



# THE NIGHTINGALE SINGS

CHARLOTTE BINGHAM

TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

## **About the Book**

When Cassie Rosse becomes the first woman to train an English Derby winner, with her home-bred horse The Nightingale, she knows that she shares this success with her dead love, Tyrone. For it was to his Irish family home of Claremore that he brought Cassie as a young bride, and it is from Claremore that Cassie has at last stormed home to win a place in the history books.

But life will never be simple for Cassie, a woman who stands alone in what is essentially a man's world. Unable to escape from the long shadows cast by the early death of her husband, yet torn between two extraordinary but very different men, Cassie's integrity and her indomitable will to win trigger a set of circumstances which quickly turn a brilliant triumph into a nightmare. Suddenly it seems that nothing can reverse the downward spiral of events surrounding her famous horse and its future and Cassie is forced to battle hard to keep Claremore, and with it her past with Tyrone and everything that makes her life worthwhile.

CHARLOTTE  
BINGHAM

— *The* —  
NIGHTINGALE  
SINGS

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TO THE LOVING MEMORY OF JANE DUFOSEE

She never made headlines. She made cakes and picnics, groomed horses, and bandaged knees, and when she was laid to rest the little country church was filled to overflowing with her friends. It is to her memory, and those women like her, that this book is dedicated on behalf of the author and her beloved partner, Terence Brady.

*Hardway House, 1996*



Cover the things that move you,  
They glide by.  
Cover the things that give you joy,  
They are nigh.

## ***Prologue***

*When Cassie first was at Claremore, perhaps to drown the sighing of the winter winds and the rains slapping at the ill-fitting old windows, as well as no doubt to turn her mind away from the flaking paintwork and the patches of damp on the walls, Tyrone would sit his young bride on the floor in front of a log fire in the huge but sparsely furnished drawing room and recount some of the old Irish legends, assuming as he did so the sing-song kind of voice used by the traditional itinerant story-tellers who had still been regularly spinning their yarns in the corners of snugs all around Ireland when Tyrone himself was but a gossoon. One of these tales was the famous Legend of Ossian.*

*'Many is the valley in Ireland that would claim the legend of Ossian for its own, in spite of the fact that this is a tale with a most unhappy ending,' Tyrone would relate. 'For the story goes that after some great period of time Ossian, who had long ago departed for the Land of the Ever Young with his wife Niamh, conceived the desire to see his greatest friend Fionn once more and so, impatient for his friend's company after so many years, set off to meet him. It must have been a fine morning for he sang as he rode, all the while greatly looking forward to the time ahead, and, as may well be imagined, once in the saddle and with the warmth of the sun on his back it was hardly surprising that he soon put from his mind the warnings of his loving wife that he was never in any circumstance to set his foot on Fionn's alien soil, for to do so would surely bring an end to all their joy.*

*'Now it would seem that all was well until Ossian came across a group of men struggling to move a rock. Being possessed of a good and loving nature our hero at once*



*stooped down from his horse to help them and in so doing the band on his saddle broke causing him to fall to the ground, whereupon all the years he had spent with Niamh in the Land of the Ever Young caught up with him and at once he became a wretched and feeble old man.'*

*Each time she had heard the story Cassie had thought it too sad, but Tyrone would have none of it. 'Not at all,' he would assure her. 'The legend of Ossian is a most interesting story. It is a moral story and one for all time, the point being not that Ossian left Niamh and the Land of the Ever Young to see his friend Fionn, but what caused Ossian to forget his wife's warnings that he thought himself able to lean out of his saddle and in doing so risk everything. It would have to be nothing more nor less than that old serpent guilt that caused his downfall. For Ossian, do you not see, was convinced that he could help others and stay in the saddle. After all no-one asked him to stop and help them, did they? Not one. Devil the man. No, I would say undoubtedly that his folly was due to the guilt of his great happiness with Niamh that led him to make his fatal error. So when I am gone before you, which being somewhat older than you one day I most probably will be, remember that like Ossian the greatest force of our own destruction is the guilt that lies within us.'*

*So the time passed and when Tyrone was tragically gathered to his ancestors much sooner than he had expected, Cassie was left to ride alone through the Valley of Life. Unsurprisingly then that long after her beloved Tyrone had been taken from her she forgot his words of warning, just as Ossian had forgotten the warnings of his own beloved Niamh when he too had begun to feel the warmth of the sun once more on his back. Not that Cassie would ever forget her husband's great love, nor his dashing looks or enchanting ways - all Cassie forgot was the moral of the famous legend. Like Ossian in so doing she also*

*leaned too far out of her saddle and at that moment it seemed that she too would be destined to fall to the ground with her happiness lost and gone for ever.*

## ***The Arc***

LONGCHAMPS

Paris, France.

October.

For one terrible heartstopping moment he thought he had got it wrong. The gap that he had been waiting for had opened and then just as suddenly closed leaving him with absolutely no way through. He could of course pull out and go round, that he knew well enough, and because his fellow was so very fast and quick-footed he knew it would still leave him in with a whisper, particularly since he had not yet asked his fellow the question and he could feel there was plenty of fuel left in the tank. But what had been five hundred metres a second ago was now a fast diminishing three hundred so, if he did choose to switch to the outside, by the time he extricated himself the leaders would be all but home.

So he waited. And he prayed.

Three strides later and the one right in front of him tired and suddenly rolled away from the rails, leaving the opening for which he had been petitioning the gods, not much of a gap to be sure, barely enough in fact to let them through, but it was now their only choice, now it was do or die. As long as the one in front rolled a little further away from the rails the gap would be big enough, but even when the gap was big enough it would have to keep rolling and start to run in a straight line, otherwise, should it begin to roll back onto his fellow, instead of an untroubled passage through there would be a barging match. If that was the case, then even if Dex did prevail he knew he'd lose the race at the inevitable enquiry.

You did not come up on the inside to make your run unless there was the room.

The rules were perfectly clear.

*The rider of any horse who has been guilty of reckless, careless or improper riding shall be guilty of an offence. And when a horse or its rider causes interference or commits such an offence it may either be placed behind the horse or horses with which it has interfered, or be placed last of all.*

*Or even disqualified altogether.*

But that was the chance Dexter had to take, because by now the leaders had passed the distance marker and all he had left were not minutes but seconds. But then as he saw the gap widen and hold rather than close back on him and shut him in, all at once he knew that those few precious seconds had just turned into all the time in the world. It would now simply take what it always took, just one shake of the reins, and the day would be won. One easy, confident go-on-go-get-'em shake, that was all. So with a none too secret smile Dex shook the reins just once, then sat down into his horse and pumped on for the post.

In response to his shout of unbridled joy as the big black horse accelerated away under him, once more The Nightingale flew home.

As the field turned into the home straight Cassie's heart sank as she lost sight of her horse completely, swallowed up in a sea of horses. More even than at Ascot she knew how vital it was if a horse was to have a winning chance for it to be in the first half dozen turning into the straight, particularly since the jockeys had gone no great gallop for the first mile, as this was so often the way the richest race in Europe was run. Instead of being a true test of stamina and speed the contest often became simply a sudden and full-blooded sprint to the line once the field swept round that final bend. For any horse boxed in tightly on the rails

or forced to fight its way out of the pack to switch to the outside in order to make its run the race was as good as lost, since by the time it saw daylight the leaders would already be going hell for leather for home.

Yet that is exactly how it was on this glorious sun-drenched October afternoon at Longchamps. The odds-on favourite to win Europe's richest race seemed lost in the *mêlée* and as the horse all but disappeared from the sight of the vast crowd a sigh of dismay arose from the whole British and Irish contingent as it seemed their hero was about to lose his unbeaten record. On the other hand the home crowd began to roar with delight as they saw Esplanade, their own dual Two Thousand Guineas and Derby winner and the clear second favourite in the betting, shooting into what appeared to be a two- to three-length lead at the two furlong pole.

While The Nightingale still seemed inextricably buried somewhere in the *mêlée* behind the leader.

Passing the distance marker the course commentator was calling Esplanade home, his rider having poached what had to be an unassailable lead on the rest of the field. But then with less than two hundred yards of the great race left to run, as the beaten animals began to fall back off the pace, all at once Cassie caught sight of her horse once more and could hardly believe her eyes. Dexter Bryant had him in third place against the rails beside an obviously beaten horse and was sitting as still as a church mouse. The big black horse was simply cruising. In fact so easily was The Nightingale going that even though the horse was still three lengths down on Esplanade, Dexter Bryant had the time to take a quick look around him to see if there was any danger other than the two remaining horses in front.

Then with one shake of the reins the race was over. Despite the last ditch efforts of its jockey Dexter could see the horse which was lying second on his outside was no threat because it was treading water so all he had to catch

and beat was the leader. With hindsight Esplanade's jockey was to say never for a moment could he have imagined that he was to be caught so near to home, particularly since his own horse showed absolutely no signs of stopping. So well was Esplanade still going that in any other year the horse would have prevailed, but although at the post mortem the jockey was to swear he sensed nothing coming at him the crowd did. They saw the danger as out of the pursuing pack The Nightingale burst as if from a giant catapult. The tumultuous cheering of the crowd turned in a moment into one massive, anguished gasp as the handsome black Irish colt hit top gear and swallowed up Esplanade. It took just a few strides and the French horse's three-length lead had gone. In fact so fast was The Nightingale flying that there was never even a moment when the two horses were racing neck and neck. The Nightingale simply strode by Esplanade to go first half a length up then a whole length, racing by the French horse so quickly in fact that by the time Dexter eased him up passing the winning post the margin of victory was nearly two lengths.

The moment the big Irish colt flew past the post Dexter stood up in his irons to stroke the horse's massive neck and tweak one of his big floppy ears. While he did so, the roars of the entire crowd swelled in volume as every racegoer present realized what they had witnessed. So mighty was their appreciation that they kept up their cheers until Dexter, having pulled The Nightingale up at the top of the straight, brought him back in front of the packed stands in the company of the course photographers before steering the famous horse through crowds of delirious well-wishers and admirers into the comparative safety of the unsaddling enclosure to be greeted by his owner, breeder and trainer, Cassie Rosse.

As Dexter hopped down from the back of what everyone present knew must surely now be one of the greatest horses ever seen on a racecourse, he was kissed by

Cassie's delighted daughter Josephine and hugged around the shoulders by her son Mattie. As to trainer and jockey, however, they just smiled at each other. Both of them had journeyed hard and far to reach this point in their lives and now they were here there was really nothing to be said. Instead they turned their attentions to the big black horse who had just won the richest race in Europe with such contemptuous ease.

Cassie reached up to tug at one of her beloved colt's ears and to stroke his fine neck.

As she did so someone came up behind her and murmured a warning in her ear.

'Mind you don't go getting too successful now.'

Cassie turned round to see to whom the voice belonged, but there was no-one there, and all at once it seemed to her the autumn air suddenly blew cold.

## ***One***

Ireland.

24 December.

For ever afterwards Cassie would remain convinced that Leonora had worn her old white and blue trimmed Chanel suit in order to remind Cassie that the past would never go away, and that in that past she too had loved Tyrone, for it was the very suit she had worn when the newly married Cassie had first brought Tyrone to Leonora's house at Derry Na Loch, the day when Leonora herself had fallen in love with Cassie's now long-dead husband.

That was not all she would remember the day for, because as a newly appointed Oriental butler had opened the doors of Derry Na Loch Cassie knew at once her visit was a mistake. Before she even stepped into the marbled hallway she could hear Tyrone's voice scolding her in the mock tired tone he employed when he most wanted to get her attention.

*How many times have I told you, Mrs Rosse? Isn't it always when we say yes and we mean no that we most learn to regret it?*

*You're right as always, Ty,* Cassie thought, staring around her at the over-ornately furnished drawing room, full of carefully chosen and expensive artefacts, those curious mementoes which the rich seem to love accumulating. She looked too at the collection of new and somewhat overbright paintings that now hung on the silk-papered walls, and at the vast, expensively upholstered sofas on one of which sat four tiny white papillon dogs. Everything was immaculate and luxurious yet from the room Cassie felt nothing but coldness.



*Isn't it always when we say yes and we mean no that we most learn to regret it?*

The thought kept running round and round in her head while she felt herself wishing she might simply turn on her heels and bolt, just the way she had often felt as a child when finding herself at some party she had been dreading. Why she had said yes to Leonora's invitation which she had fully intended to refuse was now beyond her. Initially she had resisted Leonora's pleadings that they must meet up again and bury the hatchet because for once, oddly enough, Cassie found she was right out of clemency. Leonora had tried to steal her husband, and when she had failed in that she had tried to pretend to Cassie not only that she had been innocent of any such manoeuvre but also that Tyrone was the father of their adopted son Mattie by the same young woman who had put the child up for adoption. Finally she had tried to sabotage The Nightingale's chances of winning the Epsom Derby in favour of her own horse, a *coup* which, had it proved successful, because of the side bet agreed between Cassie and herself would have given her possession of the entire property of Claremore. Little wonder therefore that since her horse's famous victory on Epsom Downs until now Cassie had never revisited Derry Na Loch nor once met its owner again, yet here she was not only standing in her bitterest enemy's drawing room but being kept idly waiting as was Leonora's perennial wont.

Finally, after a full ten minutes had elapsed, the door opened and Mrs Charles C. Lovett Andrew, *née* Leonora Von Wagner, sauntered in.

'Darlin',' she drawled, affecting an Irish brogue which failed entirely to mask her own Newport accent. 'Do for God's sake sit down somewhere. You look as if you were back at the Academy waiting to see Miss Truefitt.' She laughed and herself sat down in a huge, deeply upholstered armchair. Her toy dogs as one immediately got down from

their own sofa and tried to jump up on her knee, but their mistress was not having it. 'Get down, will you?' she commanded, brushing the little butterfly dogs away from her. 'You shouldn't even damn' well be in here.' Then she smiled at Cassie without a flicker of warmth in her eyes before slowly looking her up and down as if about to interview her.

'Cassie McGann,' she said, adjusting her long blond hair, which she wore swept back from her face. 'You know I still actually can't believe it. Little Cassie McGann we all used to tease so unmercifully at the Academy, who we all voted the Girl Most Unlikely to Succeed - and just look at you. Europe's top woman horse trainer. The first woman ever to train the winner of the English Derby, and then the Irish Derby, and now the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe. You know something, darlin'? If I were still drinking, I sure as hell would drink to you, Cassie McGann.'

Cassie eyed Leonora disbelievingly, too long used to her boasts of having given up drinking. 'What exactly did you want to see me about, Leonora?' she asked. 'You said it was urgent.'

'Oh, for goodness' sake sit down first, will you?' Leonora replied, unwrapping a piece of Nicotel chewing gum. 'I can't talk to you when you're standing up, and if you're wondering about this ghastly new habit of chewing gum, I've managed to kick the old cancer sticks as well.'

'Next thing you'll be telling me is that you've been born again.'

Leonora looked back at her with an almost imperceptible tightening of her eyes. 'You'd be surprised, Cassie McGann,' she said. 'Anything is possible once you set your mind to it.' She smiled coldly once again, before drinking most of the glass of sparkling mineral water her butler had set beside her. 'So.'

'So?' Cassie echoed, finally sitting down opposite Leonora on a straight-backed chair she swung round for

herself from in front of a fine William and Mary escritoire rather than in one of the deep armchairs. 'I would much rather you came to the point, Leonora. I really don't have very much time.'

'No, of course you don't. How awfully selfish of me,' Leonora sighed. 'A woman as famously successful as you. So OK - let's cut right to the chase, shall we? What I want to know, Cassie McGann, is what's next on the agenda for our famous owner and her even more famous horse.'

'You could have asked me that on the phone.'

'You're always too busy to talk on the phone, Cassie McGann.'

'Rosse,' Cassie reminded her.

'Rosse, of course.' Leonora smiled at her. 'It's just that now with Tyrone gone—'

'Tyrone died a long time ago, Leonora,' Cassie replied evenly. 'A very long time ago.'

'Oh, my God, yes. I suppose it really *is* a long time.' Leonora suddenly looked as stricken as if she had only just learned of the tragic news, but Cassie knew better than to remark on it. Leonora had always been singularly adroit at getting fish to rise to her bait.

'Don't look at me like that, Cassie.' Leonora frowned as if Cassie was staring at her which Cassie was not. 'I know what you're thinking. I know you're thinking I have no right to feel as I do about Tyrone—'

'Tyrone was my husband.'

*Don't, Cassie, don't,* Tyrone's voice called to her. *You're always doing this with Leonora. You're like a snake responding to the charmer's pipe. Leave her be. Didn't I tell you anyway never to come here again?*

'You're absolutely right, Cassie darling,' Leonora was continuing. 'I should imagine you'd like to box my ears but really I can't help it. Not now I'm sober and in my right mind again. You know how I felt about Tyrone, and now that he's gone - I mean, where's the harm?'

‘To his memory,’ Cassie said very quietly. ‘I don’t want his memory spoiled.’

She knew it was absurd but the thought of having to share Tyrone’s memory with Leonora was more upsetting than she could say. Such was her antipathy to her old acquaintance she did not even like to hear Leonora say his name. So, taking a deep breath, she decided to leave the subject and return to discussing the matter of why she had been summoned so urgently to Derry Na Loch.

‘There’s no use asking where I next intend to go with The Nightingale, Leonora,’ she said. ‘I make it a rule never to discuss my racing plans with anyone outside Claremore.’

‘You make it your *rule*, do you?’ Leonora wondered mockingly. ‘My. How very imperious.’

‘That’s the way it is,’ Cassie said in her best take it or leave it manner.

‘Pity,’ Leonora sighed. ‘I’m so very interested in just *everything* you do. Particularly how *well* you’re doing. I mean you must be simply coining it now. Little penniless Cassie McGann must be worth a not so small fortune. Not just from your winnings, but from the stallion fees that horse of yours is going to command.’

‘You didn’t ask me here to discuss the health of my bank balance, surely?’

‘Well, yes I did, in a manner of speaking. And what am I thinking? You don’t have a drink. Just because I’m off the sauce doesn’t mean you have to die of thirst as well, darlin’.’ Leonora pressed a bell button concealed under the table beside her and smiled her brittle little smile again at Cassie. ‘Champagne? I imagine that’s your tippie nowadays. One of the many things that’s good about being rich, I always say. Being able to drink champagne when and where you feel like it. Most of all when you don’t even feel like it.’

While she waited for her butler to reappear Leonora opened a fresh stick of Nicotel gum and, popping it into her

brightly painted mouth, crossed one elegant leg and started to swing one beautifully shod foot up and down, watching it for a while with great interest as if she had never observed the movement before. Then she slowly returned her gaze to Cassie who had decided that as far as this conversation went the mountain could come to Muhammad.

‘Talking of drink and such related topics,’ Leonora continued, ‘you do understand, don’t you? As I said in my letters, it was drink and the drugs of course that made me act the way I did. Over Tyrone, and then over the Derby. Sober and in my right mind, as you well know, I would never have behaved that way because it is just not me. We’ve known each other long enough for you to know that what happened between us was not typical of my real character, right?’ Cassie said nothing. As far as she was concerned what Leonora had done was totally in keeping with her character. ‘Seriously, Cassie,’ Leonora continued, ‘the way I behaved over Tyrone was mostly to do with what I was taking, not with what I was feeling. I know perfectly well that it was you he truly loved, not me. And I can live with that. Really I can.’

Leonora paused significantly in the way people do who are intent on making it seem that by confessing that they have reformed their ways they are somehow performing a great favour to the whole of humanity. Cassie tried once more to contain her exasperation. The last thing she needed to be told was something she knew better than anyone, namely that her husband had loved her and nobody else, and the very last person she needed to be told that fact by was Leonora.

‘I wonder, Leonora, will you get to the point?’ she asked, as Leonora’s Oriental butler arrived silently by her side to offer her a crystal flute of champagne from a small silver tray.

‘This is for Mama’s benefit, Cassie, not mine,’ Leonora said, holding up her glass for the butler to fill from a jug of

fresh peach juice.

'Why in heaven's name would your mother want you to see me?' Cassie asked, remembering how she disliked the mother nearly as much as she did the daughter. 'We haven't had any dealings with each other since she summarily removed her string of horses from Tyrone and frankly I have never had any wish to do so.'

'That's all so long ago, isn't it high time we let bygones be bygones, darling?' Leonora sipped her drink and eyed Cassie over the top of the glass. '*Que sera sera*, as the old song has it?'

'I imagine you mean what's done is done,' Cassie replied, 'rather than what will be will be, and if that's so, then I have to beg to differ, Leonora. In this instance I can't see why in hell I should forgive and forget. Your mother damned near ruined us.'

'She was just doing what mothers do, darling. She was protecting her own. You're a mother. Surely you understand?'

'She was not protecting her own, Leonora. She was protecting her own interests.'

'Because she'd had a fling with your husband.'

'Tyrone was not my husband when that happened, Leonora. It was well before I came into Tyrone's life.'

Leonora just smiled. She smiled the way she always used to do in order to give the impression that what had been said was in fact a lie.

'I think I can guess what your mother wants,' Cassie continued. 'She wants in on The Nightingale.'

Leonora moved her gum to the other side of her mouth and regarded Cassie with steely blue eyes. 'You're obviously going to syndicate this horse of yours, right?'

'What makes you think I haven't already?'

'I'd have heard, that's what, Cassie McGann.'

'Rosse.'

‘Sure. OK – you’ve got it. Mama would like a bit of the action. Why not? She can afford it. And her money’s no different from anyone else’s.’

‘That’s a matter of opinion,’ Cassie replied, beginning to enjoy herself as she realized how much this was costing Leonora in loss of face. Obviously Mrs Von Wagner had been applying endless pressure to make Leonora make the appeal on her behalf, as she would never have dared approach Cassie directly herself. ‘Let’s get this absolutely right. Your mother would like to be part of a syndicate on The Nightingale—’

‘I think you mean *the* syndicate, darling,’ Leonora interrupted.

‘No I don’t actually, Leonora. I haven’t yet formed any syndicate so it’s perfectly correct to refer to it in the abstract. So if I may just start again, if you don’t mind – your mother would like to be part of a syndicate on my horse and besides that no doubt you’re thinking and maybe hoping, I guess, that you too would like to be part of the action and maybe send a couple of your mares to him. Am I warm?’

For the first time since Cassie’s arrival Leonora showed signs of the impatience she was feeling, clicking her tongue sharply in response to Cassie’s summation and then dispensing of her no longer wanted chewing gum, which she deposited back in its wrapper before throwing it in a waste basket.

‘So what would it matter if I did?’ she said, her Newport manners suddenly snapping. ‘Where in hell is the harm in two friends wanting to do business together? You have to consider the interests of racing here, let me tell you. Mama and I between us have several high-class mares as you well know, and it won’t do your financial future much harm, will it, if The Nightingale starts producing quality two-year-olds? You’re surely not going to let the past stand in the way of the future. Even you couldn’t be—’

‘Yes?’ Cassie enquired as Leonora stopped herself. ‘Stubborn? Stupid? Obdurate? Take your choice, Leonora. I can be all three, if I so wish.’

If Cassie had been feeling less impatient she might have smiled as an agitated Leonora drained what was left of her peach juice in one gulp, just the way she used to empty a glass of vodka when she was drinking. She then sprang to her feet and, scooping one of her lap dogs up from where all four still sat on the sofa, walked over to the French windows to stare out at her manicured gardens.

She must be in terrible debt to her mother to have to humiliate herself like this, Cassie thought, which again would be par for Leonora’s course. For the truth was that it would not matter a jot how much money Leonora married for – she would always need more. There had probably never been a moment in Leonora’s married life when she had not been in debt to her mother, and since in the eyes of the Von Wagners money could buy anything, even forgiveness, much against her will Leonora had obviously been forced to engineer this meeting.

But for a long time Cassie had ignored her entreaties, and, as she now realized in the awkward silence that followed Leonora’s move to the windows, she had only finally agreed to make the visit out of sheer curiosity. In much the same way as motorists cannot help but stare at the outcome of a road accident however hard they may try not to, Cassie had been drawn to come and have a look at Leonora, expecting to find her old adversary much the worse for wear due to her constant abuse of alcohol and drugs. For a moment, when she first saw the new slim and suntanned Leonora, Cassie had almost been pleasantly surprised until she remembered that, despite whatever programme of detoxification Leonora might have undergone, underneath she would still be the old Leonora. When they were teenagers at Miss Truefitt’s famous Academy back home in the States Leonora Von Wagner had



been a spoiled and dangerous brat. The difference between then and now was that now Leonora was simply an older spoilt and dangerous brat, and that was all.

‘If all you want to know is whether when the time comes I will consider any of your and your mother’s mares, Leonora, then of course I shall be perfectly happy to do so, once I have all their details and your applications in front of me,’ Cassie said. ‘But as for the question of any syndicate —’

‘Maybe you won’t have to go as far as full syndication,’ Leonora interrupted. ‘Not when you hear what Mama has to offer. She’s prepared to invest five million pounds for a one-third share.’

Leonora looked so impressed by the information she was imparting that she poured herself another peach juice without ringing for the butler.

‘I’m not in the slightest bit interested,’ Cassie said.

‘It’s a mighty generous offer,’ Leonora continued as if she hadn’t heard Cassie’s reply. ‘Your horse is probably worth at top ten million and even that’s pushing it, so an offer of five for only a third share – well. You’d have to be crazy to refuse. It would sure as hell secure your future—’

‘I said – I’m not interested, Leonora.’

‘*And* the future of Claremore. There must be all manner of things you’re still dying to do there to keep the old place state of the art – and an investment like this—’

‘Even if my life depended on it, I wouldn’t take a penny of your or your mother’s money, and you can tell *Mama* that from me – OK? And if your new sober self likes to imagine that while there’s life there’s hope – I am sorry to tell you there isn’t. Not where you and I are concerned, Leonora, and most of all not where The Nightingale is concerned, because I am not going to syndicate him. The Nightingale stays where he belongs, in the family. Not only that but he’s not retiring to the paddocks. Not yet.’ Cassie paused to

make sure that she had Leonora's full attention. 'Fact is I'm keeping Nightie on in training as a four-year-old.'

'You're *what*?' Now it was the old Leonora who was looking at her, just the way she had used to look when they were in school and Cassie would come into the classroom to find Leonora sitting at Miss Truefitt's desk surrounded by her cronies, waiting for the target of her taunts to come into her sights. 'You can't be serious.'

'I'm entirely serious, Leonora,' Cassie replied. 'It's what the racegoers deserve. When will they ever get the chance again to see a horse like The Nightingale in action? Possibly never.'

'You're mad, Cassie McGann,' Leonora said, laughing without humour. 'What on earth would you want to do that for?'

'For a very good reason, because Tyrone would have wanted it, Leonora. Why - I really can't believe that you knew him so little that you wouldn't know that?'

'You know that everyone is going to think you're mad, don't you?' Mattie said, pouring them all out some more champagne and looking across at his mother with his usual mixture of affection and condescension. 'On the bloodstock side that is. No-one in their right mind keeps a dual Derby winner on in training as a four-year-old.'

'Vincent O'Brien did so with Roberto and with Ballymoss,' Cassie returned. 'You're surely not faulting the great Dr O'Brien's judgement?'

'Yes, but that was way back when, Ma,' Mattie sighed. 'Roberto was over twenty years ago. And Ballymoss - Ballymoss was some time back in the blasted Dark Ages.'

'1958 to be precise,' Cassie told him.

'That is half a *century* ago. Anyway, neither of those horses won the Triple Crown.'

'The Triple Crown *and* the Prix de l'Arc de Triomphe,' Josephine chipped in. 'And certainly not in the same year.'

‘Oh, thanks, Jo.’ Cassie turned and smiled at her Titian-haired daughter. ‘So you think I’m nuts as well, right?’

‘We’re thinking of Nightie. We just don’t want anything happening to him, that’s all.’

‘You think I do?’ Cassie raised her eyebrows in deliberate exaggeration. ‘You don’t think I’ve thought this thing right through? Anyway, it’s Christmas Eve for heaven’s sake. Don’t let’s involve ourselves with this now, OK? Let’s leave it on the back burner until after the festivities.’

Mattie eased himself into a large chintz-covered armchair opposite Cassie and stretched out his long legs. ‘It’s nothing heavy,’ he said with a reassuring smile. ‘It’s just that Nightie’s a very big star, you know—’

‘He’s more than a star, Matthew Rosse,’ Josephine cut in. ‘Everyone says he’s the horse of the century.’

‘Fine, Jo,’ Mattie continued. ‘So do you have any idea what his stud value is?’

‘Of course I do. I remember you and Jack Madigan discussing it on the flight back from Longchamps.’

‘Right. So you know we’re talking big money. You’ll know that Nightie’s probably going to command a stallion fee of £100,000 a throw.’

‘Now just hold everything, you two. I mean it,’ Cassie cut in. ‘Nightie doesn’t belong to a set of rules because he happens to be the exception and not the case. I bred him, I train him and I own him. He’s not owned by a syndicate that wants to realize its profit nor is he ever likely to be, so if I want to keep him on in training as a four-year-old that’s my business. I don’t have to consider anyone else’s feelings in the matter. Only those of the racing public, and you can bet your last dollar they would just love to see him back again next year.’

‘Yes all right, fine, we take your point,’ Mattie said, giving his sister a good long look which Cassie picked up as she knew she was intended to do.

‘Very well,’ she sighed, putting down her champagne glass. Really the last thing she had wanted to do at this moment was get involved in a debate about her horse’s future. Christmas Eve was always a special time at Claremore, and already Erin her housekeeper had set about fulfilling their Christmas traditions, piling the fires high with logs and the kitchen table with food before propping open the double front doors, hoping as she did each Christmas that this would be the year Claremore would be the house to which the Holy Family would choose to come. It was an ancient Celtic tradition that Cassie adored and hoped would never be broken as long as the house of Claremore stood, so this did not seem to be the moment to be discussing family business. Yet she knew that if she left the argument unresolved there was a danger it would hang over them for the rest of the evening, which was why she decided it would doubtless be best to put the matter to bed once and for all before they sat down to enjoy their traditional Christmas Eve dinner.

‘Your future in the horse is quite secure, Mattie, as is yours, Josephine, so there is no need for you to worry,’ she said, taking up their unanswered questions. ‘As a racehorse Nightie is going to keep right on belonging to me and to me alone. I don’t think you can argue with that, either of you, because you know the reason why. The day Nightie was born I dedicated him to your father and what we’ve achieved together since then – well. You don’t need telling. You both understand it fine.’ Cassie paused and looked at the portrait of Tyrone above the fireplace painted as she had commissioned it after his death, mounted on his favourite hack Old Flurry. She loved the painting, but on grey days or black days when she looked up at it all she could see was that most terrible of all moments, just as if it had happened that morning, the moment she turned to see Tyrone lying dead in the grass with one temple of his handsome head kicked in.

‘Hel-lo?’ Josephine called, prompting her back to reality. ‘Anybody home?’

‘Where was I?’ Cassie said, taking a sip of her wine to give herself a moment more to collect herself and her thoughts.

‘You were talking about our future security,’ Mattie said, taking out his spinhaler and squirting a shot of Prednisone down his throat. ‘That there was no cause for us to worry. But then neither Jo nor myself said there was.’

‘There isn’t,’ Cassie replied, trying to ignore his asthma but unable to quell her usual feelings of anxiety as she watched him inhale. ‘When Nightie retires to stud here at the end of next year I shall keep a half interest in him and I intend to divide the other half interest in equal shares between you two.’

‘What about Padraig?’ Josephine asked. ‘Isn’t he to get any shares?’

‘I’ve thought long and hard about Padraig, Josephine,’ Cassie replied. ‘As you know, adopting Padraig wasn’t the same thing at all as adopting Mattie. Your father and I adopted Mattie because after I lost my second child I couldn’t have any more children—’

‘Yes I know, Mums,’ Josephine interrupted. ‘And you adopted Erin’s baby in order to give him a good name. Which was great of you, absolutely. But even so, because he is technically a Rosse—’

‘Exactly,’ Cassie agreed. ‘Padraig is only technically a Rosse. When poor Erin found herself pregnant by Father Patrick the agreement we made was that I would adopt the child and Erin would bring it up as her own and no-one in the village would be any the wiser, seeing the way she helped bring you two up. Which is exactly how it turned out. Everyone thought Padraig was a straightforward adoption just as you were, Mattie.’

‘But won’t Erin still think Padraig has some sort of claim?’ Josephine wondered. ‘Not that it matters because it

doesn't. I'm just curious, that's all.'

'That's not how Erin thinks, Josephine,' Cassie replied. 'She wouldn't and doesn't expect anything like that for Padraig. Even so, I've made sure he won't go empty-handed. He'll get a decent present when he reaches his majority.'

'Seriously,' Mattie said after a moment of silence, staring at his beautiful and still dark-haired mother in her much loved pale pink Dior suit, silk shirt and two strands of pearls at her neck. 'I really wasn't thinking about us when I was talking about Nightie.'

'I know that, Mattie,' Cassie replied. 'If you were that sort of person I wouldn't make such a settlement on you. Same goes for Jo.'

'You don't have to do this,' Josephine said. 'Anyway - are you sure it's for the best? I mean taking into account what Mattie said about Nightie's value at stud - that is a serious amount of money.' Josephine suddenly stopped and sighed impatiently, turning around to the door behind her, which had blown open. 'Oh, God, will you just feel the draught whistling in from the Hall?' she asked. 'I do wish someone would get Erin out of this crazy habit of leaving all the doors open every Christmas Eve.'

'Jo darling,' Cassie replied, getting up to close the door. 'I do know a bit about what a lot of money can do and does to an awful lot of people. Which is why when the time does come to capitalize on the horse the money will be put into trusts for you both and will be professionally managed. So that you can't blow it all just like that - or, even more important, so that someone else can't get their hands on it. Anyway—' Cassie put up her hands to prevent further discussion. 'Anyway, that day is still some way off. But I just wanted you to know that was the arrangement. So that you didn't think I was being *entirely* selfish.' Cassie smiled at both her children and put down her empty champagne glass. 'Heavens, will you look at the time?' she said. 'Erin