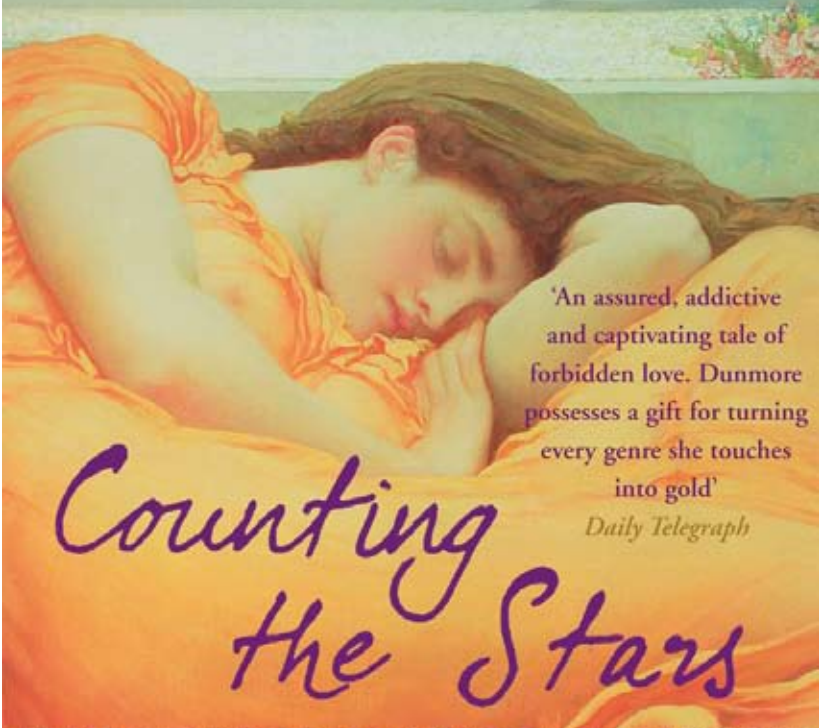




Helen Dunmore



'An assured, addictive
and captivating tale of
forbidden love. Dunmore
possesses a gift for turning
every genre she touches
into gold'

Daily Telegraph

Counting the Stars



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by
Helen Dunmore

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One

This is how it begins.

In the bolt-hole Manlius lent us: you remember it, of course you do. Your blank, blind stare doesn't fool me for a second.

You didn't think much of it.

'What a dump,' you said that first time, looking around the room while my heart thudded with the terror of having you there. Cold fire ran over my skin. My hands trembled. Metal clanged in my head as if someone were beating out a sword there. It was so loud that I could scarcely hear the words you said, let alone speak to you.

Manlius' little villa looked out of place next to the apartment blocks that towered on either side of it. It was a piece of the country in the city, a remnant of family history from long ago. It's gone now. There was a fire – a very convenient fire – when the slave janitor happened to be absent on his master's business. So no more villa, just a tasty, smouldering piece of land that was immediately snapped up by a property developer. Manlius probably took a rock-bottom price from him, not realizing the value of the plot, and never suspecting that his steadfast old slave might be pocketing a backhander.

That's Manlius' world. Slaves are treated well, and in return they offer loyal service. Wives are discreet, faithful and fertile. He's only broken the rules once in his life, when he married a girl who 'wasn't really one of us'.

You are such an innocent, Manlius. They've already thrown up a five-storey building on the site of your villa, to match the apartment blocks on either side. I don't need an abacus to reckon up the profit that the developer made. As usual the new place

has a handsome façade, and not much behind it. It's built on air, held up by a few beams here and there and a random scattering of brick. It'll fall down in a decade or two but until then it'll hold dozens and dozens of juicy tenants. They'll be squeezed until the profit gushes like blood. They'll be crushed flat like bedbugs when the floors collapse, or burned alive when fire traps them on the top storey. That's how we build in Rome these days.

Manlius' little villa was planted in the earth, like an olive tree knotted into its soil, taking flavour and colour from it. No one had lived there for years, apart from the old slave. The fountains were dry, and there wasn't a single flower growing in the courtyard.

'We've got nowhere to go,' I'd said to Manlius one day. 'She can't come to my place. I can't go to hers. It's driving me mad. Sometimes I think I'd rather not see her at all than carry on like this.'

Manlius had the villa opened and cleaned for us. The slave brought in bundles of bed linen, wine, a basket of cakes, a basket of figs, and then he was told to clear off for the day. Even ancient hobbling slaves can run fast enough to the market-place with a ripe piece of gossip. Manlius knew I wouldn't want the janitor around when you arrived.

You weren't quite as thrilled as I'd hoped when I told you about Manlius' offer. You weren't used to poky little villas in the wrong part of town. You stipulated that a separate room must be prepared for you to bathe, dress your hair and restore your make-up afterwards.

Afterwards! That's my girl. Always so practical. You would never go back to your husband smelling of another man, with the carmine smudged on your cheeks and your hair in a rope down your back. No, you played your part in the game which had nothing to do with concealment and everything to do with appearing to have made the proper effort to conceal.

You didn't come alone. With characteristic discretion, you brought Aemilia, not in the litter with you but scurrying along

behind in full view. She was quite recognizable, Aemilia, with her strange eyes and loud laugh that went off like a fart at all the wrong moments. I think she laughed like that because she was afraid. She had plenty to be afraid of, didn't she? Your husband finding out, for example, and whipping her flesh to ribbons for her complicity, or having her tortured to squeeze out the details of what you'd been up to.

– Or indeed your fury if she used the wrong colour eyeshadow on your lids.

But I think Aemilia was afraid of the whole set-up, where she had nothing to do but cower in the next room with her hands over her ears, waiting for us to be finished. She knew right from the start that none of it was a game. We were in earnest: deadly earnest, you might say. Up to our necks. You'd have to admit that much, wouldn't you?

Manlius put a roof over our love. Aemilia connived, tittered, dropped things and made the place smell of fear. In fact, when I look back, the only one who wasn't afraid and who behaved with perfect naturalness at all times was you.

That first time, I was pacing up and down the bedroom before you arrived. Yes, really pacing, like an actor in a bad play. It may be a cliché but it's what your body makes you do when you're wound up so tight with love and fear that you have to keep moving, up and down, up and down, because something in that rhythm stops the choking of your heart in your throat. I heard my own footsteps, but all the time I was listening for the heavy slap of your slaves' feet.

At last they came. I heard the shuffle of their sandals as they steadied the poles of the litter to let you down. I imagined you stepping out quickly, wrapped in your cloak. You wouldn't want anyone to see you as you flitted to the door.

I stood still in the bedroom and heard your footsteps. The tap and echo of your toes and heels on the stone. It's bad luck for the bride's feet to touch the threshold.

You'd already been a bride. I didn't want to think of your

wedding, of your husband waiting to lift you into his arms while the torches flared and the crowds shouted and sang, and children scattered to grab the nuts that were thrown to them. In a rush of air your husband had lifted you out of your old life and into the new. Your feet in their saffron-gold bride's sandals never touched the threshold on your wedding night. Your husband is a man of tradition. He'd have made sure that everything went as it should.

Tap and echo, tap and echo. Your steps were quick and firm as you entered Manlius' villa.

'The bearers had a hell of a time finding it,' you said, staring round with your eyebrows raised. 'Aemilia couldn't keep up; I hope she hasn't got lost. What a hole.'

'Aemilia?'

'Yes, Aemilia,' you said impatiently. 'She's a genius with hair, but she's got no sense of direction.'

Your hair looked as if you'd reached up your hands and knotted it casually at the nape of your neck. Natural; perfect. Bunches of curls dropped from the knot. I hadn't yet seen Aemilia's fingers at work, making nature what it should be. Your hair shone. The shallow curve of your cheek was as perfect as a shell.

You burned so brightly in Manlius' villa. I could barely look at you.

'You don't seem very pleased to see me,' you said, unfastening the pin to take off your cloak. Before I could answer, Aemilia arrived, panting and apologizing. She'd had to run to keep up with the litter, but even so she'd lost sight of it and taken a wrong turning.

She dumped a big basket on the floor, and you frowned and said, 'Carefully, Aemilia,' in the way I would come to know well. Harsh, but intimate. Aemilia knew every crevice of your body. She knew everything you did.

Aemilia was sweaty and out of breath. She looked like a clod of earth, next to you. You let your cloak slip off your shoulders

without even glancing behind you to see if she were there to catch it. She caught it, folded it and laid it over one arm while she picked up the basket in her free hand. She vanished into the little room that led off the bedroom.

I thought that the gods had infused your clothes with your own grace. Your cloak could not help falling into exquisite folds, even in Aemilia's hands. You could not help being beautiful. The hours you spent with saffron, carmine, chalk and antimony had nothing to do with it.

You taught me all your arts in time. *'This is the brush for eyeshadow, but foundation has to be blended in with the fingertips.'* I would lounge and watch you, not wanting to miss a grain of powder as it fell from the brush – and yet at the same time I was bored, bored, exquisitely bored, bored to death – yes, really aching all over with it –

True boredom is next door to desire. It stretches you out and makes you ache until you'll do anything to stop the pain. That's before you learn that the pain doesn't ever stop, it only changes. I was alone with you and I was afraid to look at you.

The rooms had been sprinkled with fresh water and swept, but they still smelled of distant lives that weren't being lived here any more. Before you arrived I thought of crazy things. Why hadn't I sent for ice from the Alps to cool the Falernian? Why not cover the bed with rose petals? It was such an ordinary oak bed, and it creaked when I sat down. Get used to it, little bed, I thought, you'll creak a lot more before we're through with you. I'd arrived so much too early that I was almost sick with boredom and desire by the time you came.

I heard your footstep on the stone, bringing our own bad luck with you. Our bad luck that's exactly like anyone else's bad luck, but feels different because it belongs to you and me. I should have offered you fire and water, as a bridegroom does to a bride when she first comes to his house. The thought never crossed my mind. It wasn't my house. You were not my bride, but the

wife of another man. I was very literal-minded, for a poet. I had no idea that these facts could be changed, or that you and I might be equal to such a transformation.

When you came into the room the dry, dusty, used-up air of Manlius' little locked-up villa changed utterly. You brought the smell of roses with you. I thought it was part of you, and I'd be able to lick it out of you when I licked the sweat from your skin.

Of course I soon knew better. You had to have attar of roses from Turkey, so expensive that even your husband's eyes must have watered when he saw the bill.

'I suppose it will have to do,' you said, testing the bed with the flat of your hand.

You wanted me, and I wanted you. It was very simple then. Aemilia faded out and disappeared. You untied your giridle, whipped that sea-green silk tunic off your body and threw it on the floor like a rag. There was nothing 'sexy' about you and nothing timid. You weren't wearing underwear. You couldn't bear it that day, you said later. The silk of your tunic touching you here and there on your naked body was enough for you.

You wore your cloak to come to me, and no one else saw through that transparent tunic, made of silk from Kos. I liked to think of you sitting in the litter, wrapped up tightly, as anonymous as a parcel, with just your head poking up from the folds of the cloak like a bud from the brown earth. Or like the little girl you'd have been before I was even born, when you were eight years old and sitting by a brazier in the courtyard in winter.

Who knows what you were really like, even at eight? Who knows if you were innocent, even then. That is, if innocence can be lost by what is done to us, as well as by what we do ourselves. You were a child, and they say your brother came to your bed, for comfort at first. He was two years younger than you, but always big and strong for his age. *'They say Pretty Boy Clodius was a grown man at eleven.'* There you sat, wrapped in one cloak with your brother, feeling your cheeks grow hotter and hotter. Pretty Boy and Pretty Girl.

Don't let's think of all that. Back to the day, the first day. My beautiful girl. That's how I remember you, sitting up on the bed, naked, careless, showing me everything with a look that wasn't even flaunting. It was more: 'Here I am. This is what I'm like.' You drank from your cup of wine and then you laughed. There were wine stains on your teeth.

I've called you a lot of things. Bright-shining goddess, tart and whore, ball-breaker, heavenly visitor. But on the happiest days you were just my girl.

After you'd left, wrapped up in your cloak again, I wandered around the villa in a daze. I kept stretching myself, pulling back my elbows like bird wings, flexing myself because I had to make sure I still had a body, after all that.

Amazement, disbelief, bliss – yes, of course I felt all those things. It was like waking up on one of those May mornings long before the heat sets in, when the shallow hills of our city are bathed in rosy, misty gold. Everything's ahead, everything's waiting, nothing is soured or used up yet. There haven't even been any quarrels. The last wagons have rumbled out of the city after making their night-time deliveries, and day's about to begin. The mother pulls her baby to her and smiles as its lips latch on to the nipple that's bursting with milk.

You came to me, and of course you left me longing for you. One more touch, one more glance. A whole abacus of kisses, with the beads flying from side to side as we tried to count them. The smell of you after sex: salty and gamey. The hiss of silk as you dressed. Even as you walked to the door with Aemilia lugging that everlasting basket behind you, I was already begging for you again.

But not aloud, Clodia. I had some dignity then. Or perhaps it was just a pinch of good sense that was soon to dissolve in the tide of my hunger for you. Maybe I guessed even then how quickly your scorn could corrode what you'd once caressed.

I wandered out into the dry courtyard. The slave had swept it clean, but now, in one corner, there was a little heap of rubbish.

I went over to it, saw it, and a ghost walked through my body, leaving a shudder in its passing. A torn loaf of bread lay on the shards of a broken pot. There were tattered poppies strewn over them. The quiet corner of the courtyard was set up like a tomb, with offerings left there for the dead.

Aemilia's done this, I thought. Someone's put her up to it. I bent over the offering. I wanted to kick it away, but I couldn't touch it. The bread had been sopped in wine, and the smell of it was already staling. Flies buzzed thickly. The trapped air of the courtyard was stifling.

What motive could Aemilia have? Besides, a slave wouldn't dare to challenge the gods with a mock funeral. Suddenly I was sure that this death offering had been left here for me. *'You think you're at the beginning, but you're at the end. Your love is like the flesh of a dead man. Soon it'll rot and stink.'*

Now I believe that it was the slave janitor who left those offerings. Who knows what lay buried there, deep under that courtyard? A child of his, perhaps. A slave baby who had taken a breath of human air, sneezed, thought better of the fate it had been born to, and died.

We thought we'd come to an empty villa, a blank wax tablet on which we would write our own story. We were wrong.

I was wrong. I was the one with delusions. Imagine, Clodia, I thought your past didn't matter. The heat of our passion had burned it off like mist. A good simile, but not, of course, the truth. You were thoroughly married, and you had your daughter, safely removed from Rome for a 'good old-fashioned country upbringing'. You'd had the same good old-fashioned country upbringing, but with some unusual elements. Brothers and sisters growing up together, all so close. Too close in some cases, if rumour was right. And now the adult siblings were showing their claws in the big arena of Rome. Your favourite brother – Pretty Boy Clodius – had become one of the most ruthless political operators in the city, with his own private army of thugs to back up his ambitions and start a riot whenever he wanted one.

I knew all these things. Becoming Roman isn't just a question of where you live, or whom you know, or what you do. It's a state of mind. I believed that I was Roman now. I'd left the provinces and plunged into a life that kept on seducing me even when it no longer dazzled me. Gossip, poetry, bathhouses, sex with girls, sex with boys, theatre, music, who's in, who's out, epigrams, satires, new books, new clothes, old wine, new friends and even newer enemies. I was a long way from Verona, and swimming as strongly as anyone; or so I thought.

- Coming to the law courts this morning? Calvus is defending.
- Coming to Ipsitilla's? She's having a party tonight.
- Coming to dinner?
- Coming with us?
- Coming, Catullus?

Yes, I was very Roman. I went everywhere and knew everyone. I knew all about Clodia's past, but I didn't believe it could affect 'us'. The calendar began afresh on the day we met.

I can't get Manlius' villa out of my head. Its clean proportions and sober history, a piece of old, plain, heroic Rome in our modern city of palatial villas and roaring, rickety tenements. It's gone, as it had to go. That hive crammed with dozens of tenants has replaced it.

I walk past there sometimes. In my head I see the villa, more real than any ghost. But the tall building looms above me. The apartment tenants eat, drink, make love, scabble enough together for a fat bet on their favourite chariot team, argue and die without the slightest idea that you were once there, on that same piece of earth, gracefully sweeping your silk tunic over your head in one movement and then kicking it aside as you walked towards me, naked, for the very first time.