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The Dilemma

Written by Penny Vincenzi

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The Dilemma

Penny Vincenzi



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The Main Characters

THE CHANNING HOUSEHOLD AND FAMILY

Isambard (Bard) Channing, *property developer*

Francesca Channing, *his third wife*

Jack and Kitty, *their children*

Nanny Crossman, *nanny to all Bard's children*

Horton, *the Channings' butler/driver*

Sandie Jerome, *their housekeeper in London*

Mrs Dawkins, *their housekeeper at their country house, Stylings*

Liam Channing, *son of Bard's first marriage, his wife Naomi
and son Jasper*

Barnby, Kirsten and Victoria (Tory) Channing, *children of
Bard's second marriage*

Pattie Channing, *their mother*

Jess Channing, *Bard's mother*

THE CHANNING COMPANY

Douglas (Duggie) Booth, *Brad's senior partner, and his wife
Teresa*

Pete Barbour, *finance director*

Marcia Grainger, *Bard's secretary*

Sam Illingworth, *press officer*

Oliver Clarke, *an assistant to Pete Barbour, son of Bard's
deceased partner Nigel Clarke*

OTHERS

Rachel Duncan-Brown, *Francesca's mother*

Mary, *A Downs syndrome protégée of Rachel's at the Help
House, Devon*

Reverend Mother, *head of the Help House*

Colonel Philbeach, *a neighbour of the Help House*
Heather and Melinda Clarke, *Oliver's mother and sister*
Graydon Townsend, *a financial journalist, and his girlfriend*
Briony

Chapter 1

Journalists writing about the Isambard Channings (and indeed Francesca Channing herself in semi-serious conversation) liked to say that Bard had proposed to her on television. This was not strictly true of course, but it made a nice story; what had actually happened was that she had been sitting in her pyjamas watching breakfast television and nursing a streaming cold one dark morning early in 1982, and there he had been sitting on a sofa with Anne Diamond, his brilliant dark eyes fixed intently on her (in the way Francesca was to come to know so well), talking about the rather high-profile deal he had just made, buying a small chain of cinemas via which he planned, as he put it, to get into movies ('Do you think Kevin Costner has a chance against me?'), and Anne Diamond had said in her artfully artless way 'And are you thinking of getting married again, Mr Channing?' and he had said no he wasn't, because he hadn't found the right person, but he wanted her to know he was always looking for the right person and if anyone watching might care to apply for the job, he would be delighted to hear from them. 'And that includes you, of course,' he said to Anne, who looked at him from under her eyelashes and said she would certainly consider it, but she was very busy at the moment, and Francesca had promptly switched off the television and sat down and written a letter to Mr Isambard Channing, c/o TVAM, Camden Lock, and said she would like to submit her application for the position he had outlined on the television that morning and was enclosing a CV (Name Francesca Duncan-Brown, Age 21, Marital status single, Educ. Heathfield and St James's Secretarial College, Current employer Gilmour, Hanks Gilmour,

Advertising Agency, Personal Assistant to the Creative Director).

She did not receive a reply and forgot all about it.

A year later she was sitting in Reception at the agency (the receptionist having been struck down with what she called a stomach bug and what everyone else knew was the result of mixing vodka and coke – in the powdered rather than the liquid version, as Francesca's boss, Mark Smithies, rather neatly expressed it), when one of the smoked-glass doors was pushed rather impatiently open and Bard Channing walked in. She was later to discover that he did everything impatiently, that the normal pace of life frustrated him; her first encounter with the quality made her edgy, almost anxious, as if she must be in some way falling short of his requirements.

He had an extraordinarily powerful presence; looking up at him, smiling her careful receptionist smile, Francesca felt as if she had received a mild slug in the stomach. He was quite short, probably no more than five foot eight or nine, heavily built, with a bullet-shaped head, the dark hair cut quite short. He was, she thought, almost ugly, and thought in the same moment that he was obviously hugely photogenic because on the television, flirting with Anne Diamond, he had looked quite good. Then he smiled and she realised that was the difference; the heavy features lightened, even in some strange way the big hawklike nose, and the dark, heavily lidded eyes became brilliant and alive.

'I've an appointment with Mike Gilmour,' he said. 'Channing is the name, Isambard Channing.'

His voice was lighter than she remembered, with an accent she couldn't quite place: almost London but almost something else as well, something softer, something slow and flat. Later she was to discover it was Suffolk, a legacy from three years as an evacuee in the war.

'Yes of course,' she said, and then, unable to resist it, added, 'I did recognise you. Please take a seat over there and I'll call Mr Gilmour.'

He did not respond to her remark, to her friendliness, simply moved over to one of the leather sofas, pulling out a sheaf of papers and ignoring the copies of *Country Life* that GHG kept in Reception to imply that their clients were country gentlemen rather than the City wideboys that most of them actually were. Francesca felt mildly relieved that he had never answered the letter, never mind interviewed her about the position.

He had come to see Mike Gilmour about possibly placing some of his business with the agency; the initial meeting went well. Two days later he was back.

Francesca was still in Reception. ‘Good morning, Mr Channing,’ she said, ‘I’ll call Mr Gilmour.’

‘Thank you,’ he said, and then, without moving, added, ‘You seem much too bright to be doing that job. Why aren’t you with all those other smart girls upstairs?’

Francesca felt an illogical sense of loyalty to the humble calling of receptionist.

‘It’s important,’ she said, only just polite, ‘this job. Giving a first impression of the agency. I like it.’

‘Quite right,’ he said unexpectedly. ‘Quite right. If you’re ever looking for a change of job, you can come and work for me.’

‘That’s very good of you,’ said Francesca, feeling herself patronised and hugely irritated by him, ‘but I did actually apply to you for a job once and you didn’t even answer my letter.’

‘Oh really?’ said Bard Channing, and his voice was instantly alert. ‘I’m extremely sorry. If you’d like to tell me when that was and the post you applied for, I shall take it up with Personnel. I don’t like that kind of inefficiency.’

‘It was a year ago,’ said Francesca, ‘and the post was that of your wife.’

‘Oh,’ he said and the eyes softened, sparkled into humour. ‘Oh, that one. I got quite a lot of letters. I’m afraid it was rather a rash offer. I ignored them. It seemed the safest thing to do. I should have asked for photographs, then I would have known at least to interview you.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought personal appearance would be a prime requirement for your prospective wife,’ said Francesca tartly. ‘I’m disappointed in you, Mr Channing.’

‘And what prime requirement would you think I’d be looking for?’

‘Resilience,’ said Francesca (God, this is going to get me fired).

‘Possibly. Yes. Anything else?’

The brilliant eyes were fixed on her now, hardly smiling; oh well, she thought recklessly, it can’t get any worse.

‘A brain. Obviously. A good one. Possibly not too good.’

‘Oh really? Why would you think that?’

‘I – think you’d both find it rather trying. If she was cleverer than you.’

He glared at her, then suddenly laughed. ‘Quite right,’ he said. ‘Absolutely spot on. Anyway, better get Gilmour at the double. I’m running late as it is.’

Francesca felt slightly sick when he had finally gone up in the lift, half expecting a summons from Mike Gilmour or at the very least Personnel. But nothing happened; she was just beginning to look forward to telling everyone else about it at lunch, when Bard Channing walked through Reception with Gilmour. He winked at her as he passed the desk, said goodbye to Gilmour and disappeared through the swing doors opening onto Brook Street. Francesca smiled sweetly at Gilmour, who nodded at her briefly and went back into the lift; she was in the middle of a complicated call from a photographic studio who had sent over the wrong prints and needed them back urgently when she looked up and saw Bard Channing standing in front of her desk. Some deeply perverse instinct made her finish the call before responding to him; then: ‘Yes, Mr Channing?’

‘I enjoyed our conversation this morning,’ he said. ‘I’d rather like to continue with it. How would the Connaught suit you? This evening, six o’clock. In the American Bar.’

Francesca was so shocked she knocked a pile of envelopes off the desk. Shit, she thought, now he'll think he's made me nervous. Which he hadn't. Of course he hadn't.

'Well – yes – that would be – thank you,' she said, hating herself for her lack of cool, and then determinedly redeeming herself and the situation. 'Six is a little early. Could it be half past?'

'No,' he said, 'I have another meeting at seven. Six or nothing.'

'Six then,' said Francesca, 'thank you.'

And so it was that, having won the first, she lost the second round to Bard Channing.

'So tell me about yourself, Miss – what is your name?' he said to her, smiling over the champagne cocktail he had ordered for her. ('They make the best in the world here, and I mean the world.') 'How absurd that I don't even know your name.'

'Duncan-Brown. Francesca Duncan-Brown.'

'Miss Duncan-Brown. What a very upmarket name. Are you an upmarket girl altogether?'

'I don't know quite what you mean,' said Francesca coolly.

'Of course you do. I mean are you posh? Did you grow up in a big house and have a pony and go to an expensive boarding school? I, as no doubt you can see, am not posh at all, and I have a great fascination with the subject.'

'Yes, yes and yes,' said Francesca, laughing.

'How very nice for you. And do you have a boyfriend?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Is he posh also?'

'Quite, I suppose. I've never really thought about it.'

'I don't suppose you have. What's his name?'

'Patrick. Patrick Forster. And he works for Christie's. In the research department.'

'And did you know him when you applied for the job with me?'

'No I didn't,' said Francesca.

‘I’m pleased to hear it. I don’t like two timing. Not in a wife, future or otherwise.’

‘Are you really looking for a wife?’ said Francesca.

‘I am. Are you really interested?’

‘No, of course not!’

‘Why of course? Could be interesting. Lots of perks.’

‘Well – for a start—’

‘Don’t say it. I’m much too old for you. Quite right. I’m forty-three and you must be at least twenty years younger than that. Am I right?’

‘Close. I’m twenty-two.’

‘Greater obstacles have been overcome. Of which there are two very considerable ones, I have to say.’

‘And what are they?’

‘My daughters, for a start,’ he said and there was genuine sadness now on his face, real pain in his voice. ‘They’re very young, Kirsten is eleven and Victoria only seven, and they have been very damaged, I fear, by an extremely unpleasant divorce. Kirsten in particular is intensely hostile to me, their mother is fast becoming an alcoholic, and the girls have to live with that on a daily basis. I hate it, but I don’t know what I can do.’

‘No,’ said Francesca, ‘no, I can see that.’

‘How extraordinary I should be telling you this,’ he said suddenly. ‘When I’ve hardly met you, hardly know your name. You invite confidences, Miss Duncan-Brown.’

‘Thank you,’ said Francesca, unable to think of anything more interesting to say.

‘Now then,’ he said, his voice suddenly and deliberately lighter again, ‘perhaps you’d like to tell me what you would do, if you found yourself hired for this position we were discussing earlier. How would you deal with my daughters? My difficult daughters?’

‘Oh – I don’t really know,’ said Francesca. ‘Try to leave them be, I should think, not pressure them, not try to take them over. They’d be bound to hate me. For a long time.’

‘They would indeed. More than one putative Mrs Channing

has withdrawn her application in the face of that hatred. The quality of resilience you put top of your list was certainly absolutely correct. What an extremely wise head you have on your very young shoulders.'

'Well,' said Francesca, 'it's easy to be wise in theory. Isn't it?'

'More wisdom. Yes, it is.' He looked at her thoughtfully. 'How do you like that silly job of yours? I still don't think it's worthy of you.'

'I don't really work in Reception,' said Francesca, smiling, relieved to be on slightly safer ground, 'but I wasn't going to tell you that.'

'Why not?' he said, waving impatiently at the waiter, ordering two more cocktails.

'Because it really annoyed me. You making assumptions.'

'I'm afraid', he said, 'I make rather a lot of assumptions. It goes with my style of doing things. So what do you do, then?'

She told him.

'And you like that?'

'Yes, I do. One day I want my own agency.'

'Very ambitious. Why don't you start right away?'

'Well, because I don't know enough,' she said, laughing, 'and also there's the little matter of money. You need capital, to get going. We don't have any, me and my mother.'

'Or your father?'

'My father's dead,' she said briefly. 'He killed himself. Eight years ago. After losing an awful lot of money.'

He stared at her. 'He wasn't Dick Duncan-Brown, was he?'

'Yes, he was.'

'Good Lord. I knew him. Or rather I met him. A long time ago. I actually went to him for a loan. He turned me down.'

'Really?' she said. 'I must tell my mother. It would amuse her.'

'Why?'

'Because he knew so many people. And always backed the wrong ones.'

There was a silence. Then: 'Is there just you? Or do you have brothers and sisters?'

'Just me. My mother said I was so nice she didn't want to risk spoiling things. She's very good at saying the right thing,' she added, laughing.

'I like her already. Tell me more,' he said.

'She's great. My best friend. Corny I know, but she is. She's very stylish and very funny, and she's never let any of it get her down. She picked up all the pieces when he died, and went out and got herself a job selling dresses in Harrods, and was running the department in no time. We had a really nice house in Wiltshire and she sold it, just like that, no fuss, and bought a flat in Battersea, and she has a wild social life, better than mine, actually, and – well, that's her. She's called Rachel,' she added.

'She sounds very interesting. I'd like to meet her.'

'Why? I'm sure it could be arranged.'

'Well you know what they say.'

'No,' she laughed. 'What do they say?'

'They say first look at the mother,' he said, his eyes half serious, probing into hers, and then in a gesture that was almost shocking in its unexpectedness reached out and very briefly touched her cheek. 'And now I must go.'

She sat staring after him, feeling quite extraordinarily disturbed.

Next day, a phone call announced some flowers for her in Reception; she went down to two dozen red roses. Pinned to them, in his own writing, was a card from Bard Channing. 'I'd like to proceed to a second interview.'

Francesca crushed an impulse to phone immediately, hung on until the end of the day. Then: 'The flowers are lovely,' she said, 'but I really am suited. I told you. Thank you anyway.'

'I have another job for you,' he said.

'I know, but I don't want it.'

'Not that one. In my company, in the advertising department. We could talk about it. Over lunch perhaps. Tomorrow?'

‘I’m busy for lunch. I’m sorry.’

‘All right. Some other time, then.’

‘Perhaps.’

He was hugely dangerous. She thought of his hand on her cheek and longed to see him again; she said goodbye and put the phone down quickly.

Two weeks went past, then: ‘Francesca? This is Bard Channing.’

‘Oh – hallo, Mr Channing. I don’t really—’

‘Please call me Bard. You calling me Mr Channing makes me feel old. Which you no doubt think I am.’

‘Of course not.’

‘Of course you do. Now I was only going to suggest that I took you to lunch. And that you brought your mother. I would really like to meet her.’

‘Oh,’ said Francesca. His power to discomfit her was impressive. Perversely she quite liked it. Patrick Forster spent his life doing the reverse, and it irritated the hell out of her. ‘Oh, well I—’

‘Good. Now I can do Wednesday this week, or Thursday or Friday next with a bit of juggling. I’m sure your mother is worth juggling for. Does she still work at Harrods?’

‘No, she came into a bit of money and now she’s a lady who lunches economically. Her description, not mine.’

‘I like her more and more. And we can talk some more about your job at the same time.’

‘Which one?’ said Francesca.

‘Either,’ he said. ‘They’re both still available.’

Rachel and Bard ignored her through most of the lunch (the Ritz – he had told her to ask her mother where she would like to go). Rachel turned up looking dazzling in an ivory slub silk suit, an absurd red feathered hat set on her silvery fair hair, red high-heeled shoes, all new, Francesca thought, silly woman, bought to impress him. Her love for her mother did not blind her to her faults. She watched Bard Channing being most

willingly charmed, delighted even, by her still considerable beauty, by her determined flirtatious flattery, her transparent efforts to please him, the superior being, the male, her large blue eyes fixed on his face, her small hand every so often touching his, and she sat, at first amused and then irritated, drinking rather too fast, feeling like a foolish schoolgirl, while they gossiped about rather remote mutual acquaintances, discussed times past, laughed at jokes she didn't understand and generally made her feel just slightly less important than the waiters. Towards the end of the meal she began to sulk, then finally (tears stinging behind her eyes) excused herself, saying she had to get back to work; they smiled at her briefly and returned to their conversation, scarcely seeming to notice her departure.

She was hurling things around her desk later that afternoon, nursing a very nasty headache, when Reception rang to say Mr Channing was downstairs. 'Tell him I'm in a meeting,' said Francesca, and rang off. Two minutes later the phone rang again; it was Bard Channing.

'I just wanted to say I could see that wasn't very nice for you and I'm sorry. It was just that I liked your mother so very much, and—'

'That's quite all right,' said Francesca coolly. 'You obviously have a great deal in common. Next time you can just go out on your own. Now you must excuse me, I'm very busy.'

'Francesca,' said Bard, and there was just the slightest touch of menace in his voice, 'Francesca, I really don't have time for this sort of thing. I get quite enough of it at home.' And he put the phone down.

It was five years before she met him again: he did not after all place his business with GHG, and Francesca left there after six months to go to another agency called Manners Bullingford as a trainee account executive. She was happy there, absorbed, felt she was actually getting somewhere; she became engaged with just the merest shadow of misgiving to Patrick Forster and

married him on a sparkly April day in 1985 at Battersea Old Church, to which occasion her mother wore the ivory slub silk suit she had bought for lunch with Bard Channing. As a result Francesca thought of Bard rather more than she might otherwise have done; and she continued to do so from time to time right through the first three years of her marriage, which was perfectly happy but somehow not totally and properly satisfying. She and Patrick had a pretty little house in Fulham, two cats, a Shogun, gave dinner parties once a week and had sex rather less frequently.

At the beginning of 1988, Patrick announced that it was time they started to think about having a family; Francesca thought of her burgeoning career (she was now an account director at a highly successful, high-profile agency called Fellowes Barkworth); of the occasional doubts she still had about her relationship with Patrick; and slightly to her surprise of Bard Channing, and told Patrick she thought it was too soon. Patrick was clearly disappointed, but said he was prepared to wait a little longer.

It was a dark, heavy November afternoon when she was called into a meeting to discuss a new business pitch; the project was to raise the profile of and develop a corporate image for a property company which owned several of the new American-style shopping malls; the budget was large, the creative work challenging. The company was the Channing Corporation.

The entire group was to go to Channing House the following week for a presentation; Bard Channing himself would not be there. 'Far too high powered,' said Mike Fellowes, the account director, 'but we're seeing a couple of his henchmen. Just as well, I imagine. From all accounts, Channing's a bit of a brute.'

'Not true,' said Francesca.

'You've met him?'

'I've met him.'

'Good Lord.'

She smiled round the group, and made it clear that was the end of the discussion.

She found herself dressing with particular care for the presentation at Channing House, in a new black crepe suit from Nicole Farhi. As she sat at the dressing table, doing her make-up, she looked at the picture of herself and her mother taken on some hotel terrace when she had been twenty-one, a lifetime ago it seemed, the untidily lovely person she had been then, the wild permed curls tumbled on her shoulders, the sunfreckled just-slightly-plump face grinning over the huge cocktail in her hand, and compared it with the sleek, glossy creature in the mirror, with her sharply etched cheekbones, her perfect creamy skin, her sleekly carved dark hair, and sighed just briefly, wondered exactly how happy she was and why indeed she should be wondering that today.

Bard was not there, as they had been told; the presentation went well. They were given a boardroom lunch; after it, Francesca excused herself and went in search of the Ladies'. And walking back along the corridor, found herself face to face with Bard Channing.

'Well,' he said, smiling at her with patent and extraordinary pleasure. 'Can it be true? Francesca! How very nice to see you. You look—'

'Older?' said Francesca, smiling.

'Grown up, I would say. And even more beautiful. I like the hair. Almost as much as I did before,' he said, and grinned at her.

'Thank you,' said Francesca carefully. It seemed the only safe thing to say.

'Why are you here?'

'I – my agency and I – are doing a presentation. To your publicity people.'

'Oh yes, of course. I knew I should have come. And are you now very important and high-powered?'

'Very,' she said, laughing.

'Good. The vacancy for that other job is still open by the way.'

'Oh really? I'm pretty well suited now. Thank you,' she added carefully.

'Does that mean you're married?'

‘Yes it does.’

‘To the posh young man?’

‘To the posh young man.’

‘And are you happy?’

‘Oh yes. Very happy.’

‘Well,’ he said, and there was a flicker of something behind the dark eyes, not as strong as pain, shock perhaps, distaste, ‘well, that’s extremely unfortunate. My fault entirely, I shouldn’t have left it so long.’

‘Perhaps not,’ said Francesca. ‘How are your daughters?’

‘Oh – difficult. Particularly Kirsten. The battles increase. She’s dying to be a model, and I’ve told her she has to go to university.’

‘She could do both,’ said Francesca, ‘lots of girls do. You should let her try. It’s a horrible life, unless you’re incredibly successful; she’ll probably be most grateful to get back to her studies. I’d have thought that would be much better than forbidding it.’

‘Still wise,’ he said, ‘even though the shoulders are slightly older. I would never have thought of that. Could you recommend an agency she should go to?’

‘Yes of course. Ring me at my office, here’s my card, I’ll give you a couple of names and numbers.’

‘Thank you. I will. Nice to see you again.’

He smiled at her, and then looked at her, the dark eyes suddenly serious, and reached and touched her face, very briefly, as he had that night in the Connaught. It had the same profound effect on her.

He phoned her two days later for the numbers and then a week after that to tell her Kirsten had been signed up by Models One. ‘And she’s being almost polite to me. Can I buy you lunch to say thank you?’

She hesitated briefly, knowing full well what might happen if she said yes. She said yes, and it did.

*

She learnt much of him over that first lunch: how life had been at once kind and unkind to him, had given him a wonderful mother and a dreadful father ('Like me,' she said, smiling at him: 'Yes, but your father didn't knock you about,' he said, not smiling at all); had given him a brilliantly fast, deductive brain and a dyslexia so severe that everyone except his mother had thought he was ineducable until he was at least nine; had sent his father off to Germany where he had been most mercifully killed; had rained bombs down on the little house in Dalston where he had lived with his mother and grandparents, had killed the grandparents and put his mother in hospital and had then sent him off, an evacuee, to the wilds of Suffolk to some kind and gentle countryfolk, who cared for him until the war was over and had put some stability into his turbulent little history; had failed to provide him with a job, even in the surging boom years of the 1950s, for who would take on a boy without a single examination to his name, and whose handwriting on letters was a laboured ungainly sprawl when so many grammar-school boys were filling in application forms in perfectly formed, neat handwriting; and had then finally set him down in a pub one night next to a rather pushy young estate agent who told him his firm was looking for a junior negotiator, and he had been taken on by them at an appallingly low salary, but on a fair bit of commission of which he had, to his own great surprise, earned rather a lot; and that he had then proceeded to the just-beginning-to-boom commercial sector. At this point the story became a little vague, but he had proceeded to junior partner there, and gone finally into business with one of his own clients (having found, through another chance meeting in another pub, a derelict building in the City for which he had been able to negotiate an absurdly good price), and from then on (he told her with a charming blend of arrogance and self-deprecation) it was all absurdly well-documented and she could read about it for herself. And of course she had read about it long ago and had had it revised for her before the presentation: the

runaway success in the first property boom, when there had been so great a dearth of commercial property – largely due to the Socialist government that had tried and failed to stop speculative development with a rash of new planning regulations – his survival of the first big crash of 1973, his swift move into the Middle East, his going public in the 1980s, his continuing steady growth, and his situation now, settled comfortably around the middle of the *Sunday Times* list of the 250 richest people in the country, with a publicly quoted company worth £100m, 35 per cent of which was still held by him and his partners in the company.

Fate had been equally quixotic with his personal life; had sent him first a wife who had been loving and lovely and had died after bearing him a still-born son, when their only other child, Liam, had been just seven years old, and a second who was as unstable and faithless as she was charismatic and beautiful; had endowed him with considerable charm and a magnetic sexuality, but really very little in the way of looks, and a height that could only optimistically be described as five foot ten inches and was actually nearer five-eight and a half.

He was (she also discovered that first lunch, and indeed consequently), while being without doubt the most arrogant, the most egocentric, man she had ever met (and, he told her, almost certainly the worst-tempered), also funny, intensely charming, and had a curiously old-fashioned chivalry about him; he walked on the outside of pavements, held open doors for her, saw her into the car if he was driving it himself, pulled out and pushed in chairs with great thoroughness.

‘I’ve been well brought up,’ he told her almost indignantly when she remarked on this. ‘My mother, like yours, is wonderful. Although rather different,’ he added, smiling, ‘and I want you to meet her. She has to approve all my wives.’

‘I’m not going to be your wife, Bard.’

‘Francesca, you are.’

*

‘I love you,’ he said after a second, rather unseemly lunch (also at the Connaught) where he had spent much of the time with one hand on her thigh (evoking, with that simple act, a more frantic desire than Patrick had ever managed in the whole of their sexual lives), and the other alternately holding hers or gently massaging the nape of her neck. ‘I really love you.’

‘Bard, don’t be absurd, of course you don’t love me,’ said Francesca, clinging with some difficulty to the remnants of common sense, ‘you don’t even know me. And I don’t know you,’ she added, ‘which some people would consider at least faintly relevant.’

‘Oh,’ he said, and there was a distant expression in his eyes, a darkness, a brooding that she had not seen before (but was often, increasingly, to see again), ‘I am best not known too well. But I’m sure that doesn’t apply to you. Come and live with me, and then I can get to know you.’

‘Bard, I’m married.’

‘So am I.’

‘You’re not. You’re divorced. That’s totally different.’

‘I don’t see why.’

‘Of course you see why. You’re being ridiculous.’

‘I am not being ridiculous,’ he said and he bent over and kissed her hand, one finger at a time, and then, his eyes very serious, very tender; ‘I love you. Come to bed with me.’

‘Now?’

‘Why not?’

‘Here?’

‘Well, upstairs. I have a room.’

‘Of course you don’t,’ said Francesca.

‘Well, I could get one.’

‘Bard no. Really. I can’t.’

‘Don’t you want to?’

‘No.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘I’m lying,’ she said, and laughed. ‘But I’m not going to.’

It was another week before he finally talked her into bed; a

week during which he bombarded her with flowers, with phone calls, with letters, with faxes, all declaring overwhelming, undeniable love; finally she heard herself on the phone to Patrick, telling him she had to attend an out-of-town meeting, and wouldn't be back till the morning.

'I'm sorry, darling,' she said, hating herself as she spoke what was nearly the simple truth, 'new client. You know what that means.'

And she lay in bed with Bard, in a four-poster bed in a hotel somewhere in Oxfordshire, discovering sex as if for the first time, discovering passion, discovering herself, hearing her own voice crying out, greedy, primitive, joyous, and knew she was properly in love.

It took a while to accept the fact, longer to tell Patrick. Guilt and affection for him consumed her; she struggled, toiled over her marriage for months, told Bard she must forget him and he her, left him three times and went back four. It was only when she was more by careless design than actual accident, pregnant with Bard's child, pregnant with Jack, that finally she knew she had to give in, bow to the inevitable.

The first year with Bard was extraordinary: a long, exalting exhausting series of dramas; of moving out of her small house, and into Bard's huge one (an absurd, excessive mansion in St John's Wood which she initially hated and grew slowly fond of as she made it hers); of leaving her easy, undemanding life with Patrick and entering Bard's difficult, overwhelming one; of the change from being in command of her life to being out of control of it, from knowing where she was and what she was doing to having no idea at all; the change from affection to love, from sexual pleasure to physical passion; and perhaps most shattering of all of it, from woman to mother. Her own mother had told her, but had not been able (of course) to prepare her for the overwhelming, unexpected force of the love she would feel, the fierce and total commitment to this small being, who first took over her body and changed it beyond all recognition,

subjected her to much discomfort and indeed considerable pain, and who then lay in her arms and gazed squintily up at her through dark eyes that were exactly like his father's, and proceeded from then to enslave her entirely, to disturb her sleep, invade her days, distort her emotions, and recentre her universe. Bard, who had seen it all before, was amused by her besottedness, at her surprise at it indeed, and even as he warned her that he was not to be moved too much aside, was still charmed by it. He was a most exemplary father to small children (while being a fairly disastrous one as they grew up), surprisingly patient, tender, insistent upon (once the birth was well over) being involved, oddly competent at such basic tasks as nappy-changing and winding, enormously proud not only of Francesca but at the change he had wrought in her.

'This time I'm going to get it right,' he said, bending over the crib, studying Jack's small, fierce profile, so like his own. And studying the larger one, thinking how wrong he had got it before, his fatherhood, how bad and how ongoing an effect it had on her life, Francesca hoped most fervently that he would.

Liam had been the greatest of the shadows over the new brightness of her life: Liam who had lost first his mother when he had been just a little boy of seven, and then his father who had rejected him, hated him almost, for being alive when his mother was dead; Liam who had been sent first to stay with his grandmother and then away to school; who had hated the stepmother who had arrived quickly, far too quickly, after his mother had died; hated the new small siblings who had seemed to have so much more of their father's love; Liam who had grown to regard that father with a hard, unforgiving hatred.

He had many gifts, had Liam, a brilliant mind, romantically dark, brooding looks, and a most mellifluously beautiful voice, all infinitely suited to his chosen career at the Bar, but success had eluded him, for which he blamed fate, difficult clients, hostile judges, ruthless rivals and above all his father; 'He sponges off his wife,' Bard had said briefly, 'farts about waiting

for his big break. She'd throw him out if she had any sense.' The hostility between the two of them was ferocious, and in that first year of her marriage Francesca met him only twice, once at the family party Bard had given to introduce her to the rest of his family, and once after Jack's birth when he had come, tautly polite, to the hospital with his wife to visit her. They had not come to the wedding; had made an excuse that they had to be away, and it was perfectly clear to Francesca that they had only come to the hospital because Naomi Channing (who clearly knew on which side her bread was buttered and who was doing the spreading) had seen it was in both of their interests to do so. Naomi was a high-flier, a banker, already in her own world famously successful; she seemed, Francesca thought, to regard Liam with a kind of proprietary distaste.

'Sweet,' she had said, looking briefly into the crib, 'a bit like Jasper, don't you think, Liam?'

Liam had said shortly he didn't think the baby looked in the least like Jasper, their own small boy, and excused himself, saying he wanted to have a cigarette; afterwards Francesca couldn't remember his addressing a single word to her directly.

The other children had come to visit her too: Barnaby charmingly pleased, Victoria hugely excited, Kirsten with her already daunting beauty sullenly, silently hostile. Francesca had looked at her, tried and failed to make her smile, to respond, tried and failed not to mind, and wondered how long it would be before she managed to win Kirsten round. It seemed almost as impossible a task as befriending Liam.

The second year of her marriage was very different from her first. The changes, the dramas were accomplished; it only remained for her to adjust to them. Unlike her mother, Francesca found adjustment hard.

The first change was her own status, as Bard Channing's wife. Nothing could have prepared her for it, for what she had become. Rachel had tried to warn her of that too, of the quite extraordinary transition from equal partner to trophy wife, and

had failed entirely. Her function before had been to run her house, do her job, earn her salary, see to her husband's well-being. Of those, only the last still properly remained to her: and even that she was forced to share with a battery of staff, efficient, competent, familiar with the task as she was not, both at home and at Channing House. She had, to assist her in the running of the house in Hamilton Terrace, a housekeeper, a daily woman, a gardener, a nanny, and Bard's driver Horton who, whenever Bard was away, was available to drive her or Nanny about as well. There were, in permanent residence at Stylings, the house in Sussex, another housekeeper, another daily woman and two gardeners, one of whom doubled as groom for Bard's and the children's horses. All these people were in theory there to help and support her, to do what she asked them, to make her life easy; all of them in practice, troubled her, worried her, made her life more difficult. Nanny Crossman was a particularly unwelcome presence: middle-aged, uniformed, rigid in her views, she had looked after all Pattie's children and Bard had insisted she came back after Jack's birth, to take over where she had left off, as Nanny herself put it. Francesca had protested she didn't want a nanny, Jack was her baby and she was going to look after him herself and if she did have any help, she would prefer it not to come in a form like Nanny Crossman's, rather something younger, more fun, less daunting. But Bard had told her (correctly) that she had no idea how much she was going to have to do and how tired and disorientated she was going to feel, that Nanny could at least see her through the first few weeks and then they could review the whole thing. At the end of the first few weeks, she was still tired, still feeling disorientated, and caught in a Catch-22 situation, in which Nanny's competence emphasised her own lack of it and her ability to handle Jack grew horribly slowly. She continued to tell herself that it was a temporary situation, that as soon as she felt just a little more in command she would get rid of Nanny, hire some cheerful mother's help, and continued to feel not in command at all. This feeling was increased by Bard's making it

very clear that from his point of view Nanny's departure would not only be unwelcome but highly unwise; and despite a few spirited exchanges on the subject, Francesca finally settled into an uneasy truce with him, the terms being that she would set the rest of her life in order and then they would review this particular aspect again. They never had.

She didn't feel much happier about the housekeeper at Hamilton Terrace; Sandie Jerome had arrived soon after Pattie Channing's departure, had seen Pattie's children grow up, regarded them with a proprietary affection, and the house as almost her own. She knew Liam, had worked with Nanny, and admired Bard; she was totally familiar with every aspect of running the house, knew what the children and their father liked to eat and when, organised the rest of the staff, paid the bills, liaised with Bard's secretary over his arrivals and departures. She was thirty-something, blonde, well dressed, attractive in a hard way; she had been her own boss for years, was extremely well paid (like all Bard's staff), she had a flat in the basement of the house, a car, generous time off. She was polite, co-operative and helpful to Francesca while making it very clear indeed that Sandie knew precisely how important to her she was.

Francesca didn't like her, but she needed her; that Sandie knew she needed her, and in the early days could not have managed without her, made her uncomfortable, increased her own lack of self-confidence. The combination of Nanny and Sandie and what she knew to be their joint view of her was formidably unsettling. The actual day-to-day running of her new life was not too difficult; the woman who had run a big department in her advertising agency, who had charmed and entertained clients, manipulated colleagues, administered budgets, hired and organised staff, was scarcely going to be thrown by the organisation of even a couple of households. What did throw her was her new situation in life. She had lost, in the moment she became Mrs Isambard Channing, personal status, independence, and in her darker moments, self-respect.