

# **The Women on Platform Two**



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*To all the women on board—thank you!*



# **The Women on Platform Two**





## Preface

The story that follows is based on a real-life event which occurred in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland in the early 1970s. While the characters are entirely fictional, the story is loosely based on the fortitude and determination of real Irish women and their actions in bringing safe and legal contraception to the women of Ireland.



## CHAPTER I

*Dublin City, 22 May 2023*

# Saoirse

I have pee on my fingers. It's my own pee, but it makes me feel gross nonetheless. I've never taken a pregnancy test before and I wasn't expecting it to be this fiddly. I set the test down on the back of the loo—face up, according to the instructions. I read them twice—front and back—hoping to calm my nerves. It didn't say anything about peeing on your own hand, but it did say to wait three minutes before reading the result. Three whole minutes. I think my heart might beat out of my chest by then.

“One line not pregnant. Two lines pregnant,” I whisper out loud. *Oh God.*

I wash my hands, close my eyes, and take some deep breaths. Seconds seem to crawl by in slow motion and I hear the ticking of an imaginary clock inside my head.

*Tick. Tock. You might be pregnant. Tick. Tock.*

Finally, I open my eyes. I think I may be sick as I bring my gaze to the back of the loo. The small plastic test stares back at me, proudly displaying a single, bright blue line.

“One line not pregnant,” I say again, louder this time.

My hand is shaking as I curl my fingers around the test, pick it up, and tuck it against my chest. Fat, salty tears trickle down my cheeks as relief washes over me.

The bathroom door creaks open behind me and I spin around. In my haste to test, I must have forgotten to lock the door. I find Miles, my fiancé, standing in the gap. His eyes are on the test in my clenched fist and his mouth drops open a little.

“Is that—”

“A pregnancy test. Yes,” I say, wiping under my eyes with my free hand.

“Is it—”

“Negative.”

Miles closes his mouth and his face fills with sadness.

“Negative,” he echoes in a barely audible whisper.

“Yup.”

I pass him the test so he can see the single blue line for himself.

“Be careful, there might be some pee on it.”

“It’s really negative,” he says, shaking his head. “But you’re two weeks late. I thought you must be pregnant for sure.”

“You were hoping, you mean,” I say, and I can’t keep the frustration out of my tone. The swell of relief I felt at the negative test clashes with the disappointment in his voice and everything bubbles to the surface.

“Is that so wrong?”

“Yes. I’ve told you a million times that I’m not ready for a baby.”

“But if it just happens . . .”

I raise my hand like a cop directing traffic. “Stop. Please. I can’t have this argument again.”

“It’s not an argument. It’s just . . .” Miles trails off.

His downheartedness whips around us like an icy breeze. I step back to avoid the freeze of it. I love Miles. He’s my favorite person in the world. I love how his floppy brown hair falls into his eyes when he’s overdue a haircut, like at the moment. I love his round-rimmed maroon glasses that he says are only

for reading, which we both know is absolutely not true. He walked into a wall trying to prove how much he didn't need glasses when we first started dating. He still has the scar above his left eyebrow. I love that too. I love how he waits to eat dinner with me when I come home from a long shift at the hospital even though I know he's been starving for hours. Miles is wonderful. He would be a fantastic father. And the only, single thing I don't like about him is that he cannot accept that just because he's ready to be a dad doesn't mean I'm ready to be a mam.

"But you love children," Miles says, rehashing the same tired line I've heard more times than I can count. "And the kids at the hospital love you. You're their favorite nurse."

I puff out, "It's my job."

"But it's not your job to keep their artwork on our fridge or bake them cakes for their birthdays and stuff. It's not your job to care about them so much. But you do."

"Of course I care about them. They're sick and it breaks my heart. But making their day less crappy if I can is not the same as having a child of my own."

"We're not getting any younger, Saoirse . . ." Miles sighs. "Think about it. Our life could be so great."

"Our life is already great."

I'm not exaggerating. We have a great life. Careers we both love. A cozy one-bedroom apartment in the city center. It's small, but the perfect space for the two of us. A good group of friends. His and mine. Weekends away, dinners out, impromptu takeaways, and too much wine. A grown-up life with no room for a child.

Miles stares at me with longing eyes and my guilt is instant. As great as our life is, he needs more. I feel him cling to the hope that someday, for some reason that neither of us can put our finger on right now, I'll feel the same. I place my hand on my heart, take a deep breath, and try once again to explain.

“Most of the children at work won’t make it past their tenth birthday,” I say. “Last week we lost a seven-year-old who I really thought was going to beat the odds. I watched her fall into a forever sleep in her mother’s arms and I watched her mother die inside too. I don’t want that. I don’t ever want to feel anything like that.”

“But not all children get sick. Our baby would more than likely be perfectly healthy.”

I shrug. “Yeah. Probably. But the ‘what ifs’ scare me. Christ, why can’t you just accept that?”

“Because it’s bloody selfish, Saoirse. That’s why.”

“See, this is why I didn’t want to talk about this.” I brush past him to make my way into the kitchen to pour myself a glass of water. “We just go round and round in circles. Over and over. It’s pointless.”

“It’s not pointless. It’s a baby. *Our* baby,” he says, following me.

I fetch a glass from the cupboard and run the tap. I stare at the water flowing for a moment before I push the glass under and fill it. I drink some and feel better.

“Now who’s being selfish?” I say. “Do you plan to keep arguing about this until I finally give in? I told you. I’m not ready.”

“If you would just think about it,” he says, as if I haven’t already spent years agonizing over this. “I know as soon as you hold our baby in your arms you’ll fall in love.”

I slam the glass down on the countertop and water sloshes over the edge.

“How do you know that?” My voice is too loud for the confined space of our small kitchen. “How could you possibly bloody know that? Do you have a crystal ball?”

“Of course not,” Miles snaps, his voice equally loud. “But all women love their babies.”

“You mean, you *think* all women love their babies. But that is just not true. Sadly, for whatever reason, some women just can’t. And besides, not all women are mothers. It’s bloody insulting if you can’t separate the two.”

I march out of the kitchen and grab my favorite oversize cardigan from the coatrack in the hall.

“Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“It’s going to rain,” he says.

“Then I’ll get wet.”

“Saoirse, stay. Please? Can’t we talk about this?”

“No.”

I slip my arms into my cardigan and open the door of our apartment. The lift creaks and groans as it lowers me two floors and spits me out at street level. I hurry outside and take a deep breath, inhaling as if I’ve just come up from underwater, and I start to walk, with absolutely no idea where I’m going.

## CHAPTER 2

# Saoirse

I wander around town aimlessly for a while. It's unusually cold for May, and without a coat, I'm shivering. I think about turning back, but instead I wrap one side of my cardigan over the other, fold my arms tightly across my chest, and lower my head into the wind.

The city is busy, just the way I like it. Solo shoppers dip in and out of shops on a mission to find the perfect bag or coat or shoes. Loved-up couples hold hands, window-shopping and enjoying a stroll. And of course, there are mothers and their children. Young women push buggies. Flustered mothers try to wrestle wiry toddlers while keeping an eye on fed-up older children. Pregnant women smile every time their hands brush against their round bellies.

One mother in particular catches my eye. She's about my age, mid-thirties, I'd guess. Her hair is red and curly like mine. She's petite too. No taller than five foot three. My height. I can't take my eyes off her and the little girl who holds her hand and skips alongside her so contentedly. The child is about four or maybe five. She's pretty. A miniature version of her mother. They look at each other every so often as they walk, and they both smile. They love each other very much and it's a beautiful thing. I try to imagine myself in the mother's shoes. I think about small fingers knitted between mine and



round innocent eyes smiling up at me. I think about loving someone unconditionally and being loved all the same in return. I think about the responsibility that falls on every mother's shoulders the moment she brings a child into this world. A responsibility to put that child first, always. And I think that I could do it. I *know* I could. Miles is right. I know that the instant I held a baby of my own in my arms, that child would come above all else. But, more than that, my gut is telling me that I am not ready. I doubt I will ever be ready.

The mother and her daughter turn into Zara and I walk on. I pick up my pace, trying to keep warm as the sky darkens. I'm almost outside Connolly train station when there's a clap of thunder and angry clouds spit torrential rain. The street empties as people scatter, searching for cover. I race up the steps of the station and by the time I duck inside, my cardigan has turned from mint to dark teal.

"Summer my arse," someone says, as a handful of people huddle just inside the entrance. "It'd freeze the balls off a pool table out there today, so it would."

There's shared laughing and strangers engage in collective venting about turbulent Irish weather. Someone says something about the forecast looking better for next week. I break away from the small group of wet people and close my eyes. Rain pounds the roof like hundreds of tiny feet marching. I love that sound. Miles and I spend many lazy Saturday mornings in bed listening to the sound of stomping rain. I wonder if he's gone back to bed with a cup of coffee and one ear cocked toward the ceiling, listening. Or maybe he's pacing around our small apartment trying to walk off his frustration. Miles always paces when he's mad or hurt. This argument is going to have our carpets threadbare. I slide my phone out of my jeans pocket and think about calling him. But there's nothing I want to say over the phone. I decide to go home when the rain stops.

The station smells of engine oil and coffee. My stomach rumbles and I remember that I skipped breakfast and lunch. I pick up a bar of Cadbury Dairy Milk and a cup of machine coffee in the tuckshop and find a bench

to sit down and wait the bad weather out. I sip bitter coffee and enjoy the soothing sounds of the busy station: the rumbling of a train coming to life and chugging away. The hum of commuters chatting, and the patter of their feet as they hurry down the platform and hop aboard. Finally, I realize the rain has stopped. But I sit a little longer, alone with my thoughts, an empty paper cup, and service announcements.

*Please stand back behind the yellow line. The next train departing from platform two is the thirteen-fifty enterprise service to Belfast. Calling at Drogheda, Dundalk, Newry, Portadown, Belfast.*

I've never been to Northern Ireland before but I've heard it's beautiful and the wine is cheaper, apparently. One of the girls in radiology travels across the border every Christmas to stock up on booze and chocolates. She says that even with the exchange rate from euros to pounds she saves a fortune. I wonder if Miles and I should take a trip. It's only a couple of hours from Dublin, and a long weekend away could be just what we need.

I'm googling hotels in Belfast when an elderly lady passes by. I catch her glossy silver hair and baby-pink raincoat from the corner of my eye and I hope I'm half as glamorous when I'm older. I watch her for a moment as she tries her best to hurry toward a waiting train. She carries a scrapbook by her side, the way a businessman might carry a briefcase. I smile as I'm reminded that before mobile phones and laptops, people used scrapbooks or photo albums to hold their memories. My heart pangs and I wish I was living in those simpler times. I sigh audibly and stand up to go home. I'm dropping my cup into the nearby bin when I notice an old black-and-white photograph on the ground nearby. *The lady must have dropped it from her scrapbook*, I think as I bend down to pick it up.

"Excuse me," I call out.

A teenager with a backpack slung over one shoulder turns around and makes eye contact.

"No. Sorry," I say, standing back up and pointing toward the lady gaining distance.

He nods, turns back, and continues walking.

“Sorry, excuse me,” I call out again, louder this time.

My efforts are no match for the noisy station. The lady doesn’t hear me. Instead, she gingerly steps over the gap and onto a waiting train.

I stare at the photo in my hand, hoping to find a clue about its owner. One corner is missing and another is fraying. Unsurprisingly, the gray image has adopted a yellowish hue over the years, but the bright smiles on the two young women looking back at me are no doubt as fresh as the day it was taken. The women stand each with one arm wrapped around the other’s shoulders and with their other arm punch the air as if they are cheering. Their joy emanates from the delicate paper, and I wonder what they’re celebrating.

I guess from their clothing the photo was taken in the sixties or maybe the early seventies. The taller of the two women is slim and stylish. Her hair is centered on the top of her head in a neat bun and she’s wearing corduroy trousers with a flare at the bottom. The other lady is older, or perhaps just less fashion-conscious. She wears a box-pleated skirt and sensible shoes. There’s a train in the background and it takes me a moment to realize the photo was taken here, in Connolly Station. The station has changed somewhat since then but certainly not enough to be unrecognizable. I turn the photograph over, hoping to find a name or an address, but unsurprisingly there isn’t either. There is, however, a date handwritten in blue pen.

*22 May 1971.*

My breath catches when I realize the photograph is exactly fifty-two years old today. I sweep my eyes over the station, searching for the lost and found. I spot a small hatch with a sign above it exclaiming LOST. The FOUND seems to have peeled away. The irony makes me sigh. *The place where lost things go and are rarely found*, I think. I shake my head. It’s obvious this photo is of great importance—why else would someone carry it in a scrapbook for more than fifty years? I’m not sure why, but I can’t escape the sense that I owe it to the smiling women staring up at me to ensure that this photograph is returned safely to its owner.

A train horn honks, and there's no time to think before I instinctively start running toward platform two. I don't have a ticket and I balk when I reach the turnstile. I count backward from three and jump. My face stings and I'm certain I'll feel the hand of security on my shoulder at any moment, but I keep going.

"I'm not getting on. I'm just giving a woman her photo," I find myself announcing to no one in particular as I race down the platform.

I'm red-faced, mortified, and short of breath when I step onto the train. I shuffle down the aisle, scanning the seats on both sides until I come upon a lady with silky silver hair shaped into a neat bob that frames her face. The scrapbook is lying on the table in front of her and up close I can see it's fragile and dog-eared, just like the photo. The leather spine is cracked and has been hand-stitched with green and blue thread.

"Hi. Hello," I puff. "I think you might have dropped something."

I open my hand and show the lady the photograph.

Her hands cup her face and she lets out a distressed gasp. The skin on the back of her hands is thin, like tissue paper covering her bones. Her nails are painted a delicate pink and match the coat she has taken off and folded across her knees.

"Oh goodness yes. That *is* mine. How on earth did I drop it? I'm usually so careful." Her voice has the distinctive crackle that comes with age.

"Ah, it can easily happen," I say, trying to make light of the situation. "I left my phone in the cinema a few weeks ago." I pass her the photograph and smile, rather pleased with my good deed for the day.

"I was rushing, you see," she continues, noticeably swallowing an emotional lump. "I have to be in Belfast for dinner this evening and I couldn't miss this train. . . ." She trails off. "But if I lost this . . ." Her voice cracks. "Well, Bernie would never forgive me." She points to the shorter of the two women in the photograph. "That's Bernie there. And that's me beside her. We were best friends for over forty years. I still haven't forgiven her for dying and leaving me to take this train alone."

I'm not sure how to react to that.

"You can smile," she says, reading my discomfort. "Bernie would. She was always smiling and laughing. Oh, what fun we had."

I do smile, because I notice how she strokes her finger over the photo, gently caressing Bernie's image with such fondness.

"I'm so glad you got this back," I say. "Enjoy Belfast."

I turn to walk away when I feel her grab my hand. She's trembling slightly and I wonder if she could use a drink. I know I could do with one after the turnstile incident.

"Thank you," she says. "Thank you so very much."

She lets me go and reaches into her purse. She pulls fifty euros out and shoves it toward me.

"For helping me . . . eh . . ." She smiles at me with her head cocked slightly to one side, and it takes me a moment to realize that she's waiting for my name.

"Saoirse," I say.

"Thank you, Saoirse." She straightens her head once more. "I'm Maura. It's lovely to meet you."

"Maura and Bernie," I whisper, my eyes falling onto the photo again. "You look beautiful."

She presses the money against my palm. "It was a beautiful day."

I smile awkwardly, not sure what to do or say and certainly not sure if I should accept an elderly lady's money. But Maura doesn't give me time to overthink it. She guides my fingers to curl around the crisp note. Satisfied it's firmly in my grasp, she cups both my hands in hers and squeezes gently. My heart swells and I enjoy this unexpected moment.

Suddenly, I lose my footing and I grab the back of Maura's chair to steady myself. "Are we moving?"

"It seems so," Maura says.

"Oh God. Oh no."

"What is it? What's wrong?"

“I’m not supposed to be on board. I mean, I just got on for a minute to give you the photo. Feck, this is all I need today.”

“Oh, love.” Maura’s face fills with concern as she pulls her shoulders toward her ears and holds them there. “Have you somewhere very important that you need to be?”

I shrug. “Actually, no. Not really. It’s my day off.”

Maura’s shoulders fall back into their rightful place and she pats the seat beside her. “Oh well, that’s all right, then,” she says. “I think you should sit yourself down. Drogheda’s the first stop. It’s not too far. You’ll be back where you started in less than an hour.”

“I don’t have a ticket,” I say, flopping into the seat next to her.

“Don’t worry, m’dear. I boarded this train for the first time on the twenty-second of May, nineteen seventy-one, so I can have a word if they ask. It’s very hard to say no to a nice little old lady.”

“That’s the date on the back of the photograph,” I say. “The twenty-second of May 1971. Was it your first time on a train?”

“Oh no.” Maura scrunches her nose. “But it was my first time on *this* train. Bernie’s too. It changed our lives forever.” A rosy hue brushes across her cheeks and I think she’s blushing. “But hey, I’m just an old lady now,” she says. “I’m not sure anyone wants to listen to my ramblings.”

“What happened on that train ride?” I ask.

There’s a twinkle in Maura’s eye and I’ve no doubt she’s replaying the memory in her mind. She stretches her arm across the table and places her hand on the scrapbook, pausing for a moment as if it’s a delicate, sleeping thing that she doesn’t want to disturb. The skin on her hand highlights her age. Time has patiently embroidered lines and folds over the fifty-two years since the photograph was taken. *Fifty-two years, I think, and still, she clutches the scrapbook photo as if it’s her most prized possession in the world.* I have no doubt that it is.

Finally, she flicks through the scrapbook and settles on a page somewhere

in the middle. She pulls some sticky tape out of her handbag and attaches the photo with a firm press.

Then she flicks the scrapbook back to the first page and, keeping it open, guides it across the table toward me.

“Bernie always said a story is best told over tea and biscuits. Do you like tea?”

I glance over my shoulder toward the confectionery cart at the end of the carriage and back toward the scrapbook with a handwritten message on the first page that reads *Property of Mrs. Bernie McCarthy*.

I haven’t had a cup of tea in years; I’m a coffee person—occupational habit, I guess. But suddenly there is nothing I’d like more than a cup of tea and a chance to hear Maura and Bernie’s story.

“Tea sounds great,” I say.

## CHAPTER 3

*Dublin, November 1968*

# Maura

It's a perfectly ordinary Saturday, mundane even, when a man walks into Switzers department store on Grafton Street and changes my life. I notice he is tall first. He is six foot if he is an inch. Next, I take in his clothes: an expensive trilby hat—the type my father wears, of that scratchy material that can't be comfortable—and a long tan trench coat. We stock that trench coat in our menswear section. It costs thirty-two pounds and fourteen shillings—more than a month's wages for me.

He walks up to the counter, looks me in the eye, and says, “Has anyone ever told you you are the spitting image of a young Doris Day?”

I blush, although I'm not sure why. People tell me I look like the famous Hollywood star all the time.

“Oh, Maureen, if she isn't a mini Doris,” my aunt told my mother on my confirmation day.

“I know.” Ma nodded. “With Maura's good looks she'll catch herself a fine husband someday.”

I've made a conscious effort to style myself in Doris's image ever since. I visit the salon once a month and have my already fair hair dyed a little



blonder. I keep it cropped above my shoulders with just enough length to tuck behind my ears. And I never leave the house without dark mascara and ruby red lipstick. My mother says it makes me look like a harlot.

“It’s the sixties, Ma,” I tell her. “Women want to look their best these days.”

Besides, management insists all female staff wear makeup to complement our uniforms. Our emerald green pinafores must sit exactly above our knees—not an inch higher, and we must wear black shoes with a block heel. I spend almost half my wages on new shoes every month, and Ma says I’d better break the habit before I get married, because no man in his right mind would put up with that.

“Do you like Doris Day?” I ask the man in the trilby hat as he stares at me boldly.

“I think she’s the most beautiful woman in the world,” he says, with a confidence that makes my knees want to buckle.

My cheeks sting for a moment before I manage to spit out, “How can I help you today, sir?”

“A coat,” he says matter-of-factly. “It’s my darling mammy’s birthday next week and I think a coat would be a fine thing.”

“Yes, indeed. Especially in this weather.” November has been particularly nasty so far. We had snow to start the month and there’s been hail almost every day this week. “Wool?”

He shakes his head. “Fur, I think.”

“Fantastic choice.”

I walk around from behind the counter to lead him toward some of my favorite blond mink coats that arrived in stock for Christmas.

His eyes drop to my legs and he makes no secret of the fact that he is studying me. I try to ignore the heat in my face as I lead the way and fetch a heavy coat from the rack. I drape it across my arms and turn it toward him.

“It’s wonderfully soft,” I say.

He strokes it and nods. “This will do nicely.”

He doesn’t ask how much, and when I ring it up on the till he opens his

wallet and hands over the cash without batting an eyelid. I can't help but imagine how wonderful it must be to have a life like that.

I fold the coat, wrap it up, and pass it to him, and wait for him to walk away. He doesn't. Instead, he says, "Do you like Doris Day?"

"I like her films very much," I say. "*Calamity Jane* is one of my favorites."

"Mine too," he says with a toothy grin, and I notice how straight his teeth are. "She has a new film just released. I saw the poster outside the Savoy today when I walked by. Oh, what was it called . . ." He strokes his chin, thinking. "*With Six You Get Egghroll*, that's it."

I'm smiling and I want to say something clever, or at least interesting, but before I have time to open my mouth, he says, "What do you say? Would you like to go to the pictures tonight?"

"Together?" I ask.

He laughs. "Well, yes."

"Tonight?"

"It's only playing for two nights. Last night and tonight. So . . .?"

"I don't even know your name?"

"Christopher." He extends his hand. "Christopher Davenport."

I take his hand and shake it. "I'm Maura Flynn. And I *would* like to go to the pictures with you, Christopher."

"Christy, please," he says, with a charming smile. "Call me Christy. All my friends do."

"You'd like us to be friends?"

"I would. Yes. Very much."

There's devilment in his sea-gray eyes, a sparkle of mischief that catches under the light, and I suspect life with Christopher Davenport is never dull.

"The film starts at six o'clock. Where will I pick you up?"

"You drive?" I say, my eyes round like two pennies.

He nods. "Your folks' house? Is it here in town?"

"I couldn't expect you to drive all the way to Rathgar. I'll meet you under Clerys clock at five fifty," I say, and it comes out confident and assured.

I see couples meeting under Clerys clock most evenings when I'm walking home from work and I've often wanted to be one of them. My belly fizzes with bubbles of excitement that tonight I will be.

"Five fifty at Clerys," he says; then he takes my hand again, kisses the back of it, and walks away.

I've scarcely caught my breath when Geraldine, my colleague, appears from the stockroom shortly after.

"What has you smiling like the cat that got the cream?" she asks.

"I'm going on a date tonight."

"Ah, Maura." She jams her hands on her hips and shakes her head.

Geraldine, at twenty, is five and a half years younger than me. She's a tiny thing, built as if a puff of wind could blow her away like a cobweb, but I've seen her lift boxes men would struggle with. She has fiery red hair and a personality to match. She wore flat shoes to work when she started, and she told our manager she had a sore big toe and he could like it or lump it. I'd never heard a woman speak to a man like that before. I have to admit, I secretly enjoyed it. And besides, Dick, our manager, is aptly named. Geraldine has worn flat shoes since. It wouldn't surprise me if she turned up in a pair of trousers someday.

"Is he good looking?" she asks.

I nod.

"Tall?"

I nod.

"Rich?"

I nod.

"Marriage material?"

I laugh. "It's a first date, Ger. Marriage might be pushing it a stretch."

"That's what they all say and within six months they're giving up their jobs and moving in with their husbands. Next it's a baby on your hip and another in your belly."

I grin just thinking about it. I rub my empty stomach and try to imagine what it would be like to grow a baby inside me.

“Ah, Maura, there’s no hope for you, I see it in you. You’ll be married in no time and then you’ll have to give up your job, and who will I talk to?”

“You have all the other girls.”

Geraldine waves her hand as if she’s swatting the idea out of the air. “With the amount of engagement announcements in the place? Ha. Soon there’ll be no one left but me.”

“Maybe you’ll get married yourself someday.”

“Never,” she says, with firm determination. “Never ever. You couldn’t pay me enough to take in a man.”

I’ve heard the rumors, the whispers among the other girls behind Geraldine’s back. I can’t remember exactly what they called her, something beginning with *L*. It’s not a word I’d ever heard before, but I think they were implying Geraldine would rather kiss a woman than a man. I’ve told them to hush up more times than I can count. Talk of illegal behavior like that could get Geraldine in a lot of trouble. Besides, what business is it of theirs who she wants to kiss?

“You could stand him up, you know,” Geraldine says.

“Ger,” I balk. “That’s awful talk. He seems like a nice chap.”

“I’m only pulling your leg, Maura. Go. Have a great date. Just don’t get married too soon and leave me.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

## CHAPTER 4

# Maura

I love Doris Day. I love her films. But I'm not paying attention to a single scene from *With Six You Get Eggroll*. Instead, I'm thinking about the moonlight shining on Christy's hair as he waited below Clerys' big old clock on O'Connell Street. I'm drinking in the sound of his laughter as he thoroughly enjoys the antics on-screen. I'm lost in his smell, like a walk in the forest mixed with warm spices. Without exaggerating, I am basking in the bliss of the most enjoyable evening of my life. All too soon the film is over. We file out of the cinema among other couples, some with their arms around each other, some holding hands. Some stopping for a kiss. I long to feel Christy's lips on mine, but of course I know he wouldn't dare. It's much too soon for that. Instead, we take a walk around the sleeping city streets. The wind is sharp, but I'm grateful for the icy air that cools my warm, excited blood. We talk and talk and it feels as if I've known him forever. I tell him about my job in Switzers and my love for fashion and cosmetics. He tries hard to show interest and I try even harder to suppress a giggle. He tells me about his job as a junior doctor and I don't have to fake my fascination. His career sounds exciting and rewarding.

"It must be wonderful to help people every day," I say. "You're amazing."

Christy's cheeks flush. It might be the cold night air, but I like to think he's blushing. We talk more and I lose all sense of time. I'm not sure why I'm compelled to glance at my watch, but my eyes almost fall out of my head when I do.

"What's the matter?" Christy asks, immediately attentive and concerned.

"It's almost eleven p.m. I've never dared stay out this late before."

"Say no more."

Christy insists on dropping me home and I don't protest. My father is waiting by the open front door. I don't want to think about how long he might have been standing there. Long enough to work up a face so sour it could turn milk.

I thank Christy for a wonderful evening, and I'm in such a hurry to get inside that Christy has to shout after me.

"I'll see you again tomorrow, won't I? Under the clock?"

I look back and nod. I can't think of anything I would like more.

"Maura," Da says in a commanding tone that stops me in my tracks as I walk up the garden path. "Where were you until this hour?"

"The pictures, Da," I say nervously. "Doris Day has a new film. It's very good. I think you and Ma would like it."

"The pictures with a chap?" He glances over my shoulder and his eyes narrow as he takes in the line of Christy's car.

I nod.

"Who is he? Do your mother and I know him?" Da begins squinting, trying to get a better look. "He's not one of the Lynches from the other side of town, is he? You know your mother doesn't get along with Mrs. Lynch."

"His name is Christopher Davenport."

My father makes a face as if he's searching his brain for a long-lost neighbor or acquaintance.

"Davenport. Davenport." He shakes his head. "No. Can't say I know them."

"He's a doctor, Da," I say.

A huge smile bursts across Da's face and he raises his arm and waves as if he's seeing royalty in the flesh.

He continues to wave until Christy's car rounds the corner at the end of our road. With Christy out of sight Da lowers his arm, shakes his head, and tuts, "A doctor, and you didn't ask him in. Oh, Maura, where are your manners?"

Inside, Ma plates up fresh apple tart and custard and Da sits at the table waiting.

"A spoon, love," he says, when Ma sets the heaped plate down in front of him. "And a cup of tea would go down nicely too."

"I'm just waiting for the kettle to boil." She smiles, already on the task.

"Did you hear our Maura is stepping out with a chap?" Da says.

Ma turns toward me, wide-eyed and unsure.

"A doctor, if you don't mind," he adds.

Ma's face lights up. "A doctor," she says, with a single clap of her hands. Then she tucks her clasped hands under her chin and rocks her head from side to side. "Oh, Maura, how wonderful. You've caught yourself a good one, haven't you?"

I see Christy almost every night after that. The only nights I don't see him are those in which something crops up at the hospital and he has to work late. He always apologizes with flowers or chocolates, no matter how often I tell him there's no need. When we're together, I feel happier and more content than I ever have before. There are walks in the Phoenix Park after work. Lazy Sunday drives in the Wicklow mountains. Dinners in fancy restaurants and talk of our perfect future. Sometimes, when I imagine our life filled with a beautiful home and a handful of children who look just like their father, I'm so full of happiness I think I might burst.

The happiest day of all comes on Sunday, 18 May 1969—six months after our first date. Christy joins my parents and me for a roast beef dinner. Da doesn't change out of his suit after mass. Ma keeps her Sunday best on too,

and I wear my favorite red dress. It has a tulip collar and it sits just above my knee. Ma says it's a little short for her liking and when she turns her back, I roll my eyes.

My mother always keeps a pristine home, but today she outdoes herself. She shoves a cloth and some polish my way and tells me to shine the door handles as she sets to work washing the kitchen floor. Neither of my older brothers were given chores when they brought a lady friend home for the first time. Instead, Ma fussed over them like a clucking hen. *My darling boys*, she called them. We don't see them all that much since they got married and I can tell she misses them something terrible. I promise myself that when I get married, I will still see my parents all the time.

The smell of beef roasting in the oven wafts around the house. Da sits in the front room with his feet on the coffee table and the newspaper in his hands. Ma brings him a cup of tea.

"To keep the hunger out until dinner," she says.

Da kisses her cheek and says, "Thank you, my darling Maureen," and he watches her with adoration as she leaves the room.

I shine the door handles to perfection as I observe them both. I hope someday, after years and years of love, Christy will still look at me the way my father looks at my mother.

Christy arrives promptly at one minute before two o'clock.

"He's early," Ma says, instantly in a tizzy when the doorbell chimes. "Well, don't just stand there, Maura, open the door, for heaven's sake."

I do as I'm told. I find Christy looking more handsome than ever in a new navy suit and a sky blue tie that complements his blue-gray eyes.

Christy passes me a tin of Jacob's biscuits and winks. "For your folks," he says.

"Oh lovely, my favorites," I hear Ma's voice behind me. I try not to smirk. Ma never eats Jacob's biscuits. She says they're far too expensive. I turn around to pass her the large tin and find she's taken off her apron and applied some lipstick.



“Hello. Hello. Welcome, young man,” Da says, joining us in the hallway. Suddenly the space feels far too small for four people.

“Dinner won’t be long,” Ma says. “You’ll have a drink, won’t you, Dr. Davenport? Sherry? A whiskey, perhaps?”

“Just water would be lovely. And it’s Christy, please. Only my patients call me ‘Doctor.’”

“Oh. Yes. Of course.” Ma blushes.

Dinner is splendid. The table is set with my late grandmother’s finest china—the china normally reserved for Christmas and Easter. The meat is tender and there is not a lump to be found in the mashed potatoes or gravy.

“Maura peeled the spuds,” Ma announces, as if I should be proud.

Da rubs his belly, looks Christy in the eye, and adds, “The Flynn women can cook, I’ll tell you that.”

“There’s nothing to it, really,” I say.

Da’s eyes narrow, reminding me that he hates to be interrupted.

“It really was a lovely meal, thank you,” Christy says, and he seems unsure where to look. He settles on me and gives me a bright smile. “You’re a lucky man with grub like this in your house, Mr. Flynn.”

“The spuds are my grandmother’s recipe,” I jump in, chuffed with Ma’s and my efforts.

“Maura!” Da says my name in a familiar clipped tone that insists I hush up. He reinforces his command with a furrowed brow and pinched lips. “Christopher was speaking.” He turns toward Christy and shakes his head as if he’s terribly disappointed in me.

After dinner Da and Christy retire to the front room and I overhear them discussing a headline from today’s paper. Ma and I clear the table and set about the tidy-up. I wash while she dries.

Ma hums the chorus of an Elvis Presley song on repeat, stopping every so often to say, “Oh, he’s a lovely boy. A lovely, lovely boy. Well done, Maura. Well done.”

I know what my mother *really* means is, *he’s a lovely doctor*.

She goes back to humming, but it's not long before she sets her tea towel down and reaches for my sudsy hands. She's rather serious looking, but there's a twinkle in her eyes.

"He's asking your father for your hand, Maura. You know that, don't you?"

I gasp. It takes me a moment to catch my breath. "Really? Do you really think he is?"

"I'd put money on it," she says, squeezing my wet hands.

Bubbles of excitement pop inside my belly.

"You'll say yes," she says, and I know it's not a question.

But it doesn't matter, because obeying her direct order is the one thing I want most in the world.

"Mrs. Davenport," I whisper. "Oh my goodness, Mrs. Maura Davenport."

I try the name on as if it's an expensive coat or a fine hat, and it makes me feel pretty and sophisticated.

Finally, I look up at my mother. "Oh, Ma."

Ma throws her arms around me and kisses the top of my head. "That's my girl."

## CHAPTER 5

*May 1969*

# Maura

“Good morning,” I say as Geraldine arrives at work.

She’s wearing slender-legged trousers that show off her ankles and she has a newspaper rolled like a telescope tucked under her arm.

“Well, do I have a bone to pick with you,” she says.

I glance at the grandfather clock next to the rack of ladies’ blouses. Geraldine is twenty minutes late for work for the second time this week. If anyone should be picking bones, it’s me. “What is it, Ger?”

She sighs and joins me behind the counter. She’s unrolling the newspaper and spreads it across the desk.

“What did I tell you about marriage?” she says. “I said it, didn’t I? I warned you that dating leads to weddings.”

I look down at the paper. Geraldine has circled the engagement announcement in blue pen. I let out an excited squeak and my feet pedal the ground as if I’m riding an imaginary bicycle.

“It is with delight that Mr. and Mrs. Charles Flynn of Rathgar, Dublin, announce the engagement of their only daughter, Maura, to Dr. Christopher

Davenport of Rathmines, Dublin,” Ger reads aloud in a most posh and proper accent.

It makes me belly laugh.

“Oh, Ger, isn’t it wonderful?” I say.

“If you’re happy, then yes. Yes it is.”

“I *am* happy. I am so very, very happy.”

My mother insisted on placing the announcement in the paper the moment Christy and my father returned to the kitchen.

“I’ll call the *Irish Times* first thing in the morning,” she said.

In all the excitement, Christy didn’t have a chance to actually pop the question directly to me, but my parents’ enthusiasm left no room for technicalities like an actual proposal. Luckily, Christy and I managed to steal a kiss and a hug alone in the garden later.

“I’m going to give you the most wonderful life, I promise,” he said, between soft, warm kisses pressed onto my lips.

“I’ll miss you something terrible,” Geraldine says now, with a voice crack that cuts through my daydreaming. “You’re nothing like the other girls here. You have a good head on your shoulders, Maura. Don’t let becoming a doctor’s wife knock it off.”

I’m not sure what Geraldine means but I smile and promise not to change.

“When do you have to give up work?” she asks, closing the newspaper and shoving it under the desk.

“The wedding is the twenty-first of June.”

“So soon.” Her eyes widen as she counts dates on her fingers. “That’s only five weeks away.”

“I know,” I say, as nervous excitement fills me to the brim. “But I can work right up until the big day.”

“And then you can never work again. Can’t even apply for a bloomin’ job because you’re someone’s wife. It’s ridiculous.” Geraldine jams her hands on her hips and puffs out, “It makes my blood boil. Married women can work everywhere else, you know.”

I shake my head. I've never heard of a married woman working, unless she was a teacher.

"They do," Ger says, indignant. "My cousin lives in England and lots of women with children and everything work over there. I bet they work in America too. I bet women can do whatever they want in America."

"I doubt any woman can do whatever she likes no matter where she lives, Ger," I say, not in the mood for another of her fanciful arguments about women's rights. "And besides, I don't mind. Christy says we'll probably have a baby by early next year. I'll have my hands full then."

"Then you'll be someone's wife *and* someone's mother."

I smile, proud as punch.

"Just promise me you won't forget you were Maura Flynn first?" she says.

"I promise."

"You'll come see me, won't you?"

"All the time."

I choke back sentiment and set myself the task of refolding the cashmere jumpers. There's a mustard one I quite fancy and I think about buying my first pair of trousers to pair with it. I envisage myself wearing the chic going-away outfit as I step into my new life and my new name. A tingle runs down my spine.

"I have something for you," Geraldine says.

"Oh?"

"It's a secret," she whispers. "When the other girls come in, we can take our break."

Intrigued, I'm about to ask what it is when a couple of older ladies come in looking for hats. The morning drags, and by the time two of the other girls arrive in, my tongue is hanging out for a cup of tea.

In the alleyway nearest the shoes and accessories entrance Geraldine and I share a cigarette, cups of tea, and half a packet of biscuits. The alley smells of the fishmongers nearby and I suggest stretching our legs with a walk, but Geraldine guides me into the doorway of a boarded-up shop. She reaches around her back, pulls a newspaper out, and shoves it into my hands.

“Another paper?” I say, surprised. I’ve never seen Ger read the newspaper before and yet today she’s sharing two.

“Shh.” Geraldine places her finger against her lips. “It’s not the *Irish Times* this time,” she says.

I unroll the paper and read the header. “The *News of the World*,” I whisper.

Geraldine’s smile grows wide and full of mischief as I open the paper and flick through the pages. I gasp when a large-breasted, topless woman on page three stares back at me. I slam the paper shut and, flabbergasted, accidentally drop it on the damp ground. Geraldine tuts and bends down to pick it up. She wipes the back of the grubby paper against the leg of her trousers and stands up again.

“Haven’t you ever seen boobs before?” she asks.

“No! And certainly not in a newspaper. It’s a bit . . . erm . . . a bit . . .”

“Liberating?”

“I was going to say shameful.”

Geraldine shakes her head and sighs. “A woman should never be ashamed of her body.”

“Where did you get this?” I ask.

“My cousin in Manchester sent me a copy. The one who works even with a husband and two children.”

“You shouldn’t have this,” I say, concerned. “It’s banned. You must know that, surely?”

“Of course I bloomin’ know that. Why do you think I have to get my cousin to send it over?”

I cringe and feel the heat of embarrassment creep across my cheeks.

“Who do the government think they are, banning a newspaper, for Pete’s sake? What do they think will happen; we’ll see boobs and all go mad?” she puffs out, defeated. “They can read this in Northern Ireland.” Ger jams a long nail against the paper, poking a small hole. “Did you know that?”

I assume her question is rhetorical, but nonetheless she glares at me as if she’s waiting for an answer.

“Isn’t that just the most ridiculous thing you’ve ever heard? Ireland is one island with completely different rules for the North. It’s not fair.”

“One island is geography. Two different governments is politics,” I say as I glance over my shoulder, making sure there’s no one in earshot, because the conversation makes me increasingly more uncomfortable. “Why would you even want to read this filth anyway?”

“Because who’s to tell me what I can and can’t read? Who, huh?”

“Oh, Ger. I love the bones of you, but this feisty temperament of yours is going to get you in trouble someday. I worry about that, you know?”

“Do you want the damn paper or not?” she says, pinching her brows.

I look at her, not entirely sure why I would. “You’re about to become a married woman,” she tells me. “And someone needs to open your eyes to the ways of the world.”

“I’m five years older than you,” I remind her.

“And none the wiser for it.” She laughs. “There’s articles in here you wouldn’t believe.”

“Like what?” I say, slightly concerned that we shouldn’t be reading about such matters.

“Women in America are burning their bras because they’re sick of being second-class citizens,” Ger says, her eyes wide and almost wild with the thoughts of it. “They’re sick of being expected to look pretty or dress a certain way. They’re sick of listening to rules. They’re protesting in the streets. They’re fighting for their rights.”

My mouth opens but no sound comes out.

“They’re standing up to their government. Could you imagine something like that happening here? Wouldn’t that be great?”

Geraldine is my friend. I like her very much. But she’s young and full of colorful ideas about changing the country. I’m confident that when she grows up some more, she’ll understand that life is about compromise. Women have compromised for centuries. It’s just the way it is.

“I like to look my best,” I say. “I like lipstick and nail varnish because it

makes me feel good inside. When I am married, a beautiful wife will make my husband proud. This is the life I want. I don't want to see topless women or read about women burning their bras. Ger, I hope you understand."

Geraldine rolls the paper and lifts her blouse to tuck it between the waistband of her trousers and her back. "I *do* understand." She takes the last biscuit from the packet and bites into it. "But if you ever change your mind, you know where to come looking."

I inhale and nod, confident that contraband *anything* is not something I will ever actively seek out.

"Come on," Geraldine says. "We better go back inside before the girls start a rumor that I tried to have my wicked way with you."

"Ger!" My voice comes out an octave higher than usual.

She cackles. "Don't worry. You're not my type."