

A
WOMAN
MADE
OF
SNOW

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ELISABETH GIFFORD

A
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To Joan and Francis

CHAPTER 1

FIFE, 1949

Wrapped in darkness beneath the trees I watch rain falling on the earth where I have slept for so long. Light from the cottage windows stretches across the lawns, but it does not reach me. Find me, I whisper. Give me my name. Some nights I will take myself up to the bedroom where they sleep and whisper to the woman. She turns in her dreams, stretches an arm out towards the child nearby and I think perhaps she has heard me, but in the morning she will blame her dreams on something else. I breathe into the wind as she comes out to hang up squares of white cloth. Find me. Tell them who I am. She looks around, pulls her cardigan tighter across her chest and goes back inside.

But now, at last, something is changing. The rain, so heavy and persistent for days on end, starts to pool on the lawn behind the cottage. Roots that have grown unseen for years, reaching out beneath the soft soil to pull away bricks in the old drain, finally finish their work. Mud creeps inside the channels until the water has nowhere else to go. The lawn becomes a sheet of moonlight. The space where I sleep fills with water stained red by the rich oxides of the earth. Water lies shining across the lawns, seeps beneath the kitchen door until the stone flags are gone under a sea of moonlight.

In the morning, they will splash through the kitchen, come out and ask each other what has caused the flood. And I will be waiting for the spades to be brought out, for the scrape of metal through soil, blades digging down to unearth the roots tangled in bricks.

Find me, I whisper. The flood waters shiver in return. I look beyond the trees to the roofs of Kelly Castle and I wait.

It is time.

CHAPTER 2

NORTHAMPTON, 1944

Caro leaned forward over the wheel, praying Gertie wasn't going to splutter to a halt again. All she could see of the road ahead were two faint cones of light filled with swirling mist and a succession of pale trees looming up on the edge of the forest before they faded back into the dark. She'd been having nightmares recently of breaking down in the middle of nowhere. The garage at Peterborough had checked the wheels, tightened the bolts so there'd be no repetition of the time the back wheel rolled away, but Gertie badly needed new tyres, which, they'd said, could take weeks to come. Caro blinked. Something ahead on the road. The shape of a man, pale as a phantom in the faint headlights. Squinting, she made out an American GI uniform. No ghost then. She was about to stop and offer a lift, as she often did for soldiers walking back to base, but as she drew alongside she saw that he was one of the black Americans. She immediately drove on, disappointed with herself in the same instant. It was just seeing him appear from nowhere had given her a start. That was all. She drew to a halt, waited till he caught up with her, leaned across and wound down the window.

'Hello there. Would you like a lift back to your base?'

'If you're sure, ma'am.'

'Of course. Hop in.'

He opened the door and squeezed in next to her, filling the space with his height. His skin was dark, patches of shine in the moonlight, his smile wide and white.

She drove on again into the darkness. She noticed him wincing at the tiny space illuminated in front of them.

‘I must tell you, I was surprised you stopped, ma’am.’

‘Goodness. I quite often give one of you chaps a lift back.’

‘But never a black one before.’

‘That’s true, but does it make a difference?’

‘It shouldn’t. Still think you’ve got some guts though, ma’am. Don’t know many women back home who’d stop like that. An attractive woman, on her own.’

So she gave him the talk. ‘I always find that if you expect the best of people, make it clear to them that that’s what you expect of them, then that’s how they behave. One has to trust people to be their best selves, you see, then they won’t let you down.’

‘And it always works?’

‘I did have one chap, very homesick, poor boy, who put a hand on my knee, but I gave him the talk, and he took that hand right back.’

‘I’m sure he did, ma’am.’

‘Oh, and it’s Caro. Caro Winters.’

‘Desmond, ma’am.’

‘I always think it must be so hard for you GI boys being stranded in the middle of nowhere. So far from home and family.’

He took out a photo from his wallet, held it to her left. Caro could just make out a woman with three small children in front of her.

‘What a beautiful family you have. You must miss them dreadfully. I’d show you a photo of my fiancé if my hands were free. We’re getting married on his next leave – that’s if they don’t cancel it again. Of course, it’s not going to be anything grand. Impossible to get enough sugar to make a wedding cake now, even with everyone chipping in

their coupons. Quite hopeless. But I must say, and I tell everyone this, I've found my rations go a lot further since I registered as vegetarian. One gets a really decent piece of cheese, you see, and pulses. And on principle it's better too, don't you think?'

'I could never refuse a steak. But I'm still thinking how it's very late to be out here on your own, ma'am. Caro.'

'I'm used to it. I lecture at the training camp near Peterborough once a week, but my digs are a beastly five miles away. I drive all over the place lecturing in village halls and such. It's important work really, bringing culture and education to working people, keeping morale up. Preparing people's minds for after the war, you see, when there's going to be a need for us to come together and really think about what we need to do to make society better. Don't you think?'

'I do, ma'am.' He nodded to himself. 'Quite an old car you've got here though.'

'Yes, poor old Gertie, should be enjoying retirement but she keeps going. Fortunately my father gave me a crash course in spark plugs and combustible engines. I'm a pretty dab hand at changing the oil.'

'I'm full of admiration for you, ma'am. And grateful for the lift.'

'You're more than welcome. We must all do what we can to help.'

There was a loud bang. The car listed down violently in the back corner, a dragging noise of rubber flapping on tarmac.

Caro braked. 'Damn if a bloody tyre hasn't gone again.'

By the light of a small torch they studied the deflated tyre. Caro was tall and well built, with what her mother referred to as childbearing hips, but her companion was even taller. It dawned on her, standing next to him, how very alone they were. From deep in the dark forests around them, an unnamed animal screamed.

'Right. Spare tyre,' she said heartily, glad of his help manhandling it off the back of the car. But opening the tool box, she found herself

hesitating for a moment as he held out his large hand for the wrench. She directed the watery torch beam while he jacked up the car, chilly air creeping up her legs and under her skirt until the beam shook in her frozen hands. Every so often, she breathed warm air into her woollen gloves.

‘You’re very efficient. Is this the sort of thing you do for a living?’

‘I’m a teacher, ma’am. Elementary grade. As is my wife. But our car back home is also temperamental.’

For the first time, she noted the two stripes on his shoulder.

He stood and wiped his hands on a handkerchief. ‘Ready to go.’

‘All I can say is thank goodness you came along when you did or I’d have been stuck here all night.’

He opened the door for her. She got back into the driver’s seat.

She dropped him off at the gates of his base. With the detour it took twice as long as usual to get back to her digs, the fog so thick she could barely manage fifteen miles an hour. Once, she startled awake and found herself driving over the rough edge of a field. She kept singing after that, any old nonsense to keep awake.

Dear Mrs Potts had left a light on in the hallway of the little railway worker’s cottage where she and Audrey – lecturing in Greek drama and philosophy – were lodging. She’d waited up, in hairnet and dressing gown, and made Caro a cup of tea and a hot-water bottle. Told her off roundly when she heard why she was so late. Caro didn’t mind. She was secretly rather proud of her ability to make good friends across the classes, with people like Mrs Potts. Once the war was over, class was not going to mean anything after all the country had been through together. War was horrid, but it stirred you up, made you realize what mattered, what you were capable of. Caro was relishing her post, the work of it, the satisfaction of knowing she was good at something that made a real difference – even if she wasn’t quite as frighteningly brainy as Audrey.

Caro tiptoed into the room she shared with Audrey, got changed in the dark and slid into the freezing bed. She picked up Alasdair's photo from the bedside table and planted a kiss about a third of the way down, picturing the apple-shaped cheekbones, his shy smile and mischievous eyes, the lick of auburn hair that was held back by his regimental Glengarry cap, a Cameron Highlander's badge pinned to one side.

She and Alasdair had only known each other for six months when he had been called up. He'd asked her to marry him the same week. Students in Cambridge, they already knew the shape of their future lives together. They would both work as lecturers at London universities, he in English, she history. Somewhere in the future, she saw rooms crammed with cigarette smoke and people just like them, debating the new world into being. Living in London, of course, meant that they would be a long way away from his mother in Scotland, and she felt a little guilty about that, but the sleeper train was marvellous for the way it whisked you from London to Edinburgh overnight. They'd go up at least twice a year. It had been such fun when she'd travelled up with Alasdair to visit Martha in what was effectively a small castle, three ancient towers joined together with a later Jacobean section, a giddy, impossibly high silhouette of turrets and corbels next to a bosky walled garden. Alasdair had finally owned up to his background the afternoon they came out of a lecture on Orwell, given by the Labour Society to which they both belonged. 'Not that it means we're wealthy. Far from it. The castle eats up any money Mother has, I'm afraid.'

Of course, after the war, people wouldn't accept that some had castles and others had nothing. Just as all this gumph about class and race and about what women could and couldn't do simply wouldn't stand any more. Her father had always taught her that a woman could work as well as any man while he was showing her how to slice ham

and haslet for customers at his Food Emporium, the Fortnum & Mason of Catford. The fierce, unmarried women teachers at Catford Girls' Grammar – each with a sad story of a lost soldier from the Great War, if you could get them in the mood to tell it, the teacher staring absently out of the window as the class of girls listened rapt – they all drummed into the girls that there was more to a woman than having babies. There were exams. And doing very well in exams. Because one day, the gels would have careers.

She pulled the eiderdown up round her shoulders. The room was freezing but Caro smiled into the darkness, trying to imagine the future. She saw herself and Alasdair together, striding out hand in hand, sharing everything. It was quite hard to be specific on the details, but she saw many deep conversations, an unbroken closeness. Their life would be much like their time at Cambridge, but deeper, richer, and with their own furniture.

CHAPTER 3

FIFE, 1949

This morning, she was definitely going to be on top of things. She was awake before the baby, though her heavy breasts felt itchy with the need to feed her soon. She checked inside the crib, the child flat on her back, arms fist high to her head, the pink cheeks and lips of a cherub. She felt a gush of intense tenderness for the tiny being, followed by a sharp answering crackle in her breasts and a flood of wet down the front of her nightie. She grabbed yesterday's blouse from the back of the chair and pushed it down the neck of her nightshirt to mop up the flow. Pulling it out and leaving it on the pile of washing, she tiptoed downstairs, ducked down to look at the rising sun slanting across the old drying lawns. It would reach through the deeply recessed window for at least part of the morning before leaving the kitchen in gloom again. Today she was going to get the washing done early, get it out to dry in the morning breeze. The bucket of nappies in the back porch was crying out for attention but for now it would have to wait. This moment was hers.

She fetched down the red enamel coffee pot they'd bought in Italy on their honeymoon. Not an elegant china and gilt affair that you might find in the drawing room of Alasdair's mother or the provost, but the honest utilitarian kind that farmers and peasants all over Italy would be using at this very moment. She put the kettle to boil on

the range, leaving the whistle open to make sure there would be no shrill scream prompting Felicity to begin hers. She balanced the tin filter on the pot's neck and poured hot water through the grounds, the earthy smell redolent of sunshine and the tiny pension on a hillside that had overlooked the Amalfi coast. Memories of all the gifts of the sun: ripe lemons and red peppers, olives and fragrant coffee, sun warming the resin in the cypress trees to the rise and fall of cicadas. All things that were in short supply in Fife.

The plans they'd had for them to both teach at one of the London universities had not come to pass. She had fallen pregnant with surprising ease, nine months after the wedding. She'd felt a little embarrassed that she couldn't manage things better, ambushed by her own fertility. Alasdair's only offer of a post came from St Andrews. It was an excellent university. As a result, they were now living five hundred miles away from London and three hundred yards from Martha.

She tipped oats into a pan, poured water over them and set the pan on the cooker. The water in the jug was almost gone, but she wasn't going to fill it now. The squeaking of the pump beneath the bedroom window would startle Felicity awake, so she allowed herself this moment to settle on the chair, one elbow on the scrubbed top of the pine table, bare feet up on another chair. Immediately, as if Felicity could see her off duty, a wail started up from upstairs. Caro sipped the coffee defiantly, hoping. No sound of Alasdair stirring as the siren continued. She dropped her head, put down the coffee and went back up to the bedroom.

Felicity's nappy had slipped out of the leg of the rubber pants, just enough to soak the cot sheet. She picked her up, the child inconsolable with some belief that she might never be fed again despite the score of times she'd latched on throughout the night. She gave off a yeasty smell of old milk mixed with ammonia. Yelling or not, Felicity needed

changing before any feed was possible. Another nappy for the bucket. Caro really needed to empty it out, pump water for a new lot of soiled ones. All the water for the cottage had to be pumped by hand and the electric generator was temperamental and often cut out, but it had seemed a small price to pay. After their honeymoon camping in the fields of an Italian family who lived off the land, tomatoes and bread and olive oil, this tiny cottage seven miles outside town on the border of the Kelly estate had seemed to Caro a statement of all they wanted in life. The fact that there would be no rent to pay had settled it. Alasdair's small assistant lecturer's salary would be their sole income for a while.

'Darlings, I can't think the old Laundry Cottage will be comfortable enough. At least come live with me in the main house,' Martha had said. But Caro loved their little cottage, the romance of it, the simple Arts and Crafts beauty of things made for work.

Caro settled herself in the high-backed rocking chair by the range and pulled the tartan blanket around her shoulders. She fitted Felicity onto her left breast. Felicity pulled away, stared up at her for a moment and smiled, then bobbed back and settled to her feed, tapping on Caro's chest bone as if applauding. These new, beatific smiles were fleeting reward enough for the wild and sleepless night that had gone before – almost. Every day a little change in what the child knew or could do. She tucked the blanket around both of them and began to rock, considering what was left in the cupboard that might make an impressive supper. Half a loaf, a bag of lentils, a cauliflower. She began to write a list of things that Alasdair must pick up in town during his lunch break. Caro had extended a standing invitation to Martha to dine with them every week. With Alasdair's mother so close, popping by unannounced at all hours – hello, dears, just me – Caro had begun to feel like the sole guardian of their privacy. Alasdair – and it was one of the things that made her love him so much – seemed incapable of saying no to his mother. The resulting placatory weekly invite

to her had seemed to Caro extremely generous, given the intense planning entailed by a proper meal with a tablecloth and napkins. Caro was secretly trying to educate Martha not only into restraining her visits but also into enjoying pasta with tomato sauce, a simple salad drenched in olive oil, and other recipes from Elizabeth David that she'd clipped from a magazine. Recipes that Martha had so far failed to enjoy judging by her hearty and profuse compliments, as if cheering on the laggard in a race.

So it had seemed unfair of Martha, after such a generous offer, to continue to drop in at all hours, unannounced.

Yesterday, Caro had finally had enough. She had tried suggesting, now that the cottage had a phone line, that Martha could ring before she popped by. Check if it might be convenient.

A look of surprise and hurt appeared on Martha's face. 'Oh well, of course, dear. If you think I am intruding. I didn't mean to be a nuisance.' In future, she promised, she would always ring first.

In the end it was all sorted very simply – after a few uncomfortable moments. It was always best to be clear. So Caro was going to make something tonight that would convey that Alasdair's mother was welcome and cherished.

Alasdair appeared in his pyjamas, walking on the balls of his feet, turning his toes up against the cold flagstones, hair adorably ruffled.

'Is that coffee?'

'In the pot.'

He took his favourite mug, poured the rest of the coffee into it. Gave another sniff. 'Is something burning?'

'Damn. It's the porridge. On the back of the range. Can you give it a stir?'

'It's fine. Perfectly edible really.' He watched her as he stirred, a sleepy smile on his face. 'You look like a cross between a Renaissance Madonna and an Indian squaw in that blanket.'

‘It was chilly this morning. Means it should be a beautiful day later.’

He put a bowl of porridge in front of her, a spoon by the side, kissed her on top of her hair. She breathed in the soft cotton smell of his blue pyjamas, the sleepy perfume of his skin.

Someone rapped loudly on the front door.

‘That’s early,’ said Caro. ‘Maybe the postie? It’s been at least a week since I had a letter from Daddy or Phoebe.’ She heard a familiar voice in the hallway and her heart sank.

‘This is cosy,’ said Martha as she appeared in the kitchen, shrugging off her coat. A tall woman with a long face, hair fastened up with many pins, and a definite, energetic manner, Martha had a way of filling any space. ‘Ooh, is something burning?’ She located the saucepan on the stove. ‘One has to watch porridge like a hawk. And I’m so looking forward to coming for a bite of supper later.’

She settled at the table. ‘Now I know I’m not following the new rules, ringing before I come and see my grandchild, but this isn’t a visit as such. I just thought I’d pop by to see if Alasdair would like a lift into St Andrews since I’m going in anyway. So much nicer than having to wait for that bus. Alasdair dear, your feet must be cold. Have you no slippers?’ She glanced over at Caro as she said this.

‘New rules?’ asked Alasdair but Caro was too busy fishing for the blanket that had fallen away, uncovering her breast, to try and explain. And what sort of wife would be rude enough not to make a cup of coffee and sit chatting, while Caro watched Martha’s eyes rove around the messy kitchen she might have had time to clear up if Martha had given her warning, and if she’d not dropped in yesterday to bring over a couple of Alasdair’s old baby blankets, with their slightly rank smell and yellowing wool, and then stayed to chat.

It was never restful when Martha was there. Always something that would worry her and that she must helpfully point out, or dropping hints she was surprised Caro was still breastfeeding Felicity at nine

months. Worst of all was when Martha decided to do something useful, energetically emptying the larder to clean the shelves and putting everything back in some improved order, finding shirts that needed ironing, because a man must have a clean shirt for work.

Felicity started crying.

‘Do let me take that child,’ said Martha standing up and holding out her arms. ‘It will give you a moment to get washed and dressed, dear. Mothers need time to themselves and you are looking awfully worn out.’

Alasdair had already commandeered the little bathroom. She went into the bedroom, lay down on the unmade bed and it was glorious, a few minutes of child-free truanting. She woke to Alasdair shaking her shoulder gently, dressed in his blue shirt and new trousers.

Caro saw the surprise in Martha’s eyes to see her still in her nightgown as she took the sleeping Felicity back. She heard their cheery voices disappearing, the thud of the door closing. They left behind a feeling of failure. As the car pulled away, Caro saw that they had also left behind the shopping list. At least Alasdair had left the ration book too.

She wrestled the nappies into the twin tub, did the necessary things with a rubber hose to drain the water into the sink, put them through the mangle by the back door and pegged them out on the line. Hoisted them up with the prop to let the breeze catch them. Ten white terry-towelling flags signalling her victory, even if in a past life she would have considered such things flags of surrender. She took the list and the pushchair and the baby and walked to the end of the drive and along the lane to wait for the bus into St Andrews. The market stall, the grocer, the butcher’s. She’d had just enough coupons left. She piled the shopping under the pushchair and walked Felicity back along the Scores, between the Victorian mansions and the far view of West Sands,

the sea going out like a wrinkled brow. She walked on past Alasdair's imposing grey stone English department, a vast mansion overlooking the sea, and thought of him working away inside. She manoeuvred the pushchair down to her favourite place, little Castle Sands, and fed Felicity in the shadow of the red sandstone bluffs, eating a quick lunch of broken-off bread and cheese. She picked up a pebble-smooth piece of sea glass, green as an emerald, and slipped it into her coat pocket. Felicity's perfectly formed, downy head cradled in her hand, the tiny weight of a precious little cantaloupe; she tried to remember this, to settle it in her memory even as the moment was passing.

If she hurried there'd be time to pop into the library before the next bus back – she felt defeated and stale if she didn't have a book on the go – and there'd still be plenty of time when she got home to put a lamb ragout with thyme into the oven to cook slowly. After being worn down by hints from Martha that she should feed Alasdair 'properly', Caro had begun cooking meat again. An apple charlotte made with fresh butter and served with cream. It would take all her ration points but it would be simple and memorable. Martha would feel cherished and welcome.

Cutting up between the old fishermen's cottages, she was surprised to spot a familiar figure across the market square coming out of the Balmoral Hotel. It was Alasdair. He was talking animatedly with a petite woman, her dark hair cut in an elfin style, an elegant red suit in the new fashion. They were smiling in the way that people do who've just had a rather good lunch in a posh hotel. The woman moved to kiss his cheek. Alasdair hugged her. Caro watched as, with hands in his pockets, he headed back to the department, his head tipped in that way he had when he was humming to himself.

Why hadn't she called out to him, hurried over with a wave? It wasn't just the thought of being introduced to the elegant woman in the red suit, Caro in her seen-better-days coat, her windblown

hair, the grocery-laden pushchair. There was something more that she didn't entirely care to examine. She'd felt a need to observe. She knew she was being quite silly, acting as if there was something illicit in what was almost certainly a working lunch with some colleague that Alasdair had failed to mention before. She could still run after him – darling, who was that I saw you with – but she knew Alasdair would need to get back to work, doing whatever it was he did in his study. And besides, she wasn't the sort of nervy and needy woman who spied on her husband.

She turned and pushed Felicity doggedly towards the bus stop. But the unsettling feeling that she'd witnessed something disloyal refused to go away. At the very least, the Balmoral was famous for its fussy three-course meals with wine and waiters – when Alasdair knew perfectly well she was cooking a special meal that evening. And a meal in the Balmoral was going to dent their weekly budget horribly. Perhaps she'd just cook an omelette later since he'd be positively stuffed. Or perhaps – and this was what she felt like doing as she hauled the shopping off the pushchair and folded it to get on the bus, Felicity on one hip – perhaps she'd go ahead and cook the lamb, with lots of potatoes, and a very large apple charlotte for pudding. Let Alasdair tell her he didn't feel awfully hungry.

As soon as she got back, the phone rang.

'Darling, bit of a hurry,' Alasdair began. 'Good news. Don't worry about cooking this evening. Mother's inviting us over to Kelly. She's got a wonderful idea she wants to run past you.'

'I've just been into town to do the shopping for tonight. You left the list.'

'Oh, I am such a nitwit. Sorry, darling. You've already done the shopping. That is bad luck.'

'Not luck exactly. By the way, I saw you across the marketplace, as you came out of the Balmoral.'

‘Really? Darling, why ever didn’t you come over and say hello?’

‘You looked as if you were in a hurry to get back to the department.’ She paused. ‘You were talking with a rather smart-looking person, a woman.’

‘You mean Diana. An old family friend. Have you never met Diana? She’s just moved back here and she dragged me in for a catch-up and a bite to eat. If only I’d known you’d be in town. We could have all eaten together. Anyway, we’ll talk tonight. About Mother’s idea.’

‘Alasdair, I can tell you now that I am simply not going to agree to move into the castle. I need – we need – space away from Martha, room to be a family.’

‘It’s nothing like that.’

‘What then?’

‘Look, darling, and don’t be cross, but it’s just that Mother’s noticed that you seem a bit down.’

‘She thinks I’m a bit down?’ Caro suddenly felt tears welling up. Was she down? Anger that Martha had noticed. Relief that someone had noticed.

‘She was thinking you might like some sort of project?’

‘A project?’ Caro allowed herself a bitter laugh. ‘She doesn’t think I’m busy enough already.’

‘Some time to yourself. A chance to do some research again. It would be an actual post, darling, archivist to the estate, rooting through family records and letters and putting them in order for Mother. And you’ll like this – perhaps you might even solve the family mystery.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘It’s never been something my family talk about much, but no one has the slightest idea who my great-grandmother was, other than that she was a Mrs Gillan. I even tried to find out more about her once or twice, but every last trace of her has been excised from the family records. Just the sort of sleuthing through archives you’re so good at.

Oh, and don't worry because Barbara could help mind Felicity when she comes in, or Mother. But we'll talk later.'

'Alasdair, I don't think—' He was gone. But even as she put the black receiver with its smell of Bakelite back in its cradle, Caro's spirits were beginning to lift. The idea of having her own work to do again, a door through which she might walk into her old life for just a little while each week. Was it possible? The idea of tracing this vanished relative was certainly intriguing. She started folding a pile of nappies from the laundry basket.

Of course it was marvellous to have a baby and people simply didn't realize that caring for a child took easily as much thought and intelligence as any thesis, and was equally absorbing and rewarding – in its own different way. But the rustle of papers at a calm desk, following through a thought. Someone else holding Felicity for a while.

Perhaps she was too harsh on Martha. Surely it wasn't beyond Caro's wit to try and get on with her better. After all, they had so much in common. They both adored Alasdair and they both adored Felicity. Or was this simply another ploy of Martha's to some obscure end? It was always hard to work out what Martha was really thinking.

Caro looked down at the skirt and short-sleeved blouse and cardigan she was wearing, had been wearing for a couple of days now. There were stains on her shoulder, the skirt in need of ironing. Yet she made sure Alasdair had his clean shirt each day. Felicity was always beautifully dressed in tiny, adorable, clean clothes. When had she become the last priority in the household?

While Felicity was asleep Caro took a hurried bath, rolled on her girdle from pre-Felicity days and snapped on her remaining pair of good stockings. Not wearing a girdle was, after all, considered a sign of bad breeding in certain circles. But she had to roll it straight off again in order to breathe. She put on her favourite red skirt,

and the embroidered peasant blouse that Alasdair had bought for her in Sorrento, pinned up her thick hair. She rooted around in her bedside drawer and found a lipstick. Stood and gazed at the woman in the mirror.

Who was that woman? Hard to know these days. Having a child had broken up the pieces of herself and handed them back in an order she didn't recognize, with the expectation that she would immediately know how to incorporate nappy buckets and feeding schedules and ways to cook turnips into her daily life. The Caro she knew had excelled at university, loved her post as a lecturer during the war. But post-natal Caro was a strange, Picasso-like woman made of opposing elements. Often overwhelmed with self-doubt. The rolling days of motherhood gave no prizes or pay packets to chart progress, just small chores that would need repeating as soon as they were done, and a dispiriting, overwhelming feeling of never being in control of events. She missed capable and confident Caro, dashing around the country, lecturing to upturned faces in village halls, able to clean a carburettor or expound on Shakespeare's plays equally well. She had admired that Caro.

A stirring from the pram in the hallway. A small grunt. She picked up Felicity and was given that beaming toothless smile. Wide-open eyes filled with such glee fastened on hers and the world tipped into joy again, one of those moments that reordered everything that had come before. She cradled the child in arms that were plumper than before, and realized that she felt strong, capable. Blessed. Standing at the open door of their life to come.

CHAPTER 4

KELLY CASTLE, 1874

Early morning, a line of light around the edges of the tall shutters. Charlotte can feel a mounting energy in the air that won't let her stay in bed. Six faint chimes from the clock in the drawing room below. No one about except for the servants moving like ghosts through the hidden passageways of Kelly, dusting, laying fires.

She slips from bed, crosses the floorboards and folds back the white shutters to see the larches bright with early sun, gold light on green. Beyond the castle roofs smoke is rising from the chimney of the Laundry Cottage, where the water will be set to boil for the day's wash. No point going to see if Mary will be free, not until Mary has finished the morning tasks for her aunt. Last summer, and the summers before, Charlotte could fetch Mary from the cottage at any time of the day and they would run through the woods, Oliver and Louisa joining in their games. But now everything's changed. Mary's been given an apron, a worried frown on her face when Charlotte asks her to come out so they can wander through the fields together. 'Not till I've finished the ironing, Miss Charlotte.' And Mary will be shut away with the hissing flat irons, folded sheets airing on rails above her like a village of white Bedouin tents floating in the air.

Charlotte opens the wardrobe door slowly, pausing at each creak so as not to wake her sister in the room above. In the inlaid mirror

she catches sight of a sliding image of last night's work, the dressing table with scissors next to an ivory comb, fistfuls of hair spilling onto the floor. She looks away quickly, thinks of Louisa's pillow with its crown of curling rags. It will be a long time before Charlotte sleeps in curling rags again.

She feels around on the floor of the wardrobe, ignoring the hateful new dress hanging above, and pulls out a pile of Oliver's old clothes. Hurrying now, for the morning's already getting away from her, she drags on the trousers, tightens the belt on the last notch. She's not as broad as Oliver was two years back. Pulls on the Aran sweater, its oily wool hinting of sea voyages and adventures. No time for socks, she laces up the boots, runs a hand over her hair. She hasn't got used to the new weightlessness.

The girls' rooms are in the oldest part of the castle in the North-West Tower, built in the Dark Ages and from which the castle has spread out in layers of increasing elegance and ambition. She winds down the stone staircase that opens out onto the chapel in the Tower Room below, crosses it to reach the drawing room. Charlotte can just about remember visiting Kelly as a small child of four or five, when Aunt Sylvia and Uncle Gregor had first purchased the castle. It was still a ruin then. She remembered great holes in the roof two floors above the drawing room, snow drifting down and piling up on the wet floorboards, dark ravens swooping and hopping through the rooms, cawing their displeasure at being disturbed. How cold it had been and how tightly Papa had held her in his arms because it was too dangerous to run through the rooms. She could remember Aunt Sylvia's excitement, her arms waving as she outlined all the things she was going to do to bring the castle back to life, a tall figure in violet capes and skirts, nodding flowers in Aunt Sylvia's hat. Why can't she remember her father's face better? Or her mother's? Because she had had no idea that one day she would need to remember them.

She thought they would always be there, a constant part of her, Father kind and solid, Mother warm and petite in a green woollen dress.

Crossing the back of the drawing room with its silk chaises and white-painted panelling – hard to imagine it as a ruin now – she comes out on the main staircase. She glances over the banister to the sunburst of black-and-white marble tiles of the hallway below, catches the shadow of a maid disappearing through a door. No one else about.

She creeps down, along the back corridor, and bursts out of the back door, four storeys of windows still sleeping blind above her. Breaking into a run, she's soon near the Laundry Cottage and glimpses Mary's aunt at the back, sleeves rolled up, casting grain to the chickens.

Of all the places that Charlotte loves in Kelly Castle, the Laundry Cottage is her favourite. How many times has she sat at the pine scrubbed table next to Mary, thick slices of a new loaf spread with yellow butter by Mary's kindly aunt, Jean, while the coal glows red in the range and the white linen airs on the rails above? Mary has become as much a sister as Louisa, in all their summers growing up together at Kelly. At Christmas and in summer, as soon as the boarding school term was over, Charlotte and Louisa would go not to their aunt, their official guardian, and her house in a gloomy street in Glasgow, but to the home of the Gillans, Uncle Gregor, Aunt Sylvia and their son Oliver. Not that they were a real aunt and uncle, but they had been such good friends of Father's that the girls had always called them such. Uncle Gregor said that the air in the countryside was so much better for their lungs than the sooty air of town. And such healthy lungs they had too, according to Aunt Sylvia, who wondered if Charlotte must always shriek like a banshee in such an unladylike way.

Charlotte frowned as she passed the cottage but carried on. It

wasn't that Charlotte wasn't welcome at the cottage any more, but lately, Mary's aunt had made it plain to her that it wasn't kind to run in and out of the cottage at all hours, tempting Mary to come out and play. This summer, Mary had to work.

Mary, she knew, was tolerated by Aunt Sylvia, as part of Aunt Jean's household. A better life for her here, Jean said, than going straight into the jute mills that were the destiny of most Dundee girls. At Kelly there was fresh air and good food and a chance to go to school in the village. But now that Mary was old enough to work, her aunt was hoping, expecting, that Oliver's mother might find a place for her niece soon among the housemaids. Otherwise Mary would have to return to Dundee and join her other aunts in the jute mill, its air thick with fibres that clogged the lungs, its thundering machines that left the girls half-deaf.

The same jute factories that had paid for Kelly Castle.

'And please, Miss Charlotte,' Aunt Jean had begged her, 'no more remonstrating with Mr Gillan about the mill conditions. They'll think it's me who has put you up to it, or Mary, when we are hoping, as you know, to hear soon.'

Mary's loss of freedom was not the only thing making this summer so strange and disappointing. Charlotte had always pitied Louisa's attempts to be dignified and seemly as the older sister while she and Oliver vied to climb the highest tree, or to shoot the straightest home-made arrows. Louisa pale and anxious on the sidelines. But lately, Oliver had shown not the slightest interest in making pirate dens. It was Louisa he noticed. He'd even praised the blue of Louisa's dress, how it matched her eyes. Oliver, who had never once noticed or cared about clothes before. A horribly upsetting betrayal. Charlotte did not have a high opinion of boys in general, but Oliver had always been a constant friend; now, however, it was as if he'd forgotten who she was, who he, Oliver, was. He'd even laughed when she'd dared

him to race her to the top of the old Scots pine on the lawn. Said girls didn't climb trees.

Angry tears pricked her eyes. While they'd been away at school that year it seemed that someone had decreed that childhood was over, a closing-down of what a girl may or may not do – and a forewarning of the hardening of roles to come that she saw in the lives of the adults around her.

Well, Charlotte was not going to accept it. She would stay true to herself and true to the things she loved. And in time, she was sure of it, Oliver and Mary, and even Louisa, would come round to her view that nothing was as fine as the freedom they had shared here at Kelly, long, light days whooping around the grounds, Oliver leading the charge, even Louisa sometimes forgetting herself, running with skirts bunched up, voices echoing against the hills.

Striding fast across the lawns towards those hills, the old boots darkening as they splashed through thick dew, she dived into the rhododendron bushes, found the break in the low iron fencing that marked the boundary to the estate and entered the cool world of larches and birch trees. She took off her itchy hat, ran her hand again over the strange shortness, the tender changes of temperature on her scalp. Her head so light she could almost float.

No, she wouldn't think of the gloomy bedroom, or the long black strands of hair on the dressing table. Her stomach turned over with a flutter of dread all the same.

She followed the boots where they wanted to go, taking wide steps up soft banks of pine needles, climbing higher through shaded avenues of slender pine trunks, the treetops above crowding together to whisper their secrets.

Then out beyond the woods where the whole coastland lay open and bathed in brilliant morning colours, magenta soil, bright green corn, or the dark green of cabbage fields that were almost navy. Beyond

it, the sea; and a little further along the coast, beyond where she could see, lay the Tay Estuary and the port of Dundee where ships travelled out across the world, to India, to America, to Russia and the Arctic. And one day – she took a deep breath – one day, she too would set sail in just such a ship.

Going back down the hill she began to feel the lack of breakfast – and the lack of socks. The left boot had chafed a sore patch on her ankle making her walk with her foot on one side. And with the rooftops of Kelly growing larger, she felt a wavering of courage. Those handfuls of hair in the gloomy bedroom were very final.

She took the longer route back, skirting unseen through the saplings round the back of the drying lawns. Sails of radiant white sheets now hung in the shafts of slanting light that would pole over the garden as the day progressed.

Briefly, she caught sight of Mary moving behind the kitchen window. Headed back to the castle with a feeling of exile.

Creeping back in through the servants' door, she could hear Annie singing in the back kitchen, Tom Griddle's flat footsteps along the stone slabs of the passage. She ran back up to her room, slipped inside. Jumped when she saw Louisa sitting on the bed, skeins of black hair in her hands. Louisa's fair hair was very much still on her head, brushed into ringlets and held with ribbons. She was wearing the blue morning dress that suited her so well.

'How could you? Have you forgotten that we are guests in the house, Charlotte?'

'As if I'm allowed to, for even a minute.'

'Where precisely do you think we will go each summer if not to Kelly? Oh, why must you be so difficult?' Tears landed on Louisa's lap, leaving dark spots on the blue cotton.

‘You don’t have to cry, Lou. It’s a few handfuls of hair, not the end of the world.’

Louisa huffed with exasperation. ‘We’re not children any more, Charlotte, playing castaways in the woods.’

‘Better if we were.’ Charlotte kicked the end of the bed, her lips set.

‘And such lovely thick black hair. I was going to help you put it up for the first time. And after Aunt Sylvia had that beautiful new dress made for you.’

‘This? This beautiful?’

Charlotte dashed to the wardrobe and pulled out the dress, held it in front of her; an ugly, fussy thing that Aunt Sylvia had ordered in Perth, since Charlotte should have something suitable for her age now, as almost a young lady. A muddy lilac stripe overlaid with encrustations of lace at the front, buttoned wrists and a long buttoned bodice that would need a maid with a button hook to get out of, a scratchy ruff of lace around the neck. A large silk bow on the back making it difficult to sit down comfortably.

‘I think it is charming. And ladylike,’ said Louisa.

‘It’s a fancy pudding with so many flavours it’s inedible, and all to show how kind Oliver’s mother is to orphans. I’ll never wear it.’

But even as she shoved it back into the wardrobe, Charlotte knew Aunt Sylvia had a way of making sure that she would.

Charlotte pulled on her oldest and most comfortable day dress. The hem was a little short of late, but all the better for running. She felt the itch of tears in her eyes again, for the cool wind on her face when she and the other children used to race across the lawns together, laughing and calling out.

As to the hair, there was nothing to be done – save using a pot of glue. Louisa chose a large velvet tam-o’-shanter, soft enough to pull down and cover Charlotte’s hair completely.

‘A lady may wear a hat indoors while dining,’ she said, doubtfully.

‘At breakfast?’ said Charlotte.

One behind the other, with solemn steps, they descended the tower staircase.

‘If Father had lived. . .’ whispered Charlotte.

‘I know, dearest. But please try and remember that we are fortunate to be here,’ whispered Louisa. ‘It is only for Uncle Gregor’s friendship with Father that we are invited here each year.’

And perhaps for his feeling of guilt, though that was never said. It was Uncle Gregor who had underwritten their father’s Arctic expedition, sent out in the hope of discovering new sources of whale oil. The Dundee jute mills could not run without it. After the expedition was lost, he had also accepted the privilege of underwriting Louisa and Charlotte’s education, relieving the elderly aunt when their boarding school term ended, the girls arriving in a series of green-and-gold summers and crisp winters, watching the gradual restoration of the old building from ragged, ivy-hung sandstone walls to a beautiful Scottish mansion house filled with medieval furniture and rare paintings.

The tower steps ended at the little chapel room. In it hung the portrait of Aunt Sylvia’s brother, William, for ever a handsome young man of nineteen in a blue Admiralty jacket. William had also disappeared in the Arctic, but some twenty years earlier than their father. He had been lost with the Franklin expedition that had been sent out in the hope of finding the fabled northern trading route and which was lost without a trace. And if anyone might think that Aunt Sylvia’s loss would make her more sympathetic to the girls’ loss, then Charlotte could have told them what was implied by every headache or injured tone from their hostess, or fit of nerves that left her in bed for days: Mrs Sylvia Gillan’s pain was too vast and all absorbing for any such thing.

Above all, the girls knew to never, ever mention the terrible lies

that had circulated around the Franklin expedition some years ago. It had taken Charlotte a long time to understand what the lies were supposedly about, and the significance of a pot of half-cooked human bones the Eskimos claimed to have found, along with a silver plate engraved with the name of Franklin's lost ship. Aunt Sylvia agreed with Lady Franklin – and even Dickens agreed in his journal articles – that sons of Empire and Admiralty could never have committed such heinous crimes, even if they were starving to death in the Arctic wastes. No, it was the Arctic savages, the Eskimos, who had murdered William and his fellow officers as the men tried to struggle home across the snowy deserts. And it was the Eskimos who had spread the vile lies in an attempt to cover the evidence of their own murderous crimes.

Now Aunt Sylvia hated the entire Eskimo race with all her heart and Charlotte's relations with Aunt Sylvia had not been improved by the time Charlotte had made a campfire in the woods and cooked something called cannibal stew. Which Aunt Sylvia had found out about when all the children were very sick from the mushrooms that Oliver had added.

The chapel led out onto the long drawing room. At the far end Charlotte caught sight of Oliver springing up from where he'd been kneeling, hurrying through into the breakfast room. She wondered why his ears were burning red.