the virtues of confession and being in a state of grace, had suddenly discovered that she could live

without it. It would have taken something dreadful to cause that, something almost unthinkable. Perhaps there was another side to her friend yet undiscovered, a dark, unwholesome side. Perhaps she was now beginning to see her friend in an entirely new, unsavoury, light.

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