

# MAEVE BINCHY

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## SCARLET FEATHER

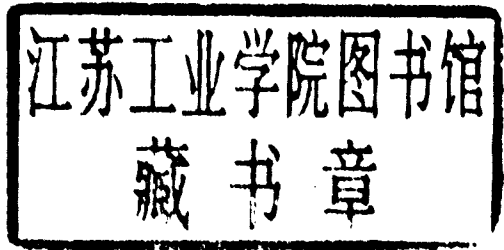
FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF TARA ROAD



# SCARLET FEATHER

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*Maeve Binchy*



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## New Year's Eve

On the radio show they were asking people what kind of a New Year's Eve did they *really* want. It was very predictable. Those who were staying at home doing nothing wanted to be out partying, those who were too busy and rushed wanted to go to bed with a cup of tea and be asleep before the festivities began.

Cathy Scarlet smiled grimly as she packed more trays of food into the van. There could hardly be anyone in Ireland who would answer the question by saying that they really and truly wanted to spend the night catering a supper party for a mother-in-law. Now that was the punishment posting tonight, feeding Hannah Mitchell's guests at Oaklands. Why was she doing it then? Partly for practice, *and* of course it would be a good way to meet potential customers. Jock and Hannah Mitchell knew the kind of people who could afford caterers. But mainly she was doing it because she wanted to prove to Hannah Mitchell that she could. That Cathy, daughter of poor Lizzie Scarlet, the maid who cleaned Oaklands, who had married the only son of the house, Neil, was well able to run her own business and hold her head as high as any of them.

Neil Mitchell was in his car when he heard the radio programme. It annoyed him greatly. Anyone looking at him from another car would have seen his sharp, handsome face frown. People often thought they recognised him; his face was familiar from television,

but he wasn't an actor, he just turned up on the screen so often, pushing the hair out of his eyes, passionate, concerned and caring, always the spokesperson for the underdog. He had the bright burning eyes of a crusader. This kind of whining and moaning on a radio show really drove him mad. People who had everything, a home, a job, a family, all telephoning a radio station to complain about the pressures of life. They were all so lucky and just too selfish to realise it. Unlike the man that Neil was going to see now, a Nigerian who would give anything to have the problems of these fools on the radio programme. His papers were not in order due to bungling and messing, and there was grave danger he would have to leave Ireland in the next forty-eight hours. Neil, who was a member of a lawyers' group set up to protect refugees, had been asked to come to a strategy meeting. It could go on for several hours. His mother had warned him not to be late at Oaklands, it was an important party, she said.

'I do hope that poor Cathy will be able to manage it,' she had said to Neil.

'Don't let her hear you calling her "poor Cathy", if you want your guests to get any food,' he had laughed.

It was idiotic, this nonsense between his mother and his wife; he and his father stayed well away from it. It was obvious anyway that Cathy had won, so what was it all about?

Tom Feather was going through the property section of the newspaper yet again. A puzzled look was on his face. He lay across the small sofa – there was never room for his long limbs and big frame unless he draped himself somehow over the whole thing. If he could put a chair at one end for his feet to rest on, it was fairly comfortable; some day he would live in a place where there was a sofa big enough to fit him. It was all very well to have the broad-shouldered rugby-player's build, but not if you needed to sit down and study the Premises Vacant ads. He shook out the newspaper. There had to be something he hadn't noticed. Some kind of premises with a room that could be made into a catering kitchen. He and Cathy Scarlet had worked so hard to make this happen. Since their first year at catering college they were going to set up Dublin's best home catering company. The whole idea of serving people great food in their own homes at reasonable prices was something that fired them both. They had worked so hard, and now they had made contacts and got the funding, all they needed was

somewhere to operate from. Cathy and Neil's little town house in Waterview, though very elegant, was far too small to consider, and the flat in Stoneyfield where he lived with Marcella was even tinier. They had to find somewhere soon. He was half listening to the radio programme. What would he really like to do on this New Year's Eve? Find the perfect place for their company to set itself up, and then he would like to stay at home with Marcella and to stroke her beautiful hair as they sat by the fire and talked about the future. No, of course that wasn't going to happen.

Marcella Malone worked in the beauty salon of Haywards store. She was possibly the most beautiful manicurist that any of the clients had ever seen. Tall and willowy, with a cloud of dark hair, she had that kind of oval face and olive skin that schoolgirls dreamed of having. At the same time, she had a quiet, unthreatening way about her that made older, uglier, fatter people take to her despite her beauty. The clients felt that some of her good looks might rub off on them, and she always seemed interested in whatever they had to say.

They had the radio on in the salon, and people there were talking about the topic. Clients were interested and joined in the argument, nobody really got what they wanted on New Year's Eve. Marcella said nothing. She bent her beautiful face over the nails that she was doing and thought how lucky she was. She had everything she wanted. She had Tom Feather, the most handsome and loving man that any girl could want. And even more, she had been photographed recently at two events with very good connections. A knitwear promotion and at a charity fashion show where amateurs had modelled clothes at a fund-raiser. This looked like the year it could all happen for her. She had a very good portfolio of pictures now, and Ricky, the photographer who had taken them, was giving a very glitzy party. A lot of media people would be there and she and Tom had been invited. If things worked well she would have an agent and a proper modelling contract, and she would not be working as a manicurist in Haywards by this time next year.

It would have been lovely for Cathy if Tom could have come with her to Oaklands. Moral support and company in that kitchen, which held so many bad memories for her, and also it would have halved the work. But Tom had to go to some do with Marcella, which was fair enough, it was going to help her career. She was so

beautiful, Marcella, she just made people stop and look at her. Tall and thin, with a smile that would light up a night. No wonder she wanted to be a model, and it was amazing that she wasn't established as one already. But then Neil had said he would help and also they had hired Walter, Neil's cousin, to be barman. And she had kept it fairly simple, nothing too tricky; she and Tom had slaved on it all morning.

'It's not fair, your doing all this,' Cathy said. 'She's not going to pay us, you know.'

'It's an investment . . . We might make a rake of contacts,' he said good-naturedly.

'There's *nothing* in this lot that could make anyone sick, is there?' Cathy begged him.

She had a vision of all Hannah Mitchell's guests going around holding their stomachs and groaning with some terrible food poisoning. He had said she was getting sillier by the hour, and he must be mad himself to have such an unhinged business partner. No one would have lent them money if they realised how the cool-looking Cathy Scarlet was actually a bag of nerves.

'I'll be fine with real people,' Cathy reassured him. 'It's just Hannah.'

'Give yourself plenty of time, go there early, fill the van with swirling music to calm yourself down and ring me tomorrow,' he soothed her.

'If I survive. Enjoy tonight.'

'Well, it's one of those noisy things at Ricky's studio,' he said.

'Happy New Year, and say it to Marcella too.'

'This time next year – imagine . . . ' he said.

'I know, a great success story,' Cathy said, looking much brighter than she actually felt.

It had been the way they got by. One being over-cheery and optimistic when the other was in any way down or doubtful. And now the van was packed. Neil wasn't home, he had to go to a consultation. He wasn't like an ordinary lawyer, she thought proudly; he didn't have office hours or large consultancy fees. If someone was in trouble, he was there. It was as simple as that. It was why she loved him.

They had known each other since they were children but had hardly ever met. During all the years that Cathy's mother had worked at Oaklands, Neil had been away at boarding school and then hardly home during his college years. He had moved out to an

apartment when he was called to the Bar. It was such a chance that she should have met him again in Greece. If he had gone to one of the other villas, or she had been cooking on another island that month, then they would never have got to know each other and never fallen in love. And wouldn't Hannah Mitchell have been a happier woman tonight? Cathy told herself to put it out of her mind. She was still much too early to go to Oaklands, Hannah would just fuss and whimper over things and get in her way. She would call and see her own parents. That would calm her down.

Maurice and Elizabeth Scarlet, known to all as Muttie and Lizzie, lived in the inner city of Dublin in a semicircle of old, stone, two-storey houses. It was called St Jarlath's Crescent, after the Irish saint, and once the dwellings had all been occupied by factory workers who were woken by a siren each morning to get them out of bed. There were tiny gardens in front of each house, only ten feet long, so it was a challenge to plant anything that would look half-way satisfactory.

This had been the house where Cathy's mother had been born and where Muttie had married her. Although it was only twenty minutes from Cathy and Neil's town-house, it could have been a thousand miles, and maybe even a million miles from the rarefied world of Oaklands, where she was going tonight.

They were delighted to see Cathy turn up unexpectedly with her white van. What were they doing to see the new year in, she wondered? They were going out to a pub nearby where a lot of Muttie's associates would gather. The men he called his associates were actually the people he met up in Sandy Keane's betting shop, but they all took their day's business very seriously and Cathy knew better than to make a joke about them.

'Will there be food?' she asked.

'At midnight they're going to give us chicken in a basket.' Muttie Scarlet was pleased at the generosity of the pub.

Cathy looked at them.

Her father was small and round, his hair stood in wisps and his face was set in a permanent smile. He was fifty years of age and she had never known him work. His back had been too bad, not so bad he couldn't get up to Sandy Keane's to put something on a cert in the three-fifteen, but far too bad for him to be able to work.

Lizzie Scarlet looked as she had always looked, small and strong



and wiry. Her hair was set in a tight perm, which she had done four times a year in her cousin's hair salon.

'It's as regular as poor Lizzie's perm,' Hannah Mitchell had once said about something. Cathy had been enraged – the fact that Hannah Mitchell, who had expensive weekly hair appointments at Haywards store, while Lizzie Scarlet was down on her hands and knees cleaning Oaklands, should dare to mock her mother's hairstyle was almost more than could really be borne. Still, there was no point in thinking about it now.

'Are you looking forward to the night, Mam?' she asked instead.

'Oh, yes, there's going to be a pub quiz with prizes, too,' Lizzie said. Cathy felt her heart go out to her undemanding parents who were so easily pleased.

Tonight at midnight at Oaklands, Neil's mother would have a mouth like a thin hard line and would find fault with whatever Cathy produced.

'And have they all rung in from Chicago?' she asked.

Cathy was the youngest of five, the only one of Muttie and Lizzie's children still in Dublin. Her two brothers and two sisters had all emigrated.

'Every one of them,' Lizzie said proudly. 'We were blessed in our family.'

Cathy knew they had all sent dollars to their mother as well because they sent the envelopes to her address rather than to their parents' home. No point in driving their father mad with temptation, letting him see American money when he knew sure-fire winners were waiting up in Sandy Keane's betting shop dying to gobble it up.

'Well, I'd like to be with you tonight,' Cathy said truthfully. 'But instead I'll be disappointing Hannah Mitchell with whatever food I produce.'

'You took it on yourself,' Muttie said.

'Please be polite to her, Cathy, I've found over all the years it's better to humour her.'

'You did, Mam, you humoured her all right,' Cathy said grimly.

'But you won't start making a speech or anything, not tonight?'

'No, Mam. Relax. I agreed to do it, and if it kills me I will do it well and with a smile on my face.'

'I wish Tom Feather was going with you, he'd put manners on you,' Lizzie said.

'Neil will be there, Mam, he'll keep me in control.' Cathy kissed them goodbye and practised her smile as she drove to Oaklands.

Hannah Mitchell had contract cleaners these days, now that there was no more Poor Lizzie to terrorise. Twice a week four women swept in, taking no nonsense from anyone, vacuuming, polishing, ironing and bringing their own equipment in a van.

They charged time and a half for working on New Year's Eve. Hannah had protested at this.

'Up to you, Mrs Mitchell,' they had said cheerfully, in the knowledge that plenty of other people would be glad to have their house cleaned on a day like this. She gave in speedily. Things were definitely not like they used to be. Still, it had been worth it, the house looked very well, and at least she wouldn't have to lift a finger. That Cathy with all her grand notions *was* in fact able to serve a presentable meal. She would be coming shortly in that big white deplorable-looking van: even the women who came to clean the house twice a week travelled in a far more respectable vehicle. She would come into the kitchen huffing and puffing and throwing her weight about. Poor Lizzie's daughter, behaving as if she owned the place. Which, alas, she probably would one day. But not yet, Hannah reminded herself with her mouth in a hard line.

Hannah Mitchell's husband Jock stopped on the way home from his office to have a drink. He felt he needed one before facing Hannah. She was always nervous and tense before a party but this time it would be magnified many times – she so hated having Neil's wife Cathy doing the catering for her. She had refused to accept that the couple were happy, well suited and unlikely to leave each other no matter how she schemed. Cathy would always be Poor Lizzie's daughter, and somehow a villain who had seduced their son in Greece. She had always believed that the girl had got pregnant deliberately to trap him, and been most surprised when this had proved not to be the case.

He drank his single malt Scotch thoughtfully and wished that he didn't have to worry about this as well as everything else. Jock Mitchell had been severely disturbed by a conversation with his nephew Walter today. Walter, an idle layabout, the eldest son of Jock's brother Kenneth, had revealed that all was not well at The Beeches, his family home. In fact, things were very far from well. Walter said that his father had gone to England just before

Christmas, and had left no indication of his whereabouts. Walter's mother, not known to be a strong character, was reacting to this turn of events by a heavy reliance on vodka. The problem was their nine-year-old twins, Simon and Maud. What was happening to them? Walter had shrugged; he really didn't know. They were managing, he implied. Jock Mitchell sighed again.

As she arrived at Oaklands, Cathy heard her mobile phone ring. She pulled in and answered.

'Hon, I'm not going to be there to help you unload,' he apologised.

'Neil, it doesn't matter, I knew it would go on a bit.'

'It's more complicated than we thought. Listen, ask my dad to help you in with all those crates, don't go dragging and pulling just to show my mother how wonderful you are.'

'Oh she knows *that*,' Cathy groaned.

'Walter should be there ...'

'If I were to wait for Walter to help me unload and set up, the party would be halfway through ... Stop fussing and go back to what you have to do.'

Cathy told herself that there were only six hours or so of this year left, only six hours or so of being nice to Hannah. What was the very worst that could happen? The very worst was that the food was awful and no one would eat it, but that could not happen, because the food was terrific. The second worst thing was that there wasn't enough of it, but there was enough in this van to feed half of Dublin.

'There are no problems,' Cathy said aloud as she looked down the tree-lined drive to the house where Neil had been born. A gentleman's residence, a hundred and fifty years old, square and satisfying somehow, with its four bedrooms above the large door and the bay windows on either side of it. Ivy and virginia creeper covered the walls and in front lay a huge gravelled circle where tonight twenty expensive cars would be parked. A house as different from St Jarlath's Crescent as you could imagine.

Shona Burke often stayed late in her office up on the management floors of Haywards – she had her own key and code to get in and out. She had listened to the programme on the radio and was wondering if she really and truly had a choice about how she would spend New Year's Eve. Long ago in a happier life there would have

been a celebration, but not in the last few years. She had no idea what her sisters and brothers would do, and if they would go to the hospital. Shona would make the hospital visit out of duty, of course, but it was pointless, she wouldn't be recognised or acknowledged.

Then she would go to Ricky's party in his studio. Everyone liked Ricky. A pleasant, easygoing photographer, he would gather a lot of people and make a buzz for them all. There would be a fair crowd of poseurs and empty-headed types dying to see themselves in the gossip columns . . . She was unlikely to meet the love of her life or even a temporary soulmate, but still Shona would dress up and go there simply because she did not see herself as the kind of person who would sit alone in her apartment in Glenstar.

The question nagged her, what would she *really* like to be doing tonight? It was so hard to answer because everything had changed so much. The good days were over, and it was impossible to imagine doing something that would make her really happy. So in the absence of that, Ricky's would do fine.

Marcella was painting her toenails. She had new evening sandals which she'd bought at a thrift shop. She showed them proudly to Tom. They had been barely worn; someone must have bought them and found they didn't suit.

'They must have cost a fortune new,' she said happily, examining them carefully.

'Are you happy?' Tom asked.

'Very,' she said. 'And you?'

'Oh, very, very,' he laughed. Was that strictly true? He didn't want to go to this party at all. But just looking at her did make him happy. He couldn't really believe that such a beautiful girl, who could have had anyone she wanted, really found him enough for her. Tom had no idea that he was attractive, he thought he was big and clumsy. He honestly believed that all the admiring glances they got as a couple were directed at Marcella alone . . .

'I heard a radio programme saying people were never happy,' she began.

'I know, I heard it too,' Tom said.

'I was just thinking how lucky we were; poor Cathy and Neil can't do what *they* want tonight.' Marcella stood in her thong and picked up a tiny red garment from the back of a chair.

'Yeah, Cathy will be there now, at her mother-in-law's house, laying up the tables. I hope she keeps her temper.'

'Well she'll have to, it's work, it's professional. We all have to at work,' said Marcella, who had bent over too many imperious hands already in her life, and wanted her day in the sunshine, walking down the ramp as a model.

'Neil will be there and that pup of a cousin he has, so she should be all right.' Tom still sounded doubtful.

Marcella had put on the red outfit. It was actually a dress, short and tight, clinging to her and leaving nothing to the imagination.

'Marcella, are you really wearing that to the party?'

'Don't you like it?' her face clouded over immediately.

'Well of course I like it. You look beautiful. It's just that maybe I'd like you to wear it here, for us, not for everyone else as well to see you.'

'But Tom, it's a party dress,' she cried, stricken.

He pulled himself together at once.

'Of course it is, and you'll be the success of the night.'

'So what did you mean . . . ?'

'Mean? I meant nothing. I meant you were so gorgeous I didn't want to share you with people . . . but take no notice. I didn't really mean that at all.'

'I thought you'd be proud of me,' she said.

'I am so proud you'll never know,' he reassured her. And she *was* a beauty. He must have been insane to have had that sudden reaction.

Hannah Mitchell stood in her navy wool dress, her hair hard and lacquered from her New Year's Eve visit to Haywards. She always dressed as if she were going out to a ladies' lunch. Cathy never remembered her wearing a pinafore or even an old skirt. But then, if you did no housework, what was the point of wearing things like that?

Hannah watched Cathy carry in all the boxes and crates, one by one, standing in her way and fussing and blocking her journey. She offered to carry nothing at all. Instead, she was hoping the crates wouldn't mark the wallpaper, and wondering where would Cathy put the van so that it would be out of the way when people came. Grimly, Cathy marched to and from the kitchen of Oaklands. She turned on the ovens, laid her tea towels on the backs of chairs, placed her bag of ice in the freezer and began to sort out the food. It

would be useless asking Hannah Mitchell to leave her alone, to go upstairs and lie down. She would stay put, fuss and irritate until the guests arrived.

'Will Mr Mitchell be home shortly?' Cathy thought she might ask him to help her unpack the glasses.

'I don't know, Cathy; really, it's not up to me to police Mr Mitchell about what time he comes home.' Cathy felt her neck redden in rage. How dare this woman be so offensive and patronising. But she knew she stood alone in this resentment. Neil would shrug if she told him. Her mother would beg her not to annoy Mrs Mitchell any further. Even her aunt Geraldine, who could normally be relied on for encouragement and support, would say what the hell. It just proved that Hannah Mitchell was an insecure nobody, not anyone to waste time worrying over. Cathy began to peel the foil from the dishes she had prepared.

'Is that fish? Not everyone eats it, you know.' Hannah had her very concerned face on now.

'I know, Mrs Mitchell, some people don't, which is why there's a choice, you see.'

'But they mightn't know.'

'I think they will. I'll tell them.'

'But didn't you say it was a buffet?'

'Yes, but I'll be behind it serving, so I'll tell them.'

'Tell them?' Hannah Mitchell was bewildered.

Cathy wondered was there a possibility that her mother-in-law was actually a halfwit.

'Like asking them would they like fish in a sea-food sauce, or herbed chicken, or the vegetarian goulash,' she said.

Mrs Mitchell tried but found it hard to find fault with this.

'Yes, well,' she said eventually.

'So will I just get on with it now, do you think?' she asked.

'Cathy, my dear, may I ask who is stopping you?' Hannah said with her face hard and unforgiving at all this confidence in Poor Lizzie Scarlet's girl.

Neil looked at his watch. Every single person in this room had some kind of New Year's function to go to except the student that they had all gathered to protect. They would be finished soon, but nobody must be seen to hasten away. It would be terrible for the man whose future hung in the balance if he thought that the civil rights activists, the social workers and lawyers were more interested

in their own night's fun and games than they were in his predicament. He was trying to reassure this young Nigerian that there would be justice and a welcome for him in Ireland. Neil would not let Jonathan spend the dawn of a New Year on his own.

'When we're through here, you can come back to my parents' house,' he said. He was already late, but it couldn't be helped.

The big sad eyes looked at him. 'You don't have to, you know.'

'I know I don't have to, and a barrel of laughs it won't be, but my wife is doing the catering so the food will be good. My parents' friends are . . . well, how will I put it . . . a bit dead.'

'I'm okay, Neil, truly, you're doing so much for me and all this has delayed you from it already . . .'

'We'll go through it once more,' Neil said to the meeting, 'then Jonathan and I will go and party.' He saw them look at him in admiration. Neil Mitchell really went the distance. He felt a bit guilty at not being there to help Cathy as he had promised, but this was much more important – she'd understand. Cathy would be fine. His father and his cousin Walter would be there to help her by now . . . Everything would be fine.

Hannah still hovered, which meant that Cathy had to talk, answer inane questions, pat down unnecessary worries and even bring up topics of conversation, lest she be considered moody.

'It's nearly seven-thirty, Walter will be here any minute,' Cathy said desperately. She could have got things done far faster had she not been under the scrutiny of the most critical eyes in the western hemisphere. Fingers could have been used more often than they were, things could have been flung into places rather than placed elegantly.

'Oh, Walter! Like all young people, I'm sure he'll be late.' There was a sniff of disapproval and resignation.

'I don't think so, Mrs Mitchell, not tonight. It's a professional engagement, he's being paid from seven-thirty until twelve-thirty. That's a five-hour booking. I'm certain he won't let us down.'

Cathy wasn't at all sure of this; she had no evidence that Walter Mitchell was reliable. But at least it was going to be known what his terms of business were. And if he didn't turn up, then his own relations would have been made aware of his shortcomings. She heard someone outside.

'Ah, that must be Walter now,' she said. 'I knew he'd be on time.'

It was in fact Jock Mitchell, who came into the kitchen rubbing his hands.

'This looks just great, Cathy. I say, Hannah, isn't this an amazing spread?'

'Yes,' said his wife.

'Welcome home, Mr Mitchell. I thought it was Walter. He's actually working for me tonight,' Cathy said. 'Did he leave the office at the same time as you, by any chance?'

'Ages earlier,' her father-in-law said. 'Boy keeps his own time. I'm getting a bit of stick from the partners over him, as it happens.'

Hannah Mitchell hated family business being discussed in front of Cathy.

'Why don't you come upstairs and have a shower, dear? The guests will be here in half an hour,' she said crisply.

'Fine, fine. Don't you want any help, Cathy?'

'No, not at all. As I say, my wine waiter will be here shortly,' Cathy said.

'And Neil?' he asked.

'At a consultation. He'll be along when he can.'

She was alone in the kitchen. So far she was surviving, but it was only fifteen minutes before eight o'clock. There were hours and hours to go.

Ricky's party was only starting at nine, and they would go much later, so Tom Feather had plenty of time to go up to his parents and wish them a Happy New Year. He caught the bus from outside the door of Stoneyfield flats, and it went directly to Fatima, his mother and father's house, weighed down with statues and holy pictures. He longed to call Cathy and ask how it was all going, but she said she had better not bring her mobile into the house – it seemed to irritate Hannah Mitchell beyond all reason. She would leave it in the van. Cathy would not appreciate being telephoned and called to the hall at Oaklands. He would have to leave it.

Tom sat on the bus, his heart heavy. He was so stupid to be upset by that skimpy dress Marcella was wearing. She was dressing up for him; she loved only him. He was so mean-spirited to grudge the hour it took to go and sit with his parents in their cluttered sitting room. It was just that they were so pessimistic, so willing to see the downside of things, while he had always been the reverse. He was a fool to be upset because they hadn't found premises for the new



company yet. They would: it took time, that's what everyone said, and then the right place would come along.

Tom's mother said they had heard nothing from Tom's brother Joe, nothing at all even on Christmas Day. There were phones in London, he could lift one of them. Tom's father said that there was an article in the paper saying that the building industry was going to go through the roof, and yet Tom Feather was chasing after moonbeams trying to set up a catering company instead of entering a ready-made office. Tom was pleasant and cheerful, and talked on and on until his jaw ached, hugged them both and said he must go back.

'I don't suppose you'd make an honest woman out of Marcella next year. Could that be your resolution?' his mother asked.

'Mam, I wanted to marry Marcella about twenty-five minutes after I met her. I must have asked her at least a hundred times . . . ' He spread his hands out helplessly. They knew he was telling the truth.

Walter Mitchell looked at his watch in the pub where a group of his friends were having a New Year's Eve drink.

'Shit, it's eight o'clock,' he said.

Cathy would be like a devil over this, but still, Uncle Jock and Aunt Hannah would stand up for him. That was the great thing about being family.

There was no sign of Walter, so Cathy unpacked the glasses, filled thirty of them with a sugar lump and a teaspoon of brandy and laid them on a tray. Later, once the guests arrived, she would top the glasses up with champagne. That boy was meant to be doing this while she got her trays of canapés ready. Cathy caught sight of herself in the hall mirror – she looked flushed and uneasy. Wisps of hair were escaping from the ribbon that tied it back. This would not do.

She went into the downstairs cloakroom and smoothed a beige liquid make-up over her face and neck. She dampened her hair and tied it more expertly back. This is where she needed Marcella, to put something magical on her eyes. Cathy hunted in her handbag. There was a stubby brown pencil, and she made a few stabs at herself with that. She put on her clean white shirt and her scarlet skirt. It looked a *bit* better, she thought. How wonderful if she got a lot of business for the company out of this party! But Cathy knew