

THE CYBER PUPPETS
by Angus McAllister

CHAPTERS 1-3

PART ONE

THE LAIRDS OF GLENDOUNE

---meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain.
William Shakespeare
Hamlet, Act I, Scene 5

ONE

Scott Maxwell realised later that his doubts had been growing for some time. But he only became fully aware of the problem when his father-in-law Hector returned from Scotland with a head transplant. The shock of that homecoming was impossible to ignore. Even five colourful years living with his wife's family failed to prepare him for it.

It even managed to eclipse the news his wife Fiona had brought him earlier that day. For most people, two such traumas at the same time – Fiona's announcement and Hector's new face – might have been too much. But less so if you were a member of the Laird family. For them troubles coming doubly meant a quiet period.

Fiona had called unexpectedly at his office during the afternoon. As usual, she looked as if she had just walked from the page of a fashion magazine. "Hello honey," he said. "It's great to see you."

She accepted his kiss perfunctorily and sat opposite his desk. "It isn't exactly a social call."

"Never mind. I'm glad you're here. Why did you come?"

"I've something to tell you."

"Good news?"

"I hope so. I've just been to the doctor."

"What's wrong? You didn't say anything about it this morning." His manner showed alarm and concern. Inwardly, he took the news much more calmly.

"I'm pregnant."

"But that's impossible."

"So they said. Apparently they were wrong."

"There's no doubt about it?"

"None."

"But that's great news!" he said, coming round from behind the desk and embracing her. "It's what we always wanted."

She responded half-heartedly. "You're pleased?"

"Of course I am. And Hector and Kirsteen will be delighted."

"You can be sure of that. A new addition to the Laird dynasty is always welcome."

"That's unfair. You know how much they've been worried about you."

"I know. You're right."

"Anyway, what did the doctor say? Will there be any complications?"

"I don't think so. I'll need more tests, and they'll have to keep a close eye on me because of the miscarriages. But so far everything seems OK."

"Well, that's just wonderful!" He kissed her again. This time she appeared to have relaxed a bit and responded more warmly.

When he paused for breath, he said, "I love you."

"And I love you too, darling."

Scott wondered which of them was being the more insincere. He decided it was a close-run thing. So the bitch is pregnant, he thought. Who's the father? Is it that bastard Walton or that snake Doberman? Why do I stick by her? She doesn't love me and I can't stand her. Why don't I walk out on her and her goddamned family? Without them I could have a good life, as well as a much quieter one.

"Does Kirsteen know yet?"

"No. I'm going straight home to tell her."

"She'll be delighted. They both will."

"So you said. Well, I'd better get going."

"It'll be a great homecoming present for your father."

"Yes, it certainly will."

"That doctor better know what he's doing. Otherwise, he'll have a lawsuit on his hands."

"Oh, Scott, stop being a lawyer for once. Everything's going to be fine. I'll see you tonight."

Scott continued to observe himself display the predictable series of reactions, as she took her prolonged leave, as they kissed again and re-affirmed their mutual devotion. What was wrong with him? It was more than just hypocrisy. It almost seemed as if he had no control over his speech and actions, as if the real Scott were trapped inside a body that was being operated by another person.

After she had left, he sat looking out of the window of his office, at the view it commanded of Primeburgh city centre. His modest premises were only a few blocks away from the giant Laird building, but his south-facing window allowed him to pretend otherwise. So far he had resisted all attempts by the Lairds to absorb him into their distilling business, though he spent so much of his time dealing with their legal work that they had managed to get him anyway.

He had a lot to think about and would have liked more time for contemplation. But, after only a brief period, whoever was controlling his actions decided it was time for him to call in his secretary.

"I'll be leaving early tonight, Dorothy. Are you nearly finished typing those letters?"

"Just about, Mr Maxwell. I hope there's nothing wrong."

"No, Dorothy, just the opposite. I'm going to be a father."

"That's wonderful, Mr Maxwell! Congratulations."

"Thanks, Dorothy. I'm so excited, I can't think about anything else for now."

I really sound as if I mean it, he thought. I'm wasted as a lawyer. I should have been an actor.

TWO

On the top floor of the Laird building, the one which Scott had taken so much trouble to hide from view, his brother-in-law Wilson Laird was about to receive a visitor.

Scott's precautions were understandable, as the Laird building undoubtedly dominated its immediate surroundings. It was a fifty-storey tower of bleached-white concrete, with rounded edges and slightly recessed windows. When the sun was behind it, as now, the windows were dark holes, and the building looked like an elongated skull with multiple eye sockets; later, as the silvered panes reflected the afternoon sun, it would gaze inscrutably over its smaller neighbours from behind a host of mirrorshades.

H. Wilson Laird looked about thirty-five years old and a perfect model of the successful young businessman. He sat behind a large oak desk, virtually bare apart from a telephone and intercom. On one wall there hung a large painting in which a generously antlered stag stood proudly against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks, wooded hills and a thatched croft from whose chimney the smoke curled into a sky of unlikely clarity. Otherwise the decor of the room was modern and functional. It gave little away about the nature of its occupant's business, except that, judging by the quality of the fittings, it was a rather profitable one.

The intercom buzzed and he pressed a button. "Yes?"

A woman's voice said, "Morton Handiman is here, Wilson."

"Show him in."

The door opened and a young blonde-haired woman led in a nondescript man of about forty. Wilson got up from his desk and walked over to meet his visitor, grasping him firmly by the hand, completing his welcome with a sincere and disarming smile. "Good to see you, Mort. What can I get you?" He led his visitor over to a reception area at the far end of the room. "That'll be all, Cassie," he told the girl, who was waiting by the door.

"I don't usually," said Handiman. "I mean it's a bit early."

"It's never too early for a drop of Laird's Sovereign," said Wilson. "Don't worry, it evaporates before it reaches your liver. I could get you something else if you want, but I know you're a man of taste."

"Sovereign will be fine. Just a small one."

"Good, good," said Wilson. He filled two glasses from a crystal decanter, added ice and gave one of the drinks to Handiman. They sat down together on the large leather sofa. "After all, this is a celebration. At least, I take it that's why you're here?"

"The work's all finished, if that's what you mean."

"Great," said Wilson. "Well, good health."

"Cheers."

"That's right, Mort," said Wilson. "Just a small sip, so that the clear Highland air drifts up your nostrils."

"Come on, Wilson, this isn't a sales meeting."

"You think I'm being cynical? Well, you're wrong. The business means just as much to me as it does to my father. It's just that his methods are a bit old-fashioned for this modern cut-throat age, if you know what I mean."

"I think I get your drift."

"You haven't met my father, have you Mort?"

"No Wilson, I haven't had that pleasure."

"He's a great man. I mean that, Mort. He built this company up from nothing. He's a business genius and a gentleman. It's a pity that you're never going to meet him."

"It sure is."

"He gets back from Scotland tonight. That's why I wanted to finalise things today. You see, he doesn't know about the services you provide for the company. It's something he might not handle too well."

"I know all this, Wilson."

Wilson slapped him on the shoulder. "Of course you do, Mort. We have an understanding and we trust each other. So let's get down to business. Everything's ready?"

"Completed and operational."

"And no-one suspects anything?"

"Of course not. We were never there." Handiman opened his briefcase and brought out a thick document in a hard plastic cover. "You'll find everything you need here."

Wilson took the document from him and skimmed through it, nodding occasionally. Then he put it down. "Well Mort, that looks just dandy. As usual, you've done a first class job. How much did we agree on? Five million?"

"Yes, our overheads were high and---"

"I know, Mort. It was a quality operation and that's what I pay you for." Wilson went back to his desk, brought out a cheque, already written, and took it over to his visitor. "There you are, Mort. You'll find I've added a little bonus. For your continued good faith and discretion."

Handiman looked at the cheque. "That's very good of you, Wilson."

"Not at all Mort. It's a pleasure doing business with you." He raised his glass again. "To the continuing success of Laird Distillers. And that means your continuing success too, Mort."

"I hope so, Wilson."

Wilson gave his most winning smile. "You can be sure of that, Mort."

Fiona Maxwell and her psychiatrist, Dr. Herman Goldberg, faced each other from matching leather armchairs. Goldberg was a handsome man of forty; his grave expression mimicked that of Sigmund Freud, whose portrait looked over Goldberg's shoulder from the wall behind. The likenesses of other famous analysts encircled the room. This formidable portrait gallery conspired with the old-fashioned furniture to put

patients in the right frame of mind; to remind them that they were worshippers at the shrine of the West's most influential secular religion.

Goldberg clasped his hands in front of him and regarded his visitor in a penetrating, though inscrutable, fashion. "So how did your husband react when you told him?" he asked.

Fiona shook her head in an exasperated manner. "How does Scott always react?"

"I don't know. I've never met him."

"You know what I mean. He was delighted, naturally."

"He's always delighted?"

"No, of course not. I've told you before. He's so ... so damn *predictable*."

"Ah!"

"He was really excited. Just like a little kid on his birthday. As if it was the only thing that mattered to him."

"But why shouldn't he feel that way? He always wanted children, didn't he?"

"Yes, but... You know what I mean."

"Do I?"

"Of course you do. You've heard all my confessions."

"I'm not a priest, Mrs Maxwell. Nor am I sitting in judgement of you. I have the power neither to grant you absolution nor find you guilty. I can only help you to solve your problems for yourself."

"I know all that. And it costs me plenty. That's not what I mean. You know damn well why I was worried about his reaction."

"Maybe I do. But you tell me."

"You don't let me off the hook, do you? All right, then." She paused and averted her eyes, as if his gaze made her feel uncomfortable. "It's because... because he may not be the father."

"I see. And do you know who the father is?"

"That's blunt enough. You think I'm a real tramp, don't you?"

"I told you already. I don't pass judgement. You sounded as if you weren't sure yourself. Could the baby be your husband's?"

"It's possible."

"You could have a test done."

"What's the point? I've got nothing to gain and everything to lose."

"There's the question of inheritance."

Fiona laughed. "I'm the member of the Laird family, remember? And there's no doubt that the baby's mine. No, Scott's the only one with any reason to have a test done. And he doesn't suspect anything. God knows why. I've given him plenty of grounds."

"You mean you haven't been discreet?"

"I was to begin with. Then I made a couple of slips... I was seen in public with another man, I was overheard making a phone call. But he obstinately refused to get suspicious. God, he's so dumb! Eventually, I got more and more careless, almost as if..."

"Yes?"

"As if I wanted him to find out."

"Do you?"

"Who knows? That's what I'm here to find out. What do you think?"

"You're the only one who can answer that question." Dr. Goldberg got up from his chair and began to pace around the room. "But we're getting to the central issue. The reason you came to me for help. To determine why you feel the need to sleep with other men."

"There's not a lot of sleeping involved."

"Quite. But what is the reason? Is it simply a symptom of something lacking in your marriage, or does it go beyond that?"

"I don't know. A bit of both, I suppose. It's true that Scott's dog-like devotion gets me mad, makes me want to lash out in some way. On the other hand, before I met him, I... well, I wasn't exactly a vestal virgin. I didn't need to remain pure to preserve my value on the marriage market. The Laird family fortune saw to that. And, apart from the question of money, men have always found me attractive." As Dr. Goldberg sat back down opposite her, she crossed her legs, allowing her skirt to slip up above her knees. Dr. Goldberg gave no indication of having noticed. For the first time she looked him directly in the eye for more than a few seconds. "You're a man. Do you find me attractive."

"That's not relevant."

"But I presume you have feelings, like any other man. Though sometimes I wonder."

If her taunt had drawn blood, there was no sign of it from Goldberg's reaction. "Let's just say that I can understand why men find you attractive."

"I suppose that's the best I can expect." She recrossed her legs and settled back further in the luxurious armchair. She gave him a provocative smile. "There *is* another reason why I sleep around."

"Why's that?"

"I quite enjoy it."

Dr. Goldberg looked a little puzzled, and then thoughtful, as if this was a possibility that hadn't occurred to him.

In another part of town, Anton Charles Bruckner, chairman and controlling stockholder of Moonshine Distillers, was welcoming a visitor into his office. Bruckner was a squat man of forty-five, who might have been considered handsome, had the human race been at an earlier stage of evolution; as an inhabitant of the modern world he seemed a little more out of place. His suit looked as if it had been made to measure by a top-class tailor who had been forced in the end to admit defeat. The room's interior designer had possibly experienced a similar professional crisis; it was clear that a great deal of money had been spent making the place look really cheap.

Bruckner's visitor, who was Japanese, was about the same age and height, but otherwise possessed a slenderness and grace that only served to accentuate the awkwardness of his host. Bruckner ushered him into a flashy leatherette chair and went over to the sizeable alcove that housed the room's bar; the gantry was packed with bottles bearing labels that might have been printed in Disneyland.

"Can I get you something?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I mean would you like a drink?"

"Thank you. Do you have any Laird's Sovereign?"

Bruckner looked taken aback for a moment. Then he laughed. "I see you have a sense of humour, Mr. Ramanuki. That's one drink you'll never get here. And I'm right out of sake as well. But anything else..."

Mr. Ramanuki inclined his head slightly. "A recommended product of your own excellent company, perhaps."

"Our best selling Scotch is Northern Thistle."

"That will do nicely."

"Ice and soda?"

"I think so."

Bruckner poured the drinks, gave one to the other man, and sat down behind his desk, facing the visitor. "Good health."

"And to you, Mr. Bruckner." Mr. Ramanuki took a sip of his drink. This seemed to put his inscrutability under some strain and he failed to hide a slight grimace.

"Call me Tony," said Bruckner. "What should I call you?"

"You can call me Mr. Ramanuki."

"Oh." Bruckner recovered quickly, and opened a polished wooden box that sat on his desk. "Would you like a cigar?"

"No thank you."

Bruckner brought out a huge cigar and stuck it in his mouth. It looked like the cardboard tube from inside a roll of kitchen towels. "You don't mind if I do?"

"I would prefer it if you did not smoke."

"Oh," said Bruckner again. He paused, replaced the cigar in the box and took a sip of his drink instead. "Well, Mr. Ramanuki, let's get down to business. You have something you want to sell. You think I may be interested in buying?"

"I think it's a possibility."

"So what exactly are you offering?"

"You are very blunt, Mr. Bruckner."

"Tony. That's the way I do business."

"Very well. What I am offering, Mr. Bruckner, is fifty thousand gallons of Scotch whisky. If the arrangement turns out to our mutual satisfaction, there is no reason why it could not be a continuing one."

"Fifty thousand gallons of Scotch whisky? By that you mean whisky distilled in Scotland?"

"That is one interpretation of the expression."

"It's the only legal interpretation."

"My product is a high quality one and my terms are extremely competitive."

"That's not the point, goddammit. I can't..."

"Patience, Mr. Bruckner! Hear me out. Now, I believe it is true to say that there is some rivalry between you and the Laird Company."

Bruckner laughed. "That's one way of putting it. Sworn enemies might be a better one."

"As bad as that?"

"Yes. It wasn't always that way. I could just about stomach old Hector Laird with his phoney castle and pretensions to Scottish ancestry. He's a snob and a moron, but

at least he's honest. But his son Wilson, now he's a different matter, the rotten, scheming, two-faced, son of... "

"I understand," said Mr. Ramanuki. "It is also a fact, I think, that your companies not only have their headquarters located in the same city, but that you are two of the very few independently-owned distillery companies in the United States. Your rivalry has a professional as well as a personal basis."

"OK," said Bruckner, "I admit it. But what's all this got to do with you?"

His visitor hesitated. "Mr. Bruckner, I do not want to seem untactful. But I believe it to be the case that Laird whisky has a reputation for very high quality, whereas... "

Bruckner laughed loudly. "It's OK, Mr. Ramanuki, you won't offend me. The Lairds are the snobs. *They're* the ones with the Scottish ancestors. I'm just in the business of making money. My great grandfather came over from Germany and started this business selling firewater to the Indians. My grandfather was a bootlegger during Prohibition. I know our stuff is rotgut, it always has been." He laughed again and drained his glass in a single gulp. "Would you like another?"

"No thank you, I have enough left. Mr. Bruckner, I can supply you with a much better quality product at a considerably lower cost. I imagine that might well help you establish an advantage over the Lairds." He hesitated.

"Go on."

"You can rely on an arrangement that is safe and discreet. After our initial contact, I would be dealing solely through a Scottish intermediary. Mr. Bruckner, do I have your interest?"

Bruckner went over to the bar and poured himself another glass of Northern Thistle. He raised the glass to his visitor and grinned. "I think you could say that, Mr. Ramanuki."

Roderick Gordon Laird and his wife Melanie were having an early lunch in the Caledonian Club. Superficially, they were well matched, both being around twenty-five, good looking and fashionably dressed. However, there was one major difference. Melanie was sober, whereas Roddy was already drunk.

The Caledonian Club's plushly-appointed dining room – with its tartan draperies, landscape paintings in ornate gilt frames, and stag's head over the bar – was designed to create the illusion that its patrons had been transported to a hotel somewhere in the Scottish highlands. While partaking, at great cost, of their cock-a-leekie soup and roast venison, they could pretend that a glance from the window would reveal a heather-clad hillside, that a few steps from the door would bring them to the shore of a loch. That the draught of cool air was a trapped mountain breeze, and not the product of air conditioning on the fifth floor of a concrete building in a modern American city.

There were still very few customers apart from Roddy and Melanie. And so when Roddy tried to attract the attention of the tartan-suited waiter, the latter had little pretext for ignoring him. He came slowly over to the table. His manner was polite, but formal.

"Would you like to order now, Mr. Laird?"

"Yes," said Melanie.

"No, not yet," said Roddy, his voice slurred. "I'll have another Laird's Sovereign. Make it a double. What'll you have, sweetheart?"

"For God's sake, Roddy!" said Melanie. "You've already had too much. We'd like to order now," she said to the waiter.

"I wannanother drink," said Roddy.

The waiter stood where he was, looking from one of them to the other, waiting for some resolution of the problem.

"Oh, get him his drink!" said Melanie. "At least it'll keep the company in profit. Nothing for me."

"Have a li'l drink with me," pleaded Roddy, but the waiter had seized his chance and left for the bar.

"He's gone," said Melanie. "So, while part of you is still above the table, maybe you can tell me why we're here."

"Whassamatter, can't a man have a meal with his wife?"

"Some other man, maybe. You said you wanted to see me about something special."

"Did I? I've forgotten what it was."

"Oh God!"

"You're not very nice to me these days. Now that you've got all my money."

"When I married your money, I thought some sort of man went along with it. But I was wrong. I've earned every penny, believe me."

"I believe you," said a voice. Melanie looked up and saw that Tony Bruckner was standing beside their table. Roddy, belatedly noticing that her attention had been diverted, drunkenly followed her gaze. "I hope I'm not intruding," said Bruckner.

"Sorry to dash your hopes. Did you want something?"

"No," said Bruckner. "I've been having a good day. I thought I'd make it better by kicking some Laird ass. Don't worry, I wasn't going to join you."

"Good. It's bad enough being stuck with a drunken idiot. I don't need a sober one as well."

"He's right about you, baby," said Bruckner, "you're not very nice at all. But we all knew that already. If there's anything worse than a gold-digger, it's a gold-digger who's clinched her share in the mine."

"Did you think that one up all by yourself, Bruckner? How many weeks did it take your dumb Kraut excuse for a brain?"

The waiter arrived with Roddy's drink. "Let me get that," said Bruckner. Roddy, who had been blearily looking for an opening in the fight, took his glass and retreated. Bruckner ostentatiously dropped a banknote on the waiter's tray. "I'll have a Northern Thistle. What'll you have?"

"Nothing," said Melanie. "When the floor show's over, I'd like to have a meal."

"I'm afraid we don't have any," said the waiter.

"They've got no food!" said Roddy with a drunken giggle. "We'll just have a li'l drink instead."

"We don't stock the drink you mentioned," said the waiter to Bruckner.

"No Northern Thistle?" said Bruckner. "What sort of place is this?"

"A class joint," said Melanie.

"How about Black Buffalo Rum?"

"Sorry sir."

"Roughneck Gin?"

The waiter shook his head. Melanie's mood appeared to be improving. "And they're clean out of Bullshine Bourbon and Apache Aftershave," she said. "In fact, they don't have any Bruckner products at all. If you need lighter fuel, you'll have to try the tobacconist downstairs."

In contrast to Melanie, Bruckner's good spirits had now vanished. "Get lost, tramp," he said, and went off to another table.

"Well done, baby," said Roddy. "You sh... sure showed 'im whose ass was due a kicking."

"Shut your drunken mouth," said Melanie, and lifted her menu.

"Another drink?" said Wilson Laird to his Japanese visitor.

"No thank you," said Mr. Ramanuki. "I have already exceeded my limit for the morning. If we have finished our business, I think it is time for me to leave."

"Sure," said Wilson. "It's up to you. I just thought you might need another drop of Laird nectar to drown the taste of Bruckner's paint stripper."

"You don't like Mr. Bruckner's whisky?"

"Does anyone?"

"But it is real Scotch whisky, is it not?"

"Oh, it's from Scotland all right, if that's what you mean. Anything the crofters can't use in their kerosene stoves, Bruckner buys up cheap. They ship it across the Atlantic in oil tankers."

"I think you are joking, Mr. Laird."

"Not entirely. Anyway, thanks for calling. Between us, we'll soon have the Bruckner problem licked."

"He's your problem," said Mr. Ramanuki. "But I have concluded a satisfactory morning's business."

After he had shown his visitor out, Wilson summoned his secretary into his room.

"Sit down, Cassie. I thought we should have a little talk."

"Is there something wrong, Wilson?"

"No, honey. Quite the opposite. But you're still new here, and if you want to stay on as my secretary, we need to be clear about some things. How do you get on with Valerie?"

"Mr. Hector's secretary? Oh, just great. She's been really helpful."

"Yes, she's a fine girl. But as you know, I gave her the day off today. So she doesn't know about my two visitors, Mort Handiman and Mr. Ramanuki. Which means there's no need for my father to know about them either. Do you get my drift?"

"I think so, Wilson."

"Good. You're a smart girl. I don't see any reason for your salary to stay at its present level too long."

"Thank you, Wilson."

After she had gone, Wilson looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he smiled.

THREE

Glendoune Castle, the Laird family home, crowned the highest hill in a three-hundred-acre estate, about five miles from the outskirts of Primeburgh. The grounds had been so landscaped that a portion of the Scottish highlands seemed grafted on to the unprotesting American soil: heather-covered hills and woods of pine competed with each other round a scaled-down replica of Loch Lomond, its bonnie banks a tribute to those of its great model, as well as those housing the Laird fortune that made all of this possible.

The castle itself was reputed to be a little smaller than Balmoral Castle, the Scottish home of the British royal family. Nor had it actually been transported stone by stone from Scotland: these days, obtaining a suitable property in this way would probably have involved bribing the British government, something even Wilson Laird had not yet attempted. Apart from that, little had been stinted in providing all the expected traditional features, together with the discreet inclusion of essential modern conveniences like air conditioning, central heating and stained glass double glazing. And the medieval battlements with their fake cannons concealed a magnificent roof garden, complete with open-air swimming pool.

Scott Maxwell considered these matters, and others, as the Lairds gathered to await the head of the family's return. Hector had phoned from the airport to say that he was on his way, and so dinner had been postponed to give him time to arrive and get changed. Meanwhile, the rest of the family had gathered in the castle library for pre-dinner drinks; some of them, notably Roddy, had got more than a head start. The library justified its name by the shelves of books covering every wall from floor to ceiling; however, Scott had never caught anyone actually reading one of these volumes. The room's present function was its more usual one.

The first talking point, of course, was Fiona's pregnancy. Her mother Kirsteen, on hearing the news, had naturally been thrust into a condition of sustained rapture. When Scott and Fiona arrived in the library, she embraced them both yet again, wetting their faces with her tears. This was her usual reaction to the extremes of joy and grief that were a normal part of the Laird condition. It was a wonder, Scott often thought, that she was not in a state of permanent dehydration.

"Its *wonderful* news!" she said. "I'm so happy for you both."

"Don't get too carried away, Mom," said Fiona. "You know what happened last time."

"Only because of that stupid riding accident. You're going to be much more careful this time. I'll see to it."

"But what about the time before? The doctors said..."

"That's all in the past," said Kirsteen. "The doctors said you couldn't get pregnant and here they are, wrong again. They never seem to get it right. They said I couldn't have any more after you were born. Where would Roddy have been if I'd listened to them?"

Maybe you should have listened to them, Scott thought. At least he wouldn't have been here. Over Kirsteen's shoulder, he could see her younger son at the bar. After the unconsciousness induced by his morning session, he had almost sobered up and was now determinedly trying to remedy the situation.

"And they were wrong about Marion as well," Kirsteen continued. "So don't let them put you off. This time everything's going to be fine, I just know it."

"I hope you're right, Mom."

"And how about you, Scott? How does it feel, now that you're going to be a father at last?"

But am I, he thought? "It feels just great," he said aloud.

The conversation continued along similar lines. As before, none of Scott's real feelings were betrayed in his behaviour. But, in any case, he would not have wanted to spoil Kirsteen's happiness. Although she was a mature woman with a grown-up family, she had managed to enter middle age with a demeanour of innocence that made everyone, including her children, feel protective towards her. Not that she looked middle-aged. Her fragile beauty had made few concessions to the passage of time. Moreover, she somehow succeeded in combining her apparent vulnerability with being the family's main source of strength, as if she were a piece of steel-lined Dresden china.

How can anyone be so damn perfect, Scott wondered? Maybe she has some unthinkable secret, like being a communist, an ex-hooker or a queen of organised crime. But of course he would never, ever voice such a thought.

Congratulations followed from the other family members, all of them acting as Scott would have expected. Only Wilson's wife Marion gave a convincing show of sincerity. Roddy might have done the same, had he been capable of it. On the other hand, his wife Melanie, while appearing to say the right things, managed to be completely bitchy.

"I'm really pleased for you darling," she said to Fiona. "I know it's what you've always wanted."

"Thank you, Melanie."

"But it'll change your life. You'll have to be prepared for that. You won't have time to see so many of your *friends*."

"I don't think I get your drift, Melanie."

"Oh, I'm sure you do, darling."

"There's no problem," said Kirsteen. "Her friends can visit her here."

"Can they?" said Melanie. "That would be interesting."

"And she won't have to look after the baby herself," Kirsteen continued. "We'll have a nursemaid, of course, and I'll help all I can."

"Of course," said Melanie. "She won't really be tied down at all. She'll be able to keep up all her *outside interests*."

Kirsteen appeared to take this at face value. Fiona said nothing, but replied with a frosty smile.

"I keep forgetting the comforts that money can bring," continued Melanie. "With me being basically a poor girl and all."

What a damn hypocrite, thought Scott. She's barely clapped eyes on her own kids for the last three years.

"Well you've got the money now," Wilson said to Melanie. "Pity you don't have the class to go with it."

"Being born into it didn't help you much," said Melanie. "You probably sold the silver spoon before it was out of your mouth."

"Now now," said Kirsteen. "I don't want any fighting. This is a happy occasion."

"So it is," said Roddy, passing on his way back to the bar. "Let's all have a drink."

"You're right, Mom," said Wilson. "Well done, honey," he said to his sister, kissing her and giving her a hug. Then he turned to Scott, clapping him on the shoulder, shaking his hand, and giving an insolent, knowing wink. "And how about Scott here? Who'd have guessed he was such a stud?"

The bastard, thought Scott! I'm going to punch him in the face. But he responded to Wilson's handshake with a firm grip. "Thanks Wilson," he said sincerely. What the hell was wrong with him?

As the evening proceeded, the family continued to behave in character. Expecting them all to live under the same roof, even such a commodious one, was the most tiresome of the Laird family traditions. Scott wondered again how the honest and upright Hector and the saintly Kirsteen had managed to produce three such children. How could these unexceptionable genes have created a devious confidence trickster, a nymphomaniac and a spoiled alcoholic? It was a scientific mystery.

The other two spouses also gave Scott food for speculation. Less so Melanie, who was easy to understand, if difficult to like. Being married to Roddy had its problems, but she gave back good measure by her general bitchiness, and she had gained much more than anyone else by marrying into the Laird family. It would probably not be long before she negotiated an extortionate divorce settlement and disappeared; the only mystery about her, as far as Scott could see, was that she hadn't done so years before.

The real enigma was Wilson's wife Marion. She had not married Wilson for his money, since her family had almost as much wealth and social status as the Lairds. And her beauty was well up to the high standards of all the Laird women. Why therefore did she continue to stick by a husband who treated her like garbage, who was a notorious womaniser and who generally qualified as the most despicable human being that Scott had ever known or could conceive of? Was she blind to her husband's failings, did she simply tolerate them, or in some unaccountable way did she find them admirable? In other words, was she an idiot, a masochist or a pervert? She didn't seem like any of these, but Scott could think of no other explanation.

What troubled Scott most was that he himself must have presented a very similar picture. In her own way, Fiona gave him just as bad a time as Wilson gave to Marion. Exactly the same questions could have been asked about him. He continually asked them himself, but never seemed able to do anything about it. Was it possible that Marion's placid exterior concealed a similar inner conflict?

But all such thoughts were banished from Scott's mind by the arrival of the newcomer, a tall man of about sixty with a full head of white hair. For the time being, Scott was rendered incapable of any kind of thought at all. This mental numbness continued as Kirsteen and the rest of the family made the new arrival welcome and questioned him about his trip. And yet, when it was Scott's turn to greet the man being welcomed home as the head of the house, as he was confronted face-to-face with the outrage, somehow the expected words managed to come out.

"Welcome home, Hector. Was it a successful trip?"

"It sure was Scott. The Muiriewhistle distillery is doing just fine, and the new blending plant is shaping up nicely."

"Sounds great."

"Can we get together in the next couple of days? I've some papers from the Scottish lawyers I'd like you to look over."

"Sure thing, Hector."

The evening continued as expected and the family retired to the castle banqueting hall for dinner. As they gathered around the huge oak table everyone, including Scott, behaved in a completely normal fashion.

I must be mad, Scott thought. There can be no other explanation. I am completely insane. And so is everyone else. Are they all blind? Can't they see?

But what could he do about it? Apparently, nothing at all.