

MAUDIE

By Karen Mason

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OBOOKO Edition

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Julia got off the train at Euston and found it hard to suppress the smile that wanted to break out over her face. A simple text message from her boss, reading *'It's On'* was enough to cause this uncontrollable happiness, and she wanted to share her joy with everyone who mattered to her.

Walking the length of the long platform (she never travelled first class - she considered it far too crass), she noticed a few of her fellow passengers doing a double take as they passed her. Some, because they recognised her; others simply because she was a tall, beautiful young woman wearing an enigmatic smile - it was enough to draw people in.

Julia Newbury was the Secretary of State for Media and Culture, and was something of a star. As typical with the British media; when she'd been elected as a 'Blair Babe' aged just twenty-nine, more attention had been paid to the fact that she was a willowy beauty with a famous mother and grandmother, than any of her policies. But as many attractive women discover in life, it had been easier to go with it than fight it, and she'd given in and used her looks to her advantage. Now, all that hard work was going to pay off. In three months time she was going to be the Labour Party's first ever female Prime Minister. But it had to remain top secret, and she hadn't even been able to tell Kate, her mother, who had been an MP for over thirty years - although that was probably for the best, Kate had a terribly big mouth and had a habit of blurting everything out.

Waiting at the end of the platform was Marcus, Julia's PA. He sometimes came with her to Liverpool when she visited her constituency, but this week he'd been snowed under, fielding all the questions from the press who'd got wind that Alistair Mitchell, the Prime Minister, was ill and planning on handing the reigns to the 'throne' to one of his favourite ministers. Julia giggled at Marcus, standing there awkwardly, like a teenager being forced to wear his dad's pin-stripe suit. He always looked harassed, no matter how busy he was; but he looked really pissed off today; and there was something in his eyes that told Julia he blamed her for it. It was a sight she saw often enough in the eyes of her two teenage sons.

'What's the matter with you?' she laughed as she joined him, passing him her overnight bag. 'I'm not late or anything.'

'Anne Currie told me to come and meet you,' Marcus said, still no humour in his face. 'I've got to take you straight to her office.'

‘What? It's half past six. The kids will be expecting me. Then I'm meeting with that researcher from Channel Four.’

‘It's non-negotiable Julia. Come on, I've a taxi waiting outside.’

Marcus didn't want to talk as they walked out of the station. He strode ahead, Julia's legs stumbling as she tried to keep up with him. Anne Currie was the head of ACD Media, the company that dealt with most of the Party's public relations. Anne had been instrumental in guiding Julia in her early days, steering her away from merely being seen as political ‘totty’ and actually being recognised for her ideas and clout. But on normal day-to-day things, Julia usually consulted with someone from Anne's team, not the lady herself; and she had no idea why she wanted to see her now.

Even in the cab to Westminster, Marcus refused to say what was so urgent. Instead he just scrolled through his Blackberry, reeling off a list of the various engagements Julia had been invited to, or the important calls she had missed whilst in Liverpool.

When they arrived at the office opposite Downing Street, Marcus tersely announced that he had to go back to Portcullis House to get on with some work and that he would see her tomorrow. Left stranded and bewildered, Julia entered the building and a sudden wave of paranoia and fear swept over her. Instinct told her why Anne Currie had summoned her here. There could be no other issue that would be so pressing and potentially so damaging.

She went into the anonymous looking building, feeling as self conscious as she had when her mother had taken her to an abortion clinic when she was seventeen and had got accidentally pregnant. She smiled nervously at Hannah, the receptionist, and made her way up to Anne's office on the first floor. As soon as Anne spotted her through the window in the door, she ended her phone call and stood up to let Julia into the small, cluttered office. Anne looked grave, but she always did; she had one of those rather dour, well-boned faces that looked permanently miserable. It usually hid a cheerful manner, but there was none of this today. She just beckoned at the chair opposite her desk and told Julia to sit down, shutting the door behind her.

‘Is this about Pavel?’ Julia blurted out, not even having planned to say it.

‘Pavel Nowak?’ Anne sighed, sitting down.

‘Yes.’

‘What were you thinking Julia? A Polish builder?’

‘So adultery would have been okay if it had been Tilly’s riding instructor...or Prince Andrew or someone?’

‘Don’t get hysterical. You’ve been in this game as long as I have Julia. You know that immigration is a touchy subject. How are you going to explain this to your constituents?’

‘Who told you?’

‘Next week Alistair is going to name you as the next Prime Minister. If this comes out, you can kiss that goodbye.’

‘Can’t you get an injunction? Who told you Anne? Who else knows?’

Anne unlocked her top drawer and from it fetched a brown envelope. She pulled out a collection of photographs and passed them to Julia. She almost couldn’t look at them, scared they’d be seedy shots, taken by a zoom lens through a hotel window. She was quite shocked and almost disappointed when she saw the first photo was a rather tame shot of her and Pavel, walking on Wandsworth Common with Kitty, her golden Labrador. Despite everything, she still felt a rush of desire when she looked at Pavel. He was laughing at whatever she was saying, those deep creases forming in his cheeks, those blue eyes twinkling with mischief. The look of love was clear on Julia’s face, and she was taken with how young she looked without make up, her dark blonde hair whipping across her forehead. In the next photo Pavel was reaching up and pushing her hair from her eyes.

‘These pictures just show two friends taking a dog for a walk,’ she protested. ‘There’s no law against that.’

Anne said nothing and let Julia carry on flicking through the pictures. The next set was of her and Pavel entering the Metropolitan Hotel in Wimbledon. It was a small, family run hotel they’d used; not realising that across the road someone had been watching them from a car, photographing them entering. The next photo captured Pavel leaving, tucking his shirt in. The one afterwards was of Julia exiting the hotel, without make-up, her hair wet from showering. Julia had seen more incriminating photographs before, but they were still pretty damning.

‘Well?’ Anne said.

‘Who sent these to you?’

‘Carrie Mavers at The News of the World. Luckily she’s an old friend of mine and owes me a favour. She’s given us this chance to defend ourselves and get an injunction. If they’d gone to anyone else, they would have published straight away.’

‘And who sent them to her?’

‘A private detective.’

‘Well someone must have hired him to get dirt on me. I can only think it’s Richard. He was my main rival for the job.’

‘Let me deal with the ‘who did what’. At this moment Spencer Henderson are on the case, getting an injunction. We’re going for a super, so the press can’t even print that there is a story being done on you. No one will know anything. What you need to do is get your house in order and make contingency plans in case we can’t stop it.’

‘What can I do?’

‘Are you still seeing him?’

‘Not really.’

‘What does not really mean?’

‘Yes I am.’

‘Well you’ve got to stop it immediately. If any journalists approach you, refer them to me. Even if we get an injunction, it can’t stop foreign websites from publishing the photos.’

‘This is a nightmare.’

‘What were you planning on doing Julia? Were you still going to see him once you were PM? Did you plan to skip Prime Minister’s Questions so you could hop off to a hotel and have sex?’

‘I don’t know! I don’t know! I don’t know!’ Julia cried. ‘It was a moment of madness. Haven’t you ever had one? Haven’t you ever met someone who made you feel so reckless, so alive that you can only think in that moment? Someone who makes you feel as though you’d die if you never saw them again?’

‘Not since my crush on a boy called Damian Francis at Cambridge, no,’ Anne replied haughtily. ‘You’ve got to get a grip Julia. You could lose your career, your husband and your kids over this man. Is he worth it?’

Julia paused. Nothing was worth losing her kids for - she couldn’t live without them. But the other two....well, sometimes she’d happily give both of them up.

‘No, of course not,’ she said quietly.

‘Now, this isn’t the end of the world. I’m going to enlist the help of Wilson and MacCready; they’re a team of private investigators who specialise in this sort of thing. I’m going to try and find out who hired the private detective. You need to end this stupid affair Julia, and you also quite possibly need to think about coming clean to Dan.’

‘He’s in New York until Sunday.’

‘Well hopefully he won’t come home to find his wife splashed all over the papers. You’ve worked so hard to get where you are Julia. Your grandmother caused a scandal; your mother had you by a boy half her age and caused a scandal. Kate’s never made it past the back-benches, but you’re the golden girl who’s come so far. Don’t blow it by making people think you come from a family of weak links.’

Julia left the office with her head spinning, convinced that people were watching her, scared that someone had been taking photographs of her and her family. What if they were stalking the children too? Will, Ed and Tilly were innocent, and she couldn’t bear it if they become victims of her weakness. Desperate to get home, she caught a cab back to Wandsworth Common, and was grateful when the driver didn’t bombard her with the usual inane questions; like when the next election was going to be held; what was Alistair Mitchell really like etc etc. Julia closed the partition and took out the phone she used for her private calls. Her hands shook as she scrolled through the numbers until she got to Pavel’s name. When he answered, she could hear the sounds of a pub in the background – he had obviously finished work for the day and was blowing his money on alcohol. As usual.

‘Hey my beautiful Julia,’ he said, his heavily accented voice slurred. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘Who have you been fucking talking to?’ she snapped quietly. ‘I’ve just been to see my press officer and she’s confronted me with a pile of photographs of you and me walking Kitty, and even worse, going into the Metropolitan.’

‘Hey honey, I haven’t said anything. Who’s been taking these photographs?’

‘I don’t know, but if we don’t get an injunction they’ll be all over the papers by Sunday.’

‘Do you want me to come and see you?’

‘No!’ she snapped. ‘No, just keep away from me Pavel. It’s over. I don’t want to see you any more.’

She ended the call and threw the phone back into her bag. It took all her strength not to cry out loud and just keep her sobbing to herself. If the cabbie looked in his rear-view mirror and saw a senior politician weeping like a teenage girl, he would no doubt run straight to the press. But the thought of never seeing Pavel again tore at her heart and made her feel as though she would never breathe

again. She loved him with every fibre of her being; and had she been a 'normal' woman, she would have taken her children and run off with him ages ago. Instead she had a duty to the public and like many people before her, had chosen duty over love.

She got home and found the house in chaos. The boys were in the living room, screaming at each other as they played a game on the Wii, while Kitty barked in chorus. So engrossed were they that they didn't even notice their mother come in. Rebecca, the nanny called from upstairs that she was bathing Tilly and that there was someone waiting for Julia in the study. Julia groaned inwardly, guessing it was Emma, the girl from Channel Four who was working on the programme Julia had reluctantly agreed to take part in. She took a deep breath, checked her reflection in the hall mirror to make sure her eyes didn't look too puffy, and went into the study. Sitting at her desk was a young woman with bright red hair, reading 'The City Girl' - a book written by Julia's grandmother Maud.

'Are you Emma?' Julia asked.

The young woman put down the book and stood up, wiping her hands on her jeans.

'Yes,' she said. 'The nanny said it was okay to wait in here.'

'I'm so sorry I'm late, I had to go in and see my press officer.'

'No worries. I know what it's like.'

The sound of her teenage sons and dog was audible through the study walls and Julia knew she had no choice but to take the young researcher elsewhere.

'Shall we go out into my library?' she asked. 'It's quieter in there.'

'Okay,' Emma said. 'Lead the way.'

Julia led Emma through the kitchen and into the garden, to the little library that had been built from the Anderson shelter that had stood there for seventy years. Emma worked for Crucial Media, a production company that made programmes for Channel Four. The channel's latest project was the Irish Potato Famine, and one of the shows commissioned, traced the modern day descendants of people affected by the Famine. Julia was one of them, and the show, which was very similar to BBC's *'Who Do You Think You Are'*, would trace her family tree, back to her great-great-great grandfather who was an Irish farmer. Emma was here to find out some more about Julia's family, so they could get on with making the programme.

‘What a cute little building,’ Emma said as they entered the library. It was all Julia had ever wanted. The study was for the whole family, but this was her grown up version of a tree-house - her own space where she could keep her books and have somewhere to think. But now all it did was serve to remind her what an idiot she’d been. If Pavel hadn’t come here to build the thing, she wouldn’t be in the mess she was in now.

They entered the library and Emma commented on how cosy it was. Julia smiled sweetly and explained how Dan had had it done as a birthday present to her. Every wall had shelves on, and every shelf was filled with books. There were two armchairs, a DAB radio that was designed to look like an old fashioned wireless, and even a little en-suite bathroom. It was quite lovely, but now so bittersweet.

Julia offered Emma a cup of coffee and she declined; she just took her note pad from her pocket and sat on one of the armchairs. Julia sat opposite and wondered what sort of questions she was going to be asked - she felt so on edge and scared of everything at the moment.

‘Thanks for meeting me so late in the day Julia,’ Emma said. ‘I’m working with three other people as well so it’s a bit chaotic.’

‘It’s not a problem,’ Julia replied. ‘How have you got on with tracing my family tree?’

‘Well I’ve found a distant cousin living in Chicago. Apparently your great uncle emigrated to America during the Famine. I’m mainly concentrating on your great-grandfather’s side of the family – the O’Shea’s. Your mother is only half Irish isn’t she?’

‘Yes, my grandfather Julian was English. His mother’s family owned land in Ireland but there was no Irish blood; and they lost a lot of their power during the Civil War.’

‘Well we’re not going to focus too much on the scandals in your family, but of course it can’t help but be touched upon. After all, our history is what makes us the people we are. Your grandmother was the daughter of a parlour- maid, who married into the aristocracy and yet run off with an Irish poet. Your mother was the sexy older actress who had an affair with a teenage boy and got pregnant by him. It would be fascinating to find out if there are any scandals further back in your family.’

‘Well I haven’t caused any scandal have I?’ Julia said, using that smile she adopted when being questioned by a particularly difficult journalist. ‘My life’s

quite boring. School; Cambridge; a career in law; husband; three kids; politics. That's it.'

'But people are still fascinated by you. When I told my mum I was working with you, all she could say was that she remembered when Kate Ryder got pregnant for you and all the scandal it caused.'

'That was forty years ago,' Julia said. 'Is it important now?'

'Of course not no. But how did your grandmother marry into the aristocracy? It was hardly common in those days.'

'Much has been made of my grandmother being the daughter of a parlour-maid, and while she was, she was hardly raised in poverty. Patience Worthing, the woman my great-grandmother worked for had two sons, and when Maud was born she was so taken with her, she practically adopted her. My grandmother had a governess and everything. But of course she wasn't entitled to a coming out party and wasn't introduced to any suitable young men. The family legend is that when Maud was working as a school teacher in Liverpool, she came out of school one day and found my grandfather slumped drunk in the street. He'd had his leg blown off at Passchendaele and his stock had diminished somehow because of it, so he was allowed to marry a commoner. Maud was beautiful and well-mannered and was considered good enough.'

'A bit like of a fairy tale,' Emma smiled.

'Yes, but it didn't end happily did it?'

'I guess not. Well, we'll do all we can to find out about the rest of your family. It should make an interesting programme.'

Julia let the girl interview her, telling all she knew about the O'Shea family, but her mind was elsewhere. She wondered what was going to happen now. What if Anne Currie couldn't secure an injunction? Her whole life would be torn apart. Not only would she lose any chance of becoming Prime Minister she would also lose her husband, and possibly her children. Ed and Will were at an age when they were likely to take their father's side. Emma's words rang in her ears. What was it about her family that was drawn to reckless behaviour? Both Maud and Kate had jeopardised all they'd achieved just for the sake of passion. Had it been born into her too? Was she somehow cursed? And just what sort of disaster was she lurching towards?

BOOK ONE

‘MAUDIE’

Chapter One

February 1933

Celia Barrie was quite possibly the most annoying person Maudie had ever met. These monthly afternoon teas in the drawing room of Redlands were supposed to be a chance for the women of the 'Cheshire Set' to mix and discuss up and coming social events, and arrange whatever charity functions they were involved in. Celia, however, used them as nothing more than an excuse to hold court, boasting of the dinner party she'd recently held that had been attended by none other than Nancy Mitford and her intended, the Rt Hon Peter Rodd. In all fairness, it was the ambition of many a young woman of a certain class, to actually meet one of the Mitfords, and while Celia's story had started off as quite interesting, on it's third re-telling, it was starting to grate. All of the women here were far too polite to tell her to shut up, but glanced at one another, wishing one of them was brave enough to actually say it.

As hostess, it was up to Maudie to conduct the proceedings, but she was otherwise engaged, too busy staring out the window, idly looking at the grounds, thinking how bleak everything looked with that dull, February mist covering it. The snow had cleared, but the plants were now ruined, and the brickwork on the perimeter wall was starting to crack. Even the grass had lost its lustre and she longed for spring to come, when things would start coming back to life.

Maudie wondered if she climbed to the top of the house, she'd be able to see Liverpool. It was only twenty miles away, and old Mrs Addenbrook, who worked in kitchen, reckoned that when she started here at Redlands back in 1885, if she went up onto the roof, she was able to see the sailing ships heading out of the Mersey. Maudie didn't know if this was true or not - she was afraid of heights and had never tried; but her home city was featuring heavily in her thoughts today. She'd sent a letter to her mother this morning, telling her it was okay for her cousin Daisy to hold her wedding reception here at Redlands. With Julian down in London, and Agnes visiting family in Ireland, she'd not run the decision past anyone and dreaded the response she was going to get from her husband and mother-in-law when they returned.

Suddenly, she was awoken from her reverie by a voice.

'Do you think you could help me with that Maudie?'

Snapping from her trance, she saw Ethel Dunmore was looking at her, her big blue eyes blinking expectantly from behind her bottle top glasses, her saucer and cup held in mid-air.

‘I’m sorry?’ Maudie asked.

‘I was rather hoping you’d help me choose a selection of outfits to take to the Duke of Cumberland’s. We do all so rate your fashion choices Maudie.’

‘Yes of course,’ she smiled. ‘It would be a pleasure. When are you going?’

‘Oh you really are a Dolly Daydream aren’t you?’ Celia berated, looking around the room for support. ‘Ethel’s just spent the past five minutes talking about it. They’re going there for Easter.’

‘I thought maybe we could go shopping in London Maudie,’ Ethel suggested. ‘We could go to Harrods and perhaps stay at The Ritz. I would rather like to go and see *Private Lives* as well, Noel Coward is so terribly cheeky.’

‘That sounds wonderful,’ Maudie smiled politely, although the thought of being marooned in London with the terminally dull Mrs Dunmore did not exactly fill her with inspiration. ‘Although of course I’ll have to check with Julian first.’

The women started chattering about something else, and Maudie found herself drifting off once more, wishing they would all go away. When she’d first married Julian and entered the social scene, she’d found her peers’ fascination with her good looks quite flattering, and had played upon it. She always made sure she had fashion magazines sent over from France, so she could instruct her dress-maker of the latest trends, and make her friends envious when she wore clothes and hairstyles they’d never seen before. The rather pasty, in-bred Cheshire wives were fascinated by her black hair, olive skin and ebony eyes. Of course they never spoke of the real reason she looked so exotic - to admit that one of their circle was the daughter of Irish peasants was anathema to them. They preferred just to treat her like a glamorous trophy, something to show off at parties - after all, no one would really know that she was common, she’d been brought up to be such a lady.

She laughed at how all her so-called friends had copied her hairstyle. She’d let the neat bob she’d sported in the twenties grow a little, and with extra length, her natural waves had taken shape, and to finish it off, she’d had a very short fringe cut in. Julian had said she now looked like Joan of Arc, but Maudie didn’t care. She took pleasure in watching as gradually one by one, her friends would turn up, sporting some variation. They were all so pathetic; and while she enjoyed being a ‘star’, among them, sometimes she longed to do something interesting and

worthwhile, rather than sit around drinking coffee and talking about other equally pathetic women and their boring lives.

There was a knock on the door and Lucy, the youngest housemaid entered, doing a little courtesy to Maudie and her friends.

‘Mrs Gilbert-Wood is here to see you ma'am,’ she said politely, doing all she could to soften her Scouse accent.

‘Send her in Lucy,’ Maudie said. ‘And fetch us some more coffee, thank you.’

She looked around and saw her friends visibly bristling at the prospect of spending time in the company of Grace Gilbert-Wood. Unlike them, Grace refused to bow to convention. She eschewed the boring social duties and instead, despite having a huge personal fortune and a husband who was almost as rich, chose to throw herself into various causes - some of which were unsavoury to the good ladies of Cheshire. Maudie had known Grace all her life and adored her - she embodied the spirit she once thought she had, but had got lost along the way.

The drawing room door opened and Grace strode in. She had obviously come from tinkering with Isabella, her little aeroplane, as her grey slacks were splattered with engine oil, as was one of the cuffs of her Aran sweater.

‘Hello ladies,’ she chuckled, in that big, booming voice of hers. ‘How is everyone?’

There were lots of mumbled ‘fine thank yous’ and theatrical looking at watches before Celia picked up her bag.

‘I think it's time I was heading off, I've a lunch appointment in Chester.’

There was a chorus of ‘me toos’ from the likes of Ethel Dunmore, Judith Rutland, and Edwina Forbes-Campbell. Trying not to laugh, Maudie rang for Holmes, the butler, to fetch the ladies’ coats and respective drivers, who would all be gathered in the Lodge, drinking tea and playing cards while they waited for their employers to leave. Grace sat down next to Maudie and watched the nice ladies leave, and as each one did, commented on her appearance, saying how pretty she looked in that dress, or asking if she'd taken a lover because she was glowing. Grace knew the rumours that circulated about her, and how uncomfortable it made the other women when she spoke in this manner, so she did it all the more, just to annoy them.

Once they were all gone, Maudie sighed in relief and flopped back on Agnes’ beloved French tapestry sofa.

‘Thanks for rescuing me,’ she said. ‘I thought I was about to die of boredom.’

‘Ethel was looking quite saucy,’ Grace laughed. ‘What's got her gander up?’

‘She's going to the Duke of Cumberland's for Easter and she wants me to help her choose a wardrobe. She thinks I'm going to transform her into Greta Garbo!’

‘Well, I come here also requiring your services,’ Grace said, pushing a lock of her wild, blonde hair off her face and smearing oil all over her forehead in the process. ‘I was wondering if you fancied coming to Liverpool next Thursday.’

‘Oh yes, what for?’

‘I've made a new acquaintance, a girl called Connie Thwaite. She's a total aristo, but is squandering the family's fortune by fighting good causes. Her latest is the exorbitant rents set by private landlords in the poorest area of Liverpool. She's giving a talk at Askew Hall on Thursday and I said I'd go along. You know what Ronnie's like when I wander off on my own; so I was wondering if you could come with me and pretend you have family to see or something.’

‘Well it's fortunate for you that I have been asked by my mother to hold my cousin Daisy's wedding reception here, and I wrote to her this morning and said I would. Maybe I could visit Daisy to discuss details.’

Grace's big, blue eyes opened wide, her lantern jaw dropping open with shock.

‘You've told one of your Liverpool cousins that she can hold her wedding reception here at Redlands? Are you mad?’

‘Cousin Daisy is a little more respectable. Her father is a clerk at the Council, and she went to grammar school. I wouldn't dream of inviting one of the more unsavoury relatives - Agnes would kill me. As it is she won't be very happy. Sometimes she likes to think that I really was related to your Aunt Patience, and she hates it when she has to face up to reality.’

‘Well I certainly forget,’ Grace laughed. ‘I'm always thinking we're real cousins.’

‘So, this Connie, how did you meet her?’

‘At a soup kitchen in Toxteth. I was doing an overnight run there, feeding the down and outs, and Connie was there too. We just hit it off. You want to get a lover Maudie. Julian must bore you to tears.’

‘It’s easier for you, your female friends don’t cause any embarrassment. How would I explain going to the theatre with some hulking brute? Besides, there’s Kate to think of. I don’t want to cause any scandal for her.’

‘Oh nonsense, she’s three years old, she won’t know a thing. One day Robbie and Steve will grow up and find out their mother was a raging Tom, but I don’t let that stop me. Children have to learn from an early age that parents aren’t perfect and they shouldn’t expect us to be.’

As the only son of Sir Walter and Lady Ryder, Julian was the natural heir to Redlands. So, when Walter died in 1922, the house had become his, which technically made Maudie - his wife, the lady of the house. After years of being in charge, Agnes suddenly became the Dowager, little more than lodger in her son’s home; and she never ceased to remind Maudie that this place had once been all hers. The staff were still petrified of her, and if there was a dispute between her and the younger Mrs Ryder, they would always take Agnes’ side. Maudie had every right to hold Daisy’s reception here, but the thought of telling her mother-in-law terrified her.

Her chance came later that week when Agnes arrived back from Ireland. Once upon a time her family had owned half of Waterford, but had lost great chunks of their estate in the Civil War. But they still had Massenden, a large house in Kilcohan, and Agnes liked to go there for the winter months because the weather was more favourable. She always returned to Redlands in late February, because she started entertaining once the better weather came.

In a matter of days, Spring had seemed to arrive, and the mist that had enveloped Redlands for so long, evaporated, and suddenly the greenery started to spring to life. Maudie longed to breathe some fresh air, so decided to relieve Jane, the stable hand, of her duties and instead walked Kate and her pony around the grounds.

Maudie had never wanted her daughter to have a pony, feeling that three was too young for a little girl to be in charge of an animal. But Agnes had put her foot down, insisting that she had ridden from the age of two, and as usual Julian had taken his mother’s side, persuading his wife to let Kate have a small pony. Her third birthday present had been Corky, a beige pony that was small enough for her to fit on. Normally Jane would take Kate out on it, holding onto the reins while

the little girl balanced on the saddle, laughing as Corky made her wriggle about. But today Maudie was in charge, delighting in watching her daughter's joy. Kate was such a beautiful child, she had Maudie's dark hair, but Julian's pale colouring. Her eyes were sapphire blue - like her father's, which Grace reckoned was very unusual given that children normally inherited brown eyes. Kate was also very cheeky, and when she laughed, it was so hearty; and in temper she showed a wilfulness neither of her parents could ever express.

When Fearghal, Agnes' Irish wolfhound came out of the house and started barking, Maudie's heart sank. She knew this meant he had heard the engine of his mistress' car and was coming out to greet her. Maudie turned around and spotted Agnes' Sedan coming up the drive - Fearghal running towards it.

'Is that Grandmother?' Kate asked.

'Yes,' Maudie sighed. 'Your Grandmother is home.'

Maudie carried on walking Kate around, all the time keeping one eye on the house. Every member of staff seemed to come out to help Agnes with her luggage. She always took so much with her, but never carried more than a handbag herself. She emerged from her carriage, resplendent in her mink coat and matching hat, that snooty look on her face as people scurried around after her.

'Can I say hello to grandmother?' Kate asked.

'Later on darling, I'm sure she'll want to rest before speaking to any of us.'

Once everyone had gone back inside, Maudie took Kate and Corky back to the stables and entered the house by the side entrance, avoiding Agnes - who was probably relaxing in the drawing room; or on the telephone to some friend or the other, conveying all the boring details of her trip to Ireland. Maudie took Kate up to the nursery, kissing her goodbye and handing her over to Mary, the nanny, so she could bathe her and put her into a dress ready for lunch. Maudie then went down to her study to catch up with her paperwork and hang out the time before she was summoned to Agnes' drawing room to be grilled about what had happened in her absence.

Maudie loved the view from the study. It reminded her of being a child, back at Fielding House, when Emma, her governess, would sit with her, teaching her about all the various trees in the wild garden that the study overlooked. In the summer it was filled with butterflies and bluebells, and Maudie would love to run through it, laughing as Emma tried to catch her. The study here at Redlands had once overlooked a plain patch of grass that Walter and his brothers had used as makeshift cricket ground as children. But by the time Maudie moved in, it had

become unloved and unkempt. So, in the hope that one day she would have her own little girl to run through it, Maudie insisted that Greaves, the gardener, scatter bluebell, poppy and long grass seeds so it resembled her special place. After nine years of marriage, she finally gave birth to Kate on her thirtieth birthday, and that was the first year the garden became full of wild flowers. This summer, she wanted Kate to run through it with Puggle, her little Jack Russell, and have the same fun she'd had.

Her paperwork seemed to grow larger every week. For every invitation she could accept, there were ten she had to turn down. Some women, like Celia Barrie, made socialising their career, but Maudie couldn't stand it. She knew for some, she was no more than a piece of exotica - a novelty item on Julian's arm. The guttersnipe with the foreign looks who'd been 'adopted' by Patience Worthing; her mother's employer, who had longed for a little girl of her own and who turned her into a lady. Well, Maudie had better things to do than act as a circus freak for the good ladies of Northern England. She preferred to work with the various charities she supported, attending fetes and fundraising events.

Then there was her book. Not even Julian knew about that. In the rare evenings they were alone together, he thought his wife was merely writing in a journal, keeping a log of what had happened during that day. Little did he know that since childhood Maudie had written stories. Emma had encouraged it, often showing the tales she'd written to Patience, who kept them in a scrapbook. For two years now Maudie had been working on her first novel. It was a tale of a Liverpool parlour-maid who gets mistaken for a lady and stows away on a steamship going to Australia, where she starts a new life. Maudie knew little of Australia, except for the letters she would occasionally receive from her cousin Jimmy, who had emigrated to Sydney ten years ago. But he painted such a vivid picture of this strange land, with constant sunshine, strange animals and insects, and yet whole groups of émigrés who behaved as though they were still in England, Maudie often felt as though she was there with him.

She was working on her book when there was a knock on the door. She told the person to come in and quickly closed the book, folding up the leaf of her Davenport desk and locking it. Lucy came in, giving her usual courtesy.

‘Lady Agnes requests your company in the drawing room ma'am,’ she said.

‘Thank you Lucy, could you tell her I'll be with her in a minute?’

‘Yes ma'am.’ Lucy nodded once more and backed out of the room, shutting the door behind her. Maudie braced herself for her meeting with Agnes. She stood

up and on looking down, saw that her shoes were covered in mud from where she'd been walking with Kate and the pony. She quickly kicked them off and slipped on the pair of ballet pumps that were in front of the fire. They hardly went with the dress she was wearing, but Agnes would be far more approving of them than dirty shoes mucking up her carpet.

Agnes had her own drawing room in the East wing of the house. The only person allowed in there without an invitation, was Julian. Maudie could never wander in there un-announced, and Kate was strictly forbidden. It contained many of the treasures that had been taken from Massenden when the Civil War came. Generations of Crawford family artefacts could not fall into the hands of Irish Republicans, and had been shipped over to England the moment there was the whisper of unrest. The various nik-naks, pieces of china and ornaments now cluttered Agnes' room and made it look like a mausoleum. Maudie found her mother-in-law in the midst of it, watering the peace lily that stood by the window. Agnes always insisted on watering her own plants, feeling the staff were too stupid to understand botany, and would end up killing them.

'Sit down,' Agnes ordered, without bothering to turn around. 'Pour me a cup of tea will you?'

She always did that. Always made Maudie pour the tea, instead of letting Lucy or one of the other maids do it. Maudie was sure it was to remind her of where she'd come from - that it had only been Patience Worthing's kindness that had prevented her from becoming a scullery maid herself.

Doing as she was told, Maudie sat upon the chaise lounge and poured two cups of tea from the china tea pot, decorated with vivid purple lavender flowers. Maudie always thought it looked cheap, like something one of her aunts would buy at Old Swan Market. But apparently it was worth a lot of money.

Agnes finished the watering, and rang the bell for a maid to come and take the watering can away. She sat opposite Maudie on the sofa, observing her with distaste. That contemptuous look never leaving her mean, narrow eyes.

'I hope everything has been running to my satisfaction,' she barked and Maudie bristled. *She* was the lady of the house, what business was it of Agnes how things ran?

'Yes,' she replied. 'Julian is in London until the weekend. I do believe he's trying to buy the Kenworth Hotel.'

‘I do know what he's doing!’ Agnes snapped. ‘He writes to his mama every week. Which is more than could be said of you. I could have come home and found my house had burnt down for all the correspondence you send.’

‘I didn't want to trouble you in Ireland,’ Maudie replied, biting her tongue once more. ‘You were on holiday. There have been no major catastrophes here, so I thought it best to leave you be.’

‘I visited a very fine school in Williamstown - Lady Evangeline's. A cousin of mine attended. I put Catherine's name down for it.’

‘She's three!’ Maudie exclaimed. ‘What if I don't want her going to school in Ireland?’

‘I think you'll find my family's money will be paying for your daughter's education. Besides, she relies far too much on you. I saw you when I arrived home, walking her around the fields like some sort of stable hand. With Catherine away at school, you can concentrate on providing my son with an heir.’

‘It took me nine years to conceive Kate. If I take that time again, I'll be over forty. Far too old to think about having another child.’

Agnes pulled an expression of distaste, raising her hand and halting Maudie mid-flow.

‘Please, we will not have talk like that in this house. I have agreed for Catherine to go to Lady Evangeline's when she is five, and that is the end of the matter. If you do not provide Julian with an heir by that time, you will be thirty-five and we will send you to a doctor.’

‘Well thank you for planning my life for me Agnes,’ Maudie snapped. ‘I realise I am so incapable of doing it myself.’

‘There is no need to take that tone with me. I am only trying to help you. You are not of our class Maud, you do not know the right way to go about things. As your mother-in-law, I see it as my role to help you.’

‘And I'm very grateful, but I'd prefer it if you let me and Julian make decisions about Kate. I've also made a few decisions about Redlands, and one of them is that I am going to allow my cousin to hold her wedding reception here.’

Agnes almost dropped her cup, and had to put it onto the table to prevent herself from doing so.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she uttered.

‘My cousin Daisy is marrying a very nice young man. He's a captain in the Royal Navy.’

‘Where would a cousin of yours meet a Navy captain?’

‘Cousin Daisy works as a receptionist at the Adelphi Hotel. Tim was staying there and they got chatting. They're marrying on May the eighteenth at St Botolphs in New Brighton. Then they're coming here for the reception.’

‘You really expect me to allow your riff raff relatives to invade Redlands? Do you think I'm insane?’

‘No, but I *know* that I'm the lady of the house, and what I decide goes. Those riff raff relatives are also Kate's relatives, and Julian's by marriage, and they're entitled to come here if they wish.’

‘Well, I want a full guest list. I'm not having anyone with a criminal record attending, and no one Irish.’

‘You're Irish.’

‘I'm English. Our family lived in Ireland, that's all.’

‘I am going to Liverpool with Grace next Thursday, and I will be visiting Daisy and her family and I will, as you wish, obtain a full list of intended guests. But I warn you, I will be making the final decisions on who comes and who doesn't, and that is the end of the matter.’

Buoyed by her defiance and shocked at her sudden willingness to argue with Agnes, Maudie ended the conversation by standing up.

‘Now if you'll excuse me, I think I will take my lunch in the nursery with my daughter and Mary.’

Chapter Two

Julian was nursing yet another hangover, and he was making things awkward for Maudie as she prepared for her trip to Liverpool. She could have got the staff to collect her things together, but she preferred to pack her own hand luggage, never liking strangers handling her personal possessions. Julian lay upon the bed, propped up against the pillows, still in his pyjamas, *The Times* laid across his lap, passing comment on everything she packed. He winced every time he reached over to get his cup from the bedside cabinet, but Maudie had no sympathy for him. He'd had some of the boys over the night before, and their card game had got a little rowdy, resulting in Julian falling off his chair and bruising his arm. There was always some sort of accident when Julian got drunk, and Maudie was hoping for the day when he would learn his lesson.

'I don't like you travelling alone with that damn fool Grace,' he said, angrily turning the page of the newspaper. 'You know full well what people think of her. I don't want them thinking them same of you.'

Maudie smiled sweetly and sat upon the bed next to her husband, brushing a lock of his unruly blonde hair from his forehead. It was always best to be nice to Julian when she was doing something he didn't approve of - he had always been so easy to manipulate.

'People just get the wrong impression of Grace because she wears trousers and likes cars and aeroplanes,' she said. 'It's not her fault she's very tall and rather ungainly. I expect she'd like nothing more than to be petite like me.'

'Well I want you back by Sunday. The Hendersons are coming over for lunch.'

'Of course.'

Maudie got off the bed and carried on with her packing, glancing in the mirror at her husband, wondering where that cheerful young man had gone. It seemed that when they'd met in 1921, the relief of not dying at Passchendaele was still flooding through his veins, and he took life with gusto; shocking his parents by marrying the daughter of a parlour maid; taking her on trips to Paris and London to live the high-life; not letting the fact that he had no left leg below the knee stop him from doing anything he liked. But life had slowly gotten to Julian. Like millions of others, he was becoming bitter at the fact that he'd been left crippled in the Great War, and yet no one had ever thanked him. The sacrifice of so many men had done no real good it seemed. The Empire was slowly crumbling; and over in

Germany, that mad little man with the moustache looked to be causing trouble. Julian had become cynical and angry, and he never smiled any more. Which Maudie thought was a shame, because when she'd met him she'd thought his smile had been one of his best features. Julian had one of those handsome, and yet comic faces; and with his big blue eyes, and that wide, boyish grin, he didn't suit misery. The last time Maudie remembered seeing him smile was when he'd held Kate after she'd been born, and that was three years ago.

There was the sound of an engine and a car horn tooted. Maudie looked out of the window, down onto the gravel drive, where Grace had pulled up in her Morgan F4 - the funny little three wheeled car.

'She's here!' Maudie exclaimed excitedly. Grace looked up, and waved. She looked so comical in the hat she normally wore for flying, the goggles still attached to it and wrapped around her forehead. Maudie indicated that she would be five minutes, and came away from the window.

'That Morgan's a death trap,' Julian grumbled. 'Can't one of the drivers take you? You could meet her up there.'

'I'll be fine,' Maudie smiled, picking up her vanity case and kissing her husband upon the cheek. 'I'll see you on Sunday.'

She left the room and found Mary and Kate in the doorway of the nursery. Kate looked so pretty in the green velvet dress Maudie's mother had bought her for Christmas. She gave Maudie her most beaming smile, and Maudie felt that constricting terror in her chest. She couldn't bear the thought that in just two years, her little girl would be wrenched from her and taken across the sea to Ireland - to a school filled with bigger girls and angry teachers.

'You promise to be a good girl for Mary,' she said, kneeling down by her daughter and stroking back her dark hair. Kate nodded and came forward, kissing Maudie upon the cheek.

'Will you bring me a present Mama?' she asked.

'Yes, what would you like?'

'A black dolly.'

'Catherine don't ask such things of your mother!' Mary snapped.

'That's okay,' Maudie laughed. 'It's because Janice Chilcote brought one to the tea party the other week. Do you remember?'

'Even so, Kate should be grateful for what she gets.'

Maudie took Kate's hands and kissed her little, chubby fingers.

‘I promise to find a black dolly for you,’ she said. ‘Now be good for Papa and Grandmother.’

She kissed Kate's cheek, pulling her close and kissing her hair, and leaving before she scooped her daughter up and took her with her, running away forever.

Outside, the staff were trying to fit Maudie's case in, along with Grace's things, into the car. The boot was quite small and the back of the little three wheeled car was starting to dip down. Maudie laughed and climbed in beside Grace, her legs feeling squashed and making her wonder how her tall friend coped with such a small car.

‘Are you sure you don't want one of the drivers to follow behind with our bags?’ she asked, glancing round at Peters - one of the young general helps, trying to squash her case in.

‘Stop fussing, it'll be fine,’ Grace replied impatiently. ‘There's some rope in there,’ she shouted to Peters. ‘Just tie it up.’

Ten minutes later, and they were finally ready to go. Maudie was shocked at how easily the car handled, given its load. She so wished Julian would allow her to have a car; but he thought women driving was immoral - except for Grace, and she was more like a man anyway.

‘So, where are we staying?’ she asked.

‘The Adelphi. My folks on father's side own a suite there. Although I'll probably be spending most of my time at Connie's.’

‘Does she live alone?’

‘No, with her sister. But she's an actress and appearing in a play in London, so Connie gets the run of the place to herself. It's only in West Derby, so I won't be far.’

Maudie wondered what she was going to do with herself for the next few days. Grace was going to be spending a lot of time with her girlfriend, which meant either Maudie would have to visit her Liverpool relatives - many of whom had little time for her, they she had nothing in common with her. Or she would have to remain in her hotel room. Fortunately she had brought her book with her (largely because she didn't trust Agnes not to go through her things while she was away). So she could at least enjoy the peace and quiet, and get on with her writing.

An hour and a half later they pulled up outside the grand Adelphi Hotel, close to Lime Street Station. The doorman summoned various members of staff to help the ladies with their luggage, and park Grace's car, and Grace made Maudie

laugh as her voice would take on a far more feminine, pompous tone when she was addressing those beneath her. She was an appalling snob at times and it was funny to think she was going to be attending some sort of socialist meeting this evening.

Grace strode into the grand, Art Deco lobby, followed by the minions desperate to please her. Maudie stumbled behind, a little embarrassed to be associated with Grace when she was in this mood.

Passing reception, she immediately recognised her Cousin Daisy - her bobbed, bright red hair making her stand out a mile. By all accounts, Captain Timothy Maxwell was quite dashing and Maudie wondered what he saw in her dowdy, little cousin. Men like that normally wanted a trophy upon their arm. Even Julian, who was injured and whose worth had dropped a little because of it, had still chosen to marry Maudie - who although brought no class, certainly possessed great beauty.

She wandered over to the reception desk and Grace noticed her do it.

‘No need to book in!’ she called, one of these men will do it for us.

‘I just want to talk to Daisy,’ Maudie said, but Grace was already gone. Maudie laughed and went up to the desk, where her cousin was stamping some invoices.

‘Hello Maudie,’ Daisy said quietly. Her Liverpool accent wasn't as strong as some of the family - a grammar school education, and working at this hotel had ironed out the brasher aspects of it. But it was still evident where she came from, unlike Maudie who just sounded as though she had been born into the upper classes.

‘Hello Daisy. You must excuse Grace, she's a little bombastic.’

‘I know, I remember her from Kate's christening.’

‘Of course, you were there. Anyway, what time do you break for lunch?’

‘In about half an hour.’

‘Would you like to meet? We can talk about the wedding.’

‘Sure,’ she smiled, her mousy little face brightening. ‘We'll go to the Lyon's Corner House.’

The suite that Grace's father's family owned, took up nearly a whole corner of the upper floor of the hotel. It was like an apartment contained within a hotel, decorated with opulent wallpapers and silk bedspreads. Maudie's room was huge, with a king size bed, a desk at which she could do her writing, and a not so

glamorous view of the trains coming in and out of Lime Street. Liverpool was so grimy, she couldn't imagine ever living here.

She changed into a modest tea dress, wrapping her woollen coat around herself, and went out to meet Daisy. They went to the Lyon's Corner House across the road, and found it filled with the type of Liverpool women who had moved out to places like New Brighton and Birkenhead, and fancied themselves posher than those across the river. Their heads turned when a woman who was so clearly a proper member of the upper classes walked in, and the usual whispers echoed around the room. It used to make Maudie feel awkward, now she just brushed it off, like she imagined a film star would.

Daisy and Maudie found a corner table and gave their orders. They made small talk, largely about Kate; Maudie omitting the fact that Agnes had enrolled her into a school hundreds of miles away. Talk then turned to the wedding, and Maudie felt so embarrassed at asking her cousin who she planned to invite.

'My family,' she said. 'Is there a problem with that?'

'Agnes is rather worried about the catering arrangements, so insists I keep the numbers low.'

Daisy laughed and sipped her tea.

'In other words she's worried I'm going to invite the rougher elements?'

'Well, yes.'

'Don't worry, I won't be inviting anyone who'll cause trouble. I want to create the right impression myself don't forget. Tim's father is a bank manager down in Surrey.'

'Will you be moving down there?'

'Yes, Tim's buying a house in Croydon.'

'Sounds wonderful. Well, you're the first one of us to venture south so I wish you well Cousin Daisy. You're a pioneer.'

The meeting was at Askew Hall on Penny Lane, a short drive from the Adelphi. Grace advised Maudie not to wear anything that showed her wealth - including her jewellery and make up. She felt naked without her eye shadow or rouge, so put just a little lipstick on her finger and smeared it over her lips to give them some colour. She always felt she looked jaundiced if she didn't wear her red lipstick. Grace wore a man's suit and a trilby, and Maudie guessed that anyone who

saw them from a distance would think they were a couple. At almost six foot, Grace certainly could pass as a man.

A crowd of people were milling about outside the drab looking Salvation Army hall. Men in neckerchiefs, who had come straight from work, handed out leaflets protesting about the potential closure of one of the Docks. Earnest young middle-class woman asked people to sign petitions for various things. Maudie almost signed one held by a pretty young woman who was protesting about the fact that women who had worked in Cracknell's - a factory that made machinery for buses and trams, during the war, had been sacked once the men came home, and were now banned from reapplying. But Maudie then remembered that Julian was a shareholder in Cracknell's, and if he ever found out that she'd signed a petition against his employees, he would throttle her.

They entered the hall, and Maudie was overwhelmed by how musty it smelt. People were shuffling around, talking in groups and laughing. On the stage at the front, a woman was trying to pin a banner up onto the red, velvet curtain. A couple of men sat at trestle tables, deep in conversation. Grace fetched Maudie a bottle of brown ale from the table at the back of the hall, and took one for herself. Maudie had never drunk brown ale in her life, and just putting it to her nose and smelling the acrid aroma was enough for her to put it straight back down again. Grace looked at the woman who was struggling to pin the banner, which appeared to say 'Fair Rents For All', and laughed.

'What is she doing?' she muttered and wandered off down the middle aisle, closely followed by Maudie. With one stride of her long legs, Grace hopped onto the stage and went up to the woman with the banner. The moment Maudie saw the way Grace lay her hand on the woman's arm, and the smile that lit up her usually quite stern face, she realised this was Connie. She certainly wasn't manly like Grace, her hair falling in soft, strawberry blonde waves around her face; she was tall, but very slight, and as Grace spoke to her, a blush came to her pretty face.

Maudie felt like an idiot, standing at the foot of the stage, watching her friend lost in the throes of romance, when suddenly, one of the men at the table looked up at her and spoke.

'Are you just gonna stand there or come and help us?'

Maudie made eye contact with him and she wasn't sure what it was, and she never would be able to explain it to herself - but right at that moment in time, everything around her ceased to exist. It was as though some invisible force bound them together and all the emptiness within her was suddenly gone. She felt a little

giddy, and had to blink several times to come back to earth. She found herself looking at the most extraordinary man she'd ever seen. Coming from a world where all the men she knew were so smart and well-groomed, this Gypsy looked as though he had stepped out the pages of some fairy tale. His dark hair was woolly and unruly, short at the back but sticking out on top of his head and curling around his ears. His eyes were black - like hers, and looked at her from under an angry, hooded brow. His skin had the same olive tinge as Maudie's, and his mischievous smile belied the stern-ness in his eyes. His thin moustache made him look like a Latin lover from a silent movie. But that accent was Irish.

'I-I'm sorry,' she uttered. 'Of course, I'll help.'

She mounted the few steps that went up to the stage, and found her legs were shaking as she walked to the table. The Gypsy sat next to a fat man in a tight suit, whose unpleasantness just highlighted the other man's beauty. He smiled smugly and sat back in his seat. She saw his dark suit was crumpled, his shirt was collarless, and the shoes he wore look weathered. He was clearly not a man of money.

'You look like a little mouse there,' he said. 'What you frightened of?'

'I've never been to anything like this before,' she said.

'Come here.'

She did as he asked, and walked around the table to stand between him and the fat man. He looked up at her, those dark eyes like her own, twinkling with mischief. He chewed a matchstick between his teeth, like some sort of navvy.

'So what do they call you?' he asked.

'Maudie Ryder,' she replied.

'Ryder? You look like a Colleen.'

'My maiden name was O'Shea.'

'That makes more sense.' He stuck out a badly manicured hand. 'Brendan Meehan,' he announced. 'How do you do Mrs Ryder?'

Maudie almost felt too nervous to touch him. She shook his hand, embarrassed because her palm was so sweaty.

'Very well thank you,' she said, quickly pulling her hand away. 'What would you like me to do?'

He picked up a handful of leaflets and handed them to Maudie.

'Could you pass them around to everyone?'

'Certainly. Thank you.'

She took the leaflets, and as she walked down the steps, she glanced at them. It was advertising a talk given by Brendan at a pub called The Harp, on Hanover Street, the following Tuesday. It was about the treatment of Irish workers in Liverpool, and Maudie didn't even need to read it, because she knew how badly her own father had been treated over the years. That was why her mother had taken the job at Fielding House all those years ago. Da spent long periods out of work, only occasionally finding labouring jobs on the Docks; whereas Alice had always done her best to be fairly well-spoken and polite, and had found it easy to secure a job in a big house.

Nervously, Maudie handed everyone a leaflet, hoping they wouldn't try and make conversation with her. Luckily, most just smiled and carried on talking to their companions. Maudie was surprised to hear that many of the people here were upper-class. They obviously felt guilty about the life of privilege they'd been born into and wanted to make a difference. By the time Maudie had finished, she saw that Grace and Connie had managed to pin the banner up onto the curtain, and the meeting was about to begin. Grace came down off the stage and found a chair at the front. She banged the empty one next to her and told Maudie to sit down. As she did so, she looked up and saw Brendan looking at her; his head lowered, his chin practically touching his chest, staring at her with those brooding brown eyes. She blushed and looked away, feeling as though he could somehow see through her clothes.

Connie stood up and banged a discarded brown ale bottle upon the table.

'Can I have everyone's attention?' she asked, her voice surprisingly commanding.

'Isn't she beautiful?' Grace whispered, leaning in close to Maudie.

'She's very pretty, yes.'

Connie carried on.

'Thank you for all coming here tonight. This meeting has been called because it has come to my attention that there are a number of landlords in the Toxteth and Dingle area who are charging exorbitant rents to tenants who are already on the poverty line.'

Connie continued to lecture, but Maudie could barely take her eyes off Brendan. He was the only person on stage who actually looked as though they knew what the poverty line was, and she wondered what he made of all these upper crust people patronising the likes of him with their concern. She leaned over to Grace and whispered quietly.

‘What does Brendan Meehan do?’ she asked.

‘Lots of things,’ Grace whispered back, keeping her eyes on Connie. ‘He’s a journalist and a poet I think. He’s also a campaigner for the rights of Irish workers in England. That’s all I know, I’ve only met him a couple of times.’ She looked at Maudie and smiled. ‘Why? Taken a fancy to him have you?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous!’ Maudie scoffed, rather too theatrically. ‘I’m a married woman. He got me to hand out his leaflets and I was curious, that’s all.’

Connie finished her speech and handed proceedings over to the fat man, who was actually called Duncan Campbell and worked for Liverpool Council on the Housing board. He was also a Socialist and tried his hardest to make changes for the poor in the City. He spoke in a heavy, Scottish accent, with the fervour of a fire and brimstone preacher; and there was something almost scary about him. When he talked of men who had returned from the war, injured and unable to work, and yet forced to pay exorbitant rents by unscrupulous landlords, Maudie couldn’t help but think of Julian. He was rich and lived in a beautiful house, but she knew that only having one leg made her husband feel less of a man, and it had destroyed his spirit. Maudie could only imagine what it would be like for someone who was living in abject poverty.

When Duncan finished talking, Connie announced a break in the proceedings for everyone to get a drink. Grace took it as an opportunity to leap up on stage and run to Connie, trying hard to restrain herself, just briefly kissing her upon the cheek, congratulating her on her speech.

Maudie cringed when she saw Brendan get out of his seat and walk towards the edge of the stage, in her direction. She realised he wasn’t a tall man - no more than five foot eight. The stereotypical wiry, little Irishman.

‘Mrs Ryder?’ he smiled, although there was no reverence in his voice. He was using her name to mock her more than pay her respect. Even so, Maudie got up and walked over to him, looking up at him; partly wanting to wipe that smug smile off his face and partly wanting to kiss him.

‘Yes?’ she asked.

‘I wanted to thank you for handing round those leaflets. I can’t help but imagine a woman as yourself has never done a day’s work.’

‘How rude!’ she gasped. ‘I’ll have you know before I married, I was a school teacher here in Liverpool.’

‘Was you now?’ he smiled and nodded. ‘Teaching little girls to sew were you?’

‘It was at a grammar school if you must know, but that's besides the point. I worked hard.’

‘I'm just pulling yer leg,’ he laughed. ‘Some us are going to Paddy's Den after this. Are you and your lady friend coming along with us?’

‘Paddy's Den?’

‘Oh I'm sorry,’ he said, pretending to sound posh, and doing a little bow. ‘I mean The Seven Bells on Smithdown Road. The owner is called Patrick and sometimes us commoners refer to it as Paddy's Den.’

The thought of going to an Irish pub, full of rowdy people, did not exactly fill Maudie with inspiration; but the prospect of spending more time with Brendan did. Besides, he had her down as some sort of refined lady with no guts. She'd show him.

‘I'd love to,’ she said. ‘And I'm sure Grace will too.’

‘I can't wait to see you letting your hair down.’

He gave a little laugh and practically skipped back to the table. When he sat back down, he gave Maudie that cheeky smile once more and she blushed and returned to her seat, wondering what the hell she was doing. She was a married woman, in a city that her husband owned quite a sizeable chunk of, and here she was, flirting with a scruffy Irish man in full view of everyone. She could guarantee that quite a few of the upper-class people here doing their bit, were connected to the Ryders in some way; and if word got back to Agnes that Maudie had been acting inappropriately, she would probably have her locked in a tower!

Grace sat back down and the meeting started again. Connie introduced Brendan and he stood up to talk. The mirth had left his face, and instead he looked angry and determined.

‘Hello everyone,’ he began. ‘Thank you for sticking around to listen to me. I'll try not to talk for long, but I think you'll be interested in what I have to say. As an Irishman, I know what it's like to be spat at; to have dog shit thrown at me just for being the wrong religion. I worked as a teacher in a Catholic school in Belfast for two years, and every time I walked home from work, I would have a group of loyalist lads throw glass bottles filled with their piss at me. That was why I came to England, because I thought I'd be treated better. And I am. But that's because I'm an intellectual. I mix with people like you and don't have to rely on some rich English man to employ me. But things aren't so good for my Irish Catholic brothers working throughout this fair city.’

From the table he picked up a piece of paper and waved it at the audience, who were all silent and enthralled by this passionate, angry man.

‘This is a letter from a man called Padraic O’Keefe, of Scotland Road. He wrote to me to tell me his plight at Boxalls, a factory in Bootle that makes bottles.’

He looked at the letter and started to read.

‘Dear Mr Meehan. I am writing to you for your help because of the terrible situation I am in. I am an Irish man living in Scotland Road, Liverpool and I have worked at Boxalls of Bootle for six years now. My job is as a packer, but of late, since the new manager, a Mr Foster, has taken over; myself and three fellow Irish men, Gerry Connor, Colm Wilson and Jimmy Doyle have been moved outside and given jobs like sweeping the yard and cleaning the latrines. I am a man of sixty years old and have a bad back; and bending over to clean the latrines is causing me great pain. We are also not allowed to eat with the other workers, and now have to have our dinner in the shed next to where the horses are kept. Just recently Mr Foster has taken on some Welsh men to do the packing, and I found out they are being paid one pound a week more than I was. When me and Gerry and Colm and Jimmy asked if we could have a pay rise, Mr Foster said we could not and if we asked again, he would sack us. I was wondering if you could help me Mr Meehan. It is winter and just of late, I have noticed my hands are going blue and will not return to pink, even when I go home. I cannot stop working as I have no money saved, and no children to look after me. It is just me and my beloved wife Maggie, who is bedridden with the arthritis. I was wondering if you could have a word with Mr Foster and ask if he would let us inside. Yours sincerely Padraic O’Keefe.’

He put the letter down and Maudie wiped a tear away. This poor old man was the same age as her Da, and where he now lived in comfort, with mum, in the lodge of Fielding House. Padraic O’Keefe had to suffer the indignity of cleaning out filthy latrines. It was immoral.

‘I paid Mr Foster a visit,’ Brendan said. ‘And do you know what he told me? He said that Irish Catholics were troublemakers and thieves and could not be trusted inside his factory. I then told him I was a Catholic and, this is no word of a lie, he took a pistol from his top drawer, pointed it at me and told me if I didn’t get out he’d call the police.’

There was a gasp all around the hall. The good ladies looking at each other in surprise that someone could behave in such a terrible manner.

‘This is England ladies and gentlemen,’ Brendan said angrily. ‘Not Belfast or Derry, or even Dublin. England. And yet life is no different, if you’re poor or

you're Irish or you're a Catholic. That's why I'm organising a protest outside Boxalls. I think it's time the employers of this City knew they can't treat people like dogs and get away with it. Who's with me?'

Everyone - except Maudie - roared and raised their hands in the air. She had a good reason to remain reticent. Boxalls were owned by Cleland Holdings, which was owned by the Ryder family. This cruel and heartless Mr Foster was technically her husband's employee. But she secretly wondered if she could use that to her advantage and try and make things better for Mr O'Keefe and his colleagues.

After the meeting, people went their separate ways - Brendan included - but Maudie felt she should wait for Grace and Connie. Brendan didn't even notice her as he walked out, surrounded by a gaggle of pretty young things who had all been blown away by his speech. Maudie wondered how many of them actually believed in the cause they were fighting for, or just used it as a way of meeting rough young men.

She got up onto the stage and was properly introduced to Connie, and offered to help them pack their things away.

'We're going to the pub for a drink,' Connie said to Maudie. 'I do hope you're coming too.'

'The Seven Bells?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'Er, I heard someone mention it.'

'Let's just pack all this stuff away. The warden here very kindly keeps it in the cellar ready for our next meeting. Then we'll get going.'

Maudie had only ever been to an Irish pub once in her life. It had been her cousin Philip's twenty-first in 1919, and he was home from the War safe and sound, so the family had held a party in The Finish, on Dale Street. Even though she was nineteen years old, Maudie had still sought Patience's permission to go, and she consented, requesting she was home no later than midnight. Maudie recalled the pub being cramped and dirty, with ale spilt everywhere, and so noisy she couldn't hear herself speak. There were family members present who she'd never met before, and when she spoke to them, they mocked her accent and questioned her being there, wondering if she was some sort of impostor. She hoped she didn't get the same sort of reception at 'Paddy's Den'.

The pub was even smaller than The Finish, with just one small bar and lots of wooden tables and benches. Every single one of them seemed to be occupied and it didn't take Maudie long to spot Brendan. He was sitting on one of the tables, holding court with a group of people sat below him. On seeing her, he stood up and held out his arms.

'Mrs Ryder!' he called, clearly on his way to becoming very drunk. 'Come and see me!'

Maudie glanced round at Connie and Grace, who both laughed, and Grace gave her a little nudge, propelling her forward. She walked over to the group of people and smiled at them, managing to find a seat at the end of a bench.

'What are you drinking me lady?' Brendan asked, deliberately making his accent stronger.

'Just a gin and tonic please,' she said.

'Paddy!' Brendan called, looking over the heads of the people at the landlord. 'Fetch the lady a gin and tonic.'

A scruffy, bearded man came over to Brendan. His face was the colour of a tomato, and he was clearly very drunk. He slapped a big hand upon Brendan's shoulder and thrust a banjo at him.

'Won't you sing for us Brendan?' he slurred. 'This place is as dead as a nun's fanny.'

He laughed and stumbled off. Brendan looked around at his audience and held the banjo aloft.

'Who'd like a song?' he asked

Everyone cheered and raised their glasses. Brendan started strumming the banjo and began to sing.

*'As I was goin' over the far famed Kerry mountains,
I met with Captain Farrell, and his money he was countin'.
I first produced me pistol and I then produced me rapier,
Saying: 'Stand and deliver, for you are a bold deceiver!'.
Musha rig um du ruma da, Whack for the daddy-o,
Whack for the daddy-o, There's whiskey in the jar.'*

Maudie immediately started tapping her leg and clapping along. She remembered the times Da would come to Fielding House and Patience would allow him and Ma to take her in the horse and cart to New Brighton. Da would

always sing this song and would get Maudie to sing along. Without thinking she even started to sing, and when Brendan caught her doing this, he started to sing louder, adding an extra verse at the end, just to keep her singing. Maudie couldn't explain this connection she felt to him. She'd never felt that way about anyone before. But right then she was convinced if she ever had to leave his side, she would die. He was so beautiful and funny and clever, and he was of the earth, like her. She could live like a lady for the rest of her life, but underneath she was working-class Irish - every single drop of blood in her body; and being here tonight, with Brendan, felt like coming home.

When Brendan stopped singing, from out of somewhere, somebody got a fiddle and started playing a jig. Paddy brought over Maudie's drink and Brendan got down from his table and came over to her, crouching down on the floor in front of her.

'Who are you Mrs Ryder?' he asked. 'You look like a Colleen, yet you talk like a lady, and yet you know all the words to Whisky in the Jar. Are you some sort of actress?'

'No,' she laughed. 'I'm not an actress, and I am a lady. Sort of. I've just been very lucky.'

'Would you like to come out for some fresh air with me? Paddy's got a table and chairs out the back for people to sit on in the summer. It's a bit cold, but I reckon you could keep me warm.'

'Okay,' she replied, although she wondered what exactly he meant by 'keeping him warm'. She couldn't deny she desired him more than any man she'd ever seen; but she took her vows to Julian seriously, and would never consider being unfaithful to him. Not even with Brendan Meehan.

They went out the side door, and to the back where Paddy had a cobbled yard. The stable still stood, from when horses were kept here, but they were now empty. A wooden bench had been put close to the window, so as they sat down, they could still hear the noise coming from the pub. It was nice to be out here, below the stars, alone with Brendan - who seemed so special it was an honour to be in his presence.

'So you were a teacher too?' she said, sipping the bitter tasting gin - she wasn't sure if there was any tonic in there!

'I was, though not in a posh grammar school like you. It was a shabby little church school in the middle of Belfast. I left in 1922 and came here. I couldn't take it any longer.'

‘My Da came over here in 1890, when he was twenty. He thought the streets of Liverpool were going to be paved with gold.’ She gave a sardonic laugh. ‘All he got was a tenement flat and a young pantry maid called Alice Nixon.’

‘Your ma?’ he smiled.

‘Yes. Mum went to work as a parlour maid at Fielding House, a big estate just outside Little Crosby. The elderly couple who owned it, Patience and Charles Worthing, had two grown up sons, and it was only years later that I found out from one of the kitchen maids that Patience had had a little girl who was stillborn several years before. Mum didn't live at the house, so used to have to commute back and forth to look after Da and my three brothers; so Patience offered to keep me at the house during the week. I was treated like a little princess. I had the best clothes, a governess, a huge nursery, the lot. After a while I think I thought of Patience as my mother more than Ma.’

‘She stole you?’

‘Steal's too strong a word. I still saw my mother every day. But from about the age of five, I didn't go home to Walton of a weekend. I stayed at Fielding House. Trouble was, I may have spoken like a lady, and had immaculate manners, but I was still the daughter of a maid, so no match was made for me. I found Julian myself. I'd just come out of school and he'd fallen over drunk outside.’

‘Sounds like a great fella.’

‘He'd been celebrating a business deal. He had the bottom of his left leg blown off at Passchendaele, and he loses his balance easily. He was nearly thirty, and un-married and wounded, so I was considered the best he could get. So we married and I moved into Redlands over in the Wirral. When his father died Julian took the house over, but his mother still lives with us, the old dragon.’

‘Kids?’

‘A little girl, Kate. She's three.’

‘Is she beautiful like her mammy?’

‘Stop it,’ she blushed. ‘Kate is a proper beauty, with my black hair but blue eyes like her Papa.’

‘And this Patience Worthing, is she still looking after you?’

‘No, she died in 1925. Mum and Da live at Fielding House though. Ma's the housekeeper for Algy, the eldest son. Da helps out when he can. What about you? Are you parents still in Ireland?’

‘Me daddy is. He's probably drinking himself to death in a bar in Wicklow as we speak. Mammy died in 1907, when I was ten.’ He looked at her and smiled. ‘So was it your da who taught you Whisky in the Jar?’

‘Yes. He and Ma would take me to New Brighton in his horse and cart when I was a little girl, and he'd sing it to me.’

‘Where are your parents from originally?’

‘Da's from Limerick and mum was born in Liverpool, but her parents were from Kilkenny. Ma reckons they're Spanish Irish because we're all so dark. Like you are too.’

‘You're more Irish than me!’

‘I don't understand.’

‘I'm half English. My real Da was an English noble man.’

‘Are you pulling my leg?’

‘God's honest. Me Daddy always treated me different to my brothers and sisters, like I was the outcast. I was the oldest and he'd always shout at me when he was pissed and tell me I weren't his son; that he married Mammy out of kindness because she was pregnant by the master of the house in Kildare she was working in. A man used to visit the house occasionally, a very posh man called Lord Geoffrey Jones. He'd take me and mammy down to the sea and stick a shilling in my hand. Mammy only ever smiled when she was with him. Then he disappeared from our lives and Mammy got sick and died. Then a couple of days after my tenth birthday, this posh old lady came to our house, gave Daddy a hundred pounds and told him never to let me contact her or her family again. I didn't have any idea what was going on. I just knew I was rich.’

‘Sounds like your mother was in love with this man, and his family wanted you out the way.’

‘That's what I like to think. Of course, Daddy tried to keep the money, but in the end he got sick of me and used it to send me to school in Dublin. I was a bright kid and won a scholarship to St Columba's College.’

‘Is St Columba's a boarding school?’

‘Yes. So there was I, a little farm boy mixing with all these hoity toity lads. I hardly fitted in.’

‘We're peas in a pod. I was given the world by Patience, but when it came to it, I wasn't allowed to marry anyone in her circle.’

‘We're outcasts Maudie. Can I get you another drink?’

‘No I'm fine for now, thank you. So, what did you do when you left boarding school?’

‘I got a job on The Dublin Chronicle as a junior reporter. I'd always been good with words and they thought they could make a fine journalist out of me. Then I got talking to some lads in the pub who were members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. I hadn't given a toss about politics until then, but as they spoke to me and made me see things, I realised what a shitty deal the Irish got in their own country, especially if you were a Catholic. I joined the Brotherhood and started publishing a newsletter for them, printing it from the Chronicle's office. I kept it going throughout the Uprising, and mercifully I escaped being caught and going to gaol. But my editor caught me using his equipment and sacked me. I got jobs in bars and things, then in 1918, the bastards tried to conscript me into the Army to fight for England. I'd have rather cut my left bollock off, so I had some friends who got me out the country and I went to America.’

‘You've been to America!’ she gasped. ‘I've never been.’

‘Aye. I lived in New York for two years, made me living as a busker. Sometimes I'd work on fairs and tell the girls I was a Gypsy. They'd love it. Then I came back in 1920. Me brother Nicky was in court for shooting at an English soldier; he wanted me to go and speak for him, so I did. I met a girl called Nancy who lived in Belfast and I moved in with her and got a job at St Matthew's School.’

To her embarrassment, Maudie felt jealous that there was a woman in his life, and she had to take a deep breath before she spoke to him again - not wanting her voice to be too clipped.

‘So is this Nancy here in Liverpool with you?’ she asked.

‘No!’ he laughed. ‘She left me for an actor. That was when I came to Liverpool. One of my old colleagues on the Chronicle told me he was moving here and starting on the Daily Post and I came over with him and I still work for them now.’

‘Are you married?’

‘Why d'y fancy me?’ he smiled.

‘Not half as much as you fancy yourself,’ she laughed.

‘What are you doing tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘Probably working on my novel.’

‘Your novel,’ he nodded, sounding impressed. ‘Do you write romances?’

‘No, I'm writing a book about a Liverpool maid who gets mistaken for a lady and goes to Australia to start a new life.’

‘A Liverpool girl masquerading as a lady. Sounds familiar.’

‘You really are a very rude man.’

‘Who's your publisher?’

‘I haven't got one. In fact you're the only person in the whole world who knows about this book, I haven't even told Grace.’

‘I'm honoured. I'm published with Gabriel's down in London. You should send your book to them.’

‘I'm sure they'd laugh. Have you written books then?’

‘Poetry anthologies. I've hardly made any money from them. If I relied on them for a living I'd be sleeping out on Albert Dock every night!’

From inside the pub, Paddy's bell rang and there was a clear shout of *'Time gentlemen please'*.

‘We'd better be going back in,’ said Maudie.

‘Have a picnic with me tomorrow in Sefton Park.’

‘A picnic! It's freezing.’

‘Oh don't be such a coward. It's March tomorrow, the beginning of spring.’

‘You're insane.’

‘Meet me outside the Palm House at twelve o'clock. You will be there won't you?’

‘I suppose so. I'll wear three coats.’

He sprang to his feet and held out his hands to help her up.

‘Be thankful you're rich enough to afford three coats. Now let's go, before Paddy loses his licence.’

The pub felt so warm after sitting in the freezing cold for a long time. Grace and Connie were getting their coats, and both looked shocked to see Maudie and Brendan walk in.

‘I thought you'd kidnapped her Brendan,’ Connie smiled.

‘I was just protecting her from you Toms.’ he laughed. The two women smiled and shook their heads, then turned to walk out. Maudie went to follow, but Brendan grasped her arm, stopping her.

‘Remember, twelve o'clock, tomorrow, outside the Palm House.’

‘Yes, yes,’ she snapped. ‘See you tomorrow.’

She knew if she stood there any longer, he would expect to kiss her and she couldn't risk that. She turned and followed her friends, just daring to look back once at Brendan and found he was still looking at her. He picked up a glass and toasted her with it. She smiled nervously and scurried out.

Grace and Connie were walking up Smithdown Road, arm in arm, taking a great risk in showing their affection in public. They were both so much taller than Maudie and her little legs could barely keep up. Finally she reached them and fell into step.

‘What were you getting up to with Brendan?’ Grace laughed.

‘We were just talking. He's led a very interesting life.’

‘All the ladies love him,’ Connie said. ‘He's so charismatic.’

‘And handsome to boot!’ Grace exclaimed. ‘Even I can see that!’

Grace drove Maudie back to the Adelphi, then she and Connie went back to Connie's place in West Derby. Even though she'd only had half a glass of gin that evening, Maudie felt drunk and disorientated, and her legs stumbled as she walked back to her suite. She wandered over to the window in the reception room and saw it offered a much better view of the city than the one in her bedroom. It looked out over the whole of Liverpool and she could see the twinkling lights stretching for miles. Somewhere out in that big city was Brendan Meehan, who tonight had taken her heart and twisted it and turned it inside out. She couldn't get his face from her mind, or his voice from her ears; and Connie's warning about the other ladies didn't put her off either. It only made him more desirable. Maudie was used to being the one who had the things other women wanted, but that had never included men - no one wanted poor Julian.

Her heart raced at the thought of seeing Brendan tomorrow; knowing that she would be so flushed with desire, she wouldn't feel the cold March wind or the wet grass soaking her skirt. Maudie didn't know what the day was going to bring, but she did know she wouldn't be able to sleep, unable to wait to be with Brendan once again.

Chapter Three

Maudie decided the gods were on her side when she left the hotel and saw the sun was shining. A cold wind blew off the Mersey, but she was used to that - she even felt it at Redlands. She had asked the receptionist to call her a taxi to take her to Sefton Park, and was glad Daisy wasn't working, as she would have felt obliged to tell her cousin where she was going. She wondered if she looked nice enough for Brendan. She'd left for the trip thinking she was going to be spending most of her time ensconced in the hotel and so hadn't packed anything suitable for a picnic in the park. All she had was a long, heavy cotton dress with a frilled neckline, and over it, she wore the long cardigan she'd remembered to pack. She kept her head warm with a woollen wide brimmed hat, and wrapped herself up in her coat. She was shaking at the prospect of seeing Brendan again, but worried that he wouldn't turn up. He'd been quite drunk the night before and it was likely he'd forget the arrangements they'd made.

Sefton Park looked glorious. The daffodils had started to bloom, and the trees were just awakening from their winter sleep. The blossom gave the place an explosion of colour and beauty, and the air was filled with the sound of children playing, their sing song accents reminding Maudie of when she was a little girl and would go home for a weekend. Ma would take her to Walton Hall Park with her cousins Sara and Jack, and they would play on the swings and by Sunday evening, Ma would have to do all she could to iron out any trace of Scouse the little girl might have picked up whilst mixing with other children.

She made her way over to the Palm House, a beautiful domed greenhouse in the middle of the park. The sun seemed to sparkle on every pane of glass, giving it a magical appearance; but Maudie found herself looking at the ground, anything to stop herself from trying to spot Brendan. But she did, immediately. He was standing there with a picnic basket at his feet and a bunch of flowers in his hand. Today he was wearing a brown suit, but that hair was still unruly and blowing in the wind, and he did nothing to smooth it down.

For a moment Maudie felt so terrified of speaking to him, that she almost turned and ran away. He then looked in her direction and waved, and she knew she had no choice but to walk forward. From a distance he looked so small and skinny, like a little boy abandoned by his mother. But last night she'd seen that he had the courage of a lion, and the best personality Maudie had ever encountered.

‘I bought you some flowers,’ he said as she came near, proffering a bunch of sad looking gerberas at her.

‘They’re beautiful,’ she lied, taking them from him. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re looking very lovely this afternoon Mrs Ryder,’ he said, picking the basket up. ‘Would you like to accompany me to a nice spot for some tea and refreshments?’

‘Certainly sir,’ she smiled. ‘It would be a pleasure.’

They walked a little, and found a spot close to the lake, where there weren’t too many children around, and the trees protected them from the wind. From his basket, Brendan took a tartan blanket and lay it upon the ground, gesturing for Maudie to sit down. She did so, in the most ladylike way she could. Brendan sat beside her and took out a Thermos flask and a couple of tin mugs. Into them he poured some tea and passed Maudie a cup. She’d never drank over-stewed tea out of a tin mug before and almost dreaded it. It was overly sweet and cloying, but he’d made it for her and she showed her manners by drinking it. He took out a tin and opened it, and she recognised from the smell that it contained corned beef sandwiches. She hadn’t eaten corned beef since she was a child, and the smell of it made her stomach rumble.

‘Help yourself,’ Brendan smiled.

Maudie took one of the sandwiches from the tin and bit into it. She let out an involuntary groan of pleasure as she tasted the salty beef, mixed with the doughy white bread. She felt instantly embarrassed for such a show of abandonment.

‘You sound like someone who hasn’t eaten for a month,’ Brendan quipped. ‘Does that rich husband of yours starve you?’

‘Of course not. We just don’t eat things like this at home. I haven’t had corned beef since I was a little girl. I wish Kate were here, so she could taste it.’

‘What’s she like? Your little girl?’

‘Lively, chatty, friendly and very bright. And you’ll never have seen such a beautiful child. She’s not as dark as me, she looks like a proper Irish lass. I’ve got to make the most of her because her witch of a grandmother has signed her up for boarding school when she’s five.’

‘Why so young?’

‘Agnes wants me to concentrate my time on Julian, and producing a Ryder heir.’

‘So you’ve got to ship your little girl off to school, to do that?’

‘Yes, and not just a school in Cheshire. Oh no, my poor little Kate’s got to go to Lady Evangeline’s in Williamstown.’

‘In Ireland?!’

‘Yes.’

‘Well don’t let her go, she’s your daughter.’

‘I live in Agnes’ house and I’m married to her son. What choice have I got?’

‘You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do Maudie. You’re a grown woman.’

‘That’s easy for you to say. You’re not tied to anyone.’

‘Maybe I’d like to be.’

‘You love your life, I can tell.’

‘But a little room in a house in Toxteth isn’t the same as a warm house filled with love.’

‘The only love in my house is mine for Kate.’

‘You don’t love your husband?’

‘Yes of course.’

She realised she’d said too much and finished her sandwich.

‘These are lovely. Did you make them?’

‘No, my landlady made them. I can’t cook for toffee.’

Maudie laughed out loud at his honesty.

‘You’re funny,’ she said.

‘And you’re beautiful.’

‘Don’t say those things Brendan,’ she snapped.

‘What? The Truth? Do you want me to tell you that you’re ugly?’

‘What am I doing here?’ she sighed, looking away from him, hoping no one she knew was visiting the park.

‘You’re here because you felt the same thing last night that I did. When we first looked at each other, you felt that connection because I saw it in your eyes.’

She looked round at him and felt a little frightened of the intensity in his expression.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘When you left me last night, tell me you stopped thinking about me. Tell me you didn’t close your eyes when you went to sleep, and saw my face before you. Tell me you didn’t lay awake going over and over in your head all the things we said. Because if you tell me any of that I’ll call you a liar, because all those things happened to me.’

How could Maudie say he was talking nonsense? That she hadn't felt that way, when she had? She was just so shocked that a man could be so honest about the way he felt.

'What I feel for you, I feel it here,' he said, punching his stomach. 'In my guts. When you left the pub last night, I couldn't breathe. I thought I was going to go mad if I didn't see you again. And you felt the same way, I could see it.'

'This is impossible,' she sighed, going to stand up. 'I should never have come.'

He grasped her hand and pulled her back down.

'Why do you want to go back to your hotel and spend the rest of the afternoon crying because you regret walking away from me?'

'Because I'm married!' she cried, immediately lowering her voice, worried people would have heard. 'Yes, I admit it, I felt all those things you did, but I have a husband and a child. I'm not like Grace; her and Ronnie's marriage is little more than a sham. They've slept in separate beds since she had her youngest son. Ronnie knows she likes women, but he turns a blind eye because she's the richer out of the two of them and they live in her family home. But Grace can do that. Who's going to think it strange if she's seen out with a young woman? People will just think they're friends. If people see me with you, they'll know what's going on.'

'People, people, people,' he said mockingly. 'What about you Maudie? You're a free human being with a brain, and yet you let people dictate your life. Whoever said you weren't entitled to be happy?'

'And do you think Julian's happy? A crippled man who can't even chase his little daughter around the garden? He has to stand and watch the nanny do it instead. Do you think Agnes is happy? Living in what used to be her house, watching a girl born a guttersnipe running it, and with her being little more than a lodger? No one's happy Brendan. Happiness is a notion we cling to in childhood.'

He reached out and gripped the top of her arms so tightly it hurt. As he looked her into her eyes there was no humour in his face, and his earnestness made him look like a young boy.

'I'm happy here with you,' he said. 'It makes me happy when you smile. When you sang last night. The way your face lights up when you talk about your little girl. You make me happy and I want to make you happy.'

'But we hardly know each other.'

'Does it truly feel that way to you? Can you honestly say that it doesn't feel as though we've been bound together forever?'

She turned her head away, feeling she would burst out crying if she looked at him any longer.

‘No,’ she said quietly.

‘Exactly.’ He finally loosened the grip on her arms and she sank like a rag doll onto the rug. ‘Now, it’s a beautiful day. And despite the fact you’re sitting with your eyes darting around, convinced someone here knows you. There is no one here who recognises you. So why don’t you just eat your sandwiches and make like someone who’s having a picnic with a friend?’

Maudie couldn’t help but burst out laughing. He was as stubborn as a mule and difficult, and thought he knew best; but she had to admit she probably enjoyed his company more than anyone she’d ever met - except Kate.

‘That’s better,’ he smiled. ‘My day’s not complete unless I see those dimples.’

Right at that moment, Maudie wanted nothing more than to lean over and kiss him on the lips; and, as if gripped by a madness - a power beyond her control, she did just that. It took Brendan by surprise and he pulled back a little, before reaching round and grasping the back of her neck, pulling her in closer. She felt his mouth open, to kiss her deeper, and she sprang away; once again, looking around, hoping no one was watching.

‘Come back to my room,’ he said quietly. Maudie knew what he wanted and she wanted it too - so much. Her desire was eating into her conscience. As if it was flooding her brain and making thoughts of Julian, or Kate, or the house or Agnes or her reputation, float away. Right now, all she wanted was to be with Brendan. Sitting here with him wasn’t enough. It was true. She felt so closely bound to him in spirit, it only seemed right they were bound in body too.

‘Alright,’ she replied. ‘I’ll come back with you.’

They quickly packed the picnic away and set off out of Sefton Park. Brendan didn’t live far away, and when they turned into his street, Maudie was a little shocked. She’d been expecting the man of the people to be living in a rough street filled with old women on door steps, and children playing on cobbled roads. Instead, Ducie Street was filled with fine, yellow brick houses with trees lining the road. There were a couple of cars, and no sign of any children or old Biddies passing the time by gossiping on corners.

‘How middle-class,’ she quipped.

‘I like my comforts,’ he laughed. ‘What can I say.’

They stopped by number eleven, and Brendan let himself in with a key. They entered a cool, marbled floor hallway, with all the doors leading off it, closed. He led Maudie up a flight of carpeted stairs to the next floor; and at the top, Maudie received a shock to see there was a bathroom, with a white enamelled bath, Ascot heater and an inside toilet. Not many inner city houses had such luxuries, and she wondered how much rent this must have cost him.

His room was at the far end of the hall, and when he opened the door and they stepped in, Maudie gave a gasp at how beautiful it was. Huge windows let the sun shine in, giving a wonderful view of the neighbouring gardens, and Princes Park in the distance. The room was so big, it could be divided into two areas, with a plump sofa in the middle of the floor, creating the living area, and at the back was a big, French Empire bed, and a grand, oak wardrobe.

‘This is a lovely room,’ she said, walking around. ‘It must cost you a lot in rent.’

‘It does, but it's worth it.’

She jumped a little when she felt him come to her from behind. Wrapping his arms around her waist and nuzzling his mouth into her neck, kissing it. One of his hands moved to her breast and she froze momentarily, wondering what the hell she was doing. But as his lips caressed her neck and ear and he pressed his body into her, she forgot her concerns and gave herself to the moment. She turned around to face him, realising how much easier it was to reach up and kiss him, than Julian. Brendan was only about five inches taller than her, but a whole foot divided her and Julian; and when they were first married, and still in love, he would lift her onto a chair, just so they were level and could kiss.

Never taking his eyes off her, Brendan took off her hat, and ran his hand through her hair, messing it up. Maudie laughed, and with shaking hands, unbuttoned her coat, throwing it to the floor. Brendan then slipped off her cardigan, running his hands up and down her bare arms, manoeuvring her back onto the sofa.

‘I-I thought we were going to bed,’ she uttered.

‘I want you here, now,’ he replied with a hiss, his mouth returning to her neck, pushing her back. ‘I want you just as you are my Spanish lady.’

By the time they made it into bed, it was to briefly sleep, rather than make love. But Maudie could not sleep for long. She hadn't been drunk many times in her life, but she did recall back when she was eighteen, and Grace had thrown a

party for her when Patience and Charles were away, she had invited some boys she knew from somewhere, and had mischievously made some very strong punch and everyone got very drunk, including Maudie. She awoke the next morning with the vague memory of kissing a boy called Tristram and allowing him to put his hand in her knickers, and the shame she felt was mortifying. Now she felt the same way. She had been drunk on her desire for Brendan, and had allowed him to have her on the sofa and the floor. He lived in a house he shared with other people and yet she had been so abandoned, there was no way his neighbours would not have heard her. How could she have done such a thing? And how could he sleep like that? With that smile on his face, like he was the cat who'd got the cream. Apart from that drunken fumble with Tristram, she had never allowed another man other than her husband to touch her intimately, and it had been so different with Brendan than it had ever been with Julian. Passion was never one of her husband's strong points; he never said it, but she always suspected his injuries made him self conscious. Not that it had ever mattered to her. In the beginning, she had been so blinded by her infatuation that she saw him as beautiful, no matter what his flaws. And after a couple of years of marriage, sex just became perfunctionary anyway. It had taken her a long time to get pregnant, and most of the time, it had just been a way of trying to produce an heir to the Ryder estate.

But she did still love Julian. Yes he could be awkward and belligerent, and frustrated by his limitations. But at heart he was kind and loving, and always provided handsomely for her and Kate. Not many wives had their own bank accounts, but he'd insisted Maudie had a small amount of money paid in each month so she could treat herself to things without going cap in hand to him. Now she had betrayed his kindness by being unfaithful. But she couldn't help herself. No one had ever made her feel how Brendan did. It wasn't just desire - before he'd even laid a hand on her, just being with him had made her feel so het up, so tense, she almost felt sick. When she thought of Sunday morning, and heading back to Redlands, and being parted from him forever, it made her want to cry and tear her hair out. To be parted from Brendan would be like someone ripping out her heart, throwing it into the Mersey, and telling her she had to live on without it.

Sensing she was watching him, he opened his eyes and smiled at her, turning on his side to look at her.

‘You're beautiful,’ he said.

‘So you keep saying.’

‘Don't lie and tell me I'm the only person who's ever said it.’

‘No, you're not. Sometimes it's a curse, and I don't mean that to sound arrogant. But I've always looked so different to everyone around me. I think Patience only wanted me because I was like an exotic bird she could nurture and fuss over. Even now, I think most of the women I'm friends with, only associate with me because I'm considered to be beautiful and glamorous; and if they invite me to one of their functions, they know it'll get them mentioned in the society press.’

‘Is Grace like it?’

‘No, Grace is different. We've known each other all our lives. She's Patience's niece. Grace was the only child and I always think she's so manly because her father, Sir Giles, made it clear he wanted a son and heir, and treated her like a boy. She inherited Merrilands when her father died, and now she and Ronnie and the boys live there. She's so lucky having her own home. I wish I did.’

‘Then you could run away from Julian?’

She reached out and stroked that damp, woolly black hair, still feeling that same awe when she touched him. Thinking she should savour every moment because soon they would be parted forever.

‘Would you run away with me?’ she asked. ‘If I did.’

‘I'd go to the ends of the earth for you.’

‘I could never run away. Julian wouldn't let me take Kate. I couldn't be separated from my child. When I think of her going to that school...’

With the emotion of everything that had happened that day, a sob escaped her lips, and soon she couldn't stop. Since Agnes had told her Kate would be going away in two years time, she had kept the pain bottled up inside her, but now she could keep it in no longer. Brendan pulled her to him, holding her close, their naked bodies sticking together. He kissed her hair and grasped her tightly, and it was then that she realised she loved him. She may have only known him for a day, but that didn't matter. He was the man she should be with, and she wished they could run away together - with Kate of course.

‘Stay with me tonight,’ he whispered.

‘I can't,’ she replied, talking into his hairy chest. ‘They'll notice at the hotel if I don't come back. My cousin Daisy is a receptionist there and she's on duty tonight.’

She pulled away and looked up at him.

‘But she's not on duty tomorrow night. Come to the hotel for dinner. We can pretend you're my cousin or something. I have to go home on Sunday morning, and I would love to spend the night with you, just once.’

‘Of course,’ he smiled, kissing her forehead. ‘Why don't we spend the day together? I'm going to cover a strike in a factory in Crosby. You could come with me and be my trainee reporter.’

‘I can't,’ she replied. ‘I have an appointment tomorrow morning. But come to the hotel at six o'clock. We'll have dinner in the restaurant, and then spend the night together.’

‘Sounds like Heaven,’ he said, pulling her close once more. ‘I can't wait.’

By the time Maudie got back to the hotel, it was seven o'clock and she felt tired, hungry and drained. She asked Daisy to arrange room service to bring her some sandwiches, and when her cousin asked where she'd been and if she'd had a nice time, all Maudie would say was that she'd spent the afternoon in Sefton Park. She then went into one of the telephone booths and called the servants' quarters at Redlands. There were two telephone lines in the house. One that ran straight into Agnes' quarters, and another that went down into Holmes' flat in the basement, which of course was the one Maudie had to use if her mother-in-law was in residence.

The butler answered the phone, and even though he had finished his duties for the day, he still sounded clipped and efficient.

‘Hello Holmes,’ she said. ‘Could I speak to Mary please?’

‘One moment ma'am,’ he said and she heard him put the phone down on the sideboard. She knew she would have to wait to speak to the nanny. Mary had her own apartment next to Kate's nursery, and this was over in the West Wing of the house. Maudie sat on the little seat provided, and thought about the afternoon that had just gone by, and how she couldn't wait to see Brendan again tomorrow. She knew she was taking a big chance on telling the hotel he was her cousin. Everyone knew that Daisy was related to her, and when she came back on Monday, if someone mentioned that a cousin Brendan had been to see Maudie, she was bound to say they didn't have a cousin by that name. Maudie then remembered a distant cousin called Liam who still lived in Limerick. She'd met him once at a wedding,

and while he looked nothing like Brendan, she did recall he was short and dark haired and would fit the description - should Daisy ask.

The phone was picked up with a noisy clunk, as Mary took the receiver from the sideboard.

‘Hello ma'am,’ she said.

‘How is everything Mary?’

‘We're all fine. I've just put Kate to bed. She's very excited about you coming home on Sunday.’

‘Tell her I haven't forgotten her dolly. I am going to Lewis' tomorrow to see if they have one.’

‘I see,’ Mary laughed. ‘Lady Agnes has been interviewing French teachers all day.’

‘French teachers?’

‘Yes, she wants Kate to be fluent in French before she goes to Lady Evangelines, so she's hiring a French teacher to come in twice a week to teach her. I told her that I spoke French perfectly well, but she insists on getting someone else.’

‘That woman is insufferable,’ Maudie sighed. Mary was very discreet, and knew her mistress' feelings for Lady Agnes, but would never repeat them. ‘Sometimes I think she forgets Kate's my daughter.’

‘Are you and Mrs Gilbert-Wood well?’

‘Very well thank you. I went to Sefton Park today, have you ever been?’

‘I can't say I have.’

‘Well maybe in the summer we'll have an afternoon out there, we can take Kate. It's very beautiful’

‘That sounds lovely.’

‘I'd better let you get back. Tell Kate I love her and I can't wait to see her on Sunday.’

‘I will, and by then we'll know who her French teacher is going to be.’

‘French! At three! Did you ever hear such a thing? Anyway, take Sunday afternoon and Monday off Mary. Why don't you go and see your mother or something?’

‘Thank you,’ Mary gasped. ‘That's very kind of you.’

‘The least I can do. I'll see you soon.’

Maudie put the phone down and took a deep breath, balling her hand into a fist. Agnes wasn't concerned about Kate learning French. She was doing this as yet

another way of getting one over on Maudie - reminding her whose money provided the lifestyle she and Kate enjoyed. Never more had Maudie wished she had her independence. Then she could get away from that dragon of a woman forever.

Chapter Four

Maudie didn't tell anyone where she was going that Saturday morning. Before she left, Grace popped in to collect some more clothes and asked where her friend was off to in her finery.

'I thought I'd go shopping in town,' she said. 'Occasionally the ladies from Cheshire take tea in Liverpool, so I thought I'd better make an effort just in case I see someone.'

'Con and I are going out to dinner tonight. Would you like to join us?'

'Er, no. I think I'll just have a quiet night in, prepare myself for the journey back home.'

'Alright. Well I'll be back about eight o'clock in the morning to get the rest of my stuff and pick you up. I'll see you then old girl.'

Grace went and Maudie left it a while before leaving the room and going down to reception. She asked for a taxi to take her to Bootle, and while she waited for it to arrive, she checked her reflection in the door of the telephone booth. Today she wore one of her finest silk dresses, her woollen coat and a wide brimmed hat. She had put quite a lot of make up on and sprayed herself with Je Reviens, so she smelt, as well as looked, expensive. She felt quite nervous about what she was about to do; but in her head she kept hearing Brendan's voice, telling her she could do anything she pleased. If she chickened out, she would let him down.

The taxi took her right outside Boxall's factory, on the outskirts of Bootle. It was a large, drab looking building that resembled a workhouse. Maudie asked the cabbie to wait for her and gave him half a crown to go and get himself a newspaper and a sandwich, as she wasn't sure how long she would be. The driver gave her a strange look, wondering why such a refined lady was visiting a factory in the middle of Lancashire on a rainy Saturday morning. But Maudie revealed nothing. Instead she entered the wrought iron gates and walked across the cobbled forecourt to the office at the front of the building. In the distance she could hear the shouts of the men, and the noise of crates being loaded onto vans. A man covered in engine oil emerged from one of the outbuildings, and wolf-whistled as Maudie passed him. She no doubt surprised him when she didn't jump or yelp or berate him. Little did he realise that she had relatives just as rough and uncouth as him and he didn't phase her in the slightest.

The door to the office was locked, and as Maudie peered through the glass, she could see a young girl of no more than twenty, sitting behind a desk, sorting

through some papers. Maudie knocked on the door and the girl jumped like a timid little mouse. She got up and came over to the door, opening it up enough for her to pop her head out, but not for Maudie to come in.

‘Can I help you?’ she asked, her accent that same ‘posh’ Scouse as Daisy.

‘Is Mr Foster here today?’ Maudie asked.

‘He is, why?’

‘Could you tell him Mrs Julian Ryder is here?’

‘Is he expecting you?’

‘No, but seeing as my husband owns this factory, I’m sure Mr Foster will see me.’

‘Oh,’ the girl said, stepping back and letting Maudie in. ‘Right. I’ll go and fetch him. Take a seat.’

Maudie entered the small, warm office, and thought it immoral that while the secretary had the benefit of a coal fire and thick windows to keep her warm; the poor Irish workers were kept outside in the freezing cold, like dogs. It seemed so wrong that so few were allowed to live a life of privilege, when so many had nothing to call their own. She could understand why Brendan was so angry. And she felt guilty for being part of the privileged classes now.

The secretary disappeared into a side door, and Maudie sat down at the desk, for a moment wondering what Julian would think if he knew she was here. Did he even know that his staff were being ill-treated? Would he care? After all, Boxalls exported bottles all over the world, and made Cleland Holdings a pretty penny-money that had brought the clothes on Maudie’s back.

The side door opened and the secretary came back in, followed by a tall, rather portly man with horn-rimmed glasses, and a very shiny watch-chain hanging from his waistcoat. It was hard to imagine someone so jovial looking keeping a pistol in his drawer.

‘This is Mrs Ryder, Mr Foster.’

‘How do you do Mrs Ryder?’ he said in a gruff, Yorkshire accent, offering Maudie a meaty hand. ‘What can I do for you today?’

‘Could we speak in private please?’

‘Certainly. Come into my office.’ He looked at the secretary. ‘Two cups of tea please Winifred.’

He led Maudie out of the side door and into his office. It was a dark and cold room, filled with oak filing cabinets, and there was a distinct lack of family photos or paintings - anything that made it remotely homely.

Maudie sat on one side of the desk, and Foster sat on the other, leaning forward onto it to give her his full attention. It was amazing how he had so much time for the owner's wife, and yet treated men, just like her Da, as though they were shit on his shoe.

‘How is Mr Ryder?’ he asked. ‘He was only here a few months ago, to open the new processing plant.’

‘Mr Ryder is very well thank you. But I haven't come here to make small talk Mr Foster, I want answers. It has come to my attention that certain workers are being mistreated by yourself, and I wish for it to stop.’

He furrowed his brow, feigning ignorance; but the gesture was so over the top, it was obvious he knew exactly what she was talking about.

‘Mistreating my staff? I don't know what you're referring to Mrs Ryder.’

‘I have had word from a journalist that Irish catholic men at this factory are treated like animals. Demoted from their jobs to clean out latrines; paid less than Welsh workers and threatened with the sack if they complain.’

‘Meehan,’ he spat. ‘I'm sorry if that vile little Paddy has been troubling you.’

Maudie bristled. Not only was he insulting Brendan, he was also insulting her. She was also a ‘Paddy’.

‘Mr Meehan also claims you threatened him with a pistol, is that correct Mr Foster?’

‘I didn't threaten him as such. But you have to see it from my point of view Mrs Ryder. I don't know if you've met Mr Meehan or just corresponded with him; he may only be small, but he has quite a threatening presence about him. I had a right to protect myself.’

‘Mr Ryder would not be happy if he found out firearms were being kept on his premises. Imagine if one of the men broke in and got his hands on it. I want that gun out of here today, do you understand?’

‘Yes Mrs Ryder.’

‘And these allegations about the Irish men, are they true?’

‘I bought some Welsh workers in, and because they kept their heads down and got on with things, the Paddies started complaining. The only way I could shut them up was by shoving them outside.’

‘And did they start complaining before or after you started paying the Welsh workers more money than them?’

‘After,’ he said barely audibly.

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘After,’ he practically shouted. ‘The Irish are troublemakers, always have been, always will be. I’d get rid of them if I could, but I know of some other factory owners who’ve done that and the Paddies went off, got some of their mates and burned the place down.’

‘One of the men Mr Meehan told me about is sixty years old, with a bad back and a sick wife. What harm could he do?’

‘O’Keefe?’ he scoffed. ‘That man wouldn’t know a hard day’s work if it came up and hit him in the face.’

‘Do you know people used to say the same thing about my Da.’

That got Foster’s attention. He froze a little, frowning his brow at hearing a lady call her father by such a common name. Maudie continued, buoyed by the fact that she’d shocked him.

‘My mother was still working as a parlour maid when she was thirty-four years old and nine months pregnant for me. All because people like you wouldn’t give jobs to my father. Yes, he’s a Paddy too and some weeks he’d go trudging to that Dock at five o’clock every morning, begging for work, only to be turned away because they were only offering jobs to Protestants. My Da wasn’t work shy, he was just born into the wrong religion. And that’s the reason why you’re persecuting Mr O’Keefe and his colleagues. Now, I know that my husband is having a review of exactly what Cleland Holdings own, with a view to selling some things and buying others. If Brendan Meehan was to write an expose of the working practices here, and not only published it in the Daily Post but The Times as well, Julian would be very embarrassed, and likely to make Boxalls top of the list of things to get rid of. I can’t say who the new owners would want as a manager, so you could find yourself out of a job. But if you reinstate Mr O’Keefe and his friends to their previous positions, on the same pay as their Welsh colleagues, then I will say no more about it and request Mr Meehan closes his investigation.’

The sour expression on Foster’s face told Maudie she’d hit a nerve with him.

‘The Irish are trouble and you’re proof of that.’

‘I’ll tell my husband you said that shall I?’

‘No,’ he sighed, his shoulders slumped in defeat. ‘O’Keefe and his cronies can have their old jobs back.’

‘On full pay?’

‘Yes, on full pay.’

‘Thank you. Mr Meehan will be coming back here in two weeks and if conditions haven't changed, he will write his article as planned. Do I make myself clear?’

‘Yes Mrs Ryder.’

The door opened and Winifred came in with two cups of tea.

‘That's very kind of you,’ Maudie said to her. ‘But I won't be staying.’

She looked at Foster and smiled smugly.

‘I think our business is concluded isn't it Mr Foster?’

‘Yes. See Mrs Ryder out won't you Winifred?’

The girl led Maudie out of the factory and as she walked back to the taxi, she saw the driver was reading the *Echo* and eating an Eccles cake.

‘Can you take me into town please?’ she asked.

‘Goin' shopping are you luv?’

‘Yes. I'm going to buy my little girl a dolly.’

Maudie went rather over the top in explaining to the evening receptionist that she was waiting for her Cousin Liam to arrive. The young woman half listened, just looking as though she would rather be anywhere but here - she wasn't remotely interested in whatever trysts Mrs Maud Ryder was involved in. Maudie waited in reception for Brendan, her heart beating fast, frightened that now he'd had his way with her, he wouldn't want her any more. She fretted that she didn't look good enough. She hadn't packed any evening dresses, so just wore the same dress she'd had on all day, but added some long beads, and had gone to the hairdressers after shopping in town to have her hair washed and trimmed. The young girls in the salon had raved about her Paris cut, asking if she could send them a photograph of herself so they could recommend it to customers.

One of the doors opened, causing a cool breeze to come into the lobby, and it brought Brendan in with it. Maudie had to do a double take when she saw him. He wore a smart double breasted, pin-stripe suit; white shirt and a plain mauve tie. His shoes were shined to perfection, and he had attempted to flatten down his hair by slicking it back, and around his ears. Maudie gasped, overwhelmed at how handsome he looked, but deciding she liked the scruffy Brendan better.

‘Look at you!’ she said.

‘This old thing,’ he smiled, glancing down. ‘I usually only wear it when I’m reporting from the Crown Court.’

Maudie looked at the receptionist, who was hardly paying any attention.

‘Liam’s a top journalist in Ireland,’ she said loudly. The receptionist smiled and went back to her work. Maudie took Brendan’s hand and led him through the lobby to the restaurant.

‘Liam?’ he asked.

‘I told them my cousin was coming to stay overnight. If I said my cousin Brendan, and someone mentioned it to Daisy, she’d know we haven’t got a Cousin Brendan.’

‘You really do think of everything don’t you Mrs Ryder.’

The grandiose restaurant with its plants and piano player and the finest plates and cutlery, just served to remind Maudie of what she was going home to tomorrow. She wondered what would become of her and Brendan, would they ever see each other again?

‘So what have you been up to today Mrs Ryder?’ he asked, laying his napkin across his lap, then reaching for his wine glass.

‘Well, I went shopping in town and got a black baby for Kate, in Lewis’s. She asked me for one because her little friend has one. I also went to Boxall’s.’

Brendan ceased what he was doing and looked at her from beneath that angry brow, and for a moment she thought he was going to shout at her.

‘You did what?’

‘I have a confession to make. Julian owns many companies throughout the North West via Cleland Holdings, which has belonged to the Ryder family since the Industrial Revolution.’

‘Cleland Holdings own Boxall’s.’

‘Yes I know. I went along today and spoke to Mr Foster. I informed him that my husband would not tolerate him threatening journalists with guns, and told him to get rid of it immediately. I also asked him to reinstate Padraic O’Keefe and his friends, and when he started spouting on about how troublesome Paddies are, I informed him that I too was a Paddy and that shut him up.’

‘And, did he say he’d do it.’

‘He did. I lied and said that Julian was thinking of closing Boxall’s down, and if you wrote a damning piece in the newspaper, he definitely would. I said you

would go along there in two weeks time and see if my demands had been complied with.'

'I am speechless,' he laughed, drinking his wine. 'I didn't know you had it in you.'

'You're not angry with me?'

'Angry? I'm really proud of you. I like a woman who can fight her corner.'

'Has there been a lot of women?'

'A few. But none as beautiful as you.'

After a wonderful meal of steak, fresh vegetables and strawberry tart for dessert. Brendan insisted on footing the bill, and when he took out his wallet and it was full of money, Maudie felt a little shocked. What with his nice home and his money, he wasn't as impoverished as he initially seemed. He also knew all about wine and good food, and was intelligent and fabulous company. What a perfect husband he would make. Maudie would be quite content to live comfortably, not in the lavish wealth she was used to. Especially if it meant having Brendan and Kate with her.

They went back to her suite and shared a bath, before returning to the room and making love. Afterwards, they lay together in the big, sumptuous bed, listening to the faint sound of the trains rumbling into Lime Street, ready to rest for the night. Maudie tried hard not to do it, but she kept thinking forward to the next night, when she would be back in bed with Julian - with him on one side, and her on the other, and a huge gulf between them. Even if he wanted to make love, she wasn't sure she'd be able to, not after being with Brendan. It felt as though she belonged to him now, and even if she never slept with another man again, she would be content just to hold onto his memory - to know what true passion felt like.

'So where's this novel Missus?' he asked, kissing the top of her head.

'What novel?'

'The one you're writing.'

'You don't want to read that.'

'Course I do! Go on, fetch it for me.'

Maudie got out of bed, realising the lights were on and she was stark naked. Even Julian had never seen her like this. She would always put her robe on when she got out of bed, but with Brendan she felt no shame or embarrassment. She got her novel from her trunk, and walked back round to the bed and passed it to him.

Brendan took it and sat up, reaching for his cigarettes and lighting one. He flicked through the pages of the small leather bound journal, stopping and reading pages. Maudie was expecting him to give up after a couple, but he didn't, he just silently read on and on.

Realising he wasn't up for conversation and had been distracted, Maudie got off the bed and carried on with her packing. She solemnly glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece and saw it was five minutes to midnight. It would soon be Sunday, and she would have to return home, and the thought of this made her want to die. If it wasn't for Kate, she could have run away forever.

Brendan finally put the book down, and stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray beside the bed.

'You know you've got talent,' he said. 'Your grasp of English is very good.'

'It should be, I've been speaking it all my life.'

'No I don't mean that. I mean the way you put sentences together and describe scenes. I'm going down to see my publisher on Friday, come with me.'

'To London?'

'Yeah. We can make a weekend of it. Piers, my editor has a little flat in Bloomsbury that he lets me stay in. What do you reckon?'

'What could I tell Julian?'

'Come off it Maudie. I've just read pages and pages of your story. You can make all this up, but you can't think of a white lie to tell your husband?'

'Well, Daisy's fiancé is from Croydon in Surrey. Perhaps I could say I was travelling down there to talk to his family about the wedding arrangements.'

'Perfect. I'll meet you at Lime Street Station on Friday afternoon.'

'No, I think we should travel down separately in case someone sees us. I will meet you at Euston Station.'

'Okay. Well don't you go chickening out.'

Maudie laughed and jumped onto the bed next to him, throwing her book on the floor and nuzzling up to him, covering his neck in kisses.

'At what point have I proven myself to be a chicken?' she laughed.

'Fair point,' he replied. He then roared and threw her back onto the bed. 'So, Mrs Ryder,' he giggled. 'Before the night is through, you should show me what else you're capable of!'

Chapter Five

Most women, if they found their best friend in bed with a man other than their husband, would run screaming, or throw something, or create a scene. But not Grace. Indeed Maudie didn't even know she'd entered the room until she opened her eyes and spotted her friend heading out of the bedroom door. She and Brendan were both in bed, stark naked, the covers barely on them. Brendan was fast asleep with a huge smile on his face and didn't even stir when Maudie sat up. She couldn't help but panic, getting out of bed and throwing on the first thing she could grab, which was Brendan's shirt, wrapping it around herself and running into the living area, where Grace was striding around, picking up her belongings.

'This isn't what it looks like,' Maudie twittered. 'Brendan just needed somewhere to stay.'

Grace stopped and turned to her, a beaming grin on that boyish face.

'And you decided to sleep in the same bed as him, stark naked? When my bed has been perfectly free all night?'

'You won't tell Julian will you?'

'You really feel you need to ask that.'

'Sorry.'

Grace walked over to her, and grasped her little shoulders, easing her down onto the sofa, sitting beside her.

'You're my best pal Maudie. I've known you longer than I've known anyone, and by God if anybody deserves some happiness and good sex, then it's you.'

Maudie blushed and giggled girlishly.

'How do you know it was good?'

'Brendan's just got that look about him. And you! Well, you look as though someone's plugged you into the electricity socket. You're glowing.'

'Do you think Julian will be able to tell?'

'Oh I doubt it dear. An hour and a half in my old bone shaker and you'll arrive back at Redlands paler than a snowman.'

Grace carried on with her packing, and Maudie went back into the bedroom and found Brendan awake and sitting up in bed, smoking a cigarette. She could barely stand to look at him, knowing it would be another five whole days before they were together again. She went over to the dressing table and took one of the compliments slips that lay on it, writing the number of Holmes' phone at Redlands. She then walked over to the bed and passed it to Brendan, sitting down beside him.

‘That's the number to the servants' quarter,’ she said. ‘Phone me on Thursday and tell me what the arrangements are for Friday.’

‘Haven't you got a phone of your own?’

‘The phone in the main house is Agnes', I have to use this one, but the servants are always very discreet.’

‘Okay, I'll call you.’

He reached out and stroked her face.

‘You will come won't you?’

‘Try stopping me,’ she smiled, kissing his wrist. ‘I'll be counting down the hours until we can be together again.’

‘Me too. I love you Mrs Ryder.’

‘I love you too. Don't forget about me over this next week. I think I would go mad if you did.’

For all the journey back to Cheshire, Maudie sat quietly, trying hard not to weep. A feeling as though she had left something behind in Liverpool tore at her heart, and she knew that if it wasn't for her daughter, she'd have asked Grace to turn the car around and drive her back to Liverpool. She would have willingly given up the luxury of Redlands for Brendan's little room in Toxteth. But she couldn't leave Kate. Her daughter meant everything to her and if Maudie left Redlands, then Kate was coming with her.

As soon as Grace's car roared onto the drive, the doors of Redlands opened and the servants came swarming out to fetch Maudie's bags. She looked at Grace and smiled sadly.

‘Well, am I still glowing?’ she asked.

‘No. You look rather jaundiced.’

‘I can't wait for Friday,’ Maudie sighed. ‘How am I going to wait five whole days without seeing him? I think I will die of pain.’

‘Just keep thinking of the weekend of deliciousness that awaits you. It's what keeps me going through the tedium.’

Maudie kissed Grace goodbye, and got out of the car, leaving the servants to the unpacking. She took a deep breath before stepping into that cold, dark lobby; but when she did, received a lovely surprise when she saw Kate coming down the stairs with Mary. Kate had obviously been playing dressing up, as she had a set of Mary's glass beads around her neck, and a wooden bracelet around the top of her chubby little arm.

‘Don’t you look pretty?’ Maudie smiled, kneeling down ready to catch Kate when she got to the bottom of the stairs. She ran to her and it felt so nice to have her daughter’s little, warm body in her arms once again. ‘Have you missed Mama?’

‘Yes,’ Kate replied. ‘Did you get my dolly?’

‘I might have done,’ Maudie said, easing her away and looking at her. ‘Wait until I unpack my cases.’

She heard the study door open, and the familiar click of Julian’s wooden leg, accompanied by dull thud of his stick.

‘Can you come into the study?’ he asked gruffly. ‘I need to speak to you.’

Maudie looked up to see her husband standing there with a cross expression upon his face. Her blood ran cold. Had someone spotted her with Brendan and told him?

‘Yes of course,’ she said, standing up. She looked down at Kate and stroked her cheek. ‘I’ll be up to the nursery in a moment my darling.’

Mary and Kate went back upstairs and Maudie followed her husband into the study. This was actually Sir Walter’s old study, and Maudie was not usually allowed in. Agnes kept it like a shrine and thought her daughter-in-law might contaminate it in some way.

Julian hobbled over to the desk and poured himself a glass of whisky from the decanter that was already opened.

‘I was expecting you back earlier,’ he said. ‘The Hendersons will be here in two hours.’

‘I’m sure the servants have got everything in hand.’

‘But it’s you. You’ve been travelling in that filthy car and you look as though you’ve been dragged through a hedge backwards.’

‘Then perhaps you should allow me to go and freshen up,’ she snapped.

‘In a minute. Look, Buntie will be staying for the next fortnight. I want you to be discreet about it and not let onto any of your friends that she’s here. She’s been having a few problems with Maurice and needs a break. Can you make sure she has everything she needs?’

‘She’s your cousin can’t you look after her?’

Maudie couldn’t believe how insolent she was being, and could only put it down to still being able to hear Brendan’s voice in her head.

‘Why are you being so belligerent?’ Julian frowned. ‘Has Grace been filling you with stupid ideas?’

‘No, I’m sorry, I’m just tetchy after my journey.’

‘I would take care of Bunty myself, but I’m going away again. An opportunity has arisen to invest in the construction of a huge housing estate in Leeds, so I’ll be going there and visiting various other interests for a fortnight.’

‘Well I must also leave here next weekend,’ she said, panicking, scared that he would forbid her from going to London. ‘My Cousin Daisy asked me to go to Croydon to meet her fiance’s parents and discuss the wedding.’

‘Can’t you talk about it on the phone?’

‘No I cannot. It’s bad enough that their wedding is going to be scaled down at the request of your mother, it’s the least I can do to pay them a visit.’

‘I suppose so,’ he sighed. ‘How long are you going for?’

‘Leaving on Friday and returning on Sunday.’

‘Right, well I suppose mother can take care of Bunty on those days.’

‘Thank you. It means so much to Daisy that I go. Can I leave now? I want to give Kate her present before I get changed.’

‘Yes, of course. Thank you Maudie.’

Kate was tottering around the nursery in a pair of Mary’s high heels, singing *Baa Baa Black Sheep* over and over again. She was so adorable and Maudie loved her so much, she couldn’t help but think of those escape plans again. She had to get Kate away from Agnes before she shipped her off to Ireland.

‘I’ve collected quite a few messages for you Mrs Ryder,’ Mary said, going over to her mantlepiece and taking a pile of paper from it. ‘Would you like to see them?’

‘Yes, thank you Mary,’ she replied, taking them off her. Flicking through, she saw it was just calls from various friends, asking if she could attend parties. There was also a message from Ethel Dunmore, asking if she could go to London with her the following weekend.

‘Is Lady Agnes in?’ she asked.

‘No, she’s gone to Lady Peterson’s for the day.’

‘Thanks Mary.’

Maudie stood up and went over to Kate, picking her up. The shoes went clattering to the floor and Kate started to giggle.

‘Lucy’s going to be looking after you today, so you be a very good girl for her,’ she said. ‘And if you are, I’ll take you out on Corky tomorrow.’

She put Kate back down and looked at Mary.

‘Have a lovely trip home Mary. If you could take Kate downstairs to Lucy, I’d be very grateful.’

‘Very well Mrs Ryder.’

Maudie went down into Agnes' drawing room, glad she had avoided Julian, as he would moan at her for not getting changed. She could hear the servants in the dining room preparing for lunch, and she groaned at the thought of spending an afternoon with Brian and Davinia Henderson. They were so boring and pompous. Usually they lived in India, but they were touring Europe, and while in England, were trying to fit in appointments with all their friends and acquaintances.

There was something quite forbidden about entering Agnes' sacred den when she wasn't there. The child within Maudie felt like kicking over the antique wine tables and smashing the pictures. But she restrained herself and instead went to the telephone, dialling the exchange and asking to be put through to Ethel's number. How ironic it was that of all the weekends Ethel wanted to go to London, it was the very one Maudie would be there with Brendan.

After going through several servants, Maudie got through to Ethel herself, and she could tell by the excited tone of her shrill voice, that she was expecting Maudie to agree to go with her.

‘The nanny told me you were in Liverpool,’ she said. ‘What were you doing there?’

‘Visiting family. That’s what I wanted to say to you Ethel, I’m so sorry, but I’m not going to be able to go to London with you next weekend.’

‘Why?’ Maudie could literally hear her friend pouting down the phone.

‘My cousin is having her wedding reception here at Redlands and Agnes is being a complete nightmare about it, saying we can only have a few guests. Daisy’s marrying an awfully nice chap from Croydon and I said I’d go down there to see his family and see what sort of arrangements we can make given all the restrictions Agnes has put on us.’

‘Well how long are you going to be with them? You could come up to London and meet me afterwards.’

‘I couldn’t possibly say. I’ll be a guest, it would be rude to abandon them.’

‘Oh I’m so disappointed. Next week is the only weekend I have free before we go to the Duke of Cumberland’s.’

‘Ethel you have a wardrobe filled with beautiful clothes. You really don’t need any more. Why don’t you go into Chester and have your hair cut at Madam Suzanne’s?’

‘I suppose so. Well, I’ll see you soon.’

‘Yes, I am sorry Ethel.’

She didn’t get the chance to say any more, as her friend put the phone down on her. Maudie felt those stirrings of rebellion once again; thinking of all the poverty and injustice in this world, and there was her rich, spoilt little madam of a friend, sulking because Maudie wouldn’t go to London with her.

It was very hard for Maudie to switch back into the role of Mrs Julian Ryder for the afternoon; laughing at Brian Henderson’s awful stories about the natives back in India and their strange customs; taking Davina around the gardens and explaining as to why which plants were where. Agnes was the botanist, not Maudie. All she cared about was her wild garden by her study. When they took afternoon tea in the conservatory, Maudie kept getting getting flashbacks to the Palm House in Sefton Park, to the other afternoon and making love with Brendan. She tried to switch her brain off, knowing she would go mad with desire, crazy through wondering what he was up to, but it was so hard.

Finally the Henderson’s left and Maudie escaped up to the nursery, where Lucy, the maid, and Mary’s stand-in, had just finished giving Kate her tea. Maudie thanked the girl, promising that there would be some extra money in her wages that week, then dismissed her. She took Kate into the bathroom next door to the nursery and bathed her, afterwards wrapping her in her pyjamas afterwards and tucking her into bed, before reading her favourite bedtime story – Cinderella. This always made Maudie laugh, as Cinders was the name Grace used to give Maudie when they were children. Maudie had been plucked from the gutter to live a life of wealth and privilege. But there had been no happy ending. Julian certainly wasn’t Prince Charming.

Kate fell off to sleep, and Maudie went down to the dining room to have supper with Julian. He was drunk after polishing off two bottles of whiskey with Brian Henderson, and as he read *The Times*, his elbow kept slipping off the table. Maudie could barely touch the lamb stew cook had made, even though it was her favourite meal. Eating was so difficult these days. The knot in her stomach and her racing heartbeat made it hard to swallow anything.

There was a knock on the door and Holmes came in.

‘There’s a telephone call for you ma’am,’ he said. ‘Your cousin Liam.’

Maudie gave a gasp that was loud enough for Julian to even notice. She thanked Holmes and said she would be down in a minute. The butler thanked her

and left the room. Maudie stood up, taking a moment to compose herself. Hoping it really was Brendan and not her actual Cousin Liam from Ireland. The disappointment would be unbearable.

‘What are your dirty Irish relatives doing ringing the servants' quarters?’ Julian slurred.

‘You know Agnes doesn't like me using her phone,’ she said. ‘So it's only fitting I speak to my *dirty* relatives on the servants' *dirty* phone.’

Maudie left the room and went down to the servants' quarters. The telephone was placed in the little hallway outside Holmes's apartment, and contrary to Julian's snobbery, Holmes kept the area immaculate. Efficient as ever, the butler stood holding the receiver, an expectant smile on his face.

‘If that will be all ma'am, I'd like to retire for the evening.’

‘Of course Holmes,’ she said, taking the phone. ‘I'll see you tomorrow.’

Holmes retreated into his apartment, shutting the door behind him. Maudie put the Bakelite receiver to her mouth and crossed her fingers, hoping it was Brendan.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘Have you thought about me at all today?’ he said quietly, but with that cocky tone to his voice.

‘Not once,’ she laughed. ‘Who are you?’

‘Are you glad to be home?’

‘I wish you were with me.’ She sighed. ‘God I hate this place. I wish I could run away with you and take Kate with me.’

‘Come and live with me here.’

‘The three of us would be far too cramped in that room of yours. I've no money of my own and you don't earn enough to keep me and my daughter. Besides, if Julian divorced me on the grounds of adultery, I'd lose Kate.’

‘You're her mother!’

‘I'd also be the guilty party.’

‘Well make sure you bring that novel with you on Friday. If you get published and get rich, you'll have your own money and can do what you like.’

‘I hardly think that's going to happen. I'll bring it, but I'll be far too embarrassed to show it to your publisher.’

‘Well we're having dinner with him on Friday night, bring it along. For me, please.’

‘Okay okay. When shall we meet?’

‘A train gets into Euston at half five. I’m going to get there in the morning, but I’ll come and meet you.’

‘I can’t wait. I love you Brendan.’

‘I love you too. Everything’s gonna be okay. I promise you.’

Chapter Six

Maudie was absolutely exhausted by the time she'd made the final leg of her journey down to London. Even though she'd travelled in the luxury of First Class all the way, the bother of changing trains in places like Crewe and Birmingham had taken their toll. Her legs were aching and she felt nauseous from the smell of the oil and the horrible pomanders that were left about to try and diffuse it. She'd never travelled to London alone, and felt excited about being able to do whatever she wanted because no one would recognise her, unlike in Cheshire where she couldn't move for bumping into some horrid woman she was acquainted with.

It had been a tiresome week. Julian hadn't bothered to tell her that Bunty had spent the previous fortnight in hospital after being beaten to a pulp by her husband, Maurice, and that she was in a terrible state. Maudie had met Bunty several times before, and she was quite the beauty normally. Tall, blonde and willowy; Grace's jaw had dropped when she met her for the first time at Maudie and Julian's wedding, and she'd become quite infatuated with her. Back when she was newly married to Julian, Maudie had been quite jealous of Bunty. Still enamoured with her husband, she'd resented the fact that he'd dated his cousin for a while as teenagers. They'd split up when Bunty went off to Paris to be a fashion model, before marrying hotelier Maurice Alexander. Over the years, Maudie had watched the light die from behind Bunty's eyes, but she never realised it was because Maurice was hitting her.

When Agnes had seen just how bad Bunty looked, she'd insisted no junior members of staff saw her, for risk of them telling other people and causing a scandal. Instead, she was assigned Lucy, and moved into the East Wing, where she remained while her wounds healed. She looked terrible, with a broken jaw and fractured eye sockets. Maudie would visit her each day and read a book to her, or else tell her all the Cheshire gossip. Bunty lived in Derbyshire now and missed mixing with the likes of Celia Barrie and Ethel Dunmore.

But for the next thirty-six hours, Maudie could put the stresses and strains of Redlands House behind her and get on with having some fun. The train pulled into Euston Station, and when she got out, a porter immediately came to her aid, to fetch her bags. Maudie stood and looked around the bustling station, trying to spot Brendan out on the concourse. There was no sign of him, and a feeling of dread

started to creep into her bones - frightened that he had stood her up, or forgotten his train or something terrible like that.

There was a tap on her shoulder and she turned around with a start. She was shocked to find Brendan standing there, that mischievous smile on his face.

‘Where did you spring from?!’ Maudie gasped.

‘The train,’ he laughed.

‘You were on the same train as me?’

‘I’ve been booked on it all along. Second class of course. If I told you I was going on it, you’d have panicked, so I lied and said I was travelling this morning.’

‘But I didn’t see you at Crewe or Birmingham, when we changed trains.’

‘That’s because you were surrounded by porters and guards, and I was just milling around on the platform, waiting for the next train.’ He smiled and shook his head. ‘How the other half live eh?’

Maudie was overwhelmed with love and relief that he was here, and without thinking, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. Brendan eased her away, laughing.

‘Come on you, time to go back to the flat. We’ve got a dinner to go to.’

Piers MacCready, Brendan’s editor lived in a small flat off Great Russell Street, but went home to Dublin every weekend, leaving it empty. It was on the top floor of a small house in a long terrace, and consisted of a reception room, bedroom and a little galley kitchen. The bathroom was shared with other people on the floor, but Brendan explained that like Piers, the other tenants went home for the weekend, so the bathroom was all theirs and Maudie need not fear being caught out whilst doing her ablutions!

The flat was poky but luxurious, with shelves filled with books, sumptuous sofas and lots of antique tables. On the wall above the sofa was a huge framed poster of a painting of Lenin holding a scroll with Russian words beside him. Maudie knew it was Russian, because Julian had studied languages at Oxford and still had lots of textbooks.

‘What does that mean?’ she asked.

‘Peace, Land, Bread,’ Brendan replied, stepping up behind her. ‘Piers is a Marxist.’

‘Julian thinks all Marxists should be shot.’

Brendan wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her neck.

‘Well I think he should be shot, then I could have you for myself.’

‘That’s a terrible thing to say,’ she laughed.

‘Didn't I tell you? I'm a bad man.’ He pulled away and slapped her on the backside. ‘Now go and make yourself more beautiful, we're going to dinner.’

‘Yes, I wanted to talk to you about that.’ she said, turning to face him. ‘Can you not introduce me as Maud Ryder? While I'm down here with you I just want to be myself, not Julian's wife. Can you call me by my maiden name? Maud O'Shea.’

‘You know that name doesn't suit the plum in your gob?’

‘Well I'm not talking Scouse as well! My name can just all add to my enigma.’

They were dining at Bertram's, a restaurant on the Strand. Maudie had never been before, but Celia Barrie had raved about it. The decor was all very colonial, with ceiling fans, palms and bizarre models of little brown Indian boys in various corners. The waiters' uniforms were so starched, they could hardly bend, and the patrons, in their finery, looked like the Cheshire set-ladies, sitting looking bored while their husbands made small talk.

Heads turned when Brendan and Maudie walked in. The day before, she had gone to Chester with Mary and Kate, and bought a silver, low backed dress with a matching turban; and this, along with her exotic, good looks, made people think she was a film star. The bored women also slyly eyed Brendan as he strode in wearing his best suit, and that cocky expression that told the world he knew he was the best looking man in the room.

George Cooper and his wife Peggy had already arrived, and were at a centre table, sharing a bottle of champagne. Brendan had explained to Maudie that George had taken over Gabriel's just after the war, when the original owner had given it up. George was a brash looking man with white hair and smoking a fat cigar; while Peggy was whippet thin with bright red bobbed hair, and sat puffing on a mauve cigarette. They were a very theatrical-looking pair, and Maudie wondered how she could possibly make conversation with them.

On seeing Brendan, George stood up, smiled and offered his hand.

‘Brendan my man,’ he boomed, grasping Brendan's hand. ‘How are you?’

‘Very well thanks George. This is my friend, Maud O'Shea.’

George took Maudie's gloved hand and kissed it.

‘Enchanted I'm sure Miss O'Shea.’

It felt strange for Maudie to hear herself called this. It had been so long, and a part of her felt guilty. If she wasn't Mrs Ryder, she wouldn't have Kate.

They all sat down, and George poured them some champagne.

‘I love your outfit,’ Peggy said in a drawly, American accent. ‘Where did you get it?’

‘A little boutique in Chester,’ Maudie smiled sweetly. She returned the compliment by looking at the jade necklace around Peggy’s neck. ‘I love your necklace, it compliments your hair.’

‘Why thank you,’ Peggy smiled, narrowing her cold blue eyes at Maudie. ‘What lovely manners you have.’

Maudie just smiled and said nothing. Peggy had obviously taken note of her name, and thought she was some sort of common floozy off the boat from Dublin that Brendan was parading around.

George's jollity made up for his sneering wife, and he made the evening go smoothly, filling the conversation with his gossip stories about the various famous people he'd met. They dined on quails eggs and lamb shank, and the champagne kept flowing, and Maudie wondered what the celebration was until George started talking about the success of Brendan's poetry book. It had sold over a million copies in America.

‘You never told me!’ Maudie gasped.

‘Well I don’t like to brag,’ Brendan smiled.

‘You’re a sensation,’ George exclaimed. ‘How are you getting on with the new book?’

‘I’m getting there George,’ Brendan said, sipping his champagne. ‘I’m getting there.’

‘What are you writing?’ Maudie asked.

‘A collection of poems about the Easter Uprising,’ he replied and she could tell his tone was uncomfortable. He was as uneasy talking about his own work as she was, and it made her laugh.

‘You don’t tell your girlfriends very much Brendan,’ Peggy said, and Maudie caught something in the older woman’s eyes. A flash of recognition. Of knowing and jealousy. She couldn’t explain it, but without words, she could tell Brendan had slept with Peggy. She wondered if it was still going on.

‘Brendan tells me you write,’ George said to Maudie.

‘Only a silly novel,’ she said quietly. ‘Nothing serious.’

‘And here it is,’ Brendan said, suddenly taking her note book from his inside pocket. Maudie gasped in shock and felt like hitting him as he passed it to George.

‘Read it George,’ he urged. ‘It’s fantastic.’

‘I told you not to bring it!’ she hissed.

‘And I sneaked it out. Have faith in yourself Maudie.’

George looked at the front of the book, where she’d written the title.

‘The Lady of Sydney,’ he said with a nod. ‘Set in Australia is it?’

‘Part of it, yes.’

‘Have you ever been?’

‘No, but a cousin of mine emigrated there and he sent me a lot of letters.’

‘Well I shall take a look, thank you very much. I always like to discover new talent.’

George put the book in his own inside pocket, after he’d taken out an envelope which he passed to Brendan.

‘I’ve called you down here to give you this,’ he said. ‘Your royalty payment.’

‘Thanks,’ Brendan smiled, too polite to open it there and then. He just put it in his pocket. ‘And I’ll get the new book done soon, I promise.’

‘You want to hold onto him Maud,’ Peggy said with a hint of regret in her voice. ‘He’s going to be a big star one day.’

They left the restaurant and took a taxi back to Bloomsbury. Once they were on their way, Brendan took the envelope from his pocket and opened it, pulling out a cheque and reading it.

‘Fucking hell,’ he gasped.

‘How much is it for?’ she asked.

‘One thousand, six hundred and seventy two pounds and six pence.’

‘You’re rich.’

‘I am.’

‘Are you going to give it to the workers?’

‘I’ll send some home to Ireland to my daddy, to make a point, and I’ll donate some to the Labour Party. But maybe with the rest, I could buy a house.’

‘For the three of us?’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know,’ she sighed. ‘How am I going to get Kate away? Julian will get custody.’

‘We’ll think of something, I promise. I’ve got to pay this into my bank in Liverpool first and let it clear.’

‘Did you have an affair with Peggy?’ Maudie suddenly asked.

‘What?’

‘Did you sleep with Peggy?’

‘It was a long time ago, when I first signed on at Gabriel’s. How could you tell?’

‘I’m a woman, we pick up on these things. Are you still sleeping with her?’

‘No! It was years ago. Are you jealous?’

‘Of course I’m jealous,’ she said, looking out at the London streets rushing by. ‘I’m jealous of every woman you’ve slept with.’

‘And there’s been a few.’

‘Don’t mock me.’

She felt him reach out and run a finger down her spine. To her chagrin her body reacted, and she wished she could stay angry with him.

‘You’re the only one I’ve loved,’ he said.

She turned to look at him. There was no humour in his face, no mischief in his eyes. Perhaps he meant it.

‘My life has turned upside down since meeting you,’ she sighed. ‘What have you done to me?’

‘Made you fall in love with me. I made it my intention the moment I saw you.’

Maudie awoke the next morning to find the sun shining and her mood high. Brendan was flat on his back, asleep, but Maudie wanted to get up and greet the day. She walked naked over to the window and opened the curtains, not caring who saw her from behind the fairly thin nets. She just wanted to share her happiness with the whole of London.

‘What are you doing?’ Brendan grumbled. ‘You’ll get arrested.’

She turned and looked at him.

‘I just want to look at London. I’m so happy to be here.’

She jumped on the bed next to him, taking his hand and kissing his long, elegant fingers.

‘Let’s go out today. Let’s go shopping in Harrods. I want to buy you something.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ he laughed. ‘I’ve just been given over a thousand pounds.’

‘I don’t care. I want to buy you something, so every time you look at it, you think of me. Please, let me buy you some cufflinks or something. And let’s get the Underground to Harrods, I’ve never travelled on it before.’

‘You’re crazy,’ he smiled sleepily.

‘Yes,’ she replied, kissing his nose. ‘I’m crazy for you.’

Maudie felt like a little girl going to London for the first time as she and Brendan took the cramped, warm Underground train to Knightsbridge. She’d first come here in 1914 with Patience. It had been Maudie's birthday on the second of January, and as a treat, Patience took her to London, and Harrods, to buy her a dress to wear to the tea she was holding for her. Maudie remembered the journey being like some grand expedition, with many train changes and having to stop off at various places. But once she arrived in the Metropolis, she fell in love with it. It was even busier than Liverpool, and outside Harrods she encountered her first ever American person. An older couple were having their purchases put into a taxi cab by one of the liveried doormen, and Patience spotted them, recognising the man as Felix DeVere, an old acquaintance. Introductions were made and when they came away Maudie had whispered to her guardian, asking why Mrs DeVere had that funny accent.

‘She's an American dear,’ Patience had explained. ‘Felix is based in New York now and that's where he met her.’

Even now Maudie could recall the excitement she'd felt at meeting an American, thinking how exotic Mrs DeVere had seemed, not realising that one day she too would be considered a novelty.

Today, the horse drawn taxis outside Harrods had been replaced by motorised ones. The vans painted in the store's distinctive green, stood waiting to be stocked with goods, and indeed there were many 'Mrs DeVeres' milling around on the pavement in their furs and finery, kissing the air beside each others' cheeks and making arrangements to meet for lunch. Women like that were Maudie's contemporaries now and seemed so commonplace that she ignored them.

Maudie loved Harrods. It was like a huge Santa's grotto, and she couldn't wait for the day Kate was old enough to be brought down here and go shopping. She tried to blank out the thought that it would indeed only be during school holidays she would be able to snatch time with her daughter; and instead she had fun exploring the cavernous emporiums, filled with goods from all four corners of the world. She then dragged Brendan up to the children's department, buying Kate a little riding outfit she could wear when she took Corky out; some ballet slippers and a silk, dropped waist dress for special occasions.

After taking tea in the restaurant, she persuaded Brendan to go to the men's department and told him to choose whatever he wanted.

‘Don't be silly,’ he squirmed, digging his hands into his pockets. ‘It's not a woman's place to buy things for a man.’

‘Stop being so terribly old-fashioned,’ she laughed, grasping his arm and pulling him into the concession. ‘Now choose something that will always remind you of me.’

Brendan ended up choosing a pair of gold cufflinks, and when the assistant asked if he wanted anything engraved on them, he asked for the letter M to be put on each one. The assistant told them they would be ready in half an hour and Maudie took it as a chance to visit the grand food hall on the ground floor, where she bought the finest Irish pork sausages, potatoes, Savoy cabbage and onions, and promised Brendan she would make him sausages and colcannon for his supper that night.

‘Did your mammy teach you how to cook colcannon?’ he asked as they stood arm in arm on the escalator back up to the men's department.

‘Oddly enough no,’ Maudie replied. ‘It was Mrs Moyes who worked in the kitchen at Fielding House. She used to teach me how to cook and thought seeing as I'm from Irish stock, I should know how to make colcannon and soda bread. She taught me the song as well.’ She started to sing;

‘Did you ever eat Colcannon, made from lovely pickled cream?

With the greens and scallions mingled like a picture in a dream.

*Did you ever make a hole on top to hold the melting flake
Of the creamy, flavoured butter that your mother used to make?’*

‘You’ve a lovely singing voice Mrs Ryder,’ he chuckled in that ‘Iorish’ accent he liked to put on. ‘My mammy taught me how to make soda bread, but I haven't made it in years. I think I might make some tonight.’

Maudie laughed and kissed him on the cheek.

‘I've never had a man cook for me before,’ she giggled. ‘It's very exciting.’

The next day, the early spring sunshine had disappeared and instead it was pouring with rain. The dullness of the weather matched the sadness in Maudie's heart. Today she would return to Redlands and had no idea if she would ever see Brendan again.

She turned onto her side to face him. He was asleep, his hand tucked under his head, those black curls strewn across the pillow, a contented smile on his face. The thought that this was the end, that she would never wake up next to him again, felt like the most agonising pain in her heart, like someone had punched her hard in the stomach. She started to cry, biting her knuckles so he didn't hear her sob. She had to think of a way of seeing him again. She wanted him to meet Kate, so she could then spend time with the two people she loved the most. An idea started to form in her mind, but it was so daring, so outrageous, she questioned herself for thinking it.

Brendan opened his eyes and frowned on seeing her sobbing. Without saying a word he pulled her into his arms and let her cry against his chest, stroking her hair and holding her tightly.

‘When am I going to see you again Mrs Ryder?’ he said softly.

Maudie pulled away and looked up at him. He smiled at her and wiped her tears away.

‘I want you to come to Redlands,’ she said, immediately regretting it; she hadn't even thought it through properly yet.

‘What?’ he laughed.

‘Julian's friends, the Huntingdon's, are staying for Easter. Julian fought in the war with Hugh Huntingdon and whenever they're together they behave like schoolboys. Hugh's wife Louise and his mother Lady Edna are coming as well; they're all good chums with Agnes and I won't get a look in. What if I have my Cousin Liam to stay at the same time?’

‘You're crazy!’ he laughed.

‘The house will be full, they'll leave us to it. We could take Kate to Chester Zoo or go to New Brighton; and I can assure you, there are plenty of nooks and crannies in that house where we can be alone together.’

‘You really think you can make this work?’

‘I'll do everything in my power. If I know that in just two weekend's time we'll be together, I'll be able to cope with not seeing you.’

He laughed and kissed her nose.

‘Well, if you think you can pull it off, I'm up for it. It'll be fun hoodwinking the bourgeoisie for a couple of days.’

‘Just think, if we can do this, there's nothing stopping you coming to the house over and over again. And if Julian's away, I could sneak into your bed at night.’

‘Won't the servants talk?’

‘Most of the servants hate Julian and his mother. It would make them laugh to see me getting one over on them.’

They travelled back to Liverpool on the same train, Maudie in First Class, Brendan in Second Class. Maudie thought over her crazy plan and wondered if it could work. This Cousin Liam had only just entered the picture, but maybe she could pretend he had been in America all these years. She loved the thought of being with Brendan at Redlands, with Kate. It was true, when the Huntingdons came to stay, the house would become chaotic. Hugh Huntingdon was a heavy drinker and egged Julian on, and Louise and Edna were like clones of Agnes. The three women liked nothing better than gathering in various rooms gossiping about their contemporaries and planning their social calendar for the year. In the early years, Agnes had encouraged Maudie to become friends with Louise Huntingdon, but she found the woman so insufferable, hating the way Louise talked to her like she was a member of staff, that she distanced herself whenever she came to stay.

Maudie didn't see Brendan when she arrived back at Lime Street Station. Tired and weary, she stood on the platform, looking for him amongst all the passengers disembarking; but before she could spot him, she was approached by James, the driver she had arranged to come and pick her up. As she walked out of the station, she continued to look over her shoulder, trying to see Brendan, just so she could discreetly wave goodbye to him, but he may as well have disappeared.

As the car turned into the drive leading up to Redlands, Maudie spotted Bunty on the front lawn, sitting in a deckchair with her sunglasses on. The weather up here was better than it was in London and Bunty was obviously under the illusion that what scant sunshine there was, was going to be beneficial to her. She gave the car a quick glance as it passed, and returned to her sunbathing.

The car pulled up on the drive and as usual the servants came out to take the bags. Maudie went into the house, and this time there was no Kate coming down the stairs to meet her. Instead, she was greeted with Agnes, standing outside her drawing room, a stern look upon her face. Maudie started to shake - she just knew this was about Brendan. A sixth sense told her she had been found out.

‘Could you come in here please Maud?’ she asked, and said nothing more, just turned and walked into the drawing room. Maudie followed her, although she was so scared, she could not feel her feet.

Agnes sat at her desk and looked up at Maudie with that disapproving, snooty look upon her face. Maudie did not dare to sit down, she got the feeling she would be told to stand up if she did.

‘Good trip to Surrey?’ Agnes asked.

‘It was satisfactory, yes.’

‘Maud, I had a phone call from Ethel Dunmore this morning. She informs me that she saw you in Harrods yesterday. You were with a young man, whom you kissed upon the cheek and were obviously intimately acquainted with. Can you explain that?’

Maudie’s cheeks burned red, and she wished Ethel Dunmore was here right now so she could slap her across her smug little face. She had obviously gone shopping in London with one of her other cronies and had seen Maudie with Brendan, and out of spite at Maudie turning down her invitation, had gone running to Agnes.

‘If you must know the truth, my trip to Croydon was not entirely successful,’ she lied, wondering sometimes where her ability to tell untruths came from. ‘May I sit down? I’ve had a terribly long journey.’

‘Yes of course.’

Sitting down on the sofa gave Maudie the chance to think some more of her story; to allow her blush to fade and to quell the shaking in her legs.

‘The Maxwell family are fine people. Probably a little too middle-class for your tastes, but because you have limited the number of people we can invite, they’re not happy with being told who they can and cannot ask to their son’s wedding. We had an argument and I went to London, where my Cousin Liam is currently staying.’

‘Cousin Liam?’

‘Yes, Liam O’Shea. He’s been living in America for the past fifteen years. He’s been working there as a journalist. He’s come to live in England and was staying in Bloomsbury over the weekend before returning to Liverpool. I stopped off to see him and we went shopping. I’m afraid Ethel is a little bad tempered with me because she wanted us to go to London this weekend, so she could choose clothes for her trip to see the Duke of Cumberland. Of course I am not intimately acquainted with Liam - he’s a member of my own family. But, we were laughing and joking. We were close as children, he would often come to stay at Fielding House.’

Maudie wanted to give herself a pat on the back for her ability to lie. Whether Agnes brought it was another thing entirely.

‘Only, you see Maud. Some women in your position...take your friend Grace for instance, everyone knows about her dirty perversions; but because she owns Merrilands and has a huge personal wealth, she can afford to take risks. You cannot take such risks. You have no money of your own and no ancestral home to return to. If you were unfaithful to Julian and he was to divorce you, you would be left out in the street. Do you understand that?’

‘I understand perfectly Agnes. But as I said. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I spent the day with a cousin I was once very close to. In fact, I wanted to tell you that I have invited him to spend Easter with us.’

‘Easter? The Huntingdons are coming!’

‘Well I’m sure we can fit Liam in as well, there isn’t a shortage of bedrooms in this house.’

‘Is he Irish?’

‘Yes,’ Maudie laughed. ‘But he’s housetrained and very intelligent, and will not show you up in front of your guests.’

‘Very well, as you’re keen to remind me, it is your house. But I don’t want an influx of your Irish relatives turning up, do you understand?’

‘Yes of course.’ Maudie struggled to smile, unable to believe she’d got away with it.

‘And please use some decorum when you’re in public with men. I don’t want scandalous rumours to reach Redlands.’

‘Yes, I apologise for that Agnes. Now I must go, Liam wants me to telephone him to tell him he can come.’

‘You can telephone from here if you want.’

Maudie knew Agnes wasn’t being generous - she wanted to listen in to the conversation, just to make sure Maudie wasn’t lying. Maudie didn’t know what to do. The phone in Brendan’s house was in the hall outside his door. If his landlady or one of the other tenants picked it up and she asked for Liam O’Shea, they wouldn’t know who she was talking about. But if she refused to call, Agnes would become suspicious. She had no choice but to take a chance.

Agnes moved from the desk and replaced Maudie on the sofa. Maudie nervously sat down and picked up the receiver, trying to stop her hand shaking. She knew Brendan’s number from memory and hoped and prayed he would pick it up.

It rang and rang and rang, and when it was answered, Maudie almost sighed in relief when he spoke.

‘Hello.’

‘Liam, it’s Maudie.’

‘Have you got company?’

‘Yes. Just to let you know that it’s fine for you to come for Easter.’

‘How did you do that?’ he laughed.

‘I’ll get a driver to pick you up from Lime Street some time on the twenty fourth. Will you be in touch with train times?’

‘Of course I will darlin’. ‘ He lowered his voice. ‘Are you going to think about me when you’re in bed tonight?’

‘Yes, more than likely,’ she replied, keeping her voice light. ‘So I’ll see you on the twenty fourth.’

‘Because I’ll be thinking of you. The way you look naked, how your skin feels. How you like to...’

‘Yes, I’ll let you get back to that,’ she said, aware her voice had raised. ‘I’ll see you in a couple of weeks time.’

She put the phone down and turned and looked at Agnes, hoping she wasn't blushing too much.

‘All sorted,’ she said cheerily. ‘Where’s Kate?’

‘She’s gone to a tea party with Mary.’

‘I see, well I’ll see her when she comes home. I’m going to have a lie down now. The journey home from London is so tiresome.’

Chapter Seven

Maudie's nerves were close to shredding. She and Kate had spent the weekend at Merrilands with Grace, Ronnie and their sons Robert and Stephen, and for the duration of the break, Kate had only spoken in French. At three years old, she was overwhelmed with her thrice weekly French lessons with Madam Leonie, the teacher Agnes had employed; and now thought she was being amusing by showing off what she'd learnt. Maudie was shocked at how much a young child could absorb after just a few lessons, and it scared her that her daughter had achieved something without any input from her. Her anxiety wasn't helped by the fact she felt so tired and nauseous, and she was dreading Julian's return the next day - somehow it was easier to answer Agnes back if Julian wasn't there to support his mother.

Before heading home to Redlands, Maudie took afternoon tea with Grace in the conservatory, while the boys and Kate played upstairs in the nursery with Delores the nanny.

'Do you know I think I'm going to sack Madam bloody Leonie,' Maudie said. 'I'm sick of the French thing. My daughter's English, not French. Patience tried to get me to learn when I was little and I was never very good at it. I can't understand what Kate's saying half the time.'

'Agnes will go spare if you sack Madam Leonie.'

'Kate's my daughter, I can do whatever I like.'

'I spoke to Connie last night. Apparently she and Brendan are picketing outside the new home of a Liverpool landlord on Thursday.'

'Really?'

'Um, it seems he's one of the ones who have doubled the rents on slum properties, but he himself is moving into a huge property in Orrell Park, so they've organised a demonstration outside his house.' She laughed wanly. 'Brendan! Causing trouble for the rich one day, then the next he's coming to live it up at Redlands House!'

'What was I thinking?' Maudie sighed. 'You know what Brendan's like, he's not the most subtle of people. What if he says something to incriminate himself?'

‘He’ll be fine,’ Grace laughed. ‘You worry too much. You’ve actually given me some ideas. I must find an excuse to invite Connie here. How’s the gorgeous Bunty by the way?’

‘Getting better, slowly. She’s starting to look more like her old self.’

Grace adjusted her trousers and licked her lips.

‘I’ll have to come and pay you a visit.’

‘What about Connie?’

‘I love Connie to death, but it’s still nice to look at something else sometimes, and Bunty Alexander is a dish.’

‘I wish she'd go home. Julian loves her so much and once he’s back, I’ll feel even more of an outcast while she's there.’

Maudie and Kate arrived home to find a black car parked outside, and as they came closer, Maudie saw it had a sign saying ‘police’ across the front grille. She panicked, thinking something had happened to Julian. Despite wanting to get away from him so she could be with Brendan, she didn’t wish her husband dead.

She got out of the car, and handed Kate over to Mary as soon as she came out of the door to greet them.

‘What’s going on?’ Maudie asked.

‘I don’t know, they’ve come to see Mrs Alexander.’ She looked down at Kate and smiled. ‘Have you had a nice time with Robert and Stephen.’

‘Oui madam,’ Kate answered in a perfect French accent.

‘Kate will you speak in English?!’ Maudie snapped. She looked at Mary. ‘If she speaks to you in French, ignore her.’

‘Very well,’ Mary said, taking Kate’s hand. ‘Come on Kate, you look tired. I think you need your bed.’

Mary took Kate off and Maudie went into the house, wondering why the police were talking to Bunty. She put her ear to the door of Agnes’ drawing room door and heard a faint sob. Taking a chance, she knocked on the door and stepped into the room. Indeed a young policeman, so smart in his dark uniform, sat on the sofa next to a sobbing Bunty, while Agnes sat at her desk, looking down at the proceedings with that expression of displeasure on her face - she hated anyone displaying emotion.

‘Is everything okay?’ Maudie asked.

The police officer looked at her and furrowed his brow.

‘Can I help you madam?’ he asked.

‘I'm the lady of the house,’ she replied, aware that Agnes was throwing her a venomous look for having the audacity to say this.

‘It's Maurice,’ Bunty cried, looking round at Maudie. ‘He's killed himself.’

‘Will you please calm down?’ Agnes snapped. ‘And be quiet, the servants could have heard that.’

‘Oh my goodness,’ Maudie gasped, sitting on the other side of Bunty. ‘What happened?’

‘There were reports of gunshots at Mr Alexander's home,’ the young police officer said. ‘My colleagues were sent to investigate and he was found fatally wounded.’

‘What am I going to do?’ Bunty whined. ‘I can't go home, everyone will be talking.’

‘You can stay here,’ Maudie said softly, laying her hand upon Bunty's. ‘Don't worry about that.’

‘Will there be an inquest?’ Agnes asked the police officer.

‘Seeing as Mr Alexander committed suicide, I would imagine there would be, yes.’

‘Oh the shame,’ Agnes hissed. ‘Couldn't you go and stay with your mother, Bunty?’ she asked. ‘She's all the way down in Brighton.’

‘No I can't!’ Bunty cried. ‘Mummy can never know what Maurice was like.’ She looked at Maudie, grasping her hand tightly in despair.

‘He left a note saying he was sorry for all he'd done to me and he couldn't live any longer. Mummy can't know that. I want her to think he killed himself because of a business deal that went wrong.’

‘You can stay as long as you wish,’ Maudie said, partly wanting to spite Agnes. ‘You're family and that's what families do, they look after each other.’

The next morning, Maudie was waiting in the reception room when Madam Leonie arrived. She heard her out in the hall talking to Holmes, and took this as her opportunity to strike. She left the room and walked out to greet the tutor - an unattractive woman in her late forties, with far too much make up, and her jet black hair scraped back to give the impression of younger looking features.

‘Hello Mrs Ryder,’ she said in her thick, French accent. ‘Where is little Catherine today?’

‘Kate won't be having her lesson today,’ Maudie said. ‘In fact I don't want her having French lessons anymore.’

‘I don't understand....Lady Agnes said...’

‘Yes yes, but I'm Kate's mother and I don't want her having any more lessons. She has spent the past weekend speaking in nothing but French.’

‘That is very good, it means she is learning.’

‘Well I think she’s learnt quite enough. Now if you would like to leave. I'm sorry you've had a wasted journey. But if you send an invoice, I will ensure you're paid up until the end of the week.’

With a huff, Madam Leonie turned and stormed out, Holmes shut the door behind her and without saying a word, went back to his quarters. Maudie turned around to find Agnes standing in the doorway of the drawing room, a look of horror on her face.

‘Come here Maud!’ she ordered, using the same tone as she did on the junior maids. Maudie was tempted to defy her, but didn't want to cause too much of a scene. If she showed too much backbone, Agnes might well start to get suspicious. Instead she stepped up to her mother-in-law, and tried hard not feel intimidated - even though she only came up to Agnes' shoulder.

‘Why did you do that?’ Maud asked.

‘Because Kate is too young to learn a language. I could barely converse with her for most of the weekend.’

‘Well that's clearly because you haven't been educated enough. She's going to go to Lady Evangelines unable to speak French properly and will be laughed at by the other children.’

‘I doubt if five year olds place much weight on an individual's ability to speak languages, now if you'll excuse me.’

‘Julian will be hearing about this when he comes home.’

‘I'm sure he will,’ Maudie said and she headed to her study.

Maudie remained in her study for the rest of the morning. She had a pile of letters to write, and kept the window open so she could hear Kate out in the grounds, having her riding lesson; laughing as she walked round on Corky. Maudie missed having her novel to dip into. She would often write a couple of paragraphs when she was bored, and she wondered what George Cooper was making of it. Brendan had been so naughty to give it to him. Gabriel's had published some classic novels, and would have no truck with an adventure story written by a bored, rich woman. Maudie made up her mind that she would call the publishers next week and ask if they could return it to her.

Suddenly the house was filled with the sound of commotion. The walls shook with the vibration of the servants' feet running up and down stairs, their voices chattering frantically. From outside there were shouts and calls of urgency from the various men working in the gardens, and Maudie could only conclude that Julian was home. She dreaded seeing her husband again. She hated the thought of tonight when they would share a bed once more. It had been so long since they'd been intimate. What if Julian wanted to make love? The thought of his rough, clumsy hands wandering all over her, after the touch of Brendan's expert fingers, made her feel sick. She never wanted to have sex with Julian again; but knew she'd have no choice because he was so desperate for a son.

She heard Kate's excited chatter and realised she'd come in with her father. Unable to resist seeing her daughter, Maudie left the study and walked to the lobby, finding Julian coming in the street door, surrounded by the team of servants. Kate was up in his arms, and this made him hobble along, as he balanced on his stick.

‘Look Mama, Papa's home!’ Kate called.

‘Kate get down and let your father walk in properly.’

Julian put his daughter onto the floor and tickled her cheek.

‘Go up and see Mary, and I promise I'll read you your bedtime story tonight.’

Kate cheered and ran up the stairs to the nursery. Maudie played the dutiful wife and went up to her husband, taking his arm and helping him towards their drawing room, but he stopped.

‘Where's mother?’ he asked.

‘Sulking in her room,’ Maudie quipped. ‘I sacked Kate's French tutor today.’

‘I want to talk to you Maudie,’ he said. ‘Go into the study, I'll be in after I've spoken to mother.’

Maudie went back to her study, wondering what Julian wanted to talk to her about. Had he thought more about Agnes' suggestion that she saw a doctor to find out why she hadn't got pregnant? Maudie didn't want some doctor taking blood from her arm, and poking and prodding her. She didn't know why they couldn't be more like the Bottomleys - Grace's family. They had come to terms with the fact that Grace would be the sole heir and left Merrilands to her. They could do the same with Kate, leave it all to her, and maybe if she had a daughter, one day she could own it too.

After waiting for an hour for Julian to come to her, Maudie got on with her work. Writing to her mother to tell her she'd seen Daisy in Liverpool, and that the plans for the wedding were going swimmingly. She also told her all about Kate and the fiasco with Madam Leonie. She didn't tell Alice about her granddaughter going off to school in Ireland because she knew she'd find that upsetting. Although Maudie didn't make it to Fielding House very often, she wrote regularly, telling of Kate's exploits, and every three months she would take her daughter into Chester, to the little salon there that photographed children and she would send the picture to her parents, so they could keep a record of how much Kate was changing. If they thought she would be going off to a boarding school hundreds of miles away for three months at a time, it would upset them deeply.

The study door opened and Julian came in. There was no affection on his face, nothing that told her he was pleased to see her, and a part of her couldn't help but feel saddened. They had loved each other once upon a time. Not like the passion she shared with Brendan, but enough to annoy Agnes and Sir Walter - and enough to make Kate. But it had all gone now - she suspected as much from his side as her own.

'Mother's been telling me a few things,' he said, sitting down on the Queen Anne chair in the corner. Maudie could see his good leg was stiff after sitting in a car for a long period this morning. 'You've never mentioned this Cousin Liam before.'

'He went to America before I ever met you,' she lied. 'We all thought we'd never see him again, but he's decided to come back. I think he'll eventually go back to Ireland, but for now he's catching up with relatives in England.'

'I also want Madam Leonie brought back. Mother's right, Kate does need another language. When I was five I could have a conversation with my Cousin Gustav, entirely in German. I want Kate to be as fluent. We'll start with French because that's an easy language to learn, then once she's mastered that we'll move onto something a little more challenging.'

Maudie bit her tongue. Once again she felt like the outsider in her own home. She'd given birth to Kate, but it seemed she had no input in how she was brought up. A fantasy flashed in her mind of living in a little house in Liverpool with Brendan, and Kate going to an ordinary school and living with them.

'One last thing. Never ever, ever speak to my employees behind my back.'

Maudie felt her blood run cold. She had no idea he was going to visit Boxall's. Foster had obviously said something to him. How was she going to talk her way out of this one?

'I don't know what you mean,' she said quietly.

'I visited Boxall's in Bootle as part of my tour and Mr Foster informed me he'd been paid a visit by you, demanding the rights of Irish workers. Can you explain yourself?'

'When I went to Liverpool to see Daisy; Grace and I went to a lecture. One of the speakers read aloud a letter from a man called Padraic O'Keefe who worked at Boxall's, and the awful working conditions he had to endure. It tore at my heart Julian. This man was the same sort of age as my father, and he too has been discriminated against all his life because he's Irish and a Catholic. I consider you to be a kind and just man who would not tolerate such behaviour in one of his factories.'

'I was perfectly aware it was going on. A lot of friends of mine have had trouble from Irish Catholics. They're almost as bothersome as the damn unions. You of all people should know how sectarian Liverpool is, and when you have Catholic and Protestant workers together, all sorts of problems begin.'

'Yes but I note it's not the Protestants who are put outside like dogs.'

He narrowed those still soft, blue eyes, as if trying to fathom her out. Wondering what had brought the change in his meek little wife.

'You sound like a Socialist.'

'Of course I'm not a Socialist; but this journalist who uncovered the working practices at Boxall's is threatening to write a piece on it in The Times. You don't need publicity like that.'

'I know and that's why I relented and told Foster that I agreed with you. But do you know how embarrassing it is for a man to go into his own factory and be told that his wife has been there causing trouble?'

'I'm sorry,' she said quietly.

'I'm worried about you Maudie. Mother's been telling me that you're behaving strangely, and I've even noticed it myself. You don't look at all well and I fear the strain of not producing a son is sending you rather hysterical. Therefore, mother and I have talked about it, and we're booking you into a sanatorium for a couple of weeks after Easter.'

'A-A sanatorium,' she uttered. 'You think I'm mad?'

‘No, no not at all. Priory House is a beautiful place just outside of Runcorn. Mother’s even been there herself. You can relax all day, have beauty treatments, take walks. It’ll be lovely.’

‘What about Kate? Will you bring Kate to see me?’

‘No, none of us will visit you. You need a complete break Maudie. And once you’re back and better, we can see about making a son. How does that sound to you?’

‘I don’t want to go to a sanatorium Julian. Please, I can’t go a fortnight without seeing Kate.’

‘Maudie, in a little over two years she will be going away to Ireland to school. You won’t see her for months. I think you should start getting used to it now.’

Maudie didn’t know what to say. Julian and his mother were obviously convinced she was on the verge of insanity, and her punishment was going to be incarceration at a glorified asylum. It was so unfair she wanted to cry; but she bit it back, for fear of him thinking her even more unhinged.

Julian heaved himself to his feet and looked down at her.

‘I’ll sleep in another bedroom if you like,’ he said. ‘I think you need complete rest and relaxation Maudie. Our marriage can start again from scratch when you come back.’

Chapter Eight

The Huntingdons arrived on the afternoon of Maundy Thursday, and Redlands went into a sort of meltdown. Agnes was convinced the servants hadn't cleaned the apartment they would be staying in adequately, and had spent the morning in the kitchen, supervising cook while she made a lunch far more elaborate than was decent. She called Maudie down, giving the impression that she wanted her opinion, but really it was to appear even more intimidating to the staff. When Maudie saw the chickens, quails eggs, salmon, freshly made coleslaw, salad and different types of bread on offer, she almost gagged, thinking of all those people back in Liverpool living in poverty.

Maudie was a little concerned about her health. She felt sick pretty much every morning, and she was sure she was due a period, but nothing had come. She also felt very emotional, wanting to cry at the slightest thing - and she recalled feeling this way when she was expecting Kate. She hoped and prayed with all her heart she wasn't pregnant. She and Julian had not been intimate in months, which meant he and Agnes would immediately know the child was someone else's. In another life, she would have loved Brendan's baby. But not now. Not how things were.

Agnes insisted they all came out to greet the Huntingdons, and Maudie reluctantly went along with it. Their guests arrived in two cars. The one in front was driven by Hugh, containing his wife and mother. The one behind was driven by their tired looking chauffer who was transporting all their luggage. Maudie stood with her arm through Julian's, Mary next to her with Kate up in her arms, and Agnes, out in front. Playing the matriarch, asserting her position within the house.

The cars stopped and Hugh got out. He was a huge man with bushy, sandy hair and a big, handlebar moustache. He and Julian had been in the Engineers together and while Julian had come from the war with half a leg, Maudie was convinced the trauma had done something to Hugh's brain. He had no volume control to his voice, sometimes speaking so loudly it hurt one's eardrums, sometimes mumbling so badly he could not be understood. She had read of men who'd been brain damaged by the conflict. Many ending up like vegetables.

'Hello!' Hugh boomed. 'How are you all?'

'Wonderful thank you Hugh,' Agnes smiled, clasping her hands together. 'How was your journey?'

‘Damned bumpy. I don’t know when they’re going to fix these damned roads.’

The two women emerged from the car. Louise was clearly pregnant, even though she was doing her darndest to hide it beneath a thick mink coat, and Lady Edna was looking as preened as ever. Where Agnes preferred the austere look, Edna chose to look like an ageing floozy, her grey hair dyed a lurid shade of orange, and she wore far too much make up. She was cloaked in a hideous black coat with big, ruffled black feathers on the collar, and she looked like a macabre clown.

‘Hello Agnes,’ she crowed, grasping her friend’s hands and kissing both cheeks. ‘You look wonderful.’

‘Not as wonderful as you,’ Agnes lied, kissing her back.

‘Hello Maud,’ Louise said in a clipped voice that demonstrated her dislike for her host.

‘You’re looking well Louise,’ was all Maudie said.

Lady Edna left Agnes and stepped up to Julian.

‘You’re looking gaunt,’ she barked. ‘Are you eating enough?’

‘I’m eating more than enough thank you Lady Edna,’ he laughed. Edna then looked at Maudie, her eyes travelling from her feet to her head in a second.

‘Um, you still have that common look about you.’

‘Mother!’ Hugh boomed. ‘Don’t be so rude. I’m so sorry Maud, you look as beautiful as ever. Mother hasn’t learnt the art of tact.’

Undeterred, Edna moved along to Mary and Kate. Maudie had ensured the nanny dressed Kate in her finest outfit, brushing her hair to perfection and tying it at the side with a pink, silk bow.

‘Does this child get at least half an hour’s exercise a day?’ Edna asked Mary. ‘She looks fat.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with Kate’s body,’ Maudie hissed, resisting the temptation to slap the old dragon round the face for insulting her daughter. ‘And she exercises regularly. Take Kate inside Mary,’ she ordered, keeping her voice even. ‘She’s looking tired.’

‘As you ask Mrs Ryder.’ Mary said, and she turned and went into the house.

‘Won’t you all come into the conservatory?’ Agnes called. ‘There’s champagne and canapés waiting for us.’

They went into the house and to the conservatory, that was bedecked with fresh flowers and exotic plants, and a couple of maids serving champagne and vol-

au-vents. Maudie took one bite of a bacon and cheese vol-au-vent and as she swallowed, she felt it come shooting back into her throat. Her body went into cold panic; she remembered being exactly the same way when she was pregnant with Kate.

The dining room looked like a Medieval banquet, with an obscene amount of food upon the table - far more than any of them could eat. Maudie had no idea why exactly Agnes always went to so much trouble with the Huntingdons; it was like she wanted to create an especially good impression on them, and yet they were such an annoying family.

The men spoke of important things, while the women remained quiet and ate their meal. Maudie switched off, thinking about tomorrow, when Brendan would come here. Did she dare tell him her suspicions? Or did she wait until she'd seen a doctor who could confirm it? What would Brendan think anyway? She couldn't bear to even contemplate his rejecting her, and so put the thought to the back of her mind and instead listened to Hugh's conversation.

'You want to come down to Johannesburg,' he boomed at Julian, helping himself to another glass of wine. 'Veritable gold mine down there, or should I say diamond mine? And you can pay three niggers the same wages as one white man.'

'South Africa's so far away,' Julian lamented. 'It would mean only spending half the year at home.'

'Well, Maud and I could keep things running darling,' Agnes said. 'You have to think of the Ryder fortune.'

'A man needs to look abroad,' Hugh continued. 'Over here, the damned unions are taking over. Just last week I was called up to Manchester because there was strike at one of my mills there. I've been bally well losing money left right and centre since the Depression, and it's one of my only few mills still going. Do you know why they went on strike? It was because, three women had become pregnant at the same time and we'd had to let them go. These union chappies.' He paused and looked at everyone around the table. 'And you'll all laugh at this. They demanded that these women were paid a full wage while they went off to have their children and allowed to keep their jobs afterwards.'

'Outrageous!' Agnes gasped.

'And have I the right to sack them? No, because they belong to a union. I blame these damned unions for this country going to ruin. Holding us to ransom and thinking they can tell us what to do.'

‘What did you expect the women to live on if they didn’t have a job?’ Maudie asked, although she heard Brendan’s voice in her head, saying it.

‘I’m sorry?’ Hugh asked.

‘If these women didn’t have jobs, how were they supposed to support their families?’

‘They’ve bally well got husbands to do it for them.’

‘Some of them haven’t. Some of them have husbands who were injured in the war like Julian, but they don’t have a fortune to live on. They can’t get a job and they rely on their wives to support them.’

‘You must forgive Maud,’ Agnes laughed nervously. ‘She’s in high spirits today, a long lost relative is coming to visit tomorrow and she’s a little excited.’

‘No need to apologise Agnes,’ Hugh said. ‘And I admire Maud for expressing an opinion. But women never understand the way of the world. They see everything through this strange fog of their emotions.’

‘Is this long lost relative from Ireland?’ Louise asked in her quiet and yet scornful voice.

‘Yes,’ Maudie replied. ‘My Cousin Liam. He went off to America to seek his fortune just after the war and is now a very successful writer. He’s heading back to Ireland but touring around England, catching up with relatives first.’

‘I didn’t realise you had relatives like that.’

‘Yes, I have,’ Maudie smiled sweetly. ‘Some did manage to make it out of The Bog.’

‘You’re looking tired Maud,’ Agnes said. ‘Why don’t you retire for a while and maybe join us for dinner tonight when you’re feeling a little more agreeable?’

‘Yes you’re right,’ Maudie said. ‘I do feel a little queasy. If you would all excuse me.’

She stood up, and Hugh being a gentleman, got up at the same time. Maudie couldn’t wait to get away from them and decided to spend the afternoon in bed; before rising to give Kate her tea and a bath and then put her to bed. Dinner tonight would be easier to endure knowing that within hours she would be reunited with Brendan once again.

Reaching the top of the stairs, she jumped a little when the door to Bunty’s apartment opened and she poked her head out.

‘How are the guests?’ she asked.

‘As irritating as ever,’ Maudie said with a roll of the eyes.

Bunty stuck her hand out, and Maudie saw she was holding a bottle of Gordon's gin.

'Fancy a snifter?'

'Why not?' Maudie laughed. 'I could do with talking to someone normal.'

She went into Bunty's modest apartment - which was actually more like a large hotel room, with an open planned reception and bedroom. Maudie felt so sorry for Bunty being almost imprisoned in here over Easter, not able to show her face in front of the Huntingdons. She didn't even look hideous now, the swelling had gone down from her face, and what remained of her black eyes could be disguised with make up. Maudie was glad to sink down onto one of the sumptuous sofas and accept a gin and tonic from Bunty - a part of her hoping the gin might do something to bring on her period.

'Are they still at lunch?' Bunty asked, sitting beside her.

'Yes, I was dismissed because I kept arguing. I'm sorry, but both Hugh and Louise Huntingdon have that effect on me.'

She sipped the gin and waited for it to make her sick, but all the symptoms from earlier on had faded. She felt fine now and that just made her more sure she was pregnant.

'What I don't understand is why Agnes goes to so much trouble whenever they come here. It's almost like she's scared to put a foot wrong.'

'You mean you don't know why?' Bunty gasped.

'No.'

'Louise was Julian's girlfriend when he went off to war. There was talk of marriage and everything. Then when he came home injured, she left him for Brian. Agnes insists on staying friends with them all, and making this place look like a palace whenever they come here - to make Louise see what she'd given up.'

'I had no idea, I really didn't. So Julian was in love with Louise once upon a time?'

'Potty about her.'

'There are so many things about this family that I'm not privy to. Sometimes I think I hover somewhere between the servants and them.'

'Agnes is a witch,' Bunty declared, finishing her gin and pouring another glass. 'Always has been.'

'Did you know that I'm being sent to a sanatorium on Tuesday?'

'What for?'

‘Because I’ve been acting strangely lately and Agnes thinks my high spirits are stopping me conceiving a boy.’

‘I had a friend who went to one of those places. She reckoned it was like an army boot camp crossed with a convent.’

‘You’re kidding?’

‘No. You’re not allowed to fraternise with the other patients, and alcohol is strictly forbidden. If you play up too much they give you this sleeping draught that knocks you out for a couple of days and you wake up unable to remember anything.’

‘It’s so unfair, I don’t need to go to a sanatorium - there’s nothing wrong with me!’

‘The more you say that, the more convinced they’ll be that you need to go.’

‘I sometimes wish I could take Kate and run away.’

‘And definitely don’t say that, they’ll put you in an asylum.’

‘What are you going to do Bunty? What plans have you got?’

‘I haven’t the foggiest darling. None of my friends want to know me now because my husband committed suicide, so all I’ve got is my family. I might stay here for a while.’

Maudie reached out and took Bunty’s slim hand in hers, squeezing it tightly.

‘Will you keep an eye on Kate for me while I’m away?’ she asked. ‘Make sure she’s looked after properly.’

‘Of course I will,’ Bunty smiled. ‘Kate’s adorable. I just wish that Maurice and I had had children. Maybe he would have been nicer to me then.’

Maudie slept little that night, excited at the thought of seeing Brendan, but nervous at the risk she was taking. What if she accidentally called him by his real name? What if someone caught them together? Bunty’s words about her being sent to an asylum rang in her head and she indeed questioned her sanity for doing this? Why hadn’t she just arranged to meet him in Liverpool? Or take another weekend down in London? This was sheer madness.

She finally drifted off as the sun was rising, and when she awoke two hours later, a feeling of sickness enveloped her. This time it was more than just nausea, and she ran into the ensuite bathroom and vomited into the sink. She wretched until her stomach was empty and her limbs were shaking. She bathed and when she was dressed, rang the bell in the corner of the room, which would summon a maid. It was Lucy, and she asked her to bring her a cup of strong tea and a slice of dry

toast. She then sat at the window, looking out, watching as Desmond, one of the drivers set off to Lime Street to meet Brendan. Maudie wondered if they would examine her at this sanatorium and discover she was pregnant. They would no doubt tell Julian, and God only knew what would happen then.

She ate her breakfast and waited for her stomach to settle. When she felt a little better she went into the nursery, where Kate was sitting on Mary's lap, while she brushed her long, dark hair. Maudie was still bristling from Lady Edna's claims that Kate was fat. She wasn't, she was just a well rounded, healthy-looking little girl. Maudie had been the same when she was a child, and by the time she got to twelve, it had dropped off and she became as whippet slim as she was now.

'I think I might take Kate to New Brighton tomorrow,' Maudie said, kneeling down by Kate and stroking her hair. 'Why don't you take the day off. Do you have friends nearby you could visit?'

'I've a friend who works as a nanny over at Mellor House in Chester. She's been saying I should visit her for ages.'

'Well there you go. I'm sorry you have to work over Easter, the least I can do is let you have a day off.'

'Lady Agnes tells me you'll be away for a couple of weeks. I have to go into Liverpool to the hospital about my knee on the fourth of April, is it alright if Lucy takes care of Kate?'

'Of course it is, but it's not my decision anyway Mary. While I'm gone everything will be down to Lady Agnes.'

Just as Maudie was standing at the bedroom window, watching Julian and Agnes walking out over the lawns with the Huntingdons and Fearghal, she spotted Desmond's car in the distance. Her heart started to beat rapidly in anticipation. Within moments all her doubts were allayed when the car pulled into the drive, carrying its precious cargo. Maudie left the bedroom and ran down the stairs, pushing past Holmes - who had come from his quarters to help carry Brendan's bags.

'Is this Mr O'Shea?' he asked.

'Yes,' she gasped. 'Yes it is.'

She opened the door and ran out onto the drive, just as the car came to a stop. Brendan didn't wait for Desmond to open the door for him, just got out himself, carrying his suitcase, looking up at Redlands House with a slight

expression of awe. Maudie fought the urge to fling herself at him, wrap herself around him and cover him in kisses.

‘How are you Liam?’ she asked politely.

‘I’m well thank you Maudie,’ he said, kissing her on the cheek. ‘How are you?’

‘Very well, very well. Holmes will take your case. I’ll show you to your room.’

Holmes led the way, and Brendan and Maudie followed as they walked up the stairs to the first floor, where she had insisted Brendan be put in the room next to the bedroom in which she was sleeping. Even if they couldn’t sleep together, at least she would know he was only a wall away. It was a modest room, but had every comfort Brendan could want and there was a bathroom at the end of the corridor that only he would use.

‘This is a beautiful house,’ he said, flopping down on the bed.

‘Can I get a maid to bring you some refreshments Mr O’Shea?’ Holmes asked.

‘Mr O’Shea will be fine,’ Maudie interjected. ‘I’ll see to anything he needs.’

‘Very well madam,’ Holmes said and he walked out of the room, shutting the door behind him. Maudie waited for his footsteps to disappear down the hall, and then laughed, flopping down onto the bed next to Brendan.

‘I’ve missed you so much,’ she said, looking at him and reaching up to stroke his hair.

‘Are servants likely to walk in on us?’ he asked, with that twinkle in his eye.

‘No, they’re all busy preparing lunch for when the others come back from their walk.’

‘So we’re alone?’

‘Technically, yes. Mary and Kate are busy in the nursery, so no one will disturb us.’

‘Fantastic. It seems like an eternity since I last saw you Mrs Ryder.’

The first real test of Maudie and Brendan’s acting skills came later that afternoon when they were taking tea on the lawn with Kate and Mary. Brendan was very sweet and gentle with Kate, and helped her build a house with her favourite coloured building blocks. Maudie chuckled to herself to see that Mary found Brendan very easy on the eye. The young nanny blushed whenever he spoke

to her and when she thought no one was looking, she would fiddle with her hair, making sure she looked nice.

When Puggle started yapping and looking in the direction of the house, Maudie turned and saw Julian heading towards them, trying to walk quickly. She couldn't help but wonder if this striding was a sort of competitive male thing. He wanted to show his houseguest that he may only have one leg, but he was still fit and could run with the best of them.

'Papa Papa!' Kate called, standing up and pointing to the ramshackle house she and Brendan had made. 'Look at this.'

'Lovely darling,' he smiled. 'Who built it? You or Liam?'

'Kate did,' Brendan replied. 'I just suggested which colour bricks to use.'

'We haven't been introduced,' Julian said, offering his hand. 'Julian Ryder.'

Brendan got to his feet and shook hands with Julian. The height difference between them was almost comical, and Maudie had to stop herself from laughing.

'Liam O'Shea,' he said with such ease, it was as though it was his real name.

'I was wondering if you and Maudie would like to join us for dinner later on Liam. Maudie's probably told you that we have some guests staying over, very old friends of ours. We'd love it if you would come too.'

'It would be an honour,' Brendan replied. 'And thank you for letting me stay here. Redlands is beautiful.'

'Oh it's no more impressive than Fielding House. Maudie tells me you spent many a summer there.'

Maudie held her breath. What if Brendan said something incriminating? She'd tried to tell him as much as she could about Fielding House, but he'd never been there. But Julian had.

'Yes, but I was a child then,' Brendan replied. 'You never take notice of the beauty of things when you're young'

'You're entirely right,' Julian nodded. 'Well, we look forward to hearing all about America tonight.'

'Oh I've a few stories to tell you.'

'I bet you have. See you both in the grand dining hall at seven thirty.'

Julian turned and hobbled back to the house. Maudie couldn't say anything to Brendan because Mary was there, but it took all her strength not to burst out laughing. She could just envisage Brendan telling the Huntingdons tales about parts of America he'd never even been to; but because he'd kissed the Blarney stone a long long time ago, no doubt he'd get away with it.

Kate started to get tired, and Mary decided to take her inside for a nap before her bath and bedtime. Maudie wanted her daughter fresh for her trip to New Brighton the next day.

‘Would you like Liam to read your bedtime story?’ Maudie asked, as Mary stood up and picked Kate up to carry her indoors. Kate nodded dolefully and asked for Cinderella, and Brendan promised he would be there at seven to read it to her.

Mary, Kate and Puggle went back into the house and Brendan got up off the rug he was sitting on and sat next to Maudie, in the deckchair that had been Mary's.

‘Julian's a good looking fella,’ he said, with just the hint of jealousy in his voice.

‘What was you expecting?’

‘Some grizzled old war hero. He'd be quite dashing if he had both his legs. Kate looks like him.’

‘I know. I'm so grateful for that. I wouldn't put it past that old witch Agnes to try and accuse me of being unfaithful. It took so long for me to fall pregnant for Kate. She might have thought I'd gone elsewhere.’

‘She's a beautiful kid. Very bright. Like her mammy.’

‘Her father's fluent in seven languages.’

‘Who cares about languages when you're smart enough to know you're so pretty all you've got to do is pout and flutter your eye lashes to get your own way?’

‘I don't know what I'm going to do, not being able to see her for two weeks while I'm in that sanatorium.’

‘Do you have to go?’

‘If I don't go, Agnes will have me put into an asylum. She thinks I'm going mad as it is.’

‘Well they can't stop me from coming to see you. I'll come as soon as I get back from London.’

‘I didn't know you were going to London.’

Brendan looked down in an expression that could only be called sheepish. What was he hiding from her?

‘I was waiting for the right time to tell you. The editor of the Daily Mirror saw an article I wrote on the closure of Prince's Dock. His brother is also a fan of my poetry, and he's offered me a job as Home Affairs Correspondent. I'm going down there on Tuesday to finalise the details.’

Maudie couldn't respond. Every muscle in her throat had constricted and she could barely breathe. If Brendan went to live in London how would she ever be able to see him?

'Hey don't look like that,' he said softly. 'Once you're out of that sanatorium why don't you make out that some long lost relative has invited you to London for a week? You could come down and see me.'

'I won't have seen my daughter for two weeks,' she snapped. 'I'll want to spend time with her.'

'Bring Kate with you! Just think, we could take her to Harrods, to London Zoo...'

It all sounded so tempting, and Maudie was sure she would be able to wangle a week away from the Ryders when she came out of Priory House. But it was just the thought of Brendan being two hundred miles away. Especially if she was pregnant with his child. What would she do then?

'S-So you want this job on the Daily Mirror then?' she asked quietly.

'Of course! Think of the difference I could make if I wrote articles on a national level.'

'I just hate the thought of you being so far away from me.'

'Maudie have faith in me. I'm going to buy a nice house in a nice area and there'll be plenty of room for you and Kate, whenever you want to stay.'

Whatever fears Maudie may have had about dinner, they went unfounded. Brendan had Julian, Agnes and the Huntingdons eating out the palm of his hand. He'd dressed in his smartest suit - cheekily wearing the cufflinks Maudie had bought him, and had slicked that wild hair down so it swept back from his brow. Within a few minutes, he had Louise simpering like a schoolgirl, and Julian and Hugh roaring with laughter at his tales of life at St Columba's College. Maudie could have kissed Brendan for playing up to the fact that like the other males here, he too had been to boarding school, allowing them to think that she also had well bred relatives. He also had the sense to not get drunk like Julian and Hugh. Alcohol would loosen his tongue, and he may have ended up saying something he shouldn't and blow the whole operation.

By the time the coffee was being poured, Julian and Hugh were completely inebriated. Hugh was sitting back in his chair, rubbing his hand over his fat stomach, Julian chain smoking and laughing at nothing in particular. With these

two overgrown schoolboys incapable of decent conversation, the attention of the women turned to the handsome - and sober 'Liam'.

‘So, Mr O’Shea,’ Louise said.

‘Liam, please,’ he smiled. ‘Only my bank manager calls me Mr O’Shea.’

‘Liam,’ she blushed. ‘Will you be returning to Ireland soon? Only I was wondering if you would like to come to Hugh’s birthday party next month. It will be at Loftings, our house in Suffolk.’

‘Say you’ll come man!’ Hugh shouted. ‘Bloody love a good Paddy at a party. Always such fun stories to tell.’

‘Hugh!’ Lady Edna hissed. ‘Don’t be so rude.’

‘No offence taken,’ Brendan laughed. ‘I’m afraid I won’t be able to go as I’ve only just found out I’ll be dividing my time between London and Dublin. I’ve been offered a position on the Daily Mirror.’

‘That socialist rag!’ Hugh scoffed. ‘What do you want to work for them for? I’m chums with the editor of the Financial times. Why don’t you have a word with him, see what he can do. Tell him I sent you.’

‘I’m afraid Finance isn’t really my thing,’ Brendan replied politely.

‘Well if you do manage to find some free time, please come to our party,’ Louise said. ‘We’re trying to secure Oswald and Cynthia Moseley as guests. I think they will be so fascinating.’

‘And Moseley is quite pro-Irish you know,’ Hugh said.

Maudie held her breath. Brendan had expressed his disgust at Oswald Moseley and his British Union of Fascists, and the terrible way they persecuted Jews in the East End of London, and she was scared he was going to react badly.

‘Despite being a journalist, I prefer not to be too political,’ he smiled, and only Maudie noticed the way his lips narrowed, indicating he was displeased. To the rest he was just a polite young man.

‘First damn Paddy I’ve met who isn’t,’ Julian slurred. ‘Always complaining about their rights and how they’re treated so badly.’

‘Do you remember that Irish cook we had?’ Louise said to Lady Edna and Hugh. ‘It was her grand-daughter’s Holy Communion and she insisted on taking the day off, even though she knew we had the Duke and Duchess of Norfolk coming to stay. Then when Sir Edwin sacked her, she threatened to get her sons onto him.’

‘Savages,’ Hugh spat. ‘Present company excepted Liam. I’d bloody well prefer to employ a nigger than a Paddy. At least half the time, down in Jo’berg, they don’t understand what you’re saying, only the orders you give.’

‘Such lovely teeth, negroes,’ Lady Edna said. ‘That’s the one thing I always notice about them. Do you think it’s because they eat bones?’

Maudie noticed a nerve twitching in Brendan’s forehead. It always did that when he was angry or impassioned about something, and this conversation was obviously getting to him.

‘If you’ll excuse me,’ he said with that fixed smile. ‘I think I’ll be getting to bed. We want to leave early for New Brighton tomorrow.’

‘Oh yes, I meant to say old chap,’ said Julian. ‘Can you drive?’

‘Yes,’ replied Brendan, puzzled.

‘Take one of the cars, whichever one you like.’

‘Thank you,’ Brendan smiled. ‘That’s very kind of you.’

‘You’re family. Maudie’s family is my family and I want you to have a car.’

Brendan left the table and Maudie did too, saying she wanted a decent night’s sleep before heading off to the seaside the next day. They walked up the stairs to the first floor, in silence. Brendan then went into his room and sat down on his bed, his face set in rage. Maudie pulled the door to and sat beside him, not knowing what to say.

‘How do you put up with those people?’ he hissed. ‘They’re disgusting.’

‘They’re my family,’ she said solemnly. ‘Kate’s family. And their views are no different to most of the upper class families in this country.’

‘It makes me sick to think I’ve got that blood flowing through my veins. You’re lucky Maudie. At least all your blood is Irish.’

‘I would run away from them tomorrow if I could,’ she sighed. ‘But they’d never let me see Kate again and I can’t live without my daughter.’

‘What about if we went abroad? To America or somewhere?’

‘But what about your job on the Daily Mirror?’

‘You mean more to me than a job on the Daily Mirror. If we went to America, they’d never find us.’

‘Julian’s got contacts everywhere. Wherever we went, we’d be looking over our shoulders.’

‘Okay, how about we sit tight until Kate goes to school in Ireland? We could move to Dublin so we’re near her. I’ll get a job on a paper there and you’d be able to see her whenever you liked.’

Maudie went to ask him what they were supposed to do in the meantime with the baby she was carrying in her belly, but she couldn't do it. If she said it, then it would make it real, and something that would have to be dealt with.

'It's about the best we can do,' she said sadly. 'If I know I've only got another two years here, it will make life a bit more bearable.'

Chapter Nine

Despite feeling sick and slightly dizzy, it was lovely for Maudie to get Kate up the following morning, to give her breakfast, dress her and brush her hair. These tasks were usually left to Mary, and it felt like a special treat to spend this time with her daughter. Kate insisted on bringing her bucket and spade and her black dolly to the seaside, and when they walked down the stairs on their way out, Julian was at the bottom, going through the pile of letters Holmes had just passed him.

‘Well look at you,’ he said to Kate, a proud smile on his face. ‘Are you excited about going to the seaside with Mama and Liam?’

‘Yes,’ Kate replied precociously. ‘Mary gave me a shilling to buy a present. I’m going to buy something for you Papa.’

Julian laughed and stroked his daughter's cheek.

‘You don't want to spend your money on me. Buy yourself something nice, and treat Mama to an ice lolly.’

He looked at Maudie and smiled. Sober and straight thinking, he was her Julian once more. The one she fell in love with all those years ago. That man was still there, it was just such a shame that most of the time bitterness overtook him and made him as cruel and cynical as his mother.

‘Are you okay for money?’ he asked. ‘I see Liam's taking the Model A. I think it might be running low on petrol.’

‘We'll be fine,’ Maudie replied. ‘What are your plans for today?’

‘Well I'm just going to join Hugh in the conservatory for breakfast and a read of the papers and we thought this afternoon we might go fishing.’

‘Sounds a lovely day. Well, we'll see you this evening.’

She stood on tip toe to kiss him on the cheek and as she did so, he turned his head so their lips brushed. It was the first time he'd kissed her in this way in months, and it felt alien, especially after Brendan.

‘I'm going to talk to Mama about the arrangements for next week,’ he said quietly, not wanting to mention the sanatorium in front of Kate. ‘See if we can cancel.’

‘Thank you,’ she gasped. ‘Thank you so much.’

‘Okay. Well, off you go. Have fun.’

Maudie took Kate outside, where Brendan was sitting in Julian's Ford car, that cheeky smile on his face. He got out and walked over to them, taking Kate's bucket and spade, and Maudie's bag.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked. ‘You look really pale.’

‘Yes,’ she replied. She looked at Kate. ‘Darling get into the car, we’ll be with you in a minute.’

Kate wandered over to the car, opening the door and climbing into the back seat. Maudie looked in the direction of the house, to make sure no one was around to hear.

‘Julian’s just intimated that he might persuade Agnes to cancel my stay at Priory House.’

‘Fantastic,’ Brendan gasped. ‘You can come to London with me.’

‘I think he has other plans,’ she said. ‘I’ve been married to him for twelve years and I know how he operates. He wants to get on with baby making. If I have a baby with him I’ll be tied to him for even longer.’

‘Can’t you take precautions? There must be things you can do.’

‘Yes, yes you’re right. I’ll go and see Doctor Walker in Chester. He’ll be able to help me. I can’t have Julian’s baby. It would ruin everything.’

As they drove to New Brighton, Brendan sang traditional Irish songs to Kate and taught her the words, reminding Maudie of her own childhood when her Ma and Da would take her to the seaside. She smiled at her daughter’s enthusiasm and laughed along, but her mind was only half on things. She thought about her predicament and how she could make things work to her advantage. If she slept with Julian that night, in a month’s time she could claim she was pregnant. When the baby came early, she could just pretend it was one of those things. She and Brendan were so similar in colouring, if the child came out looking like him, no one would think anything of it. She could worry about leaving Julian in two years time, when Kate went to school. But at least for now, she could get the problem of what to do with the baby out of the way.

It was a chilly day, but the sun was shining brightly and New Brighton was packed. Maudie noticed how over the years the place had started to look a bit seedy. A lot of the people of Liverpool now went to Southport or Blackpool for their days out. Train fares were so much cheaper now, so they could afford to go further afield. But on a day like today, in the middle of the Easter weekend, it made a great place to take a break. Brendan, Maudie and Kate blended in with the other families; Kate found a group of other children to play with in a little playground close to the beach, while Brendan and Maudie had fish and chips in an open air restaurant. Brendan watched Kate playing chase around a huge sandcastle, one of

the children had made, her little dress filthy and the bow slipping out of her hair. She looked so happy and innocent.

‘She’s a grand kid,’ he said wistfully. ‘Makes me want one of my own.’

‘Y-You want children then?’ Maudie asked.

‘I’d not really thought much about it before. But today, being here with you and Kate, people thinking we’re a family. I love it. Look at her, she hasn’t a care in the world, and when you’re with her, you find yourself feeling the same way.’

Maudie bit her tongue, so desperate to tell him she was carrying his child, but knowing she couldn’t, because then it would cause all manner of complications. Especially if she was going to pass it off as Julian’s.

‘Children are very hard work,’ she said, trying to dampen his enthusiasm. ‘I don’t know what I’d do without Mary and Lucy to help out.’

‘You say that but you don’t mean it,’ he smiled, giving her that look where it seemed he could see into her very soul. ‘I can see it in your eyes when you look at her. You adore her, and she does you too.’

‘I always thought she was a daddy’s girl.’

‘No, she loves her mammy. That’s why we’ve got to move to Ireland when she goes to school. You’re not going to be able to go for months without seeing her. It will kill you.’

Maudie let out a sob, unable to control her emotions. Brendan was right. If she really thought about it, about her darling baby travelling hundreds of miles, to be locked up in a school, filled with harsh teachers and girls twice her age, she would want to scream so loudly, the people over in Liverpool would hear her.

That afternoon they walked along Fort Perch Rock, Brendan telling Kate stories about pirates and smugglers. They then went to the lighthouse, and Maudie remembered coming here with her parents and Da telling her that if she climbed to the top and looked out, she’d see Ireland. Kate asked if she climbed to the top if she’d be able to see the moon, and Brendan assured her that she would and promised to take her to the top one day, so she could see for herself. Maudie could tell Brendan had fallen in love with her daughter, and this made her feel even sadder. A lot of men would not be willing to take on another man’s child, but Brendan made it quite clear he would be happy to look after the pair of them. And yet they couldn’t be together, not yet.

By the time they returned to the car, Kate had fallen asleep and Brendan had to carry her. He lay her across the backseat, taking off his jacket and wrapping it around her.

‘We don’t want you getting a cold, little one,’ he said softly.

They climbed into the front seat and Brendan set off. How tempted Maudie was to tell him to keep driving anywhere but Redlands, but she knew this was silly. Instead she looked out at the countryside rushing by, taking deep breaths, as the motion of the car made her feel slightly sick.

‘What’s happening this evening?’ Brendan asked.

‘I think they’re all going over to the Rushby’s for dinner,’ Maudie said. ‘I haven’t been invited.’

‘So we’ll have the place to ourselves?’

‘Us and the staff, yes.’

‘Sounds promising.’

‘We must be careful though Brendan. We don’t want to blow our chances before we’ve even got them.’

They arrived back at Redlands just as night was falling. Maudie hoped that the others would have already left and made their way over to Warrington, where the Rushby's lived. All she wanted was to put Kate to bed and then make supper for her and Brendan; then they could spend some time together in her room before everyone came back.

Brendan pulled up in the car, and the door to the house immediately opened. Holmes stepped out, along with Lucy. Maudie wondered why they'd both come out to greet them. She'd requested no help with Kate for that day, so Lucy wasn't required; and there weren't going to be any heavy bags for Holmes to carry in. Brendan opened the door for Maudie and she got out, opening the back door and getting Kate. Suddenly Lucy was behind her.

‘Can I take Miss Kate up to bed please?’ she asked.

‘It's fine Lucy,’ Maudie said. ‘I can do it.’

‘I'll do it,’ Lucy insisted. ‘I've had instructions.’

She practically manhandled the sleeping child out of Maudie's arms and rushed into the house. Maudie felt her legs give way when Holmes asked them both to go into the house. Without being told, she knew what this was. They had been found out. She wanted to run and catch up with Lucy and snatch Kate off her before they took her away for ever.

Holmes walked off into the house, glancing over his shoulder to ensure they were following. Maudie had to grasp hold of Brendan's arm, feeling she would fall if she didn't. How could they possibly have discovered the truth? They'd been so elaborate with their cover. Just the night before, Brendan had been charming the lot of them with his stories. What had changed?

Holmes led them to Agnes' study and opened the door. He didn't even introduce them, just pointed for them to go in like they were a pair of beggars off the street.

They were greeted by Julian, who was seated at his mother's desk; Hugh Huntingdon was stood by the mantelpiece, and Agnes was sat on the sofa by the window, a triumphant expression upon that miserable face.

'Pleasant day at the seaside Mr O'Shea?' Julian asked. 'Or should that be Mr Meehan?'

Maudie felt her legs buckle and Brendan had to catch her before she fell. He eased her down onto the sofa opposite Agnes, but remained standing, willing to take his punishment like a man.

'Now, I'm a reasonable man,' Julian said. 'I like to give people the benefit of the doubt. Is Brendan Meehan your pen name?'

'I'm sorry?' Brendan asked.

'It's a simple enough question. Is your real name Liam O'Shea and you are indeed Maud's cousin and you simply write under the name Brendan Meehan?'

'I don't understand what you're implying.'

'Oh stop playing the fool man!' Hugh shouted. From the coffee table he picked up a copy of *The Times* and there, as large as day, was a photograph of a group of protesters, the headline reading 'Protesters storm the home of William Dee, landlord in unfair rent claim'. At the front of the group was Brendan, next to him was Connie. Hugh looked at the paper and read aloud.

'Liverpool business man William Dee had his home barricaded on Thursday, when a group of protestors staged a demonstration outside, claiming Mr Dee charges unfair rents. The group, led by journalist and writer Brendan Meehan remained outside Mr Dee's home until ten p.m, when they were gently moved on by the local constabulary. I won't read on.' He once again showed the paper to Brendan. 'Is this or is this not you?'

'Yes,' Brendan replied quietly.

'Good God!' Agnes gasped. 'He could have murdered us in our beds.'

‘What sort of person do you think he is?’ Maudie snapped. ‘He isn’t a murderer.’

‘You see that’s what I’m trying to come to terms with,’ Julian said. ‘Just what sort of person he is. Clarence Foster also mentioned his name when I went to Boxall’s. Meehan was the journalist who had been threatening Mr Foster over allegations of mis-treatment of Irish workers.’

‘It’s a conspiracy,’ Agnes bleated. ‘I’ve never trusted her. I never thought you should marry an Irish girl. I lived there for so many years and I know how they feel about the English. She’s been conspiring with him to kill us, or rob us. I suggest we call the police in to search her room for guns.’

‘Dear God calm down will you,’ Hugh said. ‘It’s obvious what’s gone on here. As obvious as the nose on your face.’

‘What is Hugh doing here?’ Maudie asked Julian. ‘Surely this is a family matter.’

‘This is my damn newspaper!’ Hugh huffed, waving *The Times* once more. ‘Besides, until we know what sort of threat Mr Meehan is, I feel it my place to stick around and offer protection to Agnes and Julian, and you, if my suspicions are right. I think Mr Meehan seduced you in an effort to get to Redlands to rob you all, kill you or turn you over to his Republican brothers.’

Brendan laughed out loud, burying his hands in his pockets and doubling over.

‘You may laugh Mr Meehan. But the likes of you have a deep hatred for the English, especially the English who used to live in Ireland. Like Agnes. Is that not true?’

‘Yes it is true,’ Brendan chuckled. ‘But I hadn’t heard of Agnes Ryder, or her son Julian, or you or your simpering wife, or your ugly, over-made up, ignorant mother until I met Maudie.’

‘Brendan stop it!’ Maudie hissed, deeply embarrassed.

‘No Maud, let him continue,’ Hugh said. ‘Mr Meehan’s true colours are coming out now. To think I invited you to my house.’

‘I’d rather cut off my cock and stuff it down my throat than go to your house,’ Brendan snarled. ‘And I’d only want to meet Oswald Moseley so I could stick a knife in him.’

‘Call the police!’ Agnes exclaimed. ‘He’s going to kill us!’

‘Is Hugh right?’ Julian asked quietly, an air of resignation in his voice as he looked at Maudie. ‘Did Meehan seduce you?’

‘No,’ she replied, deeply ashamed at having to discuss her private life in front of Hugh Huntingdon. He was a terrible drinker and she knew he would dine out on this for months. A few too many brandies and every stately home in England would be filled with tale of Maud Ryder, the poor girl who married a rich man and cheated on him with an Irish rebel. ‘I fell in love with him the moment I saw him.’

‘How long has it been going on?’ Julian asked.

‘Can't we talk about this in private?’ Maudie asked. ‘Hugh knows Brendan isn't a danger now.’

‘HOW LONG HAS IT BEEN GOING ON?!’ Julian shouted.

Brendan sat next to Maudie and grasped her hand to protect her.

‘About a month,’ she said. ‘We met when I went to Liverpool with Grace. I never wanted to hurt you Julian.’

‘And is this the man Ethel Dunmore saw you with?’ Agnes asked.

‘Yes.’

‘What's this?’ Julian asked.

‘Ethel Dunmore called me a couple of weekends ago to tell me she'd seen Maud in Harrods laughing and joking with a young man she appeared to be intimate with. When Maud returned home, I confronted her with it and she swore blind the young man had been her cousin Liam. I take it you went to London especially to be with Mr Meehan?’

‘Yes.’

‘So you seduced my wife then got her to do your bidding at Boxall's?’ Julian asked. ‘You utter bastard.’

‘Brendan didn't even know I was going to go there,’ Maudie pleaded. ‘He'd organised a demonstration outside the factory for the following week and I thought to save trouble, it would be better if I went and spoke to Mr Foster alone.’

‘I think it's quite evident Julian,’ Hugh said. ‘You married scum and she has naturally drifted back to scum.’

Brendan shot up off the sofa and strode over to Hugh, clenching his fist close to his face.

‘I won't hit him because he's a crippled man, but I'll hit you, you fat fucking bastard.’

‘That's it,’ Agnes said, getting up. ‘I'm calling the police.’

‘You don’t want the police coming here Agnes,’ Hugh said. ‘They’re notoriously bad at keeping secrets and the scandal will be all around the county before you know it. I think your best bet would be to throw the pair of them out.’

‘This is my home,’ Maudie protested. ‘What about Kate?’

‘Kate will be well looked after,’ Agnes said. ‘You’ve forfeited your right to be a mother by sleeping with that man.’

‘No!’ said Brendan, turning to look at her. ‘No, I’ll go. I’ll never trouble Maudie again. You can’t separate her from that little girl, she means the world to her.’

Julian got to his feet, and balancing on his stick, walked over to Brendan, and despite his disability, the difference in height gave him a great advantage.

‘And you can’t walk into my house and tell me what I can and can’t do. I’m the master of this house and I don’t want you and your filthy whore here any longer. I’m asking you both to leave.’

Maudie shot up out of her seat and ran to the door, out into the lobby and up the stairs.

‘Kate!’ she cried. ‘Let me see my baby.’

She reached the nursery door to find it was locked. She pulled and pulled at the handle, screaming to Lucy to open it. She could hear Kate crying for her mama.

‘Lucy!’ Maudie sobbed. ‘Lucy open the door, I want to see my baby!’

She suddenly felt a pair of arms wrap around her waist and sweep her off her feet. It was Holmes, been sent to get her. She kicked and wriggled against him, trying to loosen his grip so she could get to Kate. He carried her down the stairs, where the door was open and Brendan was standing outside on the drive. Agnes, Julian and Hugh were by the door. Holmes carried her and threw her down onto the gravel. Brendan helped to pick her up, and she once again went to dart inside. This time Hugh caught her. She saw at the top of the stairs, Louise and Edna had appeared and were watching the proceedings with gruesome glee.

‘Let me see my daughter,’ Maudie pleaded. ‘Please. Let me take Kate. I don’t want anything else. Just Kate, please.’

‘You don’t deserve a daughter,’ Agnes snapped. ‘I will not have my grandchild living with you and your lover. Now please go.’

Hugh threw Maudie back out and she landed against Brendan, The door was slammed in their faces, but Maudie ran off round to the side of the house where there was an entrance that was rarely used. The door was locked tightly. She then ran round the back to the trades entrance to find that was locked tight too. The light

was dimming and she could barely see, and as she ran back to the front of the house, she fell flat on her face. Brendan helped her up and pulled her sobbing body to him. At that moment she both loved and hated him. She loved him ferociously but at the same time despised him, for if she'd never met him she'd still have her little girl.

‘Maudie darling this isn't the way,’ he said. ‘They're just going to call the police and have you carted off to a funny farm. You need to give them time to come to terms with what's happened. Come on, let's go.’

Too tired and numb to argue, Maudie took his hand and let him lead her through the vast grounds of Redlands. They walked in silence, along the dark country lanes until they got to a main road that headed to Hoylake. Maudie was exhausted and her feet stumbled along. By the time they made it to Hoylake and onto a train to Birkenhead, she was so tired, she fell asleep with her head on Brendan's shoulder. When they arrived, he gently shook her awake and led her to the Mersey Railway, where they took a train to Liverpool Central. As Maudie stepped out of the station, onto the bustling Cropper Street, she looked to her left and saw Lewis's, and she started to cry again, thinking that the last time she'd been in there was to buy Kate her doll. Brendan wrapped his arm around her and called for a taxi to take them to Toxteth.

They went back to Brendan's house and he helped Maudie out of her clothes and into bed. She couldn't sleep, just lay in a haze, overcome by the traumas that had happened tonight. She was aware of Brendan stripping down to his vest and braces and pouring himself a glass of whisky. He sat on the chair, looking out the window, that embittered look upon his face. Maudie admired him for keeping his temper for most of the time tonight. He had been accused of the most heinous things and yet he had remained dignified - another man would have lashed out.

Maudie considered this all to be her fault. She should never have tried to hoodwink the Ryders into believing Brendan was her cousin. That had been her trouble all her life, thinking she was cleverer than she really was. For her sins, she had now lost the most precious thing in her life. Kate would be turned against her and given time her daughter wouldn't want to know her anymore. Maudie didn't know many people who were divorced, but she'd heard about a distant cousin of Julian's, who left her husband for another man, and her children hated her so much they didn't even go to her when she was dying and calling for them. That was what was going to happen to Kate. Agnes would get what she always wanted and have Kate to herself, to shape her and mould her and turn her into a proper Ryder.

‘I want to die,’ she said out loud, although really it was only a thought, expressed from the depths of her ravaged soul.

Brendan turned to her, furrowing his brow.

‘Don't say that,’ he snapped. ‘Don't ever say that.’

‘They were right. I am a whore who doesn't deserve to be a mother. I should never have had her.’

Brendan got up from his seat and came over to the bed, lying behind her, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her to him, kissing her hair.

‘We'll get Kate back,’ he whispered. ‘I'm still going to go to London on Tuesday. I'll speak to George. He knows lots of influential people. We'll find you the best lawyer.’

‘I've no money to pay a lawyer.’

‘I've still got my royalties, we'll use that. Don't worry about the money. Just think about getting your daughter back.’

‘I'm not going to London with you,’ she said. ‘I want to be near to her. I'm going to phone Mary tomorrow and tell her where I am. Then she can tell Kate and she'll know where her mama is.’

‘You're not going to do something stupid like go and try and break in there are you?’

‘No. I just want to be near her.’

‘Because if you do something like that, you'll blow your chances of getting her anyway.’

‘I won't get her back Brendan. All the lawyers in the world can't change the fact I was unfaithful to my husband. He'll divorce me and get custody of our daughter and I'll never see her again.’

‘He can't stop you seeing her. I'll go down to London on Tuesday and I'll look for a house for us all to live in. You me and Kate. Now get some sleep. Things will seem clearer in the morning.’

When Maudie did awake the next morning, for a brief moment she thought she was back at Redlands and it had all been a bad dream. It was only when she opened her eyes and found herself in Brendan's little bedroom that it all came back to her, and she realised it was real. She had been thrown out of the home she'd lived in for the past twelve years, and was banished from seeing her daughter. The pain of this made her start crying again, holding onto her stomach and wailing Kate's name, wishing that like in Jane Eyre, when Mr Rochester calls across the

Yorkshire Moors to Jane and she hears him; that her little girl would hear her from across the Mersey and know her mama loved her.

‘Oh Maudie,’ Brendan sighed, reaching out and pulling her to him. She sobbed against his chest, holding on tightly to him, wondering if she’d ever stop feeling this devastating pain. ‘I wish you’d change your mind about going to London with me. I don’t like the thought of you being here on your own.’

‘I need to be near Kate.’

‘You also need to get your things, you’ve no clothes to wear. I’ve still got a case at Redlands too.’

‘I’ll phone Grace, she’ll go and get my things. She might get to see Kate as well and she can let me know how she is.’

‘Okay, well let me go down and make you some breakfast,’ he said, kissing her hair. ‘You’ll feel better with some food inside you.’

‘I can’t face food of a morning,’ she said. ‘I feel sick.’

He gave a nervous laugh.

‘You’re not pregnant are you?’

Maudie couldn’t look at him. She pulled away and sat up, drawing her knees up to her chin. She felt him reach up and stroke her hair.

‘Maudie?’ he asked. ‘Are you?’

‘I’m not sure. I keep feeling sick of a morning and I’ve gone off my food. I was like that when I was expecting Kate.’

‘A babby.’ She could hear the smile in his voice. ‘How far along are you?’

‘Don’t worry it’s yours. Julian hasn’t touched me in months.’

‘Now I’ve got to buy a house. Somewhere big enough for our baby.’

‘Hopefully no one in London will know that we’re not married. Otherwise they’ll know the child’s a bastard.’

‘Only until your divorce comes through, then we can marry.’

‘That will take a couple of years. My life is so horrible Brendan. I wonder how much worse it can get.’

While Brendan made breakfast down in the kitchen, Maudie had a wash, and dressed in yesterday’s clothes. She then went to the telephone in the hall and called the exchange, asking to be put through to Grace’s number. The phone was answered by Grace’s butler, Parker, and Maudie could swear there was a hint of laughter in his voice. Surely the servant grapevine hadn’t worked that quickly that he knew of the scandal she’d created at Redlands House already?

Finally she was put through to Grace, and as soon as she heard her voice, she started to cry, struggling to recall yesterday's events. For once Maudie didn't care what people thought, and if the other people in the house heard, too bad.

'Oh darling, my poor love,' Grace said. 'You and Brendan must come to Merrilands.'

'We couldn't trouble you,' Maudie sniffed.

'Nonsense. You don't want to be stuck up in Liverpool on your own. I'm going to ring Connie and ask if she can come and pick you up, while I go over to Redlands and get your stuff.'

'I don't deserve you Grace,' Maudie said sadly.

'How many times have you covered for me?' Grace laughed. 'It's what friends are for. And you will get Kate back, I promise.'

'You sound like Brendan. I'm going to lose my little girl forever, I've faced up to it.'

'No, you can't think like that. Ronnie's brother is a barrister; we'll build you a water tight case, plead ill-treatment or something. You mustn't give up. Now get yourself together, because Connie will be with you in a while and I'll see you later.'

Grace kept her promise, and an hour and a half later, Connie turned up in her little car and picked Maudie and Brendan up. Brendan sat in the front with Connie, talking about various political issues and campaigns they'd been involved in, while Maudie sat in the back, watching the world go by. It was a long journey - there was no way of crossing the Mersey, so Connie had to drive through Warrington, down through Frodsham and down to Cotton Abbots, where Merrilands House was.

Merrilands was even more grandiose than Redlands House. Grace's family could be traced back to Norman times and many years ago they had been the head family in all of Cheshire - long before the Ryders moved in. The surrounding grounds were the size of Regents Park and it took several minutes before they reached the huge, grey bricked house, with its turrets and a parapets. It looked like the set of a Gothic horror and Maudie remembered coming here as a child and finding it a bit scary.

'I've been to more stately homes in the past two days than I have in me whole life,' Brendan laughed.

‘This place is like a city all within itself,’ Connie commented, peering up at the tower of what once was the church, which now stood empty. ‘Back home our staff have just got quarters, here they’ve got their own cottages.’

They drove into the grounds of the house, Maudie recalling being taken here as a child in Patience’s horse drawn carriage, and in her childish imagination, convincing herself she was going to be locked in the tower and kept away from her parents forever. Now as an adult she realised how fortunate she’d been to be allowed to holiday in such a splendid place.

Connie pulled up on the drive outside the West Wing of the house and when the door opened, Grace herself came out. Unlike the Ryders who left everything to the servants, Grace liked to greet her own guests. She looked very manly today, dressed in a pair of tweed trousers and an emerald green sweater. She put her hand against her eyes, to protect them from the sun and strode out.

‘Hello!’ she called. ‘How was your journey?’

‘Tedious,’ said Connie, getting from her car and kissing Grace on both cheeks. ‘I do wish they’d get and open that tunnel so one could drive straight under the Mersey.’

Brendan helped Maudie from the car and as she stepped out, she felt that same giddiness, like her legs were going to give way. Showing a strength he’d never displayed before, Brendan picked her up, and carried her into the house.

‘Is she okay?’ Grace asked, hurrying along behind.

‘I think it’s the shock,’ Brendan said. ‘It’s all got to her.’

‘It’s probably a broken heart,’ Maudie heard Connie say. ‘It’s barbaric sending a mother away from her little girl like that.’

Merrilands had its own infirmary in the East Wing. These days the whole estate had a staff of around sixty, but back in the eighteenth century, before the Industrial Revolution, three hundred people had lived on this estate, and the Bottomley family had been more benevolent than a lot of squires, providing a small hospital ward for staff that became ill. Today it contained no more than two wooden beds covered in green blankets, a chair and a sideboard with a wireless on. But it was quiet and cool, and as Brendan laid Maudie upon a bed close to the window, she was grateful for its sanctuary.

‘Maudie I’m putting you and Brendan in the apartment upstairs,’ Grace said. ‘It’s all self-contained and you won’t want for anything. I’m going to Redlands now to fetch your things. I called ahead and spoke to Holmes and he’s going to collect everything together.’

‘Bring my little girl back to me,’ Maudie said, still facing the wall, not wanting to see anyone.

‘I don’t know if I’ll be able to do that darling,’ Grace laughed nervously. ‘If we’re going to battle this out in court, we can’t be seen to do anything rash.’

‘That’s what I’ve been telling her,’ Brendan said. ‘Those Ryders have got her down as a hysterical woman. If she tries to snatch Kate, they’ll have her committed.’

‘I tell you what old girl,’ Grace said, laying a meaty hand upon Maudie’s shoulder. ‘I’ll see if I can speak to Mary, see how Kate’s getting on.’

‘Thank you,’ Maudie said quietly. ‘On my dressing table there is a silver box that has a lock of her hair in it from when she was christened. Please can you bring it to me?’

‘Of course I can.’

Grace then left, telling Connie to wait for her in her apartment over in the North Wing. Brendan pulled up the chair that was by the fireplace and sat beside the bed. But still Maudie couldn’t look at him.

‘Will you be alright here Maudie?’ he asked. ‘I won’t be in London long, I promise. I was thinking of getting a house in Twickenham. I’ve heard it’s nice in Twickenham and the train will take me into town in under an hour. Children shouldn’t grow up in a busy city, it’s not healthy. They need fresh air.’

‘What if I’m not pregnant?’ she whispered. ‘What if it’s a false alarm? Will you still want me?’

He bent over her and kissed her cheek.

‘I’d want you if you had one child or a million children. I’d want you even if that babby was Julian’s. It makes no difference to me. I love you Maud and I want to be with you forever. But I know you won’t be happy until you get Kate back, so that’s why I’m going to do everything in my power to ensure you do.’

Chapter Ten

After a lunch of chicken soup and cook's freshly baked oat bread, Maudie felt able to leave the infirmary. Brendan held her arm and helped her out into the landscaped garden for some fresh air. Most of the gardens around Merrilands were rather wild and overgrown, but the garden behind the North Wing of the house was decked, with a selection of exotic plants that seemed to thrive - despite being in an unfortunate position, in the garden of a house in the cold North of England. Sir Giles Bottomley had been a keen botanist and even though he had been dead for many years, his legacy lived on.

A Japanese style pagoda stood at the end of the garden, and it was here that Brendan led Maudie, easing her down on one of the wooden seats that ran around the perimeter. He sat beside her and asked if she was warm enough.

'I'm fine thank you,' she replied, glancing up at the ceiling, and saw that the scorch mark she and Grace created twenty odd years ago was still there.

'When Grace and I were children, we camped out here one night. Her mother made us promise to come in if we got too cold, but Grace being Grace, she smuggled some matches out and built a fire with sticks and almost set fire to the roof. Look, can you see?'

'Oh yeah,' Brendan smiled. 'Grace is quite a character.'

'I'll miss her when I'm down in London.'

'She can come and stay whenever she wants,' he said softly, stroking the back of her neck. 'I'm going to buy you a palace, I promise.'

'I don't want a palace. I just want a home. Somewhere I'm not told what to do all the time, and bullied; and if I am pregnant, no one else is going to look after my baby. I couldn't bear to have another one taken away from me.'

'Do you think you should see a doctor? Get it confirmed?'

'When I'm feeling stronger. I'm sorry I've brought all this on you Brendan. All you probably wanted was a fling with a married woman.'

'I've had lots of flings with married women. But I love you, and whatever you have to endure, I will endure too.'

They were interrupted by Christine, one of the young maids. She did a little curtsy and was too shy to look them in the eye.

'Mrs Gilbert-Wood requests your company,' she said.

'Thanks Christine,' Maudie smiled weakly. 'Where is she?'

'Her drawing room ma'am.'

‘Okay, tell her we’ll be in in a minute.’

Maudie was almost too nervous to go in to see Grace, frightened about what she had to say was going on at Redlands. In the end Brendan had to practically drag her. Grace lived in a huge apartment in the North Wing, while Ronnie her husband lived in the West Wing. Robert and Stephen's nursery were also in the North Wing, on the floor above their mother's apartment. But today both boys were out with their father on a shoot at an estate up in Cumbria. Grace wasn't very happy about a seven and ten year old using guns, remembering her own near misses as a child, but it was the way of the Gilbert- Woods that boys went hunting, shooting and fishing, and Grace felt powerless to stop her husband - not when he allowed her so many liberties.

Grace and Connie were in the drawing room of the apartment. Connie was standing at the huge windows, drinking a cup of tea and looking out at the fields. Grace was sitting on the sofa, and at her feet were a selection of Maudie's suitcases, as well as Brendan's.

‘This isn't all my stuff,’ Maudie said.

‘No, it isn't,’ Grace said solemnly. ‘It's all Agnes will allow you to take.’

‘And Kate? Did you see my daughter?’

‘Yes,’ Grace smiled. ‘One of the stable hands was walking her around on Corky. I only saw her from a distance but she looked fine.’

Maudie knelt on the floor and opened each of the suitcases. They contained the most basic clothes and underwear. There were none of her fine hats, or coats or her jewellery.

‘Agnes reckons that you don't deserve any of your jewellery or anything of value at all. She also requested that if you've any jewellery on, you give it to me, so I can return it to her.’

‘Did you get my box?’

‘Yes,’ Grace said, fishing in her trouser pocket, and passing the little silver plated box to Maudie. She opened it, stroking the soft, downy black hair that lay on the red velvet.

‘Thanks for getting my things Grace,’ Brendan said.

‘Not a problem, not a problem. Why don't I call Adams, and ask him to take everything to your room?’

‘I'll do it,’ Brendan said. ‘Leave you and Maudie to chat about what was said at Redlands.’

‘Yes!’ Connie suddenly said, turning around. ‘And I'll help.’

They both moved the cases to the landing outside the room, and shut the door behind them. Maudie sat next to Grace, feeling nervous at the uncomfortable expression on her friend's face. Grace was usually so relaxed about everything.

‘What is it Grace?’ she asked. ‘What haven't you told me?’

‘Well, as you can imagine, Daisy’s wedding reception is out of the question, so I thought maybe she could have it here.’

‘I couldn’t ask that of you Grace.’

‘Nonsense, why don’t you ring her and arrange to get the invitations changed?’

‘You’re very kind. But there’s something else isn’t there? Something horrible.’

‘Agnes has told the staff that you and Brendan were plotting to rob them and that was why you were thrown out.’

‘What! Half of Cheshire will be thinking that by the end of the week; you know how servants gossip.’

‘I think that's the plan. I think she's scared that if word gets out that all it was, was that the two of you were having an affair, then it'll be a slur on Julian. It'll imply that he wasn't man enough for you, so you went elsewhere. Instead, Agnes is making out like you've been plotting against the Ryders for years.’

‘B-But if people believe that, how am I going to get Kate back? And what if they go to the police?’

‘They've no evidence, the police wouldn't take it seriously. But it is blackening your name. I thought I'd also let you know that Agnes told me she'd phoned Fielding House and told Algy about what’s happened and he doesn’t want you going there to visit your parents.’

‘But Algy's known me all my life! He knows I'm not a thief.’

‘Agnes has painted Brendan as some sort of Svengali with a mystical hold over you, so Algy feels you can't be trusted. I'm so sorry Maudie.’

‘All I did was fall in love. It didn't matter to me whether Julian had one leg or two, or half a dozen. I just didn't love him anymore and I fell for Brendan. I don't deserve to be punished like this.’

‘Don't lose heart my darling,’ Grace said, squeezing her hand. ‘Like I said, there is no evidence to prove you were plotting to rob the Ryders, and if your barrister can prove Agnes is blackening your name out of spite, that will not look good for her.’

‘Did you see Julian? Did he mention anything about a divorce?’

‘No. Julian was out with the Huntingdons. I only saw The Witch. But she did say that Julian will be seeking a divorce.’

‘On the grounds of adultery?’

‘Yes.’

‘Which means I’ll have no right to keep Kate?’

‘Without proving you were cruelly treated, no. But as I said, that old cow is slandering your name left right and centre. I think you may well have a case.’

Maudie couldn’t be as optimistic as Brendan and Grace. Adultery was probably the worst offence a wife could commit, and her punishment was nearly always that she lost her children. The thought of this made Maudie feel so unwell again that Brenda and Grace insisted she returned to the infirmary. She lay alone, making plans. Grace had said that Kate had been out on Corky. If this happened each day, that meant she would be out in the field under the supervision of one of the stable hands. Maudie wondered if they would allow her to talk to Kate, just for a little while. Just so she could let her know her mama loved her.

Night fell, and with the darkness, so Maudie’s thoughts became more malevolent. She thought about going to Liverpool and visiting her Uncle Dennis. He was her mother’s brother and rarely spoken about by Alice because she was ashamed at being related to him. He’d served twenty years in Walton Jail for the manslaughter of a dock worker, and when he was released he went straight back into his criminal ways. He and his three sons were all expert burglars, and regularly hired themselves out as muscle to anyone who needed someone beaten up or threatened. Maudie wondered how much it would cost to have Agnes killed. Not Julian - she reckoned without his mother around to dominate him, she could persuade him to let her have Kate back. It was Agnes who stood in her way.

The trouble was, she had no money of her own. She couldn’t ask Brendan for money so she could pay her Uncle to kill her mother-in-law, and she didn’t have anything to sell – Agnes had kept all her belongings of value. She then thought again and realised that murder wasn’t the answer. Her name had been slandered, and she’d been accused of being a thief, so it wouldn’t take long for the police to put two and two together and realise she’d organised it. And if she was hanged, Kate would be handed straight back to Julian anyway, and have to live with the shame that her mother was a murderer.

Maudie's only other option was to snatch Kate. She could hide in the grounds until she went out for her ride, and then persuade the stable hand to let her

have her. She had no idea where they would go - she couldn't implicate Brendan or Grace in her crimes, and she wasn't allowed to go back to Fielding House, so she'd be homeless. But at least she'd have her daughter. Perhaps they could go to Ireland and she could get a job as a teacher or something. Hide away in a quiet little village, where no one had heard of the Ryders. She could go by her maiden name and even put on an Irish accent. Then if the Ryders did try to find her, it was unlikely anyone would help them - they always mistrusted the English anyway. When she was settled, perhaps Brendan could come and live with them and they could be together before the new baby arrived.

Maudie spent all of Easter Monday in the Infirmary. There was nothing physically wrong with her, but she just couldn't bring herself to talk to anyone. It was easier to lay on the bed, curled into a ball, crying. She had gone beyond self-pity. Now she just felt utter desolation and wanted to die. She'd committed a terrible sin, and this was her punishment - she could live for another forty years knowing she had a daughter out there she wouldn't be allowed to see. It seemed so unfair, and she knew if it wasn't for the baby growing inside her, she would take her own life. She knew suicide was also a sin, but at least her physical pain would be over. But she couldn't do that anyway. Despite all that had happened because of him, she still adored Brendan and this child was part of him, and she knew when it was born she would love it. But she was determined that she would never let it out of her sight.

Chapter Eleven

Maudie made the effort to get out of bed so she could see Brendan off. Grace was driving him to Liverpool Lime Street, where he would get the train down to London. Even though Maudie had the company of Grace, Ronnie and the boys and all the staff at Merrilands, Brendan was still reluctant to leave her, and as he sat in the passenger seat of Grace's Morgan, he stuck his hand out and grasped her tiny fingers tightly.

'Are you sure you won't come?' he smiled. 'It'd be a much nicer trip with you.'

'No, you go,' she replied. 'I promise to be happier when you come back.'

'You better be,' he laughed. He leaned out and kissed her on the lips.

'I love you,' he said.

'I love you too,' she replied. 'Don't be away too long.'

'I'll call you every night,' he said. 'See you when I get back.'

They roared off in the car, and Maudie stood and watched them go, a part of her wishing she had gone with him. A trip to London, looking at houses would have taken her mind off her woes. But she couldn't concentrate on anything at the moment, so how could she have made a decent choice?

Ronnie and the boys were playing cricket on the lawn, along with Ernest and Douglas, the cook's grandsons. Agnes would never allow Kate to mix with the grandchildren of servants, and she had no little cousins either so she'd be so lonely, stuck at Redlands on her own.

As Ronnie spotted Maudie heading for the house, he called out to her.

'Fancy being umpire?!' he called. Ronnie Gilbert-Wood was a male version of his wife – big, bold and boisterous. Maudie liked him a lot and often thought it was a shame he and Grace didn't have a proper marriage - they made such a good pair.

'I haven't played cricket since I was about eight,' she laughed.

'Well one doesn't forget the rules. Come on, we insist!'

Despite herself, Maudie spent a wonderful morning with the boys. All that was required for her to do was to sit in a deckchair, drinking freshly made lemonade and pretending she knew the rules of cricket. It was lovely to hear children's laughter ringing out - it made a house a home and boys were so different to girls; always pushing and shoving each other, boasting of their accomplishments and shouting. Whenever Kate had her little friends over, the air would be full of the

sound of screeching and whining, and the assault of choice was hair pulling. Maudie laughed when she remembered a fight she and Grace had had when they were about five. It had been at Grace's birthday party, and she was sulking because she'd been given a beautiful, blonde haired doll instead of a toy fire engine, and while Maudie was wowing all the mothers and nannies present with her ballet dancing, Grace had rushed up to her and pushed her over, then kicked her. Even then she fought like a boy and Maudie couldn't remember how they'd made it up again, but it was the first and last time Grace had been quite so beastly to her.

When the boys became bored of cricket, they ran into the house to fetch a football and started a game. Ronnie was quite puffed and flopped down next to Maudie, helping himself to a glass of lemonade.

'I'd love to know where they get their energy from,' he said, watching the four little boys running around. 'It's so hard to believe one was once like that.'

'Wouldn't it be lovely to be that age again?' Maudie sighed. 'Life was so simple back then.'

'I know. Seemed like one moment I was playing rugger at Eton, next moment I was being shipped off to Flanders to fight in the war. I hope there isn't another war. I don't want Robbie or Steve to go through anything like that.'

He sipped his lemonade and looked at Maudie.

'Grace mentioned what had happened. Are you alright old girl?'

'I suppose you think I deserve everything I've got?'

'Who am I to say? We've all made mistakes in our marriages. I don't know how I would have reacted if Grace had ever cheated on me with a man, the risk of pregnancy and all that. As it is things can remain discreet.'

'Why do you put up with it?'

'Because I love the old girl, always have done, always will do. One can get sex from anywhere, but nothing beats that bond you feel with someone. She's my best friend. I always think it's a shame Gracie's not a bloke, then we could have been proper chums.'

'Trouble is, that's how I feel with Brendan. I can't explain it, but as soon as we met, it was like we were two halves of the same whole. I never felt that way about Julian. When I met Julian, I was infatuated with the handsome war hero. Besides, Patience had never allowed me to go to any of the coming out parties to find a husband, and when I found my own member of the aristocracy I had a point to prove. But with Brendan, it's so different. I've sacrificed so much for him but I don't regret any of it, I just wish I could have my daughter back.'

‘You do realise that just because Julian will get custody of her, it doesn't mean you can't see her? And if he tries to stop you, you're at perfect liberty to get a court order against him.’

‘But I committed adultery.’

‘Yes, you committed adultery, you didn't murder someone. Kate's your child and she's only a baby, and no judge in the land won't see that she'll need regular contact with her mother.’

‘I was going to lose her in two years time anyway, when Agnes ships her off to school in Ireland.’

‘Ireland?’ he frowned. ‘Why so far?’

‘Well the plan was to get Kate out of the way so Julian and I could concentrate on making an heir to the Ryder throne, but obviously things have changed a little now, so I guess Kate will be the sole heir and it's important she's educated in the correct way.’

‘Well you could definitely contest that. If you and Brendan are going to be living in London, you'll find it darned difficult to travel to Ireland regularly. You could even try and get her into a school nearer to London.’

His words were kind, but Maudie couldn't take them in. She was still convinced her little girl was going to be taken away from her forever and all she could do was smile sadly, keeping her maudlin thoughts to herself.

That evening Maudie actually made the effort, putting on a nice dress and going to dinner with Grace and Ronnie. She was a little buoyed after talking to Brendan on the phone. He had reached London and was heading out for dinner at Claridges with the editor of the *Daily Mirror* to discuss his terms and conditions. Tomorrow he was going to go house hunting for them, and in the evening he was having dinner with George Cooper before heading back to Merrilands on Thursday. Maudie hated being away from him but hearing his voice was slight compensation.

The Gilbert-Woods were fantastic hosts, and when they did something together, it was hard to believe they weren't like any other couple. Maudie accepted their offer of drinks and got quite drunk. But instead of crying, she found herself laughing and went to bed feeling content, but missing Brendan beside her.

She fell off into a deep sleep - probably the most peaceful rest she'd had in ages. Maybe it was because she'd stayed at Merrilands so many times as a child, the familiarity made her feel comfortable. She was awoken by Kate's voice - she

was crying out the word 'mama'. Maudie opened her eyes and could only see the faint outline of the furniture, illuminated by the light of the moon coming through the window. But the voice came again, a pitiful sob 'Mama! Mama!'

Half asleep and half awake, Maudie was convinced she could get to her daughter. Not remembering how far away Redlands was from here, she ran out of the house in her nightdress. Kate's pitiful cries still in her ears.

'I'm coming my darling,' she called out. 'Mama's coming.'

Delirious and in bare feet, wearing just her cotton nightdress; she ran across the fields outside Merrilands. It started to rain, but she was so convinced her daughter needed her she barely felt it. She made it past the perimeter wall, forgetting there was a ditch running all the way around it - put there once upon a time to keep invaders out. Maudie found herself hurtling down the steep ten feet drop, unable to stop herself, then everything went black.

'Where's that damn butler with the coke,' Grace cursed. 'The wretched fire's going out.'

Maudie was too exhausted to open her eyes but she knew her friend was in the room with her. She wondered what had happened. She remembered having a dream where Kate was crying for her, but after that....

Slowly she opened her eyes and realised she was in the infirmary. Grace was standing over her, an impatient look on her face, dragging heavily on her cigarette.

'Oh thank God for that, you're alive!' she exclaimed.

'What happened?' Maudie whispered, coming-to a little more, realising she was aching all over and that it was difficult to move.

'We got up for breakfast this morning and discovered you'd gone. We looked everywhere. It was Hornby the gardener who found you in the end, face down in the ditch. What were you doing?'

'I heard Kate calling for me. I had to go to her.'

'You heard Kate?' Grace sat down on the bed, laying her hand on her little friend's shoulder.

'Oh Maudie, Kate's at Redlands. Not here. You must have had a dream.'

'My body hurts.'

'Doctor Carey's here. He reckons you've badly sprained your ankle. But he wants to talk to you anyway. Are you fit to talk to him?'

‘Yes. Can you help me sit up a bit?’

Grace grasped Maudie under the arms and helped lift her up against the pillows. Maudie found it hard to believe that all she had was a sprained ankle, and not broken every bone in her body. She then remembered her baby. She didn't even know for sure she was pregnant and if she was, surely a fall like that would have harmed it.

‘Did I bleed anywhere?’ she asked. ‘Was there blood?’

‘Only a little cut on your forehead,’ Grace laughed. ‘Otherwise you're just as beautiful as ever.’ She stopped talking, as if something had come to her. ‘Are you pregnant Maudie?’

‘I don't know. I can't remember when I last had a period, and I've been having morning sickness.’

‘Is it Brendan's?’

‘Yes. Julian hasn't touched me in about five months.’

‘What are you going to do?’

‘Brendan knows and is delighted. He reckons he's going to marry me as soon as Julian divorces me. It still means my baby's going to be a bastard. Luckily down in London we might be able to get away with pretending to be married. That's of course if I didn't kill it by falling into a ditch last night.’

‘Well you don't appear to be bleeding. You might not even be pregnant Maudie. I remember about five, six years ago, I didn't come on for nearly a whole year. I knew I wasn't pregnant because Ronnie and I hadn't done anything. But I felt queasy and everything. It was just after mummy died and the doctor reckoned it could have been the shock that made me miss. You have had a lot of traumas of late.’

‘You're right. In a way I hope you are. I'd like Brendan's baby, but not until we're married. I don't want an illegitimate child. I've brought enough shame onto Kate as it is, I don't want her going to school and being told her mother was the one who gave birth to a bastard. Julian and I should be divorced in two years time, I'll only be thirty-five, Brendan and I could try for a baby then.’

‘And if you're pregnant now? Are you going to get rid of it? I'm sure we could find you someone discreet in Liverpool...’

‘No, no I couldn't do that. I'll just have to deal with it I suppose. Like I have to deal with everything.’

Grace left Maudie alone and went to get Doctor Carey. Maudie absent-mindedly ran her hands over her battered body, as if convinced she was going to

find a broken bone sticking out somewhere. She was glad it was Doctor Carey that was coming to see her. She had known him since she was a little girl. He'd been a young man then, and with his dark hair and big brown eyes she'd thought him the most handsome man in the world. He'd come to her when she fell off Monty, Grace's pony, and thought she'd broken her leg, and even now she recalled, as a tiny seven year old, being swept up in the arms of this big handsome man and it being the most exciting thing that had ever happened to her. She had seen him on and off over the years and the dark hair had gradually gone grey and the dark eyes had folds of flabby skin around them now, but she would still blush in his presence.

When he opened the door and came in, she saw that he was now almost bald, except for a little hair at the back of his head, and he was wearing thick rimmed glasses. But he still smiled at her as though she was seven years old, and his kindness made her want to cry.

‘Hello Maud,’ he boomed. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘I hurt all over, are you sure nothing’s broken?’

‘I felt for broken bones and couldn’t find anything. Why don’t you get out of bed and walk towards me?’

Maudie swung her legs round and found that everything moved as it should, just more painfully. She got to her feet and her legs didn’t give way, but as she walked, her left ankle hurt quite a lot, causing her to limp.

‘Can you put any weight on the ankle?’ Doctor Carey asked.

Maudie deliberately rested on her left ankle, as if doing a ballet move, gradually lifting her right leg up. The pain was intense, but bearable.

‘I don’t think anything is broken,’ Doctor Carey said. ‘Get back into bed and rest yourself.’

Maudie did as she was told, and climbed back into bed, wincing as her aching buttocks hit the hard mattress. Doctor Carey came round and sat beside her; that concerned expression on his now flabby, elderly face.

‘Grace just told me you went running out because you heard your daughter calling you. Is that correct?’

‘I must have had a bad dream,’ she said sheepishly.

‘Grace told me briefly what has happened with you and your husband. Is there no way you can have a reconciliation?’

‘No, Julian would never take me back. I had an affair with another man.’

‘A lot of women have done the same thing and their husbands have taken them back.’

‘Not Julian, his mother will see to that. She's spreading rumours that I was a thief and plotting against her with Brendan - the man I'm in love with. I'll never be able to show my face in Redlands again.’

‘Well what are you going to do? Can you build a future with this man?’

‘Yes, we're going to London together. Brendan's buying a house and we're going to marry when Julian gets his divorce.’

‘And what about your little girl? How will you deal with being estranged from her? She's clearly in your thoughts, causing you to have a night terror. I'm concerned about your health and wonder if you should remain here for a while.’

‘I understand your concern doctor, but while I know my daughter is only twenty miles away, I will want to go to her. But if we move down to London, I'll appreciate that she's nowhere near me and I'll have to move on as best I can, and fight for any chance I may have to see her from time to time.’

‘Is there anything else you want to ask me?’ he said, his voice lowering, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

‘Grace has spoken to you...’

‘She just mentioned that she thought you might be pregnant.’

‘It's true.’

‘Would you like me to examine you? If you do a test, it will take a week. I should also check to see if everything is okay after your fall.’

‘Okay,’ she said quietly. ‘I want to know for sure.’

Maudie felt embarrassed stripping naked from below the waist and letting the doctor who'd known her since childhood, see her most intimate parts. She stared at the wall while Doctor Carey poked and prodded her. He held a stethoscope against her lower stomach, and as soon as she saw him do that, she knew she was pregnant. Doctor Carey put his stethoscope away and went to the wash-stand in the corner, rinsing his hands in the bowl of water that on was on it.

‘I estimate you to be about four weeks pregnant,’ he said. ‘The foetus is too small for me to register a heartbeat, but your accident happened about twenty hours ago and there's been no bleeding and your cervix is still sealed, so I think baby is fine.’

‘Thank you doctor,’ she said, relieved her child was okay, but still very worried about what the future held for it. She pulled on her clothes and got back into bed. Doctor Carey sat back down again.

‘What was your pregnancy with your daughter like?’

‘I was very sick for the first few months, then everything was fine.’

‘Okay, well you're thirty-three, you're not getting any younger, but physically you're strong. It's more your mind I'm worried about. I've seen a few cases where a woman has been estranged from an older child, and goes on to reject her new baby. It's not the sort of thing people like to discuss, but it does happen. I have a very good friend, Solomon Newburg, he's a psychiatrist based in Harley Street. I will leave his contact details with Grace. I want you to contact him when you get to London. Just so you have someone to talk to.’

‘So you think I'm mad?’ she uttered.

‘I think you've had a trauma which has left you in a delicate mental state. But I don't think you're mad. In my opinion, you should remain here at Merrilands for at least another month before going to London. You're in the early stages of pregnancy and in a vulnerable position. At least take care of yourself for a while.’

‘I'll see, but thank you for your advice Doctor.’

‘You mustn't punish yourself Maud. You've made a mistake, but your baby needs you to be healthy. Hopefully with your pregnancy to think about, it will take your mind off your other problems.’

Chapter Twelve

Maudie didn't get to rest for long. Mrs Machin, the housekeeper had been a nurse in the War, and she had told Grace that the best cure for a sprained ankle was plenty of exercise. So, early Thursday morning, Grace went to the Infirmary and fetched her friend, ordering her to get out of bed and start moving again. Holding on tightly to Grace's arm, Maudie walked the half mile to the perimeter wall of Merrilands, realising she had very little recollection of doing this the other night. After an hour of hobbling, she dared to put a bit more weight onto her foot, and found she could walk without Grace's help. Her body also felt a little less bruised, but she tired easily. Grace insisted she move from the Infirmary to the apartment she'd been given, and agreed with Doctor Carey that she should stay until she was completely better - both physically and mentally.

Maudie managed a little soup for lunch, but all she wanted to do was sleep. Mrs Machin insisted that lying down would cause her muscles to knit, so she was given strict instructions to remain sitting. Making herself as comfortable as possible, in a big, soft chair decorated with bluebirds, Maudie attempted to read *Wuthering Heights*. It was such a depressing book and she wasn't sure if she should be reading it in her current mental state, and wondered if Grace had the latest Agatha Christie instead.

It was so difficult to concentrate. Maudie missed Brendan and could only think of his return today. She hadn't even spoken to him the night before. He'd called when she was asleep in the infirmary, but he'd told Grace that he had lots of exciting news for Maudie. But Maudie didn't care about his news - she just wanted him back.

Despite the advice she'd been given, Maudie wanted to leave Merrilands as soon as possible and start her new life in London. She was still plagued by fantasies of going to Redlands and snatching Kate; and she hadn't told Grace, but last night she'd once again awoken to the sound of Kate's cries; but this time she had come to more quickly and realised it was only a dream. If she was in London she wouldn't be able to think about walking to Redlands to claim her child back, and maybe she'd start to feel a little less crazy.

Giving up on *Wuthering Heights*, she decided to write to her mother. Algernon Worthing could stop her from visiting, but he couldn't stop Alice from receiving mail. With her tears dropping onto the paper, Maudie explained everything to Alice; promising that she was not a thief and neither was Brendan.

She told her that she was moving to London and invited her and Da down when they got their summer break, asking if maybe they could bring Kate - she was their grand-daughter after all.

Suddenly the apartment door opened and there was a call of;

‘Where's my favourite girl?’

Maudie looked up to find Brendan poking his head round the door, that big, mischievous smile on his face.

‘Brendan!’ she cried, and got up out of the chair, hobbling to him.

‘Hey, you take it easy,’ he said softly, going over to her. ‘Are you too bruised for a hug?’

‘Never!’ she replied, letting him enfold her in his arms. It felt so good to be close to him. Sometimes she wondered how she'd lived for thirty-three years without him.

Easing her away, he looked her over, stroking the sticking plaster on her forehead and looking down at her sorry, swollen ankle.

‘Oh my poor darling,’ he cooed. ‘Come and sit down.’

He manoeuvred her over to the sofa and eased her down, then went back out into the hall to fetch his case, which he brought in and left to one side. He then returned to Maudie, sitting close to her and gripping her hands.

‘What did you think you were doing running out into the night?’ he asked. ‘You could have killed yourself.’

‘I could hear her Brendan. I could hear Kate calling for me. I hear it every night. I think I'm going to go mad.’

‘I'm sure she's fine and happy and just thinks mammy's gone away for a little while. You need to be strong to be able to fight for her Maudie. If you end up getting locked up in some loony bin, you'll never see her. Besides, I've got some really really exciting news for you.’

‘What?’

‘I had dinner with George last night and guess what? He gave your book to his secretary to read, and apparently she would come in every morning bleary eyed because she'd stayed up reading it. She loves it and George wants to publish it!’

‘You're kidding?’

‘No. I've brought it back in my case. He wants you to finish it as soon as possible and when we move down to London, take it to him; he wants to discuss advance fees with you and everything.’

Beneath the black cloud of misery that had enveloped Maudie's mind, she felt a little hope. If she had money of her own, it gave her more of a chance to fight for Kate. Or even to buy somewhere abroad where she could take her daughter after she'd snatched her.

‘Are you happy Maudie?’ he frowned.

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Yes I am. I thought it was a load of rubbish, I never thought he'd want to publish it.’

‘Apparently the secretary reckons it's unlike anything else she's ever read. Maudie you're going to be rich.’

‘And a house, did you find us a house to live in?’

‘Yes. I'm renting a three bedroom house in Strawberry Hill. We can move in from next Monday.’

‘The doctor reckons I should rest here until I'm better.’

‘That's entirely up to you me darling. But I warn you, the house is unfurnished and if you leave it up to me to furnish it, lord above knows what it's going to end up looking like.’

‘No, I'll come to London with you. It will do me good to have something else to think about. Has this house got a garden?’

‘A beautiful sixty foot garden.’

‘Well I can sit out there and finish my novel. You see there's another reason why I have to take things easy. The doctor examined me last night and confirmed that I am pregnant.’

‘You really are?’ he smiled.

‘Yes. I was scared I'd done something to it by falling like that, but Doctor Carey seems to think everything's in order. He reckons I'm a month pregnant, so it must have happened when we first got together.’

‘I'm going to be a daddy?’

‘Yes, in December.’

Brendan whooped and pulled Maudie to him, holding her tightly. His reaction was so different to Julian's when she'd told him she was expecting Kate. He'd kissed her on the cheek, ordered her to bed and went to tell his mother.

‘I want to call him Sean,’ Brendan said. ‘After my brother who died.’

‘What if it's a girl?’ Maudie laughed.

‘Siobhan. Don't you think it's a beautiful name?’

‘You're crazy.’

He pulled away and stroked her hair, kissing her on the lips. She wished she could share his joy; she wished she could feel happy that she'd made him happy, but it was so difficult to feel any emotion these days. All she did know was that she loved him so much, and was glad she would be spending the rest of her life with him.

‘Marry me,’ he said.

‘I’m already married.’

‘As soon as your divorce comes through, marry me.’

‘Of course I will. And you know what. I don’t want my books to be published under the name Maud Ryder or O’Shea. I want my books to be published under the name Maud Meehan. So even though we won’t be married, the world can see I carry your name.’

‘I fookin’ love you Maudie,’ he smiled.

‘I love you too,’ she replied. ‘I’m so glad you’re home. The last two days have felt like an eternity.’

Maudie awoke feeling a little happier the following morning. It had been nice to spend the night with Brendan, cuddling, making love and talking of their future. Maybe it was the distraction of having him here, but she hadn’t heard Kate, and while that was a relief and meant she’d a decent night’s sleep, she also felt guilty. It was as though she had forgotten her daughter and that couldn’t be further from the truth.

‘What do you want to do today?’ Brendan asked sleepily, not even opening his eyes - he could simply sense that she was awake.

‘Perhaps we could go into Chester,’ she said. ‘Grace will probably take us. We could maybe pick up some things for the new house.’

Brendan turned over and snuggled into her.

‘Or things for the babby,’ he growled.

‘There’s plenty of time for that,’ she laughed.

And as if on cue, that now regular wave of nausea swept over her and she had to leave the room, pulling on her robe and dashing out to the bathroom down the hall to be sick. As normal, nothing but bile came out, but she felt better for it, hoping the day when she stopped feeling this way would soon come.

After washing her face and brushing her teeth, she left the room and found Adams, the butler, coming down the stairs.

‘Is Mrs Gilbert-Wood in the dining room?’ Maudie asked.

‘Madam had to rush out about an hour ago,’ the butler said. ‘She received a telephone call and left quite promptly.’

‘Oh I see, not to worry. Could we have some tea and toast brought to our apartment please?’

‘Certainly madam.’

Maudie went back into the apartment, to find Brendan sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling on his trousers.

‘Are you alright?’ he asked.

‘Yes, it’s the same every morning. I’m hoping it dies down soon.’ She sat down at her dressing table and brushed her hair, realising it hurt less to lift her arms now. ‘I just saw Adams, apparently Grace rushed out this morning, so she won’t be able to take us to Chester.’

‘We’ll just have to stay here and make ourselves busy then,’ he laughed.

They dressed and took breakfast at the little round dining table in the apartment, Brendan telling her how he was going to keep on campaigning even though they would be living in London. His philosophy was that the poor were badly treated no matter where they lived and would always need someone to speak for them. Maudie made him promise not to do anything that would put him in danger, and blanched when he mentioned that in a couple of weeks time, Piers MacCready and his comrades were planning to disrupt a meeting of the British Union of Fascists in East London.

‘Please don’t make me a widow before we’re even married,’ she fretted.

‘We’ll see,’ he said. ‘But you know me Maudie, I’m a born trouble maker.’

There was a knock on the door and Maudie went to open it. She got a shock to find Julian standing there, holding Puggle on his lead, a rather strained expression upon his face.

‘J-Julian,’ she uttered.

‘Hello Maudie,’ he replied. ‘I’ve brought someone back to you.’

He stepped into the room and Maudie cried out when she saw Grace, standing behind him with Kate in her arms.

‘Kate!’ she cried. ‘Oh my darling.’

‘Mama!’ Kate whimpered, holding out her arms.

Maudie took Kate from her friend and burst out crying, squeezing Kate close to her and kissing her hair.

‘I thought I was never going to see you again.’

She heard Brendan’s voice.

‘Katie!’

He came over to them and kissed Kate’s hair. Maudie sat upon the sofa, her daughter across her lap. She kept her arms around her little body, holding her close to her, scared to let her go. Brendan helped Grace bring in Kate’s cases. Julian stood there rigid, as though he wasn’t sure what to do.

‘I-I couldn’t take it any more,’ he uttered. ‘Every night she cries for you. Mary walked out because mother refused to let you come and see her, and poor Mary couldn’t get any sleep for it.’

‘S-She cries for me at night?’ Maudie whispered and she noticed Brendan and Grace looking at her, astounded at what had happened. Somehow, telepathically, she had heard her child crying for her.

Julian eased himself down into a dining chair, stretching out his wooden leg and letting go of Puggle’s lead. The little dog started wandering around, sniffing his new environment.

‘Grace tells me you’re going to London?’ he asked.

‘Yes, Brendan’s got a job on The Daily Mirror, and Gabriel’s are going to publish my novel.’

‘Novel? I didn’t know you had a novel?’

‘I’ve been writing all the time we’ve been married but I was too shy to tell anyone. Brendan showed it to his publisher and he’s taken it on.’

‘That’s very good news, well done.’

Sensing husband and wife had things to discuss alone, Grace knelt down before Kate, taking her little hand and kissing it.

‘You know Robbie and Stephen would love to see you,’ she said. ‘How about you come downstairs and I get Cook to make you all honey sandwiches for your breakfast?’

Kate looked up at Maudie and frowned.

‘You’ll be here when I get back Mama?’

‘Yes my darling,’ she smiled, rubbing her cheek against the top of her head. ‘Mama’s never going to leave you again.’

Kate got down from Maudie’s lap and took Grace’s hand. Brendan stood up, rubbing his hands on his trousers.

‘You know, I quite fancy a honey sandwich too,’ he said.

‘Let’s all get honey sandwiches!’ Grace boomed and she, Kate and Brendan walked out of the room, Puggle following behind them.

‘Does your mother know about this?’ Maudie asked Julian once the door was closed.

‘Yes, she’s washed her hands of me, reckons she can’t look at me for a while, so she’s taken herself off to Sardinia with Davinia McDermott.’ He gave a wan laugh. ‘If I wasn’t the only child I think she’d dis-inherit me.’

‘Thank you so much Julian. I was going insane without Kate. I used to hear her crying for me at night.’

‘Hear her?’ he frowned. ‘We’re twenty miles away.’

‘I can’t explain it. I’d hear her crying out for me. That was how I injured myself. In my delirium I ran out looking for her and fell into the ditch. I could hear her.’

‘It was relentless. I don’t know why she was doing it. She always slept in the nursery away from you anyway. But it was as though she knew you weren’t in the house. She’d play with her toys for a while, then give up, saying she wanted Mama. Mother could endure it, but it tore at my heart. She’s my little girl and I love her more than anything and I couldn’t bear to hear her in such pain. I’m not ashamed to say it, but last night it got so bad, I ended up going to her and taking her into Bunty’s room, hoping another woman would help. Still she cried and I broke down. I’ve never felt such a failure. Bunty persuaded me to give her back to you.’

‘I must write to Bunty and thank her. I don’t want anything from you Julian, no money or jewellery or anything. I just wanted my little girl back.’

She started crying again, and Julian got up and hobbled over to her, sitting beside her. He didn’t touch her, but there was something comforting about his presence.

‘I’m sorry for what happened last Saturday,’ he said. ‘I should never have involved Hugh Huntingdon. As soon as I saw that newspaper and put two and two together, I realised what had been going on, that you were having an affair with Meehan. I knew you and he weren’t plotting to kill us. I just got carried away by those two.’

‘You’re weak Julian, you always have been,’ she sniffed, wiping her tears away with the handkerchief he’d given her. ‘Underneath it all you’re a good man, but you let other people bully you.’

‘I know. Anyway, mother was spreading malicious rumours about you and Meehan around, hoping the servants would go and tell other staff from the houses in the county. So yesterday I gathered the staff together and told them that the stories were untrue; you were innocent of anything criminal, and if I found out any of them had spread lies about you, I would sack them instantly.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I’ll always love you Maudie. I’ll always be grateful for you taking me on when no one else was interested, and for giving me Kate. Will you just promise me one thing?’

‘What’s that?’

‘That you’ll let me visit her, in London. And maybe she could spend the occasional holiday at Redlands?’

‘I don’t want her going there when your mother’s there; she’ll try and poison her against me.’

‘Of course not. She can come when mother’s away.’

‘And that school, she’s not going to Ireland.’

‘No, I’ll tell mother to remove her name from the list. I will of course continue to support her until she’s twenty-one; but my lawyers have told me you’re not entitled to any money.’

‘I don’t want any money. Brendan’s got a good job, and I’ll be selling my books. We won’t have anywhere near the riches I’m used to but it’ll be enough to live comfortably.’

‘Okay, well call me with your new home address when you get there and I’ll let you know as soon as proceedings start.’

He got to his feet, but Maudie couldn’t let him go like that. Not when he’d made such a sacrifice and put Kate’s feelings before his own.

‘I tell you what, why don’t I go and ask Grace if you can stay for the weekend? You could call Bunty and ask her to come, and the two of you can spend some time with Kate before we leave on Monday.’

He looked down at her and smiled sadly, reaching out and stroking her hair.

‘I’d like that a lot,’ he said. ‘Can we stay friends Maudie?’

‘Of course we can,’ she smiled, taking his hand and kissing it. ‘You know I’d have never left you if I hadn’t fallen in love with Brendan.’

‘I know. We had some happy times didn’t we?’

‘Yes, and you’ll have more. I think once we’re divorced you should marry Bunty - you’ve always been crazy about her.’

‘She wouldn't have me,’ he blushed.

‘Of course she would. We all deserve happiness Julian. I used to think it was just a childish notion, to want to be happy every day. But it is possible. You just have to be with the right person to make sure it happens.’

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