VINTAGE

CRIMINALS

MARGOT LIVESEY

Contents

About the Book

A decent, harried young banker travels north to Scotland and his mysteriously troubled sister. A single mother struggles to make a home for her family in a society she only vaguely comprehends. A baby girl is abandoned in a bus station and picked up by a stranger. A caller leaves threatening messages. Brilliantly structured and tense as a thriller, *Criminals* shows how the best intentions can have the worst results – and how families pull together, form themselves anew, and occasionally, tear apart.

About the Author

Margot Livesey was born in Perthshire and educated in Scotland and at the University of York. She is the author of a collection of stories, *Learning By Heart,* and the novels *Homework* and *The Missing World.* She divides her time between Cambridge, Massachusetts and London.

ALSO BY MARGOT LIVESEY

Learning by Heart
Homework
The Missing World

Criminals

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Chapter 1

AS THE BUS neared Loch Leven, Ewan studied the back of the seat in front of him, which more energetic travellers had used for self-expression. The sight of so many epithets, all that passion untidily scrawled in different pens, only deepened his exhaustion. He had worked late at the office the night before and taken the sleeper up from London to Edinburgh. Scotland greeted him with her dourest morning face. Princes Street, before the shops opened, had a gloomy, dishevelled air, and the castle squatted above the city like a toad. Now, through the bus window, the waters of the loch were a rumpled grey, the soft outlines of the Lomond Hills barely visible through the mist.

George loves Lindy forever. What kind of person, wondered Ewan, wrote such things to be read by strangers? *Sow your seed*, someone else had printed neatly. *Support the Greens.* On impulse Ewan took out a pen. If he wrote something, he would know how it felt. His hand hovered, but nothing came to mind. The long glittering snake of love slithered round the corner at the first sign of his approach. His political sentiments? That seemed easier, though how to choose amongst them? *Eat the rich,* by most standards, if not his, included him. *World peace? Give bankers a chance?*

This is what people don't like about me, Ewan thought. Even my spontaneity is calculated. His sister Mollie, for instance, whom he was on his way to see, could until recently have covered the back of this seat and several more with succinct advice. *Recycle for a better world. Say no to exams. Stop eating dead animals*.

For two pins Ewan would have put his pen away, but a faint cough drew his attention. Glancing across the aisle, he saw a young man – a boy, really – in a threadbare denim jacket, watching him. The cold curiosity on the boy's freckled face reminded Ewan he was wearing a suit, pin-striped no less. On his mettle now, he shook the pen a couple of times as if he had just been waiting for the flow of ink, leaned forward, and scrawled the least likely thing he could think of: *Remember the Krays*.

There, he thought, without looking over at the young man. He put the pen away and closed his eyes. He did not feel transformed, not remotely, into the energetic, passionate person he had imagined. Behind him in London, his desk overflowed with intricate financial transactions, and more sinister matters, which he could not bear to consider, threatened. Ahead in the Scottish countryside waited his neurotic sister. He opened his eyes. The words were still there; they might be his most lasting accomplishment of the year so far.

A quarter of an hour later the bus pulled into Perth station. On previous trips north, Mollie and Chae had come to meet him here, or sometimes in Edinburgh, where they could combine collecting him with a visit to Chae's children. But on the phone Mollie had sounded so frail that Ewan had announced he'd take the bus all the way to the local town. He even offered to take a taxi the final five miles to her house. This she brushed aside. 'Of course I'll fetch you,' she said, with a catch in her voice that made Ewan wish, for the first time in years, he had learned to drive. In London, and the other cities where he did business, taxis filled the streets yearning for the sight of his raised arm, but in rural Perthshire, his lack of skill became a noticeable handicap.

'Twenty minutes,' the driver called.

Ewan stood up with his briefcase. Reluctantly, he eyed his bag in the overhead rack. He let the other passengers go

ahead and went to ask the driver if it was safe to leave his luggage.

The driver paused in the midst of extricating his stout bulk from behind the wheel. ‘Safe as houses,’ he said with such conviction that to take the bag would’ve been an insult.

Ewan thanked him and stepped down onto the oily tarmac. A few yards away, the boy in the denim jacket was hawking and spitting. Ewan watched as he sauntered off, kicking an empty beer can along the gutter. He would have bet a hundred pounds the boy lived at home, another fifty that he was unemployed.

The station was no more than a single low building with a covered area down one side, where passengers could wait and be encouraged by a series of faded posters to take pleasure trips to the Trossachs, Oban, and Inverness. Ewan made his way to the cafeteria, thinking of coffee, but stopped short as soon as he opened the door and smelled the overwhelming odour of bacon. Coffee would be a disaster. The thing to order in these places was tea. No sugar, he had to say twice to the woman behind the counter to halt her automatic gesture.

He carried his cup to a round table, strewn with other cups, and perched there, trying to read a history of Mary, Queen of Scots that Mollie had given him for Christmas. Now, four months later, he had brought it along, hoping to seem tactful. I can’t do anything right, she had said on the phone, and he could suggest one small contradiction: look at the pleasure her gift was giving him. It was the autumn of 1542, and Mary’s mother, Mary of Guise, was preparing for her accouchement at Linlithgow Palace. Ewan read a page. At the bottom he realised he had understood nothing. He read it again, to no greater effect. He was so tired that the sentences melted before his eyes; he could not keep one in mind long enough to grasp the next. Even the tea, thick as treacle, did not help.

An excruciatingly thin man in a shabby raincoat shuffled by, sat down at the next table, and began to devour a plate of baked beans, fried eggs and toast. Forgetting Mary, Ewan stared at the man in surreptitious fascination. His Adam's apple heaved with every mouthful, and he clutched the knife and fork like weapons. There was something bizarre, Ewan thought, about this spectacle.

Suddenly he remembered the time. He stood up, downed the rest of his tea, and headed in search of the Gents. It was outside, halfway down the building, next to a poster of Loch Ness. He opened the door and once more was assailed by the smell of bacon, which here at least served to mask other, potentially less pleasant scents. Inside were one stall, its door a couple of inches ajar, and two urinals. Ewan had the place to himself. After using a urinal, he washed his hands at the surprisingly clean basin. There was no mirror, but on the cream-coloured wall someone had drawn a neat rectangle and printed MIRROR – 12 × 16.

He was leaving, rubbing his hands dry on the legs of his trousers, when he heard a small sound behind him. Mice, he thought. Or something worse? The sound came again, a soft whimpering that did not seem rodent-like. Cautiously Ewan pushed open the stall door. On the floor, wrapped in yellow plastic, was a doll. No, not a doll. A baby.

Unthinkingly Ewan did what he often did at moments of crisis: he loosened his tie. He squatted down beside the bundle. 'Goodness,' he muttered. The baby looked past him with round dark eyes and whimpered again. The tile floor, unlike the basin, was not clean; an empty crisps wrapper lay in one corner, and pieces of paper clung damply to the base of the toilet.

The baby's skin had a coppery sheen, and its hair was silky black. Slowly, awkwardly, because there was nothing else to do, Ewan picked it up. He stood in the doorway of the stall, holding the baby, dumbfounded. Then from outside

came the blaring of a horn, and he remembered his luggage in the rack above his seat. He bent down to grab his briefcase and stepped quickly through the door. A few yards away the grimy bus was already vibrating. A new driver, a prissy-faced woman, sat behind the wheel, writing in a notebook. When Ewan reached the top step she demanded his ticket without interrupting her task.

'I found this. My 1-1-1-1-'

The driver closed her notebook and looked up. At the sight of Ewan's suit and the yellow bundle, her face lost some of its primness. 'My, you've got your hands full. Just take a seat for now, sir.' She almost smiled. 'We're leaving.'

Another late passenger was waiting behind him. As he moved down the aisle, Ewan heard a male voice ask for a day return. His luggage was still there. Ewan stepped into the cramped space in front of the seat. He caught a flash of red, a jacket or pullover, as the man passed him and took a seat a couple of rows further back. In a series of jerks, the bus pulled out of the station.

Later Ewan could never quite recapture his thoughts at this crucial moment. He had intended, hadn't he, simply to retrieve his bag and make his way to the police station. But the door closed, the bus started moving, and, to avoid falling, he sat down with the baby in his lap. Exhaustion clung to him like cobwebs. The bus passed beneath the railway bridge and accelerated towards a green light. The freckled boy, the main witness to his previous solitude, was gone, and the other passengers from before, three teenage girls in the back, would have found a sack of potatoes more interesting than a middle-aged, besuited banker.

As for the baby, the baby was no help. It stared at Ewan, and Ewan stared back. He was much more familiar with millionaires than with infants. Although some of his friends had them, he glimpsed them only from afar, mysterious visitors; he could not remember when he had last held one. Now he studied this strange object. It was wrapped so

neatly, a tiny mummy, with just the head visible. ‘Who are you?’ said Ewan. ‘Where do you come from?’

The baby’s eyes widened slightly. Ewan experienced a flicker of recognition. Not an object, he thought – a small, silent human. Presently he unwrapped the yellow plastic, which turned out to be a poncho of the kind worn by cyclists and hikers. Beneath was a clean blue blanket. There was no note, nothing saying *My name is David* or *I am Nell. Take good care of me*.

Vexed, perhaps, by the loss of its outer covering, the baby sent up a piercing wail. The sound, no worse than a dog barking or the teenagers in the back seat with their radio, made Ewan instantly desperate. If they had still been in Perth, he would have begged the driver to let him off and dialled 999 at the first phone he came to. But already they were passing by fields, ploughed on one side, grass on the other. The occasional cows and sheep promised no succour; they had their own knock-kneed offspring to deal with. He patted the blue blanket, uselessly. ‘Be quiet,’ he whispered. And then, ‘Shut up.’

He had, he realised, nothing to offer by way of refreshment. What if the baby was hungry? But its plump cheeks did not speak of starvation so much as passionate aggravation. Finally Ewan raised it to his shoulder. He had seen people do this, men and women, in shops and parks, raise their babies and pat their backs. In his attempt to imitate them, he found that the baby’s head fitted under his chin, snug as a violin. The wails continued for a few seconds and abruptly, in the middle of an especially loud outcry, ceased.

The bus slammed over a series of potholes, then entered a wood of beech trees. The new leaves, bright green even on this dull day, cast an aqueous light. Ewan felt his own breathing slow. The baby’s head, crooked against his neck, was astonishingly warm, as if its entire life were happening just beneath the skin. He stared again at the graffiti on the

seat in front. Children, he now noticed, were conspicuously absent. If his hands were empty, he would write something different. *Free childcare?*

Somehow that thought led him to his sister. He managed to reach into his briefcase, where he'd been carrying her letter since it arrived earlier in the week. She had written in pencil, on a page torn raggedly from a notebook. No date, no address.

Dear Ewan,

Black birds follow me. They wait for me in the treetops and swoop down when I leave the house. I'm afraid of their beaks. They hate my eyes. When I drive, they dive-bomb the car. I can't see where I'm going.

Or maybe they're bats.

Inside are voices. They ooze from the table and the tap. They say bitch cunt Penelope whore stupid mole-eyes snot yellow tongue. They know.

And at night poisonous gas fills the house. I'm afraid to lie down, afraid to breathe. Maybe there is something buried under the stone floors. I never used to think of bones but now the house is full of them . . .

Rereading the jagged sentences, Ewan thought the only consolation was that Mollie had dealt successfully with all the business of posting a letter. The envelope was addressed clearly, a first-class stamp affixed. 'I got your note,' he had said when he phoned to announce his arrival. 'My *cri de coeur*,' she said with an embarrassed laugh, and thanked him.

He slipped the letter back into his briefcase and, like his small companion, closed his eyes. For a few minutes Mollie's dark words fluttered round his brain, then they gathered into a flock and flew away into a dreamless sleep.

He woke as the bus pulled into the narrow streets of the town. Something warm lay against his chest. Looking down, he discovered the baby still sleeping in his arms. Good God, he thought, what have I done? But in the confusion of getting off, there was no need to answer. By the time he'd lifted his bag down from the rack and packed the yellow poncho, the other passengers had departed. With his bag,

briefcase, and the baby, Ewan manoeuvred down the aisle and off the bus. Behind him, the driver, who seemed to have forgotten all about his ticket, called goodbye.

In the street, a second, smaller shock awaited him. Rain had begun while he slept and was bucketing down – ricocheting off the pavement, sinking into his suit and hair, his bag, and the baby's blanket. Through his beaded glasses, Ewan searched the town square. Most of it was given over to parking, with a bronze war memorial in one quadrant. There was no sign of Mollie. He spotted several of his fellow passengers sheltering beneath the sizeable canopy of the old Odeon. The teenage girls were examining one another's earrings, and the man who'd followed him onto the bus, wearing what Ewan now saw was a red jacket, was smoking a cigarette. Ewan made his way over and stood on the top step, facing the street.

Cars passed, a baker's van, and one intrepid, black-clad cyclist, whose undulating progress Ewan followed attentively. Just as he began to worry that something had happened to Mollie, that she had been unable to drive after all, he heard a horn hooting. Across the road, from the open window of a blue car, an arm was waving. Once more Ewan gathered his belongings and hurried down the steps. Somehow he managed to get himself and everything else into the car and close the door.

'Sorry I'm late,' Mollie said, leaning over to kiss his cheek. 'Christ, what's that?'

'I should have thought it was obvious.' As so often in childhood, her emotion calmed him. 'A baby.'

'But whose is it? Where did *you* get a baby?'

In a few sentences Ewan explained about the Gents, the bus leaving, his luggage. 'I didn't know what to do,' he said. 'Maybe I should have left it there?' But the notion that he could have emerged from the Gents empty-handed was by now inconceivable. What if the freckle-faced boy had found

the baby? Or the thin man in the cafeteria? Horrid newspaper visions flitted through his mind.

Mollie did not answer his question. Momentarily he forgot he was meant to be taking care of her and instead waited nervously for her to scold, then rescue, him. Surely he'd overlooked some practical thing that would be readily apparent to her, like the time he failed to put a filter in her and Chae's coffee machine. But Mollie was regarding him with an odd expression, one he did not know how to interpret. Her face was pale, and her hair, shorter than he had ever seen it, had an uneven, bitten quality. In their school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* she had played Puck, and still, at thirty-five, she looked as if she ought to be flying through the trees, admonishing lovers and fairies alike.

'Is it a boy or a girl?'

'Not sure.' And then, as Mollie reached towards the baby, 'Careful, it's asleep.'

'Well.' She drew back. 'You're certainly full of surprises, Ewan.'

In the long pause, they all three simply breathed. Rain throbbed on the roof of the car and hazed the windscreen. The situation was urgent, Ewan reminded himself, but his nervousness had ebbed. He was experiencing an almost drowsy contentment, similar to what he often felt after swimming, when the chlorine of the pool took on narcotic properties. Mollie was cracking her knuckles, a dark, sinewy sound he recognised as the puzzling noise he had sometimes heard in the background during their last month of phone calls. The gesture signalled anxious thought but only reinforced his own lack of anxiety. She was his older sister; soon, he was certain, she would tell him what to do. They would deliver the baby to the proper authorities, go back to Mollie's house and solve all her problems too. A lorry roared by, leaving the car rocking slightly in its wake.

‘I think,’ said Mollie, ‘I think for now we should take it home. The police here won’t have a clue how to deal with a baby. It’s not even police plural, just Mr Stevenson, using his parlour as an office. No, we’ll have to drive back to Perth, and I’m not up to that in all this rain. Besides, I left soup on the stove.’

Her voice was unexpectedly high, as if she hadn’t spoken much recently, but what she said made sense. The baby was asleep, Ewan thought, and he was hungry. They would go home and eat; he would take a bath and change. Then they could return to Perth in a civilised fashion. An hour or two would make no difference. Mollie had described driving as difficult but not impossible, and that in itself seemed a good sign. The black birds were staying in the treetops. They could even have dinner in Perth, or see a film. After all, he was meant to be cheering her up. ‘Good idea,’ he said heartily, rousing himself. ‘I’m starving.’

‘I’ll need to get one or two things.’ Before Ewan could ask what, she had opened her door and was running through the rain towards the row of shops.

He sat back and watched the pedestrians. Most, like Mollie, hurried to avoid getting wet, but near the war memorial two women dressed in anoraks, skirts and Wellington boots were engaged in a lengthy conversation, seemingly oblivious to the rain. Only the white cairn belonging to the taller one kept tugging at his lead in an attempt to find shelter.

Presently Mollie returned with a large shopping bag. She put it in the boot, then came round to open Ewan’s door. ‘You have to sit in the back,’ she said. ‘It’s safer.’

The back seat was untidy and covered with long fawn hairs: Sadie’s domain. Ewan hunched over grumpily, the baby cradled on his knee, and waited for the five miles to pass. In the sodden fields were sheep, cattle, birds. He remembered Mollie whizzing down this road at sixty, laughing off his pleas for caution. ‘How would you know?’

she’d said. ‘You don’t even drive.’ Now she drove with irritating sedateness, signalling, changing gears at precisely the right moment.

At last they turned into the side road, along the track, and between the two stone gateposts. Mill of Fortune was a nineteenth-century farmhouse, a dignified version of the kind of house that children draw – a door and four windows, with a sloping slate roof and tall chimney stacks at either end. It boasted a duck pond, an apple orchard and several outbuildings. Halfway up the drive, Mollie suddenly braked. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘The ducks.’ Over her shoulder Ewan glimpsed four brown ducks waddling towards the pond. During their early years in the house, Mollie and Chae had endlessly quoted Dylan Thomas and revelled in their wonderful crops of lettuces and raspberries. More recently, on the phone, Mollie had invited Ewan to Mill of Misfortune.

They pulled up at the back of the house. In the rain, the grey stone had darkened almost to charcoal, and the windows gave back nothing but the gloomy sky. The whole effect, to Ewan’s eyes, was quintessentially Scottish. There was no effort, as on the part of English houses, to be welcoming; this was old-fashioned, uncompromising shelter. He sat waiting in the car while Mollie opened the back door, and noticed she’d left it unlocked. In London he had recently installed a burglar alarm and new window locks, and still he never came home without wondering if he’d been robbed. Finally, the baby in his arms, he climbed out of the car. Sadie, the Shetland collie, rushed to greet him and was intercepted by Mollie. Then they were all inside. Sadie nuzzled Ewan happily as he stood in the middle of the kitchen, looking round for changes.

They were everywhere. For years the large flagged kitchen had been his favourite room, the place he pictured whenever he needed an image of domestic happiness. He loved the deep windows, the whitewashed walls, the fabulous clutter. Every nook had held something strange

and exotic: a tiny skull, a bird's egg, an antler, a plaster saint. Mollie used one corner for her loom, and hanks of coloured wool hung along the wall, an extended rainbow. Above the big window had dangled four mobiles made of heather roots, feathers, sticks – one each for Mollie, Chae, Daniel and Rebecca. This morning the walls were empty save for two prints. The mobiles were gone. The skulls and stones. The loom, despite the work stretched on it, looked as if it hadn't been used for some time. Everything was too orderly. Only the blue budgerigar, Plato, uttered a familiar tweet from his cage to the left of the stove. Mollie was clearing the table, and it took barely a minute to remove the newspaper, the salt and pepper. Gone were the candles, incense, pots of herbs, table toys.

Ewan laid the baby down, and Mollie unwrapped the blanket. Beneath was a stretchy blue sleeper. 'From Mothercare,' she remarked. 'Quite good quality.'

The baby was a girl, about four months old, Mollie judged. At once Ewan saw her features leap into the feminine. A girl, he thought with pleasure, as if that made his picking the baby up off the lavatory floor a far greater accomplishment. He smiled, and briefly she forgot her interest in her own feet and smiled back. 'Look,' he said.

'Oh,' Mollie murmured, setting aside the tin of formula she had been examining. Together they stood smiling down at their small visitor, and she beamed, broadly, at both of them.

Mollie changed her nappy and prepared a bottle. Ewan, his own hunger temporarily forgotten, watched the baby feed. Whatever her recent adventures, this skill remained intact. She sucked with such ferocity that several times her face darkened and she had to break off, reluctantly, to cough. Then, the bottle almost empty, she fell asleep.

Mollie wedged her in the armchair near the stove, and she and Ewan sat down at the table to have their own lunch. Over lentil soup, bread, cheese and fruit, they made a plan.

Rather than drive thirty rainy miles, they would phone the police to ask if a baby had been reported missing and find out what they should do.

Though it was Mollie who suggested the phone, the idea instantly appealed to Ewan. He did most of his business through machines and believed in the virtues of electronic communication. He had a vision of the three of them traipsing from one draughty office to the next, filling out innumerable forms like refugees. Yes, he thought, phoning was best. And it would be easier to explain what had happened. For now, as he reached for the Brie, he suddenly understood an explanation would be required. The messenger was never entirely innocent. Mollie got up to make coffee, and the next thing he knew, he had nodded off over his empty soup bowl. She shook his shoulder and sent him to take a nap. ‘You’re in Daniel’s room,’ she said. ‘We’ll go to Perth when you get up.’

He climbed the crooked stairs, marvelling as he had before at the horrendous creaking. No wonder they didn’t need a burglar alarm. When he opened the door of Daniel’s room, he found it, like the kitchen, amazingly altered: every trace of the boy was gone. Ewan’s visits to Mill of Fortune had seldom coincided with those of Chae’s children, but such was the impenetrable state of their rooms that he had always slept in the parlour. Mollie had told him Chae regarded chaos as a sign of affection; his son and daughter wanted to leave their mark on his household. Now what remained was almost a parody of a guest room – the bed neatly made, with the counterpane smooth as an ice rink, the bedside light, the box of Kleenex, the radio, the stack of predictable books: Dick Francis, Georgette Heyer, something about Provence. Ewan brushed his teeth, got into bed, and was overwhelmed by the absence of noise. He missed the thunder of lorries, the chugging of taxis, the steady rumble of buses that formed his usual lullaby in London. He lay back between the stiff sheets listening hard, but all he heard

was a faint quacking from the pond. A pause. And more, louder quacking.

He woke in panic, both feet already on the floor. Late for a meeting? Only when he caught sight of his suit draped over the chair did he remember where he was. He slumped on the edge of the bed, trying to follow the thread of alarm back into his dreams. Something to do with the office? Or Mollie? He saw yellow and blue. The baby. Before his apprehension could even take shape, he was rushing downstairs.

He burst into the kitchen, and the collie leapt upon him, her paws pressing against his thighs. She let out a volley of excited barks.

‘Down, Sadie,’ Mollie snapped, half rising from the chair near the stove, where she was sitting with the baby on her lap. ‘Ewan, are you all right?’

He stopped, sleepy and abashed, not knowing how to explain. He came over and knelt beside the two of them. The baby’s eyes were fluttering open and closed. ‘What,’ he asked, ‘did the police say?’

Mollie shook her head. ‘Once you’d gone upstairs, I realised it was pointless to phone. Nobody lost this little girl. They abandoned her.’ As she spoke, Ewan saw her arms tighten around the baby. ‘Abandoned’ was the word she had used, over and over, on the phone to describe Chae’s behaviour towards her. Usually it heralded a storm of tears.

‘So what should we do?’ he said carefully. He tried to think of anyone he knew who had been in a similar situation, and drew a profound blank. People found gloves and wallets, not babies.

‘It’s getting late,’ said Mollie.

‘Late?’ He turned from her to the clock above the sink. To his astonishment, it was four-thirty; he would have sworn he had slept no more than half an hour, an hour at most, yet nearly three hours had vanished in befuddled dreams.

Outside the window, the overcast sky was already growing dark.

‘I think we should wait until tomorrow,’ Mollie continued. ‘Wait until everyone’s back in their offices. No reason to rush to throw her into the maw of social services. We might as well try to find the best place for her.’ She slid one pale finger into the baby’s tiny, grasping hand. ‘Don’t you think?’

Of course, Ewan said later, thinking was exactly what neither of us was doing. We were bandits scenting money, moles tunnelling towards light.

Chapter 2

THAT HE AGREED was the main thing: tomorrow was soon enough to deliver the baby to the authorities. Before Ewan could change his mind, Mollie sent him off to take a bath. Alone in the kitchen, she stood up, still holding the baby, and walked over to draw the curtains, heavy swaths of grey velvet that had come with the house when she and Chae moved in ten years ago and even then had been so old that the fabric was pleated into light and shadow. Looking out across the orchard, she could just distinguish the Youngs' garage, several hundred yards away; soon the leaves would entirely hide them from each other. During the last month, Mollie had come to dread this isolation. But now, as she pulled the curtains one-handed, she considered how lucky she was not to have to deal with curious neighbours.

For anyone to bring her a baby would have been amazing, but for her pedantic brother to do so was astounding. She had summoned him only because there was no one else. Bridget, their older sister, was hopelessly far away, in another country, where at this very moment she was probably enjoying a salad for lunch and saying 'Gee'. Occasionally, when she couldn't sleep, Mollie had dialled Bridget's number and been defeated by the insouciant chirp of her answering machine. She was even starting to sound American. In comparison, Ewan's greeting – 'Hello, Ewan Munro' – was oddly reassuring. A couple of weeks ago she had rung late at night, and he, still half asleep, had answered the phone with that very phrase. 'God, Ewan,' she'd said. 'Who did you think was going to be phoning at one in the morning?'

‘People in the States sometimes forget,’ he replied. ‘Are you okay?’

‘No,’ Mollie had said, and begun to weep.

She sat down again by the stove, and the baby squirmed and pouted. ‘Hush,’ Mollie said, ‘you’re safe.’ She wanted to add ‘with me’, but did not yet dare. Her joy must be kept secret a little longer. Instead she described how Mill of Fortune belonged to a family called Craig who had seven sons, each of whom hated farming worse than the last, rather like a fairy story. She remembered her friend Lorraine telling her that children learned to speak because people talked to them, and that the irritating habit of baby talk had a biological imperative in so far as babies were visibly more responsive to high-pitched sounds. As soon as the sons grew up, Mollie went on, one by one they ran away to Glasgow and broke their father’s heart, leaving the house in need of tenants. ‘And that’s us,’ she concluded, tapping first herself, then the baby, on the chest. The baby made a startled noise, as if she might not be quite ready for the responsibilities of paying rent.

From overhead came the tread of footsteps. Ewan. Oh dear, Mollie thought, if only he could be transported instantly back to London. Then she shook herself. His visit was a mere two days, a scant forty-eight hours; she could navigate that.

He came in, bringing with him the soapy aura of the bath. She knew, just from the way he opened and closed the door, that his earlier perturbation had passed. ‘Sorry to be such a sloth,’ he said. ‘What can I do to help?’

‘Play with her while I cook?’ Without waiting for an answer, she stood up, handed him the baby, and headed for the sink. As she filled a saucepan, she heard a squawk and a muttered ‘Bother’. She stole a glance in their direction. Ewan was clutching the baby to his chest, eyeing her dubiously.

‘Do I need to hold her?’ he complained. ‘It makes everything so complicated.’

‘You can put her down if you want, but she’ll probably cry.’ Mollie carried the pan to the stove and went to get the pheasant from the fridge. She was sure his efforts to discard the baby would be useless. After only a few hours in her company, Mollie believed absolutely in the baby’s powers to be her own Circe, to transform Ewan not into a swine but into a less rigorous version of himself. Hadn’t she already changed the house Mollie had grown to hate back into a home?

Mollie was cooking pheasant with roast potatoes, leeks, mushrooms and rowan jelly. Following Ewan’s phone call on Monday, she’d pulled out her cookbooks and sat at the table reading recipes for beef Wellington, Chateaubriand, oysters Rockefeller – delicacies she had never eaten, let alone prepared. She observed her own behaviour with bewilderment. Ewan wasn’t difficult about food, even though he ate in restaurants all the time. But after six weeks of making nothing more complicated than a cheese sandwich or a bowl of cereal, the activity of cooking for others, once as natural as breathing, seemed part of a language she had forgotten. In the end she bought whatever looked good in the shops. The butcher urged the pheasant upon her. For years she and Chae had boycotted his shop, crossing the road to avoid the display of game dangling in the window; now Mr Rae, his bald head shining, greeted her as if she’d been buying stewing steak once a week all along. He hefted the frozen bird in one hand and passed on the wisdom of his wife. ‘More versatile than hare, she always says.’

As she moved between the stove and the table, Mollie studied her brother. He had changed into what she knew he regarded as casual clothes: grey slacks, a grey pullover and a white shirt with one button cautiously undone at the neck. He had dressed like this even at university. Involuntarily she