A Dream Come True

Maureen Lee

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

It was Friday evening when Maggie phoned her husband from the conference hotel in Brighton.

'Hello, John, I've arrived safely,' she said in her quiet, gentle voice.

'Did you have a pleasant journey, dear?' he asked politely.

You'd never think they'd been married for over twenty years. 'Fine, thank you,' she replied, just as politely. 'I got here just in time for dinner.'

'I hope you enjoy the weekend, Margaret.' He was the only person who called her by her full name. 'Sleep well tonight.'

They said goodbye and rang off. Maggie put on more lipstick and combed her thick brown hair, looking critically at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were grey with flecks of silver and her skin was flawless, if a bit pale. She was quite attractive, despite her ordinary white blouse, black skirt and sensible low-heeled shoes. Neither tall nor short, Maggie looked older than forty-three – or at least she thought so. It was a

long time since anyone had paid her a compliment. There'd been a time when people had told her she was pretty – John used to tell her all the time – and in those days she'd *felt* pretty, too, but she didn't feel it now.

She went along the corridors and down the stairs to the dining room, her feet sinking into the thick carpets. Maggie hadn't stayed in many four-star hotels.

'Are you dining alone, madam?' a waiter asked when she entered the dining room.

'Yes.'

Her boss, Hugh Miller, wasn't expected until later that night. Maggie worked in Liverpool for Astral Travel Agency, which had recently been taken over by a big London company. Buzz, as it was called, had been buying agencies all over the country and now owned one in every big town and city. Felix Anderson, the founder, was quite famous – Maggie had often seen him on television. Now that they were all one company he had made arrangements for this weekend conference, to which staff from all the agencies had been invited, so that he could talk about the future, and tell them how he wanted the business to be run.

'I suppose we'll all learn our fate tomorrow,' Hugh had said gloomily the previous day. He was worried that Felix Anderson would employ

his own staff at the agency and he would lose his job.

After she'd eaten, Maggie went for a walk along the brightly lit Brighton seafront. By now, it was dark, but warm for October. She was aware that she was one of the few people who were there on their own and for some reason she felt tears prick her eyes. If only things were different between her and John! If only she could telephone and tell him how lonely she was – not just tonight, but most nights. She felt lonely even when they were in the same room. Over the last few years, they'd grown further and further apart.

She was leaning against the railing, listening to the sound of the sea, when a voice said, 'Excuse me.'

Maggie turned to see a young man with fair hair and deep blue eyes, who was smiling broadly at her. 'Yes?' she replied.

'You're staying at the Brighton Towers, aren't you? I sat near you in the dining room. Are you here for the Buzz meeting too?' Maggie nodded and he went on, 'I wondered whether I could invite you to have a drink with me?' His smile became even broader. 'I'd rather not be on my own. If I go into pubs by myself, I only get hassled by people who think I must be in need of company. It must be my fatal attraction!'

Maggie felt her lips curl into a smile. He was charming and handsome. About six feet tall, he wore jeans and a leather jacket.

'All right,' she agreed, 'though I don't normally go into pubs with strange men.'

He thrust out his hand. 'I'm Connor O'Reilly from Manchester, married with three children. There now, you know my name so I'm no longer a stranger.'

'Maggie Holt from Liverpool. I'm married, but have no children.' They shook hands. No one, not even John, knew how much it hurt her to say that she had no children. 'You hardly look old enough to be married with a family,' she remarked.

'I'm thirty-five.'

'You don't look it.' He was only eight years younger than she was.

'I don't know what age you are, but you don't look it either.'

They grinned at each other. Maggie thought it was a miracle that he'd come along when he had, just when she really needed company.

They entered the first pub they came to and, although it was full of customers, they managed to squeeze themselves on to the end of a bench. Maggie felt very daring and couldn't recall when she'd last been out with a man who

wasn't her husband. She told herself that she wasn't exactly going out with Connor.

He went to the bar and brought back a glass of white wine for her and half a pint of lager for himself.

'What does your husband do?' he asked as he sat down again.

'He's a teacher, a headmaster. Does your wife work?' That seemed a silly question to ask when he'd told her that she had three children, which must mean she had lots of work to do at home, but Connor nodded.

'Emma's a secretary.' A shadow fell over his boyish face. 'Her mother looks after the children during the day, but I worry about our son, Harry. He's three and a real handful, always on the go. Emma's mother doesn't have much patience with him.' He shrugged. 'Mind you, neither does Emma, so what difference does it make?'

If Maggie had three children, she'd want to be with them every minute of every day, no matter what they were like. John, a very religious man, had refused to be tested to see whether it was he who could not have children. The doctor had found nothing wrong with Maggie that would explain why she had not become pregnant.

'If it's what God wants, then who am I to argue with Him?' John had said.

'But why on earth would God not want us to have children?' Maggie had cried.

John didn't answer, and she wondered if that was because he didn't want people to know the fault was his.

Connor asked whether she was worried that Felix Anderson might tell them that some people would lose their jobs when he spoke to them the following day.

Maggie said, 'It wouldn't bother me if I did. I only work part-time. If I lose this job, I can easily get something else. It's a different matter for my boss though, so I am worried about him.' She'd worked with Hugh now for ten years. As he was in his late fifties, it would be much harder for him if he found himself out of work. 'What about you?' she asked Connor.

'My agency, Centurion, was started by my great-grandfather almost a hundred years ago,' he explained. 'When Buzz offered to buy the business, I wanted to keep it but Emma insisted I sell. She was dazzled by the amount of money Buzz offered.' He frowned. 'Now my job's at risk and she's concerned because she knows the money that we got from the sale won't last for ever.'

Maggie got the distinct impression that his

marriage was an unhappy one. Whenever he spoke about Emma his smile disappeared. She vowed not to mention his family again and changed the subject. 'What do you think of Brighton?'

'It's a great place, full of life. Not that Manchester's exactly dull.'

'Neither is Liverpool, although my favourite place in the world is Paris.' She and John had gone to Paris on their honeymoon. 'Have you ever been?'

'Many times, but *my* favourite place is New York.' His blue eyes danced. 'Have *you* ever been?'

Maggie giggled. 'No. What's your favourite film? Mine's *Scent of a Woman* with Al Pacino.'

'Mine's *The Shawshank Redemption*. Which television soap do you like best? I never miss *EastEnders*.'

Maggie had to confess that she never watched the soaps. 'John can't stand them. He keeps the remote control on the arm of his chair, so they're off limits.'

They compared likes and dislikes and, after about ten minutes, they found that they had nothing at all in common. 'Ah, never mind, Maggie,' Connor said with his lovely grin. 'We like each other. At least, I like you.'

'And I like you,' Maggie said warmly – more warmly than she'd intended. She blushed.

'Would you like to see the pier?'

She clapped her hands like a child. 'Yes, *please*.'

'Come on then.'

When he took her hand, she didn't pull away, but let him lead her outside and back to the seafront. By now, it was even darker, and the pier, shining brilliantly with lights of every colour, stretched away into the black water.

'It's beautiful,' Maggie gasped.

'Not bad, is it?' Connor was still holding her hand as they strolled along. Suddenly, he stopped dead and said quietly, 'I've only been with you for a few hours and yet I feel as if I have known you for years. As if I have always known you.'

'I know,' she murmured. 'I feel the same.'

Maggie thought it was like being in a dream, except she'd never dreamt that something like this would ever happen. She wasn't even sure what *was* happening – but for now, she knew she was happy.

They stood and watched the thin curve of new moon that had appeared from behind a cloud. 'Aren't you supposed to make a wish if you see a new moon?' Connor asked.

'I'm not sure,' Maggie admitted. 'It might

have to be a full moon, but shall we make a wish just in case?'

'I reckon we should.'

For a moment, they were silent as they stared at the moon, surrounded by a million tiny stars. She had no idea what Connor wished, but Maggie wished that the weekend in Brighton would be the best she had ever known.