A MAID on FIFTH AVENUE

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To Bridget Crowley and Mary Anne Lyons

PART ONE

Prologue

BALLYDRYNAWN, CO. KERRY

August 2022

The storm came out of nowhere, rattling windows, tearing washing off lines and calling a halt to the under-seventeen league final which was the closest the parish had come to glory in over fifty years. The villagers closed their windows, fired up the tumble dryers – ignoring the dire warnings from their younger children about global warming – and consoled their disconsolate teens, all the while raining curses down on the weather forecasters who had promised a decent weekend. But what did that shower above in Dublin know about Kerry weather anyway? With their charts and their apps and their winking at you after the news as if it was all only a bit of fun after a day spent behind a desk in their warm, dry offices. They hadn't a clue what it was like trying to get a tourist season properly off the ground for the first time in three years, when the weather itself was trying to get everyone to stay at home.

And up by the cliffs the wind blew stronger.

The pub owners and the restaurant owners looked at their sodden parasols, newly purchased and branded at

great expense for the summer, and wheeled their outdoor furniture back inside. Because it was all very well those experts talking about ventilation and mitigation, but no one was asking them to feed a party of Americans bowls of stew and plates of fish and chips when the wind was blasting so hard down Main Street the fish themselves were in danger of being blown back into the bay, only wearing beer batter jackets this time around.

And out at sea the storm rose.

The parents in the holiday homes unpacked the Switches and the Xboxes and handed them to their children, telling themselves they could do the #makingmemories bit tomorrow and thanking the heavens they had shelled out extra for Wi-Fi, while the local families closed their curtains on the grey skies and squalls of rain and binge-watched *Stranger Things*. And next to the cliffs, a woman in a bedroom with panoramic views of the bay turned her back on its fierce beauty and, exhausted by confusion and pain, closed her eyes to the chaos.

She slept so deeply that she did not hear the rumble of thunder nor feel the power of the wind as it rose to a terrifying velocity; she did not see the clouds scudding across the water, nor the waves that had risen to a level not even the most confident surfer would risk. And she did not see the single bolt of lightning that struck the shore and caused a crack in over one hundred years of village faith and memory. The tree shuddered, then swayed, but everyone was at home now, insulated from the storm, and there was no one around to see its roots dragged from the earth, and with them the soil of the last century, the scurrying insects and the picked-clean gleam of the bones.

Chapter One

CO. KERRY

1908

Through the grey gloom came a whisper.

'Where are you off to, child?'

'I won't be long.'

Auntie Kathleen opened her mouth to speak but closed it again almost immediately, giving, instead, a brief nod. Annie pulled on the heavy wooden door, opened it a fraction and then squeezed her way through, anxious not to flood the cottage with morning sunlight. It had been a difficult night for all of them but particularly for her mother, and now that Eileen had finally fallen asleep Annie had no desire to wake her.

She stepped out onto the grass, dew soaking the soles of her feet, then stood still for a moment, relishing the silence, so thick it was almost tangible. For over a week now their little home had been filled with strange and unsettling noises, the heavy tread of footsteps in the darkness, the buzz of urgent conversations, the clack of her grandmother's rosary beads and, above it all, the raspy sound of her mother's laboured breathing. Last night had been the most frightening time of

all, the kitchen bed Annie shared with her little sister Eve sent rocking in the darkness as visitors pushed past to get to the bedroom at the back of the house.

Their father's sister had urged them to say their prayers and to go to sleep and Eve had obeyed, at six years of age still young enough to trust that God, and Auntie Kathleen, would make everything better by morning. But Annie, two years her senior, had been unable to ignore the tension in her aunt's voice or the air of barely suppressed panic that was swirling around their home. Too scared of the answer to ask what was going on, she had shut her eyes tight but the darkness had served simply to amplify the sounds around her and eventually she had curled herself into a ball and jammed her fingers into her ears, as if by sealing herself off from the horror she could pretend it was not happening at all.

But now, for a short time at least, she was free. She dipped her hand into the pocket of her skirt to make sure the treasure she was guarding was still safe inside then ran across the patch of scrub grass that lay between the cottage and the road. The sky was blue and cloudless overhead, it was going to be a warm day and Annie made a mental note to collect rags later and soak them in seawater for her mother's forehead. But first she had a much more important job to do. Moving more quickly now, she continued along the dusty track for a few yards then stopped when she got to the crossroads, ignored the turning that would have taken her to the village and, raising her skirts, jumped over a low stone wall. Wildflowers dusted pollen on her bare feet as she trotted across the meadow, heading for the cliffs, and then she

paused, as she always did as the sparkling waters of the Atlantic opened out in front of her. The sea was royal blue this morning, a light breeze raising foamy tips on the tiny waves, and as salt tickled the back of her throat Annie couldn't help but smile. But even as she did so an image of her mother's grey lips and shuddering chest flickered in the corner of her mind. She blinked the memory away then slipped her hand into her pocket and touched again the edge of the lace handkerchief she had hidden in here. Soon, there would be no need to worry any longer. Soon, everything would be in order again.

The hawthorn tree stood a few paces back from the cliff edge, squat and bent in places from the strong Atlantic winds but its trunk still thick and strong. As Annie began to walk towards it she felt her own breath skitter in her chest as anticipation and raw hope bubbled inside her. Annie knew her grandparents had not approved of her father's decision to build their home so close to the ocean, claiming the salt breeze made the soil inhospitable and that it would be far too easy for winter gales to find their way through the thatched roof of the cabin. But Pádraig Thornton had married an island woman and when Eileen had moved to the mainland for him he had promised her she would never live out of earshot of the waves. That was a promise, Annie knew, that meant far more for the two of them than the odd gust of wind. Especially now, with her mother—

Enough. She was not going to think of that now. This was a morning for hope. She stretched out her hand and touched the tree trunk gently, its bark rough under her small fingers. This was the other reason her father had built their home so near the sea – to seek the guardianship of

this Fairy Tree that had stood here for as long as anyone in Ballydrynawn could remember. The field in which it grew was, in truth, part of the Lynches' farm, but not even Seánie Lynch would dare fence it off or prevent the other villagers from having access to it. Besides, how could he claim ownership over something that had existed long before he was born? All that mattered to the Thornton family was that it stood within easy reach of their cottage, summer and winter, between them and all harm.

Annie bent down to look at the strips of ragged material that had been knotted to the tree's dense, sturdy branches. She didn't dare touch them but examined them as closely as she could, thinking of the hands that had tied them, and their owners' fervent wishes for a child, or a husband, or a letter from a family member who had gone to live across the very ocean that now stretched out in front of her. And today, Annie had her own request to make.

'Boo!'

'Oh!'

Lost in thought, she hadn't heard the footsteps padding up behind her and she turned sharply, her hands flying to her throat in alarm.

'I'm sorry!'

May giggled at the startled expression on her friend's face, and then her expression grew serious.

'How is your mammy? We heard ye had to get the doctor again last night.'

'We did, we—'

But Annie's throat dried before she could finish the sentence. Despite their young age, both girls knew that to call the doctor from the town, with all of the expense

that decision entailed, was to admit just how serious her mother's condition had become. Then she swallowed, and her face brightened.

'I know how to make her better though. Look! I brought this to help her.'

She withdrew her hand from her pocket, revealing the square of material, its whiteness emphasised by her grubby, sunburned fingers. Her friend gasped.

'Does your mammy know you have that? She'll kill you if she…'

May's voice tailed off as she realised the insensitivity of her words, but Annie simply smiled.

'I took it yesterday morning but this is the first chance I've had to use it.'

May hesitated for a moment, and then, the innate curiosity of an eight-year-old girl getting the better of her, she stretched out her own hand.

'Can I hold it?'

Annie shook her head.

'You'd better not. It mightn't work if too many people handle it. But you can look.'

She balanced the handkerchief in her palm, flattening it with the tips of her fingers, and May, tucking her hair behind her ears, bent over to take a closer look.

'It's so beautiful.'

The girls stared at it for a moment, taking in the fine cotton weave, the delicacy of the lace at the edges, before May spoke again.

'Where did your mammy get it, do you know?'

'There was a new teacher in her school, a lady teacher.'

Annie had heard the story so many times that telling it was

a comfort and even the horror of the night before receded as she touched the edge of the lace before continuing.

'She gave the pupils a spelling test at the end of every week and my mammy got every one of them right.'

'Every one?'

May screwed up her face in doubt; she herself was no fan of schoolwork, but Annie simply nodded, beaming with inherited pride.

'Every single one. Some of the boys said she must have been cheating, but she wasn't. She was just the best. In the end the lady teacher gave her a pair of handkerchiefs for her very own.'

'She never used them though?'

May's voice was solemn, as if imagining the danger that could come to such delicate objects during the roughness of day-to-day life in a busy home. Annie shook her head vigorously.

'No, no. She keeps them folded away at the back of the dresser. Me and Eve aren't allowed to touch them even.'

'So when did you get this one?'

'Yesterday morning, when everyone was asleep.'

It was only part of the story, but even though Annie loved her friend like a sister, she couldn't bear to tell her the truth, which was that although she had had to tug the heavy wooden stool across the kitchen floor and climb up onto it to locate the hidden treasure, the rest of the household had been gathered in the bedroom, their heads bowed in prayer, too preoccupied to notice her.

'Won't she miss it?'

'No, she—'

And suddenly the lump was back in Annie's throat again,

bigger than ever this time. The truth was, of course, that her mother was locked in a fierce battle for every breath and past caring about lace handkerchiefs or even the whereabouts of her beloved children. May reached over to grasp her free hand, and the two children stood silently for a moment, in the shade of the tree, thinking thoughts too terrible to be spoken aloud.

And then Annie pulled her hand away from her friend's and took a decisive step forward.

'The tree will look after her.'

She bent down and tied the handkerchief to a low branch, taking care not to snag the lace on the thorns. It was foolish, she supposed, to take such care, as the ocean wind would leave the material tattered within days, but it seemed important, somehow, to respect the handkerchief as much as possible.

May stared at her in horror.

'You can't mean to leave it here. Your mother—'

'She's very sick, May. I'm asking for her to be cured. The doctor said she might die…'

It was as if finally saying the words loosened the knot in her throat and Annie burst into loud, hot sobs. Her friend threw her arms around her and with the empathy of the very young began to cry too and they held each other tight, tears soaking the shoulders of their thin dresses. Such was their misery, it was several minutes before they heard the name being called.

'Annie!'

They turned then and Annie's stomach seemed to shrivel up inside her when she saw the slender figure of her aunt, waving frantically from across the field.

'You're to come home now, child. Hurry!'

The tone in Auntie Kathleen's voice allowed for no dissent, and Annie dropped May's hand without a word and ran. By the time she had reached the cottage, her aunt had gone back inside. Annie allowed the door to close behind her, walked across the floor to the bedroom and then stopped, unable to move any further. Her father stood between her and the bed. He was holding her little sister in his arms and his shoulders were bent and shaking with silent sobs.

'Go to her, a stór.'

Her aunt reached over and tugged gently on her arm but Annie couldn't move. Every inch of her wanted to turn and run in the opposite direction, back out of the door and across the fields, past the tree and further still, into the ocean even, any place that was far from this room and from the words she had been dreading. She had tried so hard, so hard, had said her prayers every night and visited the Fairy Tree, petitioning everyone from Holy God to the fairies to save her mammy and not to take her away. But now here they were, and the silence in the bedroom was far, far scarier than any noise she had heard the night before. And then her father turned to her and Annie was astonished to see a smile on his unshaven, tear-stained features. She looked past him to the pale figure in the bed and there she saw hope, weak, but determined. It couldn't be, could it? But it was, it was her mammy, propped up by pillows and extending a trembling hand.

'Come closer to me, alannah. I want to see you. I'm feeling so much better but I'm going to have to stay in bed for another while. You've been such a good, brave girl…'

Her aunt tugged at her sleeve again and now Annie could see that Auntie Kathleen was smiling too.

'Go over, child. She's been asking for you ever since she woke.'

In a moment, Annie was kneeling by her mother's side. She looked tired, but her eyes were bright, the sheen of sweat was gone from her skin and her chest was falling and rising quite easily. Around the room the adults had begun to mutter again and Annie could hear words float past, theories about medicine doing its job and an infection bravely fought. But Annie ignored them all and simply took her mother's pale hand in hers, and as her eyes blurred with tears she suddenly felt as if she was looking at the handkerchief too, fluttering and waving from the Fairy Tree.