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Opening Extract from...

The River Woman

Written by Sorrel Pitts

Published by Indigo Dreams Publishing

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THE RIVER WOMAN

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Indigo Dreams Publishing

Second Edition: The River Woman
First published in Great Britain in 2011 by:
Indigo Dreams Publishing Ltd
132 Hinckley Road
Stoney Stanton
Leics
LE9 4LN
www.indigodreams.co.uk

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ISBN 978-1-907401-57-2
British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data. A CIP record for this book can be obtained from the British Library

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Designed and typeset in Minion Pro by Indigo Dreams
Cover image by Irene Lamprakou/Trevillion Images

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Imprint Academic, Exeter
Papers used by Indigo Dreams are recyclable products made from wood grown in sustainable forests following the guidance of the Forest Stewardship Council

‘Until she strides in again beyond her shadows
And cancels everything behind her.’

Seamus Heaney

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost to my agent, Tara Wynne at Curtis Brown, for keeping the faith, and to all at Indigo Dreams for turning the dream into reality.

To my family for their encouragement and patience. And to Sarah Moncrieff and family, Tibet Kara, Murray Cooper, Deborah Heron, Boyanna Elks, Nicky Wicks and Kevin Leahy for always being there. Thanks too, to Emily Rosser, Deirdre Gyenes and Barbara Mercer for the loan of their talent and professionalism.

Special thanks go to Sir Michael Parkinson for promising me an honest opinion – thank goodness it was a good one!

And finally, thanks to Mike Scott, musician and poet, whose genius has inspired me throughout my life.

For my father, Denis Pitts

THE RIVER WOMAN

PART ONE

Chapter One

I have to make a decision.

I know that I'm not in the best frame of mind for this. For a start, I'm nearly dead from cold, and in a near-death state it's hard to think clearly about the simplest of things. But in my case oncoming death has brought a strange kind of clarity. It has done away with all those confusing shades of grey and left me with a very simple dilemma. That dilemma is whether to live or to die.

I am only thirty years old. But I have done something very bad. No, that is a euphemism. I have done something terrible: something which I know I deserve to die for; something which I have planned to die for.

Here is my death scene. It is the middle of winter. I am sitting in the snow on an old bridge in a big field somewhere in Wiltshire. My bare legs hang over heavy blocks of sharp-edged sarsen stone which rise, in a rugged curve, over a wide stream. I stare into its depths, absorbed by the endless sifting of flint and weed. Freezing snow cuts into the crook of my knees and my feet dangle over the swollen, ice-grey waters.

I have been sitting here for hours, since early morning, and believe me the cold, when it gets you, hurts like nothing else. So many pains …. I'm confused, but I concentrate on the water and the frightening fact that soon I'll be completely numb.

The snow, glittering and virgin, covers the river banks and forms sad moustaches on the naked branches of trees. A blackbird's song drifts over its silver slopes. The large, now

familiar, house on the distant hillside frowns at me, no doubt wondering what on earth I'm doing on such a day, in such clothes, wishing to die. In my mind I picture its inhabitants, sitting beside a fire, the rosy glow on cheeks, a newspaper, mugs of sweet tea. They are oblivious to this girl who has followed them all day in her tortured imaginings.

I raise my gaze from the water and look at the house longingly. It is perhaps a mile away, the only human structure on the bleakest of landscapes. The house is the reason for my change of heart. I do not have much time left. My story may end here, forever untold, or it may begin without a history, without an explanation. These are critical moments.

But as my body begins to pull itself back from the water's edge, I see I have already made my decision. My spirit, that house, fear – I'm not sure what, is propelling me away from the death's edge, the abyss. I know I can do nothing but cause further pain, I know my way is littered with crumpled motivations, inexcusable curiosities, petty logics. Although I'm crazy, believe me, I'm quite sane. I know what I'm doing, I just can't stop it. It's because I need answers. I thought that this would be an answer, this frozen end, serenaded by the gentle song of the river. Evidently it's not.

It seems to me that there's more reason in my living than in my dying.

I lever myself away from the bridge and begin to crawl, my knees and hands pushing into the deep snow, slow, hesitant, pausing every few feet. Then, forward again, a death-shadow over my shoulder and the waters beside me. I am cold, so cold, my

body hurting, every inch a victory, every twist of a limb a signal to my blood to keep moving, keep flowing.

I force myself to straighten, but movement has already brought back some circulation and my body is losing its stiffness. I wobble, pressing a hand into the snow, and rise to my feet. The water drifts, and from the mauve taint coating the suffocating winter sky, I see that evening is approaching. With evening more snow will come.

I am dizzy but I can stand. And walk. Every part of me aches but I can walk, slowly at first, my breath on the air, my arms gripping my stomach. It's more a lurch than a walk, but those old-men trees by the field's edge begin to look not so distant, and the river's voice is growing silent.

I do not know how long I struggle before I see him. I clamber through a barbed wire fence, gashing my hands and legs, though I can barely feel the pain for the cold. I'm in a second field, the large house is as distant as ever and now the light is fading. I realise that, like a desert, the landscape obscures distance – what seems like half a mile may be five miles, what seems like twenty minutes may be twenty days. All I know is that the dying of the light is the dying of my spirit. Weakness returns. It is the end of the day. I let my body sink back into the snow. Of course it is not fair for me to live.

And now I really hate myself for this double betrayal – deciding to live, only to die. I will look such a fool to them all, such a callous fool. They will find me here tomorrow, my death spread on the snow, my arms outstretched, blue, bloodied, my

mouth and eyes open, gazing at hell.

And they will know what I have done.

I open my mouth to pray. But then I see him and the prayer unfolds into a long breath of relief. He's hurrying from the direction of the house, his wild hair falling around his face as he pulls his long legs through the drifts. Our eyes meet for a second before mine fall.

'Help me.'

Thirty seconds, a minute, and I feel him kneel beside me, a hand on my shoulder.

'Help me.'

He's speaking to me but I cannot hear what he says. I don't care. I only know that his voice is as soft as the snow – it sounds like warm honey pouring over a silence as cold as the ground beneath me.

I raise my head with a painful jerk and, with the briefest of glances, take in as much as I can of the stranger. He's looking down at me through a tangle of brown curls, his wide, youthful mouth pursed, his eyes large and afraid.

He kneels and takes off his jacket. 'Here,' he whispers.

He places the jacket carefully around my shoulders and produces a small bottle from its pocket. He twists off the top before pushing the cold glass to my lips. I splutter and cough and the liquid runs over my cheeks and neck.

'Drink it.' He puts a hand under my chin and forces my head up, pouring the whisky down my throat as one would give medicine to an unwilling dog. It sears my stomach like a hot sword cutting through ice. A thin wail escapes into the silent, late

afternoon air as I fall into firm arms which lift me upwards.

'I'm going to get you home.'

I shake my head, forcing an arm against him and pushing his body from mine. But the cold has left me weaker than a child. He pulls me forward and my head lolls against him.

'No, let me rest. Please, let me rest.'

'There's no time. My father is a doctor. He'll take care of you.'

My balance fails and I stagger against him. He pulls my arm over his shoulders. I cannot lift my head and stare blindly at the white snow under our feet. He half-lifts, half-drags me through the drifts.

'What's your name?'

I shake my head.

The snow sucks us down. I feel its icy fingers grip my naked legs. Cold slivers worm their way into the tops of my boots and the lower half of my body gradually becomes senseless as we continue forward, our laboured steps the only sound. Even the blackbird has given up. The stranger is determined and unyielding. When I let my feet drag in a futile effort to rest, he shakes me hard and pours more whisky into my mouth.

'I want to sleep,' I splutter, pushing him away.

'If you sleep you'll die.'

'I wanted to die.'

He doesn't reply.

He is strong. I let my head fall against his shoulder but as I study the erratic movement of my limbs, my balance goes again and I stumble heavily into a deep drift. My face hits the snow and

my eyes close.

A stinging slap around the face wakes me. He's above me, shaking, kicking, shouting. I reach out and blindly try to hit him back.

'Get up!'

'Let me sleep. I want to sleep.'

'I said get up!'

He takes my upper arms and hauls me to my feet. 'What in the hell happened to you?' His face is only inches from mine and the condensation from his breath folds into my own. 'Tell me.'

I shake my head and look at him through half-closed eyes. His expression is grim and frustrated. He pulls me against him once more and we stumble on.

Eventually we reach flatter, easier land. I make out a sweeping plain of dirty whites, criss-crossed here and there by wire and fence post. An angry, grey sky breathes down on the horizon and small white flecks spiral before my eyes. The cold has refuelled itself and a whispering blizzard has begun to engulf the oncoming night. My legs have lost whatever feeling they'd regained. As they buckle beneath me, his arms take the full weight of my body and he begins carrying me like a child, my head bumping against his shoulder.

As I pass in and out of consciousness, I'm aware of him murmuring, but his words are indistinguishable. I'm in his arms and through the final trudge of this terrible journey I can hear the breath tearing from his exhausted body. Then I'm not even aware of that.

When I wake there are voices, his voice and another, gruffer

one, which I can barely understand.

'Where's my dad?'

''Ee's in th'ouse.'

'Get him, can you?'

Hurried footsteps crunch on snow. My head is pressed into his shoulder. I can no longer move, cannot raise my head to see who these people are. I hear another voice: soft and enquiring.

'Where did you find her?'

'By the river.'

'We've got to get her inside. Art, call an ambulance.'

'S'no good, John. Nothin's gonna get through till Barnes gets the ploughs out.'

'Let's get her inside anyway.'

I feel several pairs of hands on me and suddenly I'm being carried along like a coffin in a procession. I start to faint again, the life seeping imperceptibly from my body and this time, because I'm sure I will die, I say it quietly. So quietly I'm sure nobody will hear.

'Nicola,' I say. 'My name is Nicola.'

The urgent cry of a cockerel occasionally filters through this stubborn wall of sleep. I'm aware from day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute – which timescale I'm not exactly sure – of small sounds, home sounds, farm sounds: the lowing of a cow; the sweeping of a brush on concrete; the roar of a tractor's engine. Sounds that tickle the edge of my consciousness, fall away, return, fall away. Sleep sucks at me, I'm a pushover for sleep. I welcome its warm embrace, its entwining arm.

I resist the temptation to open my eyes. I'm aware that I am alive, that my senses are intact, but when I open my eyes there will be questions, questions I do not want to answer.

Instead I let my fingers explore the cotton corners of a pillow, the fat ridge of a quilt. They stroke the smooth surface of crisp sheets then move to my own body, my skin under a foreign nightdress, my arms and legs still faintly plump. I squeeze and manipulate, in awe of the body I still possess. I stroke my hair, the long strands dry and broken under my finger tips. Only when I'm assured of my own being do I finally open my eyes.

I survey the room. It's white with a faded pink carpet and low beams which grip the eaves. It has a small latticed window, its frames bubbled with yellowing paint. Above me is a large crack in the ceiling. The wallpaper is discoloured, nicotine-brown curdled with white. There are pictures, each one is a version of the same bird, its feathers a rich reddish-brown plume – a bird of prey.

Turning my head to the wall, I think of another room, of a

telephone ringing unanswered, fingers working through letters and diaries. How long until the unpaid bills arrive, the creditors from the agency? Then I wonder who exactly will miss me. I have few friends, he saw to that. Oh yes, I have no doubt of that.

Footsteps approach my door, they are light and clipped.

He doesn't knock but walks straight in. Does he presume I am still asleep? Seeing my eyes are open he gives a start and smiles.

'Well, hello. I see you're back in the land of the living.'

This is not the man who rescued me. The one who enters my room now is older, frailer. With a shock I realise I'm disappointed. I have looked forward to this intrusion without knowing it. Somehow, during my unconsciousness, there has been a sustained vision of determined eyes, a strong arm dragging me, confused words ….

This man pauses at the door. His tired face is lean, the cheekbones and forehead high, his mouth thin. He wears gold-rimmed, crescent-shaped glasses which are positioned half way down his small, straight nose.

'That was a very doctorish thing to say,' I whisper huskily.

'Well, I am one, you know.'

His eyes betray his tired appearance. While the rest of him gives the look of weariness and defeat, those cool blue irises are intent. They are small, and surrounded by fine, ragged lines. He moves forward with light steps and leans over me. Fine silver hair slides over his narrow brow and I notice the scars which cruelly mark his face. There are three: one on his forehead, travelling from his left temple to his right eye, two more cut across his

cheek. They're deep. Healed, but deep.

He reaches out a hand and presses it against my forehead.

'You must be built of strong stuff. I thought you wouldn't pull through. Can you put this in your mouth?'

He places a thermometer under my tongue.

'We couldn't get you to the hospital, I'm afraid. There's chaos on the roads. We've had the worst blizzards for forty years.'

The voice is gentle, educated.

'So you are Nicola.'

'Umhmm.'

'You have been very sick. Where on earth did you appear from?'

I motion to the thermometer with my eyes. He smiles at me from under his glasses and looks at his watch.

'How's your appetite, could you eat something?'

I shake my head.

'Soup? Something liquid. You must eat, you know. You've not had a thing for days.'

He takes the thermometer from my mouth, reads it, and puts it on a table beside the bed.

'That looks better. You've had pneumonia. How long were you out there?'

I shrug. 'I don't know. A day, something like that ….'

'You wanted to kill yourself.'

'Yes.'

'Now why would a pretty young woman like you want to do that?'

I turn my head away from him, my eyes staring at the

yellowing wall. Why does he do this, calling me *pretty*? Can't he see it's too late to tell me my worth, can't he see I have no worth?

He looks at me with a concerned expression.

'Is there anyone we can contact for you? Family? You had no identification on you, no mobile phone or anything. Not even a bag. I checked with the police. They are going to come and speak to you when you're a bit better.'

I struggle to raise my head.

'Please try to be still, you'll get your strength back soon enough. The antibiotics are beating the infection now.'

He rises.

'Is there anyone?'

I shake my head.

'Please,' I say quietly. 'Please don't get the police. There's no need. There's no need,' I repeat. 'And I really don't want them involved.'

He looks at me a moment longer and shrugs. 'Whatever you say. You're not a child.'

'Thank you.'

'Don't thank me,' he says softly. 'Thank my son. He's the one who saved your life.'

The next morning, he arrives with a bowl of something steaming. I'm awake and waiting for him, my body propped up by the pillows, the dizziness past. He moves over to the window first and draws back the curtain. A thin light coats the walls.

'Snow's beginning to thaw at last.'

He smiles at me and I notice he's wearing the same clothes as

yesterday. Placing the soup carefully on the table he sits down on the bed, the V-necked, cotton jumper wrinkling around his thin waist. He says nothing, staring down at my face with concern. Then he feels my forehead.

'You look better.'

I nod. 'I feel it.'

'See if you can manage some of this.'

He lifts a spoonful of the soup and looks at me closely. He puts it in my mouth and I swallow the hot, beefy-tasting liquid.

As I eat, I notice how tired his face looks, the bruised and battered appearance of his skin. There are flecks of broken veins around his nose and mouth and the insides of his eyes are unhealthily pale. His bone structure, however, hints that he was probably once quite a distinguished-looking man. His features are aquiline, what people of his class would call well-bred, but partially hidden now by grey stubble and the unsightly scars.

In turn, he is appraising my face with the same level of attention, those cool eyes quietly absorbing my features.

Finally he puts down the soup and sighs.

'Well Nicola. It seems to me that you are on the mend. How do you feel?'

'All right, I guess.'

He places the thermometer in my mouth and rubs his chin thoughtfully. Growth crackles under his fingers.

'Your temperature is almost normal.'

'Where am I?'

'You're at Morton Farm.'

'Morton Farm?'

'The back of beyond.'

He smiles faintly.

'We're seven miles from Salisbury. You know Salisbury?'

I shake my head. 'I know of it. I've never been there. Who are you?'

'Morgan,' he says, still smiling. 'John Morgan.'

'You're a doctor?'

'That's correct. I told you yesterday, don't you remember?'

'Yes.'

'And who are you?'

I let my head fall to one side and yawn heavily.

'You don't want to tell me?'

'I'm Nicola.'

'Do you have a surname?'

'I had such terrible dreams.'

'You were delirious.'

'Wolves. Being chased … I couldn't stop running. So tired.'

I press my face into my hands.

'Please don't get the police,' I say quietly.

I can hear his breathing, slow and heavy as he sits beside me.

'Thank you,' I say. 'As soon as I'm better I'll find a way to repay you. I'll leave, there won't be a problem. I just don't want to involve you.'

I drop my hands and stare at him.

He stares back, and nods.

'But what about your family?'

'My family are dead. To me, anyway.'

'All of them? No aunts, uncles – nobody at all? Someone out

there must care about you.'

'No one that matters.'

'Where are you from? How did you end up by the river – on our land? I know you're not from Morton, I've been asking around. How did you get here?'

'I walked.'

'But from where?'

'From the road.'

'The Salisbury road?'

'I suppose that was it – it was a busy road.'

'You had a car?'

'Dr Morgan. Please ….'

'You don't want to talk. What if I arranged for you to see someone? Someone who can help? It's a tragic thing, someone of your age trying to do what you did. I don't want to see you get better just to walk out of the door to do it again.'

'I won't.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I changed my mind.'

He rises, picking up the bowl. I watch him go stiffly to the door. He reaches it and turns to look at me thoughtfully. Then he shakes himself, as if a draft has come from somewhere.

'I'd like to be sure of that before I see you go,' he says. 'But it's better you rest now. There's plenty of time.'

There's something strange about this man, this doctor who is being so kind to me. There's a sadness in his soul, I see it. I see that, like me, he has suffered and appears to be very much alone.

Where is the other one? There are no sounds of a young

person in the house; no music drifting from an unseen bedroom; no television blaring below. Why doesn't he visit me? After all, he half-killed himself trying to save me.

But only Morgan comes, regularly, morning and evening with various soups and stews. I feel myself gradually getting stronger until I can wobble around the room without help and get to the small toilet across the draughty, bare landing on my own.

Morgan doesn't attempt to glean further information from me. His manner stays the same despite the unforthcoming nature of this stranger who demands so much of his time. He remains gentle, courteous, but we talk little except to discuss small things like the state of the paintwork in my bedroom and the depressing weather, which doesn't let up.

'I've let things go rather,' he says to me one morning. 'This is a large house and I was never much good at DIY.'

He smiles at me constantly, and I at him, as people do when there's a strain between them.

I spend long hours at the window, wrapped in a woman's dressing gown, staring at a drab vegetable garden and a group of outhouses beyond. Apart from a rough driveway which winds itself away from the house to a gate in the distance, the farm seems mainly to consist of mud, metre upon metre of it, dispersed with the odd patch of green and the occasional, naked tree. Directly below me lies the vegetable garden. From here I can see the withered roots of untended, discarded plants which have obviously been left to rot, uncared for since the summer months.

I said that there was a reason for living, but that was on the

brink of unconsciousness. Now I find I'm still angry. I still want to hurt – as *he* has hurt me. But what am I doing here in this house, accepting such kindness from a stranger?

Several days have passed since I regained consciousness. Questions! If I could just get out of this room and get on with the dirty business of living again. I thought that his questions would be the difficult ones – but it's me who's driving myself mad.

Gradually I find I can move around for longer periods without needing to rest. I look at Morgan with new hope, demonstrating my recovery by getting up quickly to open the door whenever he knocks. I say nothing, but he must see it in my face.

One morning he arrives with an armful of clothes. 'I found these for you. There's some woolly tights here, and a couple of jumpers. They're warmer than the clothes you had on.'

He stands looking at the bundle, then straightens and gives me one of his melancholic smiles. 'Of course, if you want your own things ….'

'No, they'll be fine.'

'How are you feeling?'

'Better.'

'Ready to move about, see the rest of the house?'

I looked at him unsurely. 'Would that be all right?'

He nods and smiles. 'I don't see why not.' He passes me the clothes and I lay them on the bed. I pick out a pair of jeans and a black jumper.

'Whose are they?'

'They were my wife's. I was going to throw them away.'

'Where is she?'

'She died.'

He offers no further information, but his face grows harder, as if a pane of glass has fallen between us.

He sighs and turns toward the window. 'I'm writing a book at the moment, don't worry if I disappear for long periods of time.'

'Really? What about?'

'Oh, just medical things, you know.'

'Don't you have patient visits, that kind of thing?'

'Used to. Actually, I'm more or less retired now. It's just that once a doctor, always a doctor. You see my meaning?'

I smile. 'I want to thank your son for helping. If I could do more than that, I would.'

'Yes. I expect he'd like to see you too.'

But he says it without conviction and remains facing the window. His expression is strained, but I cannot tell if it is due to the memory of his wife or the mention of his absent son.

'Is he here?'

'David doesn't come to the house.'

'Have you got any other children?'

'No. Only David.'

'How old is he?'

'Twenty-three.' His tone grows more guarded.

I look at the pictures on the wall. 'Where does he live?'

'Here, on the farm ….' His words trail off.

'You don't want to talk about it?'

'It's rather complicated.'

I push a strand of hair behind my ear. 'In that case, perhaps

you can understand my predicament, Dr Morgan. I'm sorry I'm so …, but it's the same for me.'

Morgan's face regains its concentration.

'It's just that I would rather not tell you anything than tell you lies,' I add quietly.

He frowns, pushing his hands deep into his pockets, and stares at me. 'I see,' he murmurs. As he turns to leave the room I feel that I have offended him. But when he turns to speak his voice is gentle, without animosity. 'I'll be in the kitchen. Please let me know if you need anything.'

I confess that I feel a certain guilt in leaving this bedroom with its peeling walls and its tiny window. But padding downstairs in these unfamiliar clothes, in this unfamiliar house, I allow myself involuntarily to take in a deep gulp of air untainted by sickness, that tastes, instead, of life.

I find Morgan sitting in a wooden rocking chair. He has a copy of *The Times* on his knee.

'You need plants,' I say.

It's the biggest kitchen I've ever seen, and also the barest. It's square, with a floor made of solid-looking dark red brick and a large, polished oak table. A wooden dresser stands opposite, its varnished wood laden with plates and chipped mugs. There is a letter-rest overflowing with bills at one end and a pile of junk mail at the other. A latticed window sits above a metal sink, with a view of the farm.

Morgan folds the paper and smiles. 'We used to have them. They passed away. My scientific skills don't stretch to botany I'm

afraid. Help yourself to coffee.'

He watches me pad around the kitchen, occasionally pointing out where things are. Although he seems only half-interested, I know his awareness of me is more than casual.

I sit down and take a gulp of coffee. It brings on another coughing fit.

'You've still got a lot in your lungs. It'll take time to clear.'

I blow on the coffee. 'It's hot, that's all.'

There is the awkward silence of strangers between us. He places the paper gently on the table. 'Perhaps,' he says carefully, 'I should explain a little more about myself. I wasn't very forthcoming earlier, was I? I live here and David lives in … well, I would call it a shack. It's at the other end of the farm, in the woods. He seems to prefer a recluse's life.'

'Why doesn't he live here?'

He sighs. 'I think you should ask David that question. Things have not been very good between us for some time, for reasons that are best known to David and which I would prefer not to discuss. In fact, when he brought you to the house – well, I believe it's the first time he's spoken to me for nearly a year.'

He pauses in order for me to digest this. 'I come from Cambridge. Studied and practised medicine in London and met David's mother there. After a brief spell abroad we came here, ten years ago, so I could go into general practice. David's mother came from Salisbury. She wanted to return to the countryside.

'Two years ago I went into early retirement – for health reasons mainly. I still do some locum work here and there, but that's about all. I have a man here who looks after the running of

the farm. It's only a small place – you'll see when you're well enough to go outside. I sell some produce to the village and a lot of the land is leased. Life is fairly easy.'

'And David?'

'David,' he says, 'can explain himself.'

A silence descends. He takes off his glasses and rubs them absently on his jumper. 'I don't know who you are Nicola,' he says. 'And you don't seem to want to tell me anything. That's fine. But where will you go?'

A cockerel's crow rises from the farm.

I lift my head. 'I keep hearing that. You keep chickens?'

He nods. 'We supply eggs to the local shop.'

'What other animals?'

'Cows, pigs. We're not big. It's a hobby really.'

I draw a slow picture on the polished wood with my fingertips and do not look at him. He leans forward in his chair.

'You haven't answered my question.'

'Dr Morgan,' I say, 'I promise that I'll leave as soon as possible. In the next few days, if that's all right with you, when I'm a little stronger. As soon as I find a way, I'll send you a cheque to cover any expenses. I'm more than grateful for what you've done already.'

A knock on the door interrupts me. Morgan gets up rather tiredly and adjusts his glasses.

'That'll be Art – my farmhand.'

But it isn't. It's the other one. He comes in hesitantly, wearing the same green coat and mud-splashed jeans he had on that terrible day. At first he doesn't see me, probably because he

doesn't expect to. He and his father stand facing each other.

'Came to see how she's doing.'

The younger man's voice is strained. He looks awkward leaning there in the doorway, one hand in his jeans pocket, his eyes averted from his father's face. Morgan stands opposite him, his narrow shoulders tense, his chin high.

'She can tell you herself.'

I step forward.

David reddens behind his locks of brown hair. I instantly recall him, the dark eyes, the hard mouth.

'Hi.'

'All right. You better?' He shifts slightly as he speaks and pushes a hand through his thick, curly hair.

'Yes.' My voice falls. 'I'm sorry you found me like that.'

'It's good job I did. You were lucky. I came down to photograph an animal, a bird, it's for my painting – in the snow and everything. You know.'

'The bird in the pictures?'

'In my old bedroom – the attic room?'

I nod.

'You saw them?' His face brightens. 'Did you like them? She's mine. The bird I mean. I trained her. You'll have to come and see her.'

'I'd like to.'

'I don't think Nicola's well enough yet,' his father breaks in. 'She should stay indoors for a bit longer.'

'Well that's up to her, isn't it?'

The sound of his father's voice seems to shake David. His

expression changes and his tone flips to aggression. He looks at Morgan sharply and turns to leave. Halfway out he pauses.

'I'll see you before you go?'

'Yes,' I say. 'I'd like to see the bird.'

'Sure, come up anytime.'

Then he shuts the door and we listen in silence to the sound of his departing footsteps.