Little White Lies

Emma Blair

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Chapter 1

'Sweet Jesus,' Ethne McDougall muttered on her first sighting of Thistle Street. It was a dump, an absolute, and appalling, rubbish-strewn slum. A lump rose in her throat and threatened to choke her.

Ethne's daughter Lizzie, sitting alongside, regarded the street with horror. 'Oh, Ma,' she whispered.

Damn you, Dougal, Ethne inwardly raged. It was because of him they'd been forced to come and live in this hell-hole. She vowed there and then she'd never forgive her husband as long as she lived. Never.

'What's the number?' asked Mr Walker, the haulier who'd brought them and their belongings all the way down from the Highlands to the great ugly urban sprawl that was Glasgow.

'Thirty-four,' Ethne croaked.

Mr Walker flicked the reins and the horse continued on its way, the well-laden cart rattling over the cobbles.

'It's maybe not as bad as it looks,' Lizzie said hopefully to Ethne, trying to kid herself.

Ethne shot Lizzie a glance which said she didn't believe

a word of it. If anything, Ethne reflected, it was probably worse.

Two middle-aged women with scarves tied round their heads, even though it was the height of summer, paused in their gossiping to stare curiously at them as they went past.

Lizzie wrinkled her nose in disgust. Thistle Street, like many they'd gone along since entering Glasgow, positively stank, reeking of chimney smoke, body odour, stale kitchen smells, human waste, and God knows what else.

'Here we are,' Mr Walker eventually announced, drawing up in front of number 34. This was his first visit to Glasgow and would certainly be the last, since he thought it was as awful as Ethne and Lizzie did. He couldn't wait to get turned round and out of the place. In truth, apart from loathing the city, he sensed a menacing air about it that frightened him.

A few moments later a smiling Dougal appeared from the mouth of the close which was the entrance to their tenement. 'There you are.' He beamed. 'I spotted you from the window. I was watching out for your arrival.'

Ethne remained silent as he helped her down on to the pavement; nor did she respond to the quick peck he gave her on the cheek.

'It's grand to see you again, lass,' he went on. 'I've missed you somewhat chronic.'

Ethne glanced into his face, and saw the sincerity there. She'd missed him too, but wasn't about to say so.

'So how was the journey down?' he asked.

'Long.'

'Aye, well it was bound to be that. Tomintoul is a long way away.'

Mr Walker lit up a cigarette while this exchange was taking place, and sniffed disapproval of his surroundings. The sooner he was out of here the better.

Dougal turned his attention to the hovering Lizzie. 'And how are you, my girl? You look in the pink.'

'Starving, Dad.'

He pulled a face. 'Well, you'll have to wait a wee while longer before we can attend to that. Mr Walker and I have to unload this cart first and get everything upstairs.'

'It wasn't part of my fee to unload as well as load,' Mr Walker protested. 'There was never any mention of that.'

'Oh, see sense, man. I can't do it all by myself. You must have realised.'

'I did nothing of the sort. I was contracted to load the cart and bring it here. Nothing more.'

'If Doogie has to do it by himself with the help of me and Lizzie here then it's going to take a lot longer than if you get stuck in,' Ethne pointed out shrewdly. Mr Walker saw the sense in that, not wanting to stick around Thistle Street for a second longer than he had to.

'For an extra half-crown perhaps?' he tried to bargain.

'Not a brass farthing more, Mr Walker,' Ethne retorted sharply. 'Your so-called fee is daylight robbery as it is.'

Mr Walker gazed up at the towering, to him anyway, soot-encrusted building. 'What floor?' he queried.

'Top.'

Mr Walker groaned. Just his bloody luck! It would have to be that. 'Then let's get started,' he grumbled.

'You and Lizzie go on up. The door's open,' Doogie told his wife. 'Top right hand side.'

'Take something with you,' Ethne said to Lizzie, grabbing hold of a rolled-up rug that was one of her prize

possessions. Then she led the way into the dark maw that was the close.

The stairs she and Lizzie climbed were made of grey slate and concave in the middle from years of use. The walls were half tiled, in a cream and brown design that wasn't wholly unattractive. Ethne was convinced she could smell damp.

Sure enough, the door to their apartment was open as Doogie had said, a cheap plate on the front proclaiming the previous occupants had been named Bell. Ethne would soon find out that Glaswegians always referred to such apartments as houses, albeit they were nothing of the sort. This one consisted of a bedroom and a kitchen, the kitchen doubling as a second bedroom. Lizzie stared in fascination at the recessed bed cut into one of the kitchen walls, thinking it looked like a small cave. She didn't have to be told that was where she'd be sleeping. For some reason, maybe because she was fifteen, the idea appealed.

'Filthy,' Ethne declared, stony-faced. And she wasn't exaggerating. God knows how long it had been since the kitchen was given a good clean. She was sure the bedroom wouldn't be much better, and when she went into it she found that to be the case.

Meanwhile Lizzie had crossed to the kitchen window, wondering what the view was like. Her heart sank at the sight of a debris-strewn back court with overflowing bins at the end. What a contrast to the view from their kitchen window in Tomintoul. That had been glorious Highland countryside with the glimpse of a loch in the distance. During winter deer would come down off the hills, often almost right up to the cottage itself. Well,

there wouldn't be many deer here – mangy old cats, more like.

Gingerly Lizzie tried the pump at the sink and, to her relief, found it to be working, water gushing forth as she worked the handle.

'What do you think?' Ethne asked unnecessarily, coming back into the kitchen.

Lizzie shrugged, and didn't reply.

Ethne closed her eyes for a few moments, fresh anger bubbling up inside her. If only Doogie hadn't opened his big trap and insulted the laird's wife this need never have come about. But Doogie, drunk as the proverbial skunk, had. And, worse, had done so in front of other gentry, friends of the laird. Perhaps, just perhaps, if witnesses hadn't been present, Doogie might not have been given the sack and told he would never work in that area again, but the friends had been there and the inevitable retribution had swiftly followed. And the laird would not change his mind. It was well known he never did once having taken a decision.

'Are you all right, Ma?' Lizzie anxiously inquired, observing the expression on her mother's face.

'Of course I'm not,' Ethne snapped back. 'And surely it's obvious why. Just look at this place. Just look at it!' She shook her head in disbelief, and for the second time since they'd arrived in Thistle Street tears almost overwhelmed her. She felt such despair as she'd never before felt in her entire life.

'We'll just have to make the best of it,' Lizzie commented sagely. 'That's all we can do, I suppose.'

Ethne took a deep breath and nodded her agreement. The lass was right. There was nothing else for it.

At which point a red-faced Doogie and a grumbling Mr Walker struggled into the apartment carrying the kitchen table.

'Thank God that's over,' Doogie wheezed, and sank into a comfy fireside chair. 'I'm whacked.'

Mr Walker, having been paid, had only just left them, having the graciousness to wish them luck before going.

Ethne eyed the kitchen range, thinking there was nothing she could do with that right now as there wasn't any coal or kindling. 'What time do the shops shut round here?' she asked Doogie.

He shook his head. 'Ages ago.'

Lizzie's stomach rumbled loudly and complainingly from lack of food.

'We're going to have to eat something,' Ethne declared. 'I don't know about you, but Lizzie and I haven't had a bite since breakfast. And heaven knows that was only a couple of slices of buttered bread and tea from a dixie.'

Doogie yawned. It had been a hard day at work, on top of which he'd brought up all their stuff, some of it really heavy, from the street. He was well and truly knackered and could easily have fallen asleep there and then.

'There's a chippie just down the street,' he announced. 'I'll give Lizzie money and she can run and get three fish suppers. How's that?'

Ethne couldn't see any alternative. 'That's fine then. Will the lass be all right?'

Doogie blinked. 'How do you mean?'

'She won't be attacked or anything?'

That amused Doogie no end. 'It's Glasgow you're in,

not the Wild West. There aren't any Indians lurking about outside waiting to scalp her. She'll be right as rain.'

Ethne still wasn't convinced. 'Are you certain about that? Anybody with half an eye in their head can see how rough it is round here.'

Doogie sighed. 'Take my word for it. It is rough, I grant you, but a lassie, even a single one on her own, is safe enough. A single chap maybe not so much, particularly if he isn't known, but no one will harm a female. They'd probably be bloody murdered if they did.'

'I'm not scared,' Lizzie announced bravely, motivated by hunger more than anything else.

'Good girl.' Doogie fumbled in a trouser pocket to produce a florin which he passed over. 'Now be off with you.'

'You said down the street, Da. Is that to the left?'

'Has to be as you didn't pass it on the way here. Right?'

'No, left,' Lizzie teased, and hurriedly left them.

Ethne stared grimly at her husband as the outside door snicked shut. 'Is this the best you could do?'

Doogie frowned. 'How do you mean?'

'This place. Couldn't you find anything better? I mean, I wouldn't expect pigs to live here.'

He shifted uneasily in his chair, knowing a row was about to happen. A row he'd been fully expecting. 'It was difficult for me to look around, lass, what with being at work all day and everything. Can you understand that?'

Ethne continued staring grimly, and didn't reply.

'It's handy for my job. I've only got about a five-minute walk and I'm there. It's very convenient.'

'Convenient, is it?' she murmured scornfully, resisting the urge to cross over and slap his face.

'And the rent's cheap. There was that to take into consideration. I'm not exactly earning a fortune at the steelworks. More or less the same as Tomintoul except there the cottage came with the job.'

He did have a point, Ethne conceded to herself. But even so . . .

'And please don't start on about the laird again,' Doogie begged wearily. 'We've been all through that a thousand times. What happened happened, and there's nothing I can do to change it. I know it was my own stupid fault, which I bitterly regret. If I could turn back the clock I would, only that's not possible. You know how sorry I am.'

Ethne didn't reply, just turned her head away so he couldn't see her expression. She doubted he was half as sorry as she was.

'Now tell me something about the journey down?' Doogie asked quietly, hoping to change the subject. 'All you've said is it was long.'

Ethne took her time in answering. 'It wasn't the most pleasant of experiences, as you can imagine. Camping out at nights under an open sky. Having to go behind a bush or tree to attend to the call of nature. And having to spend all that time in the company of Mr Walker, who's the most miserable bugger you'll ever come across. I'm convinced he kept trying to spy on Lizzie and me when we went to the toilet, especially Lizzie. He's just the kind of sleazy sort to do so.'

'Did you ever catch him at it?'

Ethne shook her head. 'But I'm still certain that was what he was trying to do. Or may even have succeeded for all I know.' She took a deep breath. 'At least it never rained

during any of our nights on the road. We were spared that.'

'Well, you're here now, safe and sound, which is all that matters,' Doogie declared, attempting a smile.

Now it was Ethne's turn to change the subject. She was genuinely curious. 'You said in your letters that the hostel you've been staying in wasn't bad. Is that true?'

Doogie decided to be honest. 'No, it isn't. It was terrible. Worse than that. Every night I was surrounded by drunks, homeless and the like.' Despite himself he shuddered. 'I was never more pleased than when I left this morning for good. And that's a fact.'

There was a brief silence between them, then Ethne said in a quiet, somewhat strangulated voice, 'It broke my heart to leave the cottage. To close the door behind me for the last time. We'd lived there all our married life. Brought up three children there. Been happy there. And now . . .' She broke off. 'And now this dump.'

Doogie literally squirmed with guilt, a guilt that had been steadily eating at his insides since he lost his job on the estate, further compounded when he'd arrived in Glasgow and discovered the reality of Scotland's premier city.

'I can't disagree with you there,' he said miserably. 'For that's exactly what it is.'

Ethne bit back an angry retort. 'I'll start to unpack a few of our things before Lizzie returns,' she declared.

And swept from the kitchen.

'Excuse me, didn't you move into number thirty-four earlier?'

Lizzie looked at the girl directly ahead of her in the queue who'd turned and spoken. She nodded.

'I saw you arrive. I'm your neighbour, by the way. We live just below you.'

'Really?'

'Aye, that's right. I'm Pearl Baxter.'

Lizzie shook the offered hand, a bit taken aback. 'And I'm Lizzie McDougall.'

'Pleased to meet you, Lizzie.'

'And you, Pearl.'

About her own age, Lizzie judged. Maybe a year or two older.

'You're not from Glasgow, are you?'

Lizzie shook her head. 'How do you know?'

'The accent. A dead giveaway.'

'We're from the Highlands, actually. Banffshire. A place called Tomintoul.'

'Never heard of it. Is it nice there?'

Lizzie's smile was almost beatific. 'Wonderful.'

'So why did you leave?' Pearl queried.

'My father got laid off and there wasn't any other work to be had. He was told there was in Glasgow though, which is why we're here.' That might not be the whole truth, Lizzie reflected, but it was close enough. She had no intention of telling a complete stranger that her da had been sacked. Nor why that had happened.

'That's too bad – your da being laid off, I mean. So I suppose he'll be looking for work now?'

'He came down a while ago on his own and has found a job at Bailey's steelworks. It's me who'll be looking for something next.'

Pearl eyed her speculatively. 'What did you do up there?'

'I milked cows, actually.'

Pearl burst out laughing. 'You did what!'

'Milked cows and helped out with the chickens.'

Pearl was still laughing as they shuffled nearer the counter. 'You won't find many cows round here. At least not the four-legged kind. And the only chickens you'll come across are in the butcher's shop. All nicely plucked and ready for the pot. If you can afford one, that is.'

'What about yourself, Pearl?'

'I'm a machinist. You know, sewing machines? We make clothes. Male, female, children's. You name it. I've been there since leaving school.'

'Sounds interesting.'

'Bloody hard graft, I can tell you,' Pearl replied, serious again. 'But they're a good bunch of women and we have a right laugh at times. As jobs go there are worse.' She suddenly frowned. 'Here, I've just had an idea.'

'What's that?'

Pearl told her.

'You took your time,' Ethne admonished Lizzie when she got back from the chippie.

'There was a long queue, Ma. I had to wait my turn.'

'And you didn't have any trouble there and back?'

'None at all. In fact I came home with someone I met in the queue. Her name's Pearl Baxter and she lives directly below here with her parents.'

Ethne had already laid out plates on the table on which the fish suppers were now deposited. Without further ado they opened the newspaper wrappings and began to eat. Lizzie fell to with a will as she was ravenous. Starving hungry, as a Glaswegian might have said.

'This is good,' Doogie commented, half his fish already gone.

'So you've met a friend already,' Ethne said after a while.

Lizzie nodded. 'Who's come up with a suggestion about me getting work.'

'Oh?'

'She's a machinist in a local factory . . .'

'What sort of machinist?' Ethne cut in.

'Sewing machines. They make clothes.'

'I see.'

'Well, Pearl has suggested I go along this Friday and apply for a position as trainee. Apparently they're advertising for a couple.'

'Did she now,' Ethne mused.

'What sort of money do they pay?' Doogie asked.

Lizzie shrugged. 'Pearl didn't mention.'

'And how long does this training take?'

'Until you learn what you have to. Not long, according to Pearl.'

'What do you think, Ethne?' Doogie queried, knowing it was his wife's opinion that counted more than his own. She wore, and always had, the trousers in their family.

Ethne pursed her lips. 'I'm not sure.'

'It would be a bit different to milking cows and looking after chickens,' Lizzie commented, and smiled. 'Pearl thought it a right hoot I used to do that. Said the only cows I'd run into round here didn't have four legs.'

Ethne also smiled, warming to the notion of Lizzie's training to be a sewing machinist. A stroke of luck, really, if it worked out. 'Why Friday in particular?' she asked.

'According to Pearl that's the best day as everyone's in

a good mood with the weekend coming up. She says my chances, and anyone else's, are higher than any other day when things can be a bit fraught. Particularly if they have a big order to complete.'

That made sense to Ethne. 'Would you enjoy that sort of work, lass?'

Lizzie considered that. 'I don't know. What I do know is I must get something soon to bring money into the house.'

'True.' Ethne nodded. They could get by on what Doogie earned, but Lizzie's pay packet had been of enormous help in the past.

'There's no harm in going along to see what's what,' Lizzie pointed out.

Ethne could only agree with that.

'If I'm going I've to meet Pearl outside her house at quarter to eight. The people at the factory start at eight prompt.'

'So this factory isn't far away, then?'

'Only two streets.'

'I think you might have fallen on your feet, lass.' Doogie beamed. 'Lucky for you that you ran into this Pearl. What's her surname again?'

'Baxter.'

'And they live directly below us?'

'That's right.'

Ethne sat back to let her food digest. She was dying for a cup of tea but couldn't make one because the range was out.

Suddenly she was desperately tired. It had been a long, long day.

* * *

Doogie rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. 'It's going to be grand sleeping in my own bed again. The ones at the hostel were terrible – hard as bloody nails.' None too clean either, he reflected, but didn't say so in case it put Ethne off. She might imagine he'd caught fleas or something, which he hadn't, he'd checked.

'It will that,' Ethne agreed. Sleeping on the ground hadn't been much fun either.

Doogie went to her and took her into his arms. 'You've no idea how much I've missed you, girl. It's been a trial right enough.'

A trial that need never have come about if he'd only kept his big yap shut, she thought bitterly.

'Have you missed me at all, Ethne?'

'A little bit,' she conceded.

'Only that? A little bit?'

'I'm dead beat,' she prevaricated.

'Don't change the subject, woman. Only a *little* bit?'

There was that tone in his voice which she recognised of old, telling her what this was leading up to. Well, she was having none of it. He could go fly a kite as far as she was concerned. With a practised movement she squirmed free.

'Ethne?'

'What?'

'I thought . . .'

'Yes, I know what you thought,' she interrupted, her tone steely. 'And you're wrong.'

'Please, Eth?'

'No. You can forget about that.'

'But it's been so long,' he pleaded. 'I'm absolutely rampant.'

'I wouldn't care if you were the bloody Lion Rampant itself. There'll be none of that this night.' Nor the next or the next, she vowed. Not the way she felt about him.

'You're being cruel,' he accused.

'Am I?'

'You know you are.'

'I know nothing of the sort, Dougal McDougall. All I do know is I want to sleep.'

'It won't take long, lass.'

She almost laughed to hear that. Of course it wouldn't; it never did. 'I said no, and meant it. All right?'

Doogie sighed deeply, and his shoulders slumped. 'If that's what you want.'

'I do.'

Suffer, Doogie, she thought as she began undressing. And judging from his expression he was.

Lizzie lay tucked up in her 'little cave' as she'd already begun to think of the kitchen's recessed bed. It was certainly comfortable, she reflected. And somehow comforting, too, being enclosed on three sides. Fortunately for her she wasn't in the least claustrophobic.

Through the dividing wall she'd heard her parents arguing, or so it had sounded. But it had fallen silent now and she presumed they'd gone to bed.

What was life going to be like in Glasgow? she wondered. She shivered a little at the prospect, the great unknown that lay in front of her.

How she wished she was back in Tomintoul, working and living in the peace of the estate. She missed her older brothers Gordon and Stuart, whom they'd left behind, who also worked for the laird. Most of all she missed

wee Mhairi, Gordon's six-year-old daughter. Mhairi had been a great favourite of hers.

She just had to put the past out of her mind, she told herself. Remembering would only bring misery and discontent. For better or worse she lived in Glasgow now, horrible place that it was. She simply had to accept that and get on with it, though it was hard.

Hard indeed.

The next day Ethne answered the door to find a smiling woman roughly her own age standing there, a bucket at her feet.

'Hello. I'm Mrs Baxter from below. I've brought you this pail of coal to tide you over till the man comes tomorrow.'

How very kind, Ethne thought. And the coal a right blessing.

She introduced herself and then invited Mrs Baxter in, apologising for the state of the house.

'Why don't you come down to me instead and have a nice cup of tea?' Mrs Baxter suggested. 'And I've just baked a sponge cake you might like to try.'

It was the beginning of an enduring friendship that would last through the years.