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A Lifetime Burning

Linda Gillard

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

2000

The Dunbars are a good-looking family – even the old ones – and massed in black, as they are now, impressive. Clearly the gene pool has never been muddied with inferior stock. Was it in fact ancient in-breeding that produced such refinement of feature, such acute sensitivity, such intelligence? The Dunbars aren't telling. We're a canny and a clannish lot, loyal to a fault - even when we hate each other. A Dunbar will stand by another to the bitterest of ends - even the black sheep. Especially the black sheep. (And I should know - flighty Flo, dear Aunt Flora, poor Reverend Wentworth's mad wife who, for everyone's sake, really should have been kept in the attic.)

The Dunbars have an effective way of dealing with miscreants. You could call it assimilation, I suppose. We simply pretend the black sheep is white. As Hugh once said in one of his sermons, 'There's none so blind as those who don't wish to see.' There was a lot the Dunbars didn't wish to see.

And so we didn't.

Theodora Dunbar, matriarch, known always as Dora, is ninety-three. Only my mother could manage to look commanding in a wheelchair. The entourage helps of course – a bevy of attractive and attentive men hovering, pandering to her every wish. Dora has loved us all in her own peculiar way and the Dunbars have returned that love with loyalty and devotion. Only I stepped out of line. And of course Colin, but he was instantly forgiven on account of his extreme youth and my extreme wickedness.

Dora's wheelchair is manoeuvred by one of her grandsons, Colin. My ex-lover. My nephew. My brother Rory's son – like Rory, but much darker. The awkward boy has matured, as I (being something of a connoisseur in these matters) always knew he would, into a handsome man. But today Colin stands, as ever, in Theo's shadow.

Theo. My son. At thirty-four, a few months older than Colin, taller, fairer, finer-featured and always said to favour me. Everyone agreed Theo's Apollonian good looks owed little to Hugh. Theo is a Dunbar through and through.

Nevertheless, Hugh and Theo are close - to spite me, perhaps. Theo adores Hugh, protects him, supports him – at the moment quite literally. At nearly eighty, Hugh's tremendous height and bulk are bowed. Leaning heavily on Theo's slender frame, he droops, like an ancient, gnarled tree, his thick black mane now white as a wizard's.

There has been much love in this family – some would say too much – and not a little hate. The most unlikely love has been Hugh's for Theo and Theo's for Hugh. Against all the odds… I doubt Hugh ever contemplated revenge since he regards himself as even more of a black sinner than me, but if he'd wanted to settle old scores, loving Theo and making Theo love him would have been a masterstroke.

Rory weeps. My brother stands between his wife Grace, as plain and four-square solid as Grace has always been, and Colin. (My niece Charlotte is not present. She is on the other side of the globe, the distance she thought necessary to put between herself and my son.) Colin fidgets, clearly embarrassed by his father's tears. My husband and son are dry-eyed; my mother, stunned by grief, is stoically composed; my sister-in-law Grace can barely disguise her relief.

Grace hated me. I can't say I blamed her - she had good reason. Several, in fact. But if you asked my gracious sister-in-law why she hated me, she'd say it was because I seduced her precious firstborn, relieved him of the burden of his virginity, chewed him up and spat him out on to the admittedly sizeable scrap-heap marked 'Flora's ex-lovers'. That's what Grace would say. But she'd be lying. That isn't why Grace hated me. Ask my brother Rory.

Rory and I haven't spoken for thirteen years, but my twin brother, my childhood companion, the other half of my life, the other half of my self weeps, weeps for me, his dead sister, who burns.

Burns...

Like a witch.

'It is better to marry than to burn.'

The elderly man bearing a marked resemblance to an Old Testament prophet appears to be talking to himself.

'What?'

'Paul's first Epistle to the Corinthians. Chapter seven, verse nine.'

'Oh,' Theo replies vaguely. The younger man, though tall, is still shorter than his companion. He is thin and his delicate, almost feminine features are drawn. He appears young at first but closer examination reveals many fine lines about his eyes and mouth suggesting a greater age, or at least a fondness for the outdoor life. His thick, fair hair, brushed vigorously in honour of the solemn occasion, is being coaxed by a gentle summer breeze into its natural state of unruly curls.

As the men wander round the parched crematorium flowerbeds, Theo finds himself wishing his mother had died in the spring. July has little to offer apart from blowsy hybrid tea roses and vulgar gladioli. Not Flora's flowers at all. He tries to think what she would have preferred. Something blue perhaps, to match her eyes. Delphiniums. Larkspur. Cornflowers. Theo finds the botanic litany oddly comforting.

Hugh resumes his grumbling. 'Trust St Paul to take a dim view of marriage. What did *he* know about it anyway? Lifelong celibate! Homosexual, probably. Poor bugger…' The old man loses his footing and leans more heavily on Theo.

'Take it easy, Dad. The paving's uneven here. I wish you'd brought your stick.'

'Don't need it, my boy.' The old man halts and breathes heavily, giving the lie to his claim. He speaks eventually and in quite a different tone. 'I *did* love your mother.'

'Dad, don't upset yourself. It's all over and done with. Long ago. Let's go home.'

'I tried to love Flora. But my kind of love wasn't enough. She needed more than I could give her and, God knows, I needed more than she could give me. Mutual misery should have brought us together. It was one of the things we had in common.'

'*Dad*…'

Hugh draws himself up to his full, imposing height so that Theo has to look up into his face. The remarkable brown eyes are barely dimmed; there is passion still. *'But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.'* He snorts and raises a finger to admonish the absent saint. 'In this – as in so many things – St Paul was wrong!' He shakes his white head. 'Flora and I married

and burned…'

Rory is now composed. As Grace drives them home she steals a glance now and again at his profile and wonders if her husband will ever age. At fifty-eight, there is something of the superannuated schoolboy about Rory. His sandy hair is now threaded with silver but it still flops across his forehead when he moves his head suddenly, which he is inclined to do. His thick fair eyebrows have become untidy but his face is still lean, the skin almost unlined. Grace scowls at her own furrowed brow reflected in the rear-view mirror and envies the blessing of Dunbar genes.

Rory, staring straight ahead, announces suddenly, 'You know, Flora always thought she'd burn in Hell.'

'She didn't really believe in all that mumbo-jumbo, did she?'

'I think she did. She was a vicar's wife. Goes with the territory.'

'How horrible…'

Rory is silent for a while, then resumes. 'I don't think she saw it like that. Hell wasn't a place she was afraid of going to, you see. My sister spent most of her life there.'

Grace lifts a hand from the wheel and lays it on her husband's. Despite the summer heat, Rory's long fingers are chilled.

In a Sydney wine bar a young woman sits alone with a briefcase and a bottle of wine. There is only one glass on the table but the bottle is nearly empty. A folder of documents lies open in front of her, unregarded as she fingers a dog-eared postcard, tapping the table with it nervously. One side of the postcard is covered in a black, uneven scrawl. The other shows a botanical print: *Fritillaria meleagris,* the snakeshead fritillary, checkered purple and white. Her favourite flower. She wonders how long it took to find a postcard of it and drinks again, turning the card over and over, as if rotation might eventually generate a different message.

Charlotte Dunbar - at thirty-one she hasn't married and believes she never will - steels herself to read the postcard again. The message is unchanged.

Dear Lottie

I've asked Grace to forward this to you. She won't give me your address. I don't expect you to reply but I wanted you to know that my mother has been found, but she was dead. The cremation will take place on July 21st. I'm OK

but my father took it very badly.

All love, as ever,

T.

CHAPTER 1

1942

Dora Dunbar had given up hoping for a child. At thirty-five, after fourteen years of marriage, she'd come to terms with her barrenness. Archie was equally sanguine. He apportioned no blame and kept his disappointment to himself. The painful subject of prospective parenthood was no longer discussed.

Dora's faith in God was vague but unquestioning, as befitted an Anglican in wartime. She assumed quietly, with little fuss, that the confirmation of pregnancy, followed some months later by a diagnosis of twins, was nothing short of miraculous. Dora prayed in her modest way that at least one of the babies would survive. She didn't pray for a son, partly because she feared to tempt Fate (a pagan deity who co-existed comfortably and just as inscrutably alongside her God); partly because she simply didn't care about the babies' gender. A baby, any baby, something to hold in her arms, to present to Archie, a piece of himself, a Dunbar scion, was all Dora asked. But Dora refused to pray mainly because she knew prayer didn't work.

As a child she'd prayed nightly till she wept for her adored brothers to be spared in the last war. God had shown Himself to be deaf or indifferent and had taken Henry in 1915 and Roderick the following year. Dora had consoled herself with the infant Henrietta, had petted and spoiled the baby as if she were a treasured doll. Dora's parents were grateful for the distraction of a new life in the family and, praising the resilience of children, marvelled at how young Dora cared for little Ettie, as she came to be known.

Dora would chatter incessantly to the infant long before she could understand anything she was told. Dora's parents, bereft of both their sons and numbed by grief, paid little attention to Dora's prattle. As she leaned over the cot, they assumed Dora told the baby stories.

She was indeed telling stories - stories of her adored brother Henry, dead at twenty. Dora, aged nine, told stories so that she wouldn't forget Henry and so that little Ettie, who had never known him, wouldn't forget him either.

When the twins were born - a pigeon pair: Roderick Henry and Flora Elizabeth - Dora wept copious tears. Archie assumed it was relief; the midwife said it was the milk coming in. Nobody asked Dora why she cried. She might not have known, but when two live babies were placed in her arms Dora found herself suddenly overwhelmed with grief for her two brothers, dead more than twenty-five years.

Ettie, hovering outside the bedroom door not wanting to intrude, might have understood but if she had, she would have said nothing. Ettie said little but perceived much. It was Ettie who, when Dora remarked anxiously that Roderick seemed such a mouthful for a tiny baby, suggested he be known as Rory. Dora looked up and smiled gratefully.

Rory settled to his feeds better after he'd been re-named. He fed well and slept soundly, unlike his older sister who, to Dora's distress, seemed perpetually hungry, perpetually wakeful. The midwife on one of her visits cast a professional eye over Rory sleeping in his cot and Flora fussing at the breast and announced harshly – but prophetically – that Flora was 'a naughty greedy girl'.

1987

Tea sat untouched in bone china cups as brittle as the preceding silence. Dora sighed, then said firmly, 'It's wrong, Flora.'

'Says who?'

Dora flinched at the sharp retort but continued evenly. 'I do. So do Rory and Grace… And Hugh. Not that you care what Hugh thinks.'

'Too bloody right, I don't.'

'Please don't swear, Flora. It isn't necessary and it doesn't help.'

'Well, mind your own damn business, Ma!'

'I do usually. You know I do. I always have… But I think I have a right to speak here. You are making my grandson very unhappy.'

'On the contrary - I appear to be making him deliriously happy. Ask him.'

'Don't be glib, Flora. There's more to life than sex. Don't pretend you think

otherwise.'

'There's more to Colin and me than sex.'

Dora gave her daughter an appraising glance. 'Yes, I dare say there is – for Colin.'

'How dare you judge me!'

Dora fixed her daughter with faded blue eyes, still astute, still steely. 'I may be very old but I am not yet a fool. Colin is twenty-one and you are forty-four. At best it's mutual infatuation. Put an end to it now before Colin is hurt.'

'Why should I? It's not as if he's a child. Or particularly immature. He wasn't even a virgin, actually.'

Dora winced and held up her hands in protest. 'Please! I don't wish to hear details of Colin's private life. Or yours for that matter.'

'So why is it wrong? Tell me. He says he loves me. And I - I'm terribly fond of him…' Her voice faltered. 'We have a lot of interests in common,' she added quickly. 'And we enjoy sleeping together. Why is that wrong?'

Dora looked down at her hands, registering the throb of pain in her arthritic knuckles. The ugliness of her once beautiful hands never failed to repel her. She looked up into Flora's still lovely face and, against her better judgement, relented. 'I don't know if it's wrong, but I do know that one day you'll regret it. I think you will feel…' Dora cast around for a word and seemed almost surprised by her choice. 'I think you'll feel ashamed.'

Flora laughed, a high, barking sound that had nothing to do with mirth. 'Oh no, Ma! That's one thing I won't feel. I was inoculated against shame a long time ago.'

I don't remember my mother as a young woman. She was thirty-five when we were born and in my earliest memories she already seems old. Our father was sixteen years older than our mother and so it was as if we'd been born to grandparents.

When I think of my mother, I see her in the garden wearing an old straw hat and a moth-eaten fur jacket that for all I know might have been fashionable in its day. I was crucified with embarrassment on the rare occasion when I brought a friend home to tea. They could barely stifle their giggles. Other people's mothers wore pretty dresses, high-heeled shoes and took trouble with their hair. Mine

wore galoshes.

The resemblance between Dora and my son Theo was astonishing - the same remarkable blue eyes, the high cheekbones and silky curls (except that Dora's were, from her mid-forties, pure white.) She was pretty, tiny and doll-like. When she became crippled with arthritis, Hugh would lift her out of her battery-driven cart, kiss her pale powdered cheek and carry her indoors. Dora was unperturbed by the lack of ceremony – I think she relished the attention, especially from Hugh. She'd cling on round her son-in-law's neck, continuing her conversation over his shoulder. Except that Dora didn't really do conversation. She waved a twisted but regal hand and gave you an audience.

When Theo was placed in my arms as a newborn I finally felt I was no longer a child. At twenty-three, I was free at last from my parents' jurisdiction and disapproval. But as I cradled my beautiful son, I was struck by the sickening realisation that I hadn't the faintest idea how to be a mother to this child.

1945

Rory didn't speak. By the age of two he had uttered no recognisable words and very few sounds. He would cry out in pain and laugh out loud but he had no language other than a low humming, chaotically melodic, that accompanied his play and to which Flora appeared to respond, sometimes antiphonally, sometimes in unison. When Flora babbled to Rory's droning hum, it was as if the two toddlers were making music together.

As the twins' third birthday approached, Flora was speaking in whole sentences but Rory was still verbally silent. Dora worried aloud that he was deaf or mute although she knew he was neither. Ettie pointed out that Rory scarcely needed to talk with such a vocal twin to interpret his every wish. Rory had only to look up, point at a toy and Flora would interpret: 'Wor want his teddy.'

Flora observed her brother closely as if he were an object of fascination, like an animal at the zoo. She kept up a kind of running commentary on his every move. If Rory rubbed his eyes Flora would announce, 'Wor tired now.' If a look of pained concentration stole over his face Flora would exclaim, 'Wor want his potty! *Quick*!'

Flora could pronounce neither of their names and they emerged as 'Wor' and 'For'. Sometimes the two monosyllables were indistinguishable and it was unclear whether Flora was talking about herself or Rory. Since she eventually seemed able to interpret most of his needs without even looking at him, it was often unclear which twin she was referring to, or even if she herself made a distinction.

The family tended to address Flora as spokesperson for the twins. They tried to talk to Rory through her but eventually they just talked to Flora. Rory retreated still further into his impenetrable musical world. Dora fretted but Archie said it was mere laziness and cited an older brother of his who hadn't said a complete sentence before starting school but who'd made up for lost time by becoming an MP. Dora was not reassured.

Ettie suggested separating the twins for a day to see what happened. Only then did it occur to Dora that the twins had never been apart for more than a few minutes at a time. She agreed readily. Ettie took Flora out in the pushchair doing her best to ignore the child's increasingly frantic cries as she looked at the empty space beside her, aghast.

'Where's *Wor* gone? Aunt Ettie, where's *Wor*?'

Dora sat on the hearthrug with Rory, surrounded by a battery of toys including a new wooden xylophone. He looked round the room, his eyes darting, his head swivelling at the slightest sound, his ears cocked for Flora. Dora tried to distract him. Rory's head movements increased in their rapidity, taking on the appearance of a nervous tic. His droning hum began, soon punctuated by heartbroken gulping sounds as he cried in his own distinctive, almost silent way. Dora picked up the small hammer of the xylophone and picked out a tune, singing unsteadily.

'Three blind mice…
Three blind mice…'

Rory took no notice and started to make a new sound, pressing his lips together and blowing, as if he would burst. The sound that emerged was 'Fff… Fff…'

Dora paused, the little hammer in mid-air. 'Flora? Are you trying to say Flora, Rory? *For?*'

The boy looked round the room and pointed at the door, still puffing at his lips. 'Fff…'

'Flora! Say "Flora", Rory!'

His head jerked back and he sobbed, a terrible groaning sound that appeared to come from his stomach. Dora felt uneasy but lied cheerfully about Flora's imminent return. She beat out 'Three Blind Mice' again, singing the words loudly in an attempt to drown Rory's cries, then, dropping the hammer, she gathered him into her arms, unable to bear his distress. She rocked him back and forth, stroking his thick fair hair back from his forehead until he seemed a little calmer. The child pointed to the hammer on the floor, then looked round for Flora. As he started to cry again Dora reached hurriedly for the hammer and put it into his hand.

Rory looked at the spherical head of the hammer, his silky golden brows twisted into a frown, as if the hammer itself had been the source of the music, now fallen strangely silent. He turned his head quickly and looked up at Dora. Another jerk of the head as he stared at the door, then his eyes settled on the hammer again. He heaved a deep, shuddering sigh. His mouth opened but at first there was no sound. Then to the tune of 'Three Blind Mice' Rory sang, 'Where - For - gone?' He looked up at his mother, startled, as if it were she who had sung. Dora was too astonished to answer and Rory sang again. 'Where - For - gone?'

Breathless, Dora sang tentatively in reply, 'For - gone - out.' Then, more confidently, 'For – back – soon!'

Rory smiled and chuckled. Dora hugged him tight and kissed his cheek. 'Clever Rory!' She grasped the hammer and beat out the four notes of Big Ben's chimes on the xylophone, singing boldly, 'Where – has – For – gone? - She'll – be – back – soon!' Rory laughed again. Dora repeated her improvisation to Rory's increasing delight. He nodded his head vigorously to the beat of the music. As he grabbed the hammer from Dora the front door slammed. Rory's head jerked upwards, catching Dora painfully under the chin. He fixed his eyes on the door, scarcely breathing. The handle rattled and Flora charged into the room, her face grubby and tear-stained. Ettie followed, looking exhausted. 'I'm sorry, Dora. She was quite inconsolable. I thought we'd better come back - she was making herself sick with crying. Did Rory fare any better?'

Flora threw her arms round her brother and squeezed. 'Wor!' She caught sight of the hammer in his fist and snatched it away. 'What's this for?' She tapped him on the head with it. Rory beamed.

Dora whispered, 'Give it back to him and he might show you.'

Reluctantly, Flora handed the hammer back to Rory. He stared at the end again, then at his sister. Grasping the hammer tightly, he opened his mouth and sang softly, to the tune of Big Ben's chimes, 'Where – you – gone – For?'

Flora's jaw dropped and her eyes widened. For the first time in her short life, she was speechless. Rory laughed delightedly and tapped her on the nose with the hammer.

Rory and the xylophone were inseparable thereafter. His speech, once started, developed quickly but it was many months before he could speak without singing. Thus, at the age of three he started to compose his own music so that he could talk. When many years later he said in an interview that he had learned to compose music before he had learned to talk, the claim was dismissed as artistic licence on the part of an eccentric musician, but in fact the statement was quite true.

They said that was when I started to feel jealous of my Wunderkind *brother. Attention-seeking Flora, little Miss Look-at-Me couldn't cope with the competition. But that wasn't it at all. Jealousy wasn't the problem, but they didn't have the words to describe what was really going on. It was the first time Rory had seemed separate from me and I couldn't handle it. My brother was me and I was him, we came as a package, an indivisible whole. Or so I'd thought.*

The tantrums and spitefulness weren't sibling rivalry or even just plain naughtiness as my benighted father thought. It was a form of grief. They'd probably call it 'separation anxiety' nowadays. I was trying to cope with having half my self amputated, without anaesthetic. I was a Siamese twin forcibly separated when I'd thought we'd been doing quite nicely, thank you.

Rory survived the operation. I didn't. I just took a long time – a lifetime - to die.

1948

Flora's performance as the Virgin Mary was perhaps the first and last time she felt herself to be the star of the show that was to be her life. With her fine, pale blonde hair, her large blue eyes and air of intelligent composure, there was no

question but that Flora Dunbar should play Mary in the St Ethelred's Elementary School nativity play. As Miss Stapleton remarked in the staff-room, puffing on her Craven A, 'That child has *presence* – and she will look lovely in blue.' She didn't add that unless they put the Dunbar girl centre-stage in a spotlight, she would find some other, less acceptable way of drawing attention to herself. Damage limitation was a concept that hovered on the outskirts of Miss Stapleton's mind, but she was too kind-hearted to acknowledge it.

Equally easy to cast was her brother Rory as the Angel Gabriel. Apart from his golden hair and an appropriately solemn expression, Rory had a beautiful singing voice and would cope well with the angelic solo Miss Stapleton had in mind, informing Mary of her impending happy event.

The staff all agreed they'd be sorry to lose Rory. 'A crying shame,' was the general consensus. That some of the best boys were sent away to public school was neither kind to the boys nor fair on the girls but, as Miss Stapleton pointed out philosophically, brushing ash from her lap, that was the way of the world for those who could afford to choose.

But she did wonder how the Dunbar lad – strangely aloof, yet somehow vulnerable – would cope with the rigours of boarding school. It was hard to imagine him separated from his more robust sister. Miss Stapleton, with her many years' experience of young children, thought there would probably be trouble.

1949

Rory was making his preparations to run away from school.

His letters home had been censored; his painted measles had failed to convince Matron and had simply earned him a stern lecture from his Housemaster. Refusing to speak had disconcerted staff and pupils alike for a week but had achieved nothing beyond an even sterner talk from his Housemaster, to which Rory had made no reply. He'd refused to make a sound even when being beaten.

So there was nothing for it now – he was going to have to run away if he was ever to make them understand.

Dora answered the door to a police constable accompanied by an urchin whose face and clothes were so filthy she stepped back in alarm. Then she recognised the

badge on the boy's blazer and gasped. As she enveloped Rory in her arms the constable explained that the boy had evidently been sleeping rough and had collapsed in a neighbouring village. A doctor had been summoned and pronounced the child to be suffering from exhaustion and dehydration. Rory couldn't – or wouldn't – speak and had nothing on his person to identify him but someone at the surgery had recognised the school badge. The receptionist had rung to enquire about absconders and Rory had been identified at once. Matron, much relieved, confirmed that there had been 'a spot of trouble' recently. She'd suggested the boy be sent home for a few days to recover from his ordeal.

Later, when Rory was in the bath, Dora asked him why he'd run away. He was silent for a while then said, with a croak, 'Because they found the tunnel.'

'Tunnel?'

'Yes.'

'You were digging a *tunnel*?'

'Yes. Me and Parsons. So we could escape. But Mr Abbott - the gardener,' Rory explained, 'fell into it with his wheelbarrow.' Rory's thin frame heaved a sigh. 'It was taking far too long anyway… Parsons was *useless* at digging.'

'What I actually meant, Rory,' said Dora, as she applied plasters to his blistered feet, 'was why did you feel the need to run away from school? Why did you want to come home?'

Rory blinked at his mother in astonishment. 'To see Flor, of course. I thought she'd be missing me,' he added nonchalantly.

1987

Flora sat on the stairs, clad in an old pair of pyjamas and a raincoat, waiting. A mouse appeared from behind the skirting board and scurried across the hall floor. She watched it without interest, her eyes unfocused. The rain had started up again and she could hear the penetrating drip-drip as water fell through a hole in the roof and landed in the bucket. She rubbed at her knee. The damp was making her joints ache. Pulling her raincoat around her more tightly, she poured the last of the vodka into a grubby tumbler. Beyond the heavy rain Flora thought she heard a distant car engine. She stared fixedly at the front door.

A car drew up outside the house, braking suddenly. Flora listened for the door opening but there was no sound apart from the accelerando of dripping water. Eventually a car door opened and shut. A firm knock on the front door sent it swinging on its hinges.

Rory stood on the threshold, his hair and clothes unkempt, his face drawn, his features blurred by a two-day growth of beard.

'Hello, Ror…'

'Hello.'

'You look as if you've been sleeping in ditches.'

'No… In the car. I didn't want to stop.'

'You've driven straight here? From *Suffolk*?'

'Yes.'

'Jesus! Have you eaten?'

'I had something…' He cast his eyes upwards as if trying to remember. 'Yesterday.'

'Well, there's not much here. Only tins.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Did you bring booze by any chance?'

'No.'

'Pity… There's no kindling left either. It's bloody cold. How did we use to bear it here?'

He shrugged, his shoulders tense. 'We were kids.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Flora…'

'Yes?'

Rory's gaze was level but his chest rose and fell as he tried to control his breathing. 'You know I will never forgive you for this.'

'Yes, I know,' Flora said mildly. 'But you see, Ror, I'm past caring if anyone forgives me – even you. The only thing that matters to me now is that you're here. Come in and shut the door. Mind that hole in the floorboards - the dry rot's got a lot worse.'

Rory pushed the door shut behind him and stood shivering on the worn coconut mat. He looked down at the filthy floor and said absently, 'Those are bat droppings.'

‘Yes. We’ve got bats, mice, a barn owl and a nest of robins – and that’s just indoors. Outdoors we have a pine marten.’

‘Really?’ Rory’s face was slashed by a sudden bright smile.

‘Yes. I put scraps out for him and he comes out of the woods at dusk. It can’t be the same one, can it?’

Rory shook his head. ‘After thirty-odd years? No, of course not. It’s probably a descendant. Can it peel hard-boiled eggs?’

Flora smiled, her face radiant. ‘Yes.’

‘There you are then.’ And with that Rory covered his face with his hands and started to cry silently.

Flora rose unsteadily from the stairs, raised her glass and said, ‘Welcome back, Rory.’