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Songbird



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The mesmerizing bestseller from Josephine Cox – the nation’s favourite storyteller. Some secrets can haunt a whole lifetime. In the riverside town of Bedford, four students can hear the haunting voice of a woman singing. The beautiful melody is coming from their neighbour – a reclusive creature who never opens the door to anyone or leaves her home in daylight. They have no way of knowing that the woman next door, Madeleine Delaney is driven by a dangerous memory that for over twenty years has controlled her meagre existence ... Madeleine’s angelic voice and striking looks capture the hearts of many. But she only has eyes for club owner, Steve Drayton – a devastatingly handsome but terrifying man. Then one night she witnesses a horrific crime, and her life is irrevocably changed forever. The kindness and friendship of one girl – Ellen, rescues Madeleine from utter devastation. But in order to survive, they must flee London, leaving behind those they dearly love, and danger is following them wherever they go.

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Содержание

Songbird	6
Copyright	7
CONTENTS	8
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

SONGBIRD

JOSEPHINE COX



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This book is for my Ken, as always

Huge love and acknowledgement to Chloe and Milly.

Two very special little girls.



Also to our two fine sons, Spencer and Wayne, And Jane.

Thank you all, for the joy you give me.

CONTENTS

[Half Title Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

PART ONE Bedford Town, 1996 <i>A Caged Bird</i>	
PART TWO London, 1978 <i>In the Beginning</i>	
PART THREE Blackpool, 1978 <i>Lighter Hearts</i>	
PART FOUR Bedfordshire, 1979 <i>Hideaway</i>	
PART FIVE Bedford Town, 1996 <i>Sacrifices</i>	

[Keep Reading](#)

[Also By](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

PART ONE



Bedford Town, 1996

A Caged Bird

CHAPTER ONE

SOMETIMES, SHE COULD make herself believe that the bad things had never happened. And then there were the other times, when she could feel his breath against her face and his hands around her neck, squeezing, choking the life out of her. She could see the loathing in his eyes as the darkness enveloped her.

It was Alice – her dearest friend – who had saved her from the dark. Because of that fine, brave woman, her own life had been spared, albeit at a terrible cost.

Through the years that followed, the horror of that night had never left her. She remained ever-vigilant. The darkness kept her prisoner, and the daylight was her enemy. And on the rare occasions when she must go out during the daytime, with every step she was looking over her shoulder, anxious to get back and lock herself inside the house alone with her fears.

It was a lonely, forsaken existence. Her treasured collection of records and tapes, and the music she heard on the TV and radio, were her only consolation.

For Madeleine Delaney, once known as ‘The Songbird’, music was her life.

The beauty of nature also gave her immense pleasure. Come the dawn she would hear the birds welcome a new day, and when the sun lit the skies, she would sit at her open window and feel the gentle breeze on her face – until a passing stranger glanced up from the road outside and frightened her away. In her isolation, Maddy had come to love the seasons like never before. Winter had its own special beauty, with snow-covered trees and laden boughs that hung their heads as though in shame. Her heart sang with the first appearance of the tiny robin redbreast that hopped about her front yard and peeped up at her with bright beady eyes. Below her window, the children threw snowballs in the street, laughing and screeching, wrapped in coats and scarves, oblivious to the driving chill of a winter’s day.

Lighter of heart, she would sit and watch and imagine she was down there with them, a child again, with not a care in the world.

Inevitably, the same old question would burn its way into her brain: *How did you end up alone and unwanted like this, trapped in a self-imposed prison in a rundown house here in the town of Bedford, so very far from your roots?*

The answer was simple: she had fallen in love with the wrong man, and from the moment she met him, her hitherto contented life began to unravel.

Sometimes, she wondered if she would ever find the courage to venture out, live life to the full again, and face the consequences, whatever they might be. Oh, how wonderful, to love and to laugh – and not be afraid any more.

Many times she had promised herself she could do it, but seventeen years had come and gone, and now she felt more lonely than she could ever have imagined.

Yet in a strange kind of way, she felt safe in her solitude, because if she kept herself to herself, she could never be hurt again. *Not like before.*

‘Who’s that?’ Curious at the sound of laughter from the street outside, she went across the room and peered out, hiding herself behind the curtain. A group of young people came jostling down the pavement, laughing and joking, full of life. She counted six of them; three boys and three girls. They were the students who lived next door. She had seen some of them come and go before.

Her attention was drawn to one particular young woman dressed in skin-tight jeans and a Levi’s denim jacket. Elfin-like, with a cap of fair hair, she had an appealing smile, and when she laughed, it seemed to come from the heart.

Shifting the curtain to get a clearer look at this happy young thing, Maddy was shocked when suddenly, one of the boys said something and they all looked up. The fair-haired girl smiled right at her.

In the blink of an eye, something passed between the two of them; and Maddy felt a strong sense of kinship with her.

Maddy immediately dropped the curtain and backed away as the friends ran up the steps to the shabby student house next door.

The fair-haired girl was the last to go in. Lingered on the step she turned her head to glance back up at Maddy again, but seeing how the timid woman had disappeared, she went skipping up the step to join her pals, unaware of the trauma she had caused.

That was me once upon a time, Maddy mused. Young and pretty, full of confidence – with loyal friends and a song in my heart. She paused to remember. Oh, but we had such good times then, sharing our hopes for the future, our impossible dreams. She gave a half-smile, which lit up her sad face. Not a day went by when we didn’t laugh out loud.

But those days and those people were long gone now. Her heart thickened with nostalgia as she thought, I don’t suppose I will ever see any of them again.’

When she had started performing at the Soho cabaret club, all those years ago, she had fallen deeply in love with its owner, and her friends had drifted away, but not Alice. Alice was special – always there, always watching over her, like the mother Maddy had lost in her teens. How terrible, then, that on that fateful night, darling Alice had paid the ultimate price for befriending her.

‘May God forgive me,’ Maddy murmured aloud, the tears threatening to fall. ‘Why couldn’t I see his badness? How could I have been so blind!’

But it was poor Alice who haunted her waking hours and tortured her sleep. Alice ... ‘Dear Alice.’ Her heart hardened. ‘So many times you tried to warn me,’ Maddy told the empty room, ‘and I never listened.’ A deep shivering sigh marbled her words. ‘I know you forgave me, but as long as I live, I can never forgive myself.’

Closing her eyes, she thought of the lovers she had known before she met Steve – good and honest young men who had cherished her and wanted the best for her. And then she had become infatuated with that cruel, merciless man, who had used her and abused her for his own ends.

If it hadn't been for *him*, she might have found fame and fortune, travelled the world and made a decent life for herself. And through it all, Alice would have been right beside her.

That man had taken her confidence and her hopes, and left her in a dark place where there was no laughter, no love. She had fought him – and lost. Now, there was no fight left in her.

Like a wounded animal, she hid away, licking her wounds, afraid of the future and what it might bring.

Weary to her soul, Maddy went to the dresser and picked up the tiny mirror there, shocked by the image that looked back at her. Her long dark hair was carelessly scraped back with a rubber band. Her face was pale and dog-tired, and void of make-up: no lipstick to shape and warm the generous lips; no shadow to accentuate her once-sparkling dark eyes. 'I look like an old woman,' she sighed. 'I never realised there was so much grey in my hair.'

Desolate, she returned to sit in the chair. Through the bedroom wall, she could hear the low murmurings of conversation from next door. Maddy didn't mind the noise, or the occasional bursts of loud music. It was comforting to know that outside these walls, life still went on – for others if not for her.

She wondered about that pretty young girl and her friendly smile. Did she have a devoted family – a lover? A plan of sorts for the future? Maddy hoped so.

Most of all, she hoped that the young woman would be wise enough to avoid making the same mistakes that she herself had made ...

CHAPTER TWO

UNAWARE THAT THEIR next-door neighbour had been so affected by their arrival, the students settled down to enjoy their supper, bought from the chippie on the corner. Dave Wright, who was studying Physics, called their attention to the new member of staff at the college. 'Hey, that new Maths lecturer is a bit of all right! Do you agree, lads?' With an appreciative eye for the women, Dave was a real Jack the Lad. 'Wouldn't mind a bit of private tuition from *her*.' He gave a long, exaggerated sigh.

'Behave yourself!' Betsy was the elfin-like creature with a soft heart and big smile. Thrusting his bag of saveloy, chips and two pickled onions into his hands, she asked, 'What on earth would Poppy say if she heard you talking like that?' Poppy was a Geography student at the college; she was also Dave's current girlfriend.

Taking a large bite out of his saveloy, Dave threw himself into the nearest armchair and mumbled, 'What she doesn't know won't hurt her.'

'Honestly, Dave, I don't know why you say those things, because you know you would never cheat on her.'

Dave nodded and grinned. 'You're right. By the way, have you got any tomato ketchup?'

'You're a prat, sticking to one woman. Play the field, that's what I say.' Hard-headed and self-opinionated, Darren Brown was a frequent visitor to the house. With his selfish manner and constant bickering, however, he was not always wholeheartedly welcomed.

'Treat 'em mean and keep 'em keen,' he went on, stabbing at the batter on his cod. 'There's hundreds of 'em out there, all gagging for it.' Good-looking and proud of it, Darren was never short of female company.

Used as she was to his callous remarks, Betsy now took stock of him. 'And what about Ruth?' she asked. 'I thought you said you two might get married after college? That's what *she* thinks, anyway.'

Darren waved a chip in the air in a dismissive gesture. 'They were just words ... they meant nothing. Ruth is a passing fancy, that's all.'

'You don't deserve to have a decent girlfriend,' she told him bluntly. 'If Ruth knew what you were really like, she'd run a mile.'

All the same, Betsy could see how the girls might be drawn to Darren. Tall, with well-honed muscles and wild dark hair, he had an easy way with him, and when he turned those broody brown eyes on the girls, they simply fell at his feet. 'One of these days you'll come unstuck,' she warned him. 'I can see it coming a mile off.'

He shrugged. 'Sounds to me like you're jealous.'

At this, she burst out laughing. 'Huh! You should be so lucky.'

'Never mind the new Maths lecturer – you can give *me* tuition any time you like, Daz.' That was Abigail the dreamer, whose room they were in. Scatter-brained and vulnerable, she could see no harm in him.

'Sorry, sweetheart, you're not my type.' Sharp and to the point, he did not mince his words.

'So, who *is* your type?' That was Judith; hard-nosed and ambitious, she had met Abigail in college and invited herself to the house on many occasions. Also, she had long fancied a relationship with Darren; though as yet he had not made a move.

'Well now, let me see.' Thrusting a chip into his mouth, the arrogant young man chewed and talked at the same time. 'Long shapely legs, big firm boobs and a small enough mind not to ask any questions. Oh, and she mustn't worry about being dumped the day after the night before, if you know what I mean?'

'Big boobs and a small mind, eh?' Judith gave a groan. 'That lets me out then.'

Darren surveyed her slim, boyish figure. 'Oh, I'm sure I could fit you in if you really wanted.'

'Are your fish cakes and chips all right, Rob?' Betsy turned her attention to the only one of them who had not joined in the banter. 'If they're cold, I can put them in the microwave to warm them up.'

'Thanks all the same, Betsy, but they're fine. Besides, I was that hungry I'd have eaten a scabby dog!' Not exceptionally good-looking like Daz, or the life and soul of any party like his best friend Dave, Robin was both studious and likeable. In his early twenties, he was a young man going places; studying medicine and working in a big London hospital. This evening, he had driven over in his elderly car to see Dave, whom he had known since their schooldays. From boyhood, nothing had swerved him from his goal to become a doctor, though his father was bitterly disappointed that his only son was not going to follow him into the established family business.

'Right then.' Scrambling out of his chair, Darren strode across the room to sort through the records. 'Jude, how about opening another bottle of wine and I'll put some good tunes on. There's a Smiths' LP in here somewhere, isn't there?'

Judith objected. 'Oh God, Morrissey is *so* depressing. Let's listen to the Police instead. Oh, and that reminds me. Susie borrowed my Alanis Morissette tape. I'll have to get it back before she lends it on, like she did with my Madonna one.'

'Hey! Don't start taking over,' Robin joked. 'Unless you fancy paying Abigail's rent between the two of you?'

'I wouldn't mind paying rent if I could live here,' Judith retaliated. 'It's got to be better than living in hall.'

'I second that!' Daz declared, lighting a roll-up. 'I can't see why you lot won't let us share with you. When all's said and done, there are four bedsits in this house. I could double up with you, Dave, and Judith could double up with one of you girls.'

'Not a snowdrop's chance in hell, mate.' In a light-hearted way, Dave made his feelings known. 'I'm not doubling up with anybody. I left four brothers behind at home, and I've got my own room at long last. And I am *not* giving it up for love nor money.'

Betsy and Abigail were of the same mind. 'At the moment, we can chuck you out when we've had enough of you,' they joked.

‘Yeah,’ Dave said, laughingly addressing himself to Darren. ‘Gawd help us if we had to get up each morning and see your ugly mug.’

In no time at all, the Police were belting out their best, followed by some vintage Stones, and for a while, the friends drank the wine and chatted and smoked – until Darren decided to leap onto a chair and give a performance of his own, playing air guitar and screeching at the top of his voice along to ‘Black Sugar’.

‘Put a sock in it,’ Dave begged him. ‘You’ll have all the cats round.’

Abigail threw a cushion at him and Robin threatened to douse him with cold water. But nothing stopped him, until Betsy pulled the plug from the wall.

‘Party poopers!’ Climbing down from the chair, Daz went storming off into the kitchen in search of more booze.

‘Does anybody mind if *I* choose the next record?’ That was Betsy.

‘*I* mind!’ Daz returned to his seat empty-handed. ‘I’m not in the mood for listening to one of your soppy love-songs.’

‘Too bad,’ she told him, ‘because whether you like it or not, we’re *all* having a turn at choosing.’

She picked out a Nat King Cole ballad, ‘When I Fall In love’, and it came as no surprise when Darren immediately protested, ‘Bloody hell! Do we have to listen to *that* rubbish?’

‘Shut up, misery.’ Judith was rapidly going off him. She gave him a shove. ‘If that’s what Betsy wants, that’s fine by the rest of us, and if you don’t like it, you can go home, you awkward sod.’

Folding his arms, Darren slouched deeper into his chair and pointedly started doing the crossword in the local free paper.

As the smooth silky tones of Nat King Cole flowed through the room, the girls sang along.

Unaware that Robin was watching her with fond eyes, Betsy let the song wash over her. She loved Nat King Cole’s sensuous voice, and the words were so beautiful. Abigail had bought her the *Greatest Hits* CD last Christmas, and it was one of Betsy’s prized possessions.

It was when Judith stopped singing to cadge a cigarette from Darren, that Betsy thought she heard something. ‘Ssh!’ Sitting bolt upright in her chair, she called for silence, and when everyone was attentive she said, ‘Listen – can you hear that?’

Against all his instincts, Darren found himself listening too, ‘Hey! There *is* somebody else singing ...’ He looked suspiciously from one to another. ‘Come on ... what are you lot playing at?’

The rich contralto voice of a woman sailed through the wall, as she sang the song again, to herself. Even muffled, like this, the voice was hauntingly beautiful.

‘Who on earth *is* that?’ Robin asked into the hush.

Dave voiced all their thoughts. ‘It seems to be coming from next door,’ he said.

Judith laughed, breaking the spell. ‘What! You can’t mean that strange old woman up at her window.’

‘Never!’ Darren was adamant. ‘I should think the best she could manage would be a croak. She gives me the heebie-jeebies, she does, spying on us from behind her net curtains, and creeping about in the dark.’ He gave an exaggerated shiver. ‘There’s something dead weird about her. The Shadow-Thing ...’ With an evil grin, he made moving gestures with the tips of his fingers.

Even Abigail had to agree. ‘She is a bit frightening. I’ve never seen her out in daylight, yet as soon as it’s dark she goes scurrying down the street, hiding in the corners like a little hobbit.’

Darren gave a snort of disgust. ‘If you ask me, she’s not all there. I reckon somebody should put her out of her misery.’

‘You’re a callous bastard,’ Robin reprimanded him. ‘The poor woman’s obviously ill.’

‘There you go then,’ Daz insisted. ‘Like I said ... Loopy Lou! They should put her in a home, for all our sakes.’

‘Ssh!’ Betsy was still listening; the woman’s voice was pure and powerful. ‘It’s *her*, I’m sure of it. It can’t be anybody else.’

Judith was cynical. 'How could such a beautiful voice belong to such a strange-looking creature?'

Suddenly the singing came to an end and the silence was thick.

'I was in the paper-shop the other day,' Dave told them all, 'and she came in after me for some batteries and a box of matches. When she spoke to Mr Hassan, the shopkeeper, her voice was so low it was almost inaudible.' He shrugged, bemused. 'She seemed very nervous and a bit dithery. When she came rushing by me, she dropped her box of matches. Of course I stooped to pick it up.'

He could see her now. 'She seemed such a sorry little thing, all depressed-looking and dishevelled. But in that split second when she grabbed the matches from me, she looked up.' His voice sank to a whisper, as though talking to himself. 'She had the most *amazing* eyes ... chestnut-brown they were, and yet against the paleness of her skin they seemed dark as night. It was strange. Even after she'd gone I couldn't get her out of my mind.'

He added thoughtfully, 'I swear, I've never seen anyone look so frightened.'

'Ooh, Dave!' Grinning spitefully, Darren sat bolt upright. 'You're done for now! She probably thought you were onto her. You'd best be careful, mate. Sounds to me like she's bewitched you already.'

'Oh, do shut up!' Like everyone else, Abigail had long been curious about the old woman, but she had no time for Darren's silliness. 'I can't help feeling sorry for her. I mean, what went wrong in her life, do you think?' She looked around at her friends. 'What could have happened to make her like she is, so terrified of people, and so paranoid about going out in daylight?'

For a while, they discussed their neighbour, until Robin suddenly remembered he had promised to call his father. 'I'd best get down to the phone in the hall and give my dad a quick ring.'

'Make him wait, why don't you?' Having fallen out with his own family long ago, Darren bitterly resented those who stayed together. 'He's always giving you grief over wanting to be a doctor, instead of going into his poxy veterinary business. He made his choice and it's time he let you make yours. For Chrissake, Rob! When will you stop running after him, like some frightened little kid!'

In the ensuing silence, all eyes were on Robin. A quiet guy, he was not easily roused into temper. But Darren's words were harsh, and the tension almost palpable.

Getting up, his face set like stone, Rob crossed to where Darren lay slouched in an armchair. 'You'd best explain what you meant by that,' he said, his voice low and trembling.

Shocked to see the dark anger in Rob's face, and like the coward he was, Darren swiftly withdrew his comment. 'I didn't mean anything,' he replied curtly. 'All I'm saying is, families aren't what they're cracked up to be. Look at me!' He held out his arms triumphantly. 'I had the good sense to dump my family long ago, and now I'm much better off without them.'

'Really?' Robin regarded him with contempt. 'Well, thankfully, you and I are very different. I would *never* turn my back on family. You see, the only family I have now is my father, and whatever the differences between us, I have no intention of ever dumping him. In fact, I love and respect him. Never a day goes by when I don't thank my lucky stars that he's around.'

His cold gaze was unswerving, 'So tell me, Darren, do you have a problem with that?'

The other boy shook his head. 'None whatsoever.'

'So, will we ever have this conversation again?'

'Not as far as I'm concerned, no.' Shaken by this unexpected confrontation, Darren the bully wanted the incident ended. 'You and your dad are none of my concern.'

'Glad to hear it. So now – if it's all right with you – I'll be about my business.'

Robin was almost out of the door when Betsy grabbed her denim jacket and went after him. 'I'll come with you,' she said. 'I could do with a change of scene myself.' Like the others, she had been appalled by Darren's spiteful remarks.

As always, Robin saw Betsy as a true friend. 'I'd like that, yes. Let's go down to the callbox on the corner. Get a breath of air.'

When the front door was shut behind them Betsy glanced back to see their neighbour's curtains twitch. 'She's watching us again,' the girl whispered with a smile.

Deep in thought, they walked on.

'Rob?'

'Mmm?'

'How do you really think she came to end up here, all alone and scared to go out?'

'It could have been any number of things,' he mused. 'The loss of someone she loved, a disastrous business venture that left her short of money and friends, or it could have been a family fall-out. Who can tell? Life has a way of kicking you in the teeth when you least expect it.'

Betsy's curiosity was heightened. 'You sound very bitter.'

'That's because I am. But then I believe that whatever happens in life, and however devastated we are, we just have to make the best of what we've got and get on with it.'

Betsy sensed his sadness. 'You never mention your mother,' she ventured nervously.

Robin did not answer. Instead, he cast his gaze to the ground and quickened his step.

'I'm here if you want to talk about it,' Betsy went on.

He shook his head. 'Some things are best left unsaid.'

Affectionately squeezing his arm, Betsy apologised. 'Sorry. I didn't mean to pry.'

'I know that,' he replied. 'Thanks for caring anyway.'

They continued walking down the street until they reached a low wall by an area of wasteland.

'Let's sit down for a moment,' Robin said. A few moments later, much to Betsy's surprise, he began to confide in her.

'I was just a kid of six, when my mother was involved in a car accident.' He paused and took a breath. Even now it was hard to talk about it. 'It took them three hours to cut her out of the wreckage.'

He could recall every moment, of every tortuous day and night. 'She was in a coma for weeks. In all that time, Dad and I never gave up hope, even though deep down, I think we knew she would never recover. One summer's morning, she just slipped away ...' He cleared his throat. 'They said she didn't suffer, that she wouldn't have known anything.'

He took a moment to collect his thoughts. 'Afterwards, my dad changed beyond all recognition. He used to be always smiling and joking, the life and soul of the party. He adored my mother, and when she was gone, it was as if a big part of him went with her. He couldn't seem to function any more ... couldn't work, didn't sleep. For days he just wandered round the house in a trance.'

He grimaced. 'Dad was well qualified. From an early age, he always loved animals; his one burning ambition was to have his own veterinary clinic. When he left college he became a junior assistant at the local vet's ... worked his way up, and now he has four reputable clinics across Bedfordshire.'

Betsy was impressed. 'That's quite an achievement,' she said. 'And were you ever interested in joining him?'

Robin shook his head. 'Before I started school, I'd go with him on his calls sometimes.' He gave a chuckle. 'It was all a bit scary and bloody.'

'But it didn't put you off wanting to be a doctor?'

'No, just the opposite. It made me want to help ease pain and suffering ... but in people, not animals. So, in one way, I suppose my ambitions were much the same as my dad's. Although he can't seem to grasp it that way.'

Looking down on Betsy, he went on in quieter tones, 'At first – after the accident, I mean – the way it was, I began to think I'd lost *both* my parents.'

The girl was tempted to comment, to reassure him, but then she realised he needed to open the door which he had kept locked for too long, so she remained silent and let him speak.

'I was just six years old. He was my dad but he didn't even seem to know I was there.' The boy's memory of it was still vivid.

‘We never sat down to a meal any more. It was either curry or Chinese from the local take-aways, or beans on toast and Lyons individual fruit pies. He left me to my own devices for days on end. You see, he forgot that I, too, was desperately missing my mother.’

He still recalled the sense of helplessness and loss. The awful loneliness.

‘After a while, Dad went back to work. It was as if he went from one extreme to another. This time, he drove himself like a mad thing – with extra clinics, longer hours, home visits ... anything so’s not to be in the house. I was only a kid, but I learned to fend for myself. I would get up, wash, dress and go off to school in the village, never knowing if he’d be there when I got back. Not knowing if he would *ever* come home!’

Robin gave a wry little smile. ‘I never told anyone how things were at home, so nobody bothered. I went to school and all I could think of was my dad, and ... everything. One afternoon, my teacher came round and told Dad how I was falling badly behind in class; it made him realise how much he’d neglected me. After that, things were better. He talked to me, about my mother, and how much he missed her. He would hug me and cry, and tell me how sorry he was that he hadn’t been looking after me. But he never once asked me how *I* felt. Inside, I was crying too, but he couldn’t see that. He couldn’t see past his own grief.’

Betsy gently urged him on. ‘What was she like, your mother?’

He smiled, a soft, loving smile. ‘Best mother ever. She was caring and understanding. And small, much like you. She always knew what to say and when to say it. Oh, and she could be so funny. She made us all laugh with her silly jokes and made-up stories.’ His voice caught with emotion. ‘She was more than my mother. She was a special friend. I never felt lonely when she was around.’

When the emotion threatened to overwhelm him, he took a moment to compose himself before going on. ‘After my teacher came round to see him, Dad worried they might send social services to check up on us. So, eventually he found a married couple to come and stay. Joan and Tom were lovely – they were a great help to Dad on the farm, and Joan used to make me all my favourite puddings. I was so upset when they went to live at the seaside. Dad was, too.’

An enormous grin suddenly spread over his face. ‘After that, we had Sheelagh. I’ll never forget her, Betsy. She made our house really happy again ... But I’ll tell you all about her some other time. Still miss her, all these years later, you know. She was like a second mother, for the short time she was with us. As for Dad, looking back, I think he fell in love with her, only to be left alone again.’

Restless, Robin got up. ‘For a while when Sheelagh left us, he seemed hellbent on destroying himself again. He turned his back on his business ... leaving things to his accountant. It was another really bad period for us – one minute up, the next down. The turning-point came when two of Dad’s best vets left the practice and he had to close down one of his clinics. Then he discovered that his accountant had been stealing huge amounts of money from him. He finally came to his senses, got himself together and picked up the reins. He built on what he had, and now he has those four clinics within a twenty-mile radius. Somehow I got through school without making too much of a mess at it, thanks to Dave, whose mum was a friend of our family.’

Like the others, apart from Dave, Betsy had known nothing of Robin’s background. Now she asked: ‘Do you think you’ll ever meet up with Sheelagh again one day?’

Robin shook his head. ‘Dad did try to find her, but nothing came of it. He stopped looking ... said she deserved to have her own life back, if that was why she had gone missing.’

‘And has your Dad come to terms with losing your mother and ... everything?’

‘He still lives on his own and works far too hard. I’m his only child, and that’s why he was so disappointed when I wouldn’t join him in the family business.’

‘He sounds like a determined bloke.’

‘He is. But so am I, and he won’t change my mind.’ Robin grinned down at her.

‘Do you look like your dad?’ she asked.

‘Hmm ... not much. I’ve been told I take after my grandad on my mother’s side.’

‘So, what did *he* look like?’

Smiling broadly, Rob gave Betsy a little playful shove. ‘Oh, you know – handsome, well-built, and with this animal magnetism that women couldn’t resist ...’ They were still chuckling Oa, arm-in-arm, they arrived at the phone box.

Robin asked if she wanted to come inside with him, out of the cold.

Betsy graciously refused. ‘I don’t want to eavesdrop on your conversation,’ she said, stepping back. ‘I’ll wait out here.’

As it was, she couldn’t help but pick up some of the conversation, because the evening was unusually clear, and Robin’s voice could be easily heard.

‘Yes, Dad, everything’s fine. Yes, I would tell you if it wasn’t. No, I don’t need any money – I already told you, I’m getting my accommodation and meals free at the hospital.’

There followed a short pause during which Robin turned and rolled his eyes at Betsy through the glass. ‘No, I haven’t reconsidered,’ she heard him say patiently ‘... and I wish you’d stop asking me, because it only causes friction.’

Another pause. ‘I’m in the booth at the bottom of North Park Street. No, I’m not on my own. My friend Betsy’s waiting outside.’ Another slight pause before he chuckled and said, ‘I don’t think she’d appreciate you saying that.’

The conversation was ended with Robin assuring his father, ‘You know I will. I’ve said before many times, I don’t mind helping out with the animals when I’m home. I just don’t want to do it for a living.’ He nodded. ‘Okay, Dad. Take care of yourself. Talk again soon.’

When he emerged from the booth, Betsy asked him, ‘What did you mean when you said I wouldn’t appreciate that?’

The boy grinned. ‘Oh, nothing.’

‘Tell me!’

‘Well, for some reason, he thinks you’re my girlfriend.’

‘I see. And that worries you, does it?’

Concerned that she might have been offended, Robin changed the subject. ‘He should not assume things. He has a way of doing that – like thinking I would naturally follow him into veterinary medicine, without ever actually talking to me about it.’

‘I suppose he just wants what’s best for you.’ Disappointed that he had chosen to shift the conversation on to a less personal level, Betsy nevertheless played along. But all the time she wanted to shout out, ‘I’d love to be your girlfriend! The first day I met you, I knew I wanted to be part of your life!’

But she made no mention of her feelings, and neither did Robin. Instead, they walked on together, chatting of other things. There was to be a student fashion show soon, and one of the models would be wearing a dress designed by Betsy herself.

‘I can see you being one of the best designers in the country,’ Robin told her proudly.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that.’ Betsy was not one to brag. But in truth, she had already set her heart on establishing her own label one day.



They were almost home, when Betsy whispered, ‘She’s there again ... look.’

Against the soft background lighting of the next-door front bedroom was the silhouette of a woman.

‘Sometimes I want to knock on her door and make friends with her,’ Betsy told Robin. ‘She must be so lonely.’

The boy looked down on this lovely young woman beside him, and his heart was warmed. ‘You know your trouble?’ he said tenderly.

She looked up. ‘No. But I’m sure you’ll tell me.’

He took a moment to regard her, that small uplifted face and those appealing dark eyes, and he felt the urge to kiss her right there and then. Not wishing to frighten her away, he answered, 'You're far too nice for your own good.'

He desperately wanted to tell her how he felt, but some instinct held him back. Besides, if she'd wanted to be his woman, she had had her chance to say something back there when he told her what his dad had said, about her being his girlfriend. Anyway, a girl like Betsy, talented and pretty with an exciting future before her – why would she be interested in a humble young doctor like him? Though there was a fleeting moment when he was tempted to convey his true feelings. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, and twice he could not bring himself to say anything.

So, the moment passed, and with it his opportunity to tell her how he felt.

As they went up the steps and into the house, Betsy never knew how close he had come to sharing this last secret with her. From the relative safety of her hiding place, the woman watched them disappear into the house. 'So young,' she sighed. 'Such a lovely couple.' She drew away. 'My life is over now, but they've got all their lives in front of them. Don't be like me ... so much heartache,' she muttered brokenly. 'Don't waste your chances of happiness.'

Turning from the window, she drew the curtains together and ambled across the room to the sideboard. In the light from the small lamp, she opened the drawer and took out a bundle of papers tied with string.

Taking them with her to the chair, she sat down and for a moment made no move to open the bundle. Instead she laid herself back in the chair, and allowed the anger to envelop her. 'I stood up to him once,' she murmured proudly, 'Oh, but he was such an evil man ... *an evil, evil man!*'

Taking a moment to compose herself, she then untied the string and laid it carefully across her lap, then the same with the bulk of the parcel. Rummaging through the photographs, she found the one she was looking for. It was a photograph of herself many years ago. She gazed down on it with fondness. 'That was me!' she whispered incredulously. 'I may be haggard and worn now, but there was a time when I could hold my head high.'

Clothed in a clinging dress that drew in at the waist and fell naturally over her young figure, and with her long dark hair caught in a black bandana about her head, she looked amazing. 'I remember that dress as it was yesterday,' she chuckled joyfully. 'Purest ivory it was, with a sweetheart neckline, and a teasing split at the hem ...' She laughed out loud. 'Cost me a week's wages it did!'

Her mood sobered. 'That was the night it all started to go wrong,' she whispered, laying the photograph on her lap.

Having taken a few minutes to reminisce, she glanced again at the photograph and a whimsical expression crept over her features. 'Was that really me,' she asked wonderingly, 'with a figure like that ... up there on the stage with everyone looking at me, listening to me sing ...' She tried to recall the feelings, but like so much of her past, they were pushed to the depths of her mind.

She looked again at herself as a young woman with the world at her feet, and a sense of desolation took hold of her. 'Come on now!' she reprimanded herself. 'It won't hurt to remember the way it was ... the laughter, the songs. You did nothing wrong, you have to remember that.'

Shyly glancing down to study the photograph once more, she gave a hearty laugh. 'What a dress! And look at the black patent-leather high heels, oh, and the silk-stockings. It's all coming back ... and how it riled him, when the men couldn't take their eyes off me.' She groaned. 'Hmh! If they could see me now, they wouldn't even help me across the road, and who could blame them, eh?'

Standing the photograph on the mantelpiece, she began gently swirling and dancing around, losing herself in the joy of yesteryear. In her head she could hear the soft music of her favourite song, 'I Believe'. Twirling and swaying, she began to sing ...

One of her all time favourite songs was 'I Believe'. As she sang it how her heart was filled with joy as the poignant words took her back over the years ...

All alone now, with no audience and no wickedness waiting for her, she danced in the twilight, lost herself in the song, and for a while she felt incredibly free. It was easy to imagine herself back there, in the night club, with the people looking up, their hearts and minds tuned into the song and the music.

But always in the wings or leaning on the bar ... he was there watching ... waiting.
She could see him now, dark and menacing in her mind's eye. It was a bad feeling.

PART TWO



London, 1978

In the Beginning

CHAPTER THREE

HE HAD ALWAYS been confident that Madeleine would return to him. But on this particular night, he had no inkling that she was about to make a surprise entrance.

Alice Mulligan knew though, and she had done everything in her power to dissuade the girl from coming back to a man who had proved time and time again that he could make her life a misery. But her young friend was utterly besotted with their boss.

Steve Drayton had never accepted any of the blame for the couple's rows. And this time, as usual, he believed himself to be the injured party.

Turning to Alice, the manageress of his club, the Pink Lady Cabaret Bar off Soho Square, he murmured, 'If I find out she's left me for another bloke, I swear to God ... she'll live to regret it.' He stared at the little Irishwoman suspiciously. 'You know something about this, don't you? Thick as thieves, you two are. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't be at all surprised if you'd known where she was all along. All right – out with it! Where is she? Is she with another man? Is that why you're afraid to tell me?'

When Alice chose not to answer, but merely carried on removing notes from the cash register to transfer to the office safe, he grabbed her by the shoulders and almost lifted her off her feet. 'Answer me, woman!' he hissed. 'Where is she?'

'Well now, you'd best ask her that yourself, hadn't you? You being the big boss-man an' all.' Small in stature but big in courage, Alice had been around the block a few times and was not one to be intimidated by the likes of Steve Drayton.

'Don't you get clever with me,' he growled. 'No one's indispensable, lady!'

With a flick of her head, Alice gestured to the door. 'Like I said, she's here now, so you can ask her yourself, can't you?'

The open street-door sent a rush of cool air through the smoke-filled haze of the nightclub. Curious, he glanced up, and there she was: the Songbird, star of the show – his woman.

Though secretly relieved to see her, Steve was inwardly seething with anger, vowing that he would make the bitch pay for humiliating him. But he was cunning enough not to show his feelings here, in front of all these adoring people. Madeleine was a valuable asset, the reason why his club had flourished. In the early days, when he had let his gambling habits get the better of him, her charismatic appeal and popularity as a singer had brought him back from the brink of financial ruin. He still owed money to some undesirable types, but was reluctant to settle his debts. Steve Drayton never liked to pay what he owed. Arrogant and selfish, he played on his sexual appeal to get what he wanted – from women – and sometimes from men, too.

In the three weeks or so since Maddy had gone on the trot, his takings had dipped to an uncomfortable level. Deeply concerned, Steve had searched high and low, had even put the word out on the streets, but to no avail. The girl had simply disappeared.

Meanwhile, Steve had recruited other entertainers but they were no substitute for Madeleine. She had a certain special something – the punters came back to hear her time and again. ‘Songbird’ was what all the regulars called her. Or, ‘our own Pink Lady’ when she wore one of her glamorous pink stage dresses. Her accompanying musicians, pianist and bass-player Dave and Dino, were very grumpy without her. In desperation, with clients and money rapidly dwindling, Steve had been forced to sack the odd cleaner and even one of his two chefs but that was merely throwing out ballast to keep the ship afloat.

The truth was, only the loyal and the believers had continued to frequent his bar, in the hope that she would be back.

Well, here she was, and now the atmosphere was charged with excitement. But for all that, he was determined to teach her a lesson.

Shoving Alice aside, he gave a cynical smile. ‘Here she comes, strolling in as though she hasn’t a care in the world.’

For what seemed an age, Madeleine paused to glance across the club, her dark eyes seeking him out. And then she was moving towards him, and despite himself, he felt his pulse quicken.

In that darkened room with the soft music playing in the background, all eyes were turned on the woman.

Of petite build and with a certain quiet beauty, she wended her way between the clients, acknowledging their greetings with a ready smile and a friendly word and, much to the annoyance of the man who laid claim to her affections, occasionally accepting a kiss on the cheek.

Steve Drayton’s hungry eyes followed her every step of the way. In spite of his violent temper and his liking for anything in a skirt, the sight of Madeleine could still thrill him like no other. With her mass of rich chestnut hair tumbling to her shoulders, and that lazy, swaying walk which had first attracted him to her, she could turn any man’s head.

She was uniquely talented, yet even now, when she could see how much they thought of her, Madeleine did not seem to realise just *how* good she was. In truth, she possessed a kind of childish innocence that shone from within. Up there on the stage, when the music filled the room and her voice cut to their hearts, she was magnificent. When the music had died down and her voice was still, she became shy and hesitant, almost naïve in her trust of others. She had fallen under Steve’s spell after auditioning for the club two years ago. Between boyfriends, and feeling lonely, she had found herself in her new employer’s bed by that first nightfall.

Now, as she stopped to chat with a regular, Steve stared at her and felt the familiar arousal, though it still rankled, the fact that she had walked out on him – without even a phone call to let him know what was going on. No woman had ever done that to him before.

He turned to Alice. ‘I knew she wouldn’t be able to stay away for long. Didn’t I tell you she’d be back?’

‘Mebbe so, but she’s a damned fool, so she is!’ As Irish as the Blarney Stone and wick as a leprechaun, Alice Mulligan was herself a force to be reckoned with. ‘It’s a mystery to me how she ever puts up with you.’

‘Women are no mystery to me,’ Steve boasted. ‘I’ve always been able to twist ’em round my little finger.’

‘You’re too clever for your own good, that’s your problem, mister.’ Being a woman of some fifty years, Alice had lovely skin and a slim figure that looked good in her smart business suit. Her blue eyes were alive with vitality. ‘When you said she’d be back, I hoped you might be wrong,’ she sighed. ‘But here she is, an’ may God and all His Saints help her.’

In truth, Alice was not at all surprised to see the younger woman here tonight, because it was not the first time today that Maddy had walked through these doors, though Steve Drayton didn't know that.

'She must have lost her mind, to make her way back here,' Alice said, closing the till and putting a rubber band round the notes. Earlier on, she had said the very same thing to Maddy. 'It just goes to show what bloody fools we women can be!' she added cynically. If only Maddy could see through this bully.

'My girl is nobody's fool,' Steve argued. 'She knows which side her bread is buttered, and come to think of it, so do you. But I can see it's put your nose right out of joint, now she's done the sensible thing and come home to me.' His mood darkened. 'The truth is, you never thought I was good enough for her.'

Undeterred, Alice ignored his last remark and looked him in the eye. 'That's because you're *not* good enough for her! And ye never will be.'

Steve helped himself to a large Scotch from the bar, and added a handful of ice. 'I don't give a sod what you think.' He glanced over at Maddy. '*She* thinks differently, and that's enough for me.' He preened himself. 'Besides, she won't get better than me, however hard she tries.' ... Steve didn't believe in God, but he did believe in 'An eye for an eye'. Two could play at that game of 'now you see me, now you don't'.

'Well, all I can say is, she must be a devil for punishment. Gawd! When I think of the way you treat her ...' Alice tossed her head.

'She can't do without me,' he declared smugly. 'In fact, I haven't yet decided whether I'll have her back or not.'

'Oh, but you will, me boyo.' Alice had no doubts about that.

'Really, and why is that then, eh?'

'Because without her, the punters would soon stop coming and you'd be broken like a twig underfoot. Besides, one time when you were drunk out of your skull, you actually spoke a few home truths, so ye did.'

'Is that so? And what might *they* have been, then?'

'You said she was a feather in your cap, for all the other men to envy.' Alice had no liking for this self-centred man. 'Deep down you don't love her at all,' she scoffed. 'That poor girl is just another acquisition for you to show off.'

'Hmh!' Swigging down his Scotch, Steve pressed his glass against the optic for another shot. He searched Madeleine out, to smile lovingly on her. 'Since she walked out on me ...' his voice grew softer 'I ... might tell you, I've really missed her.' It was the truth. The man sometimes wondered if he had foolishly fallen in love with Maddy; it scared him, brought out the violence in him.

'Missed the money she brings in, more like!' Alice snapped, completely unsympathetic. 'Deep down, yer a bad bugger, only she can't see it. You don't deserve a woman like that, kind and giving; the loveliest thing who ever walked onto a stage. There's not a man in the crowd who wouldn't give his right arm for a woman of her calibre.'

Alice threw Steve a contemptuous glance. 'And then there's you – a bully and a womaniser – treating her like the dirt under your feet.' She was angry with Madeleine for coming back, and proving him right. She had no liking for this man who provided her wages; though she earned every penny twice over.

Since the nightclub had opened eight years ago, Alice had worked tirelessly, shown her true worth and earned her boss's trust. As a result, her wages had increased in line with her responsibilities.

To her credit, Alice had fought her way up from the bottom; in turn she had cleaned the toilets, scrubbed the floors, worked as a cloakroom attendant and then behind the bar, had also served at tables and run errands. Eventually she had risen from taking money as the clients arrived, to being entrusted to bank the takings. And now she was a fully-fledged manageress.

From the start, she was honest, reliable and knew how to keep her mouth shut when necessary, as long as there was nothing criminal or harmful involved. Though when she heard how a certain client had been beaten so badly he ended up in hospital, that was a turning-point in her loyalty. From that moment she kept herself to herself and never showed interest in any of Steve's shadier activities.

While Steve Drayton valued and respected her, she could never respect him; he reminded her too much of her own cheating husband, Eamon. It was five years now since she'd walked out on him, and good riddance to the man! Childless, she had taken young Maddy to her heart and loved the girl as her own blood. After seeing how badly Steve treated every woman who took a shine to him – and there were many – Alice had grown to dislike and distrust him; especially these past two years, since Madeleine caught his eye.

Steve might love her and he might not. Alice could not be sure. But it was a strange, destructive love, for he seemed determined to make the young woman's life a misery.

Steve interrupted her reverie. 'I *do* love her,' he said, answering her unspoken question. 'The trouble is, when I get drunk and senseless, I find myself agreeing with you, that she's too good for me – and then I get insanely jealous. Like you said, any man would want her, and maybe even give her a better life than I do.'

He dropped his gaze to the floor. 'The thought of losing her sends me wild,' he said hoarsely. 'Then I hit out and hurt her.' He swished the ice cubes in his glass, and she could barely catch his last few words as he whispered, 'I swear I don't mean to.'

He watched as Madeleine lingered to chat with another one of the customers. There was no denying, she was a special woman, and Alice was right ... he did not deserve her.

'I'm not surprised she cleared off,' he conceded regretfully. 'The last time we had a set-to, she took a terrible beating – and all for something and nothing. A fella at the club put his arm round her as she walked out and as usual, I laid the blame on her.' He shrugged. 'Yeah, that's what it was all right – something and nothing.'

He sighed self-indulgently and took another measure of whisky. 'Mind you, we were busy making up till the early hours, and I can tell you here and now, your precious Maddy didn't have no complaints about my performance *that* night!'

'You're an arrogant devil.'

'Yes, so you keep saying.'

Straightening his shoulders beneath the beautiful cloth of his Jermyn Street suit, Steve drew himself up to his considerable height. 'She always comes running back. It only goes to prove how bad she wants me.' He flicked open a box of Dunhill cigarettes and lit one with a gold lighter. 'Want one?' He offered the box to Alice, who ignored it.

'Why don't you marry her?' Alice was known to come straight to the point.

He laughed. 'I *never* marry my women. Can't trust a single one of 'em. My old mother taught me that, the poxy tart. God knows who my father was – she had more men than you've got spuds in Ireland, love. No, there's no woman alive who'll get me shackled to her.'

'Have you told her that?'

'I don't have to, she already knows my opinion – that women are good for one thing only.' Swinging round to face Alice, his mood suddenly darkened, as it so often did. 'I think it's time you got back to work,' he hissed. 'Before I get to thinking I might be better off with somebody who doesn't ask so many questions! Bloody women, it's nothing but yap, yap, yap.'

Despite her recent vanishing act, Steve was satisfied that he had his Maddy exactly where he wanted her; his little songbird on a string. And it didn't matter what he did to her, because she always ended up singing along to his tune.

Still weaving a path through the dining-tables, Madeleine was stopped many times by clubbers who were delighted to see her back, from what they had been told was a well-deserved holiday away from the hustle and bustle of Soho.

With a sweet smile, she thanked them and moved on towards her tormentor; the man she could neither live with, nor without. She loved him, she hated him, and now as she glanced at him across the room, she wanted him as much as ever.

Not overly handsome, Steve Drayton was a big man. Fit and toned, with a quick mind and an instinct for making money, he had built the Pink Lady up from nothing. There was an aura of power about him that was very sexy, and a certain kind of look from his narrow hazel-coloured eyes that could turn Maddy's blood to water. Sometimes he was so good to her; at other times, he became a devil.

Though apprehensive, she was glad to be back, to realise that he still wanted her. And yet there was always that niggling doubt that he might throw her aside; that he would find someone else, younger than her thirty years, and she would have no part in his life. In her heart she knew that might well be for the best, but she hoped it would never happen.

Now though, she had something to tell him. Something that might seal their future together, once and for all.

As she drew nearer, the doubts set in. He was such a volatile man, so unpredictable. How would he react? The moment she was standing before him, her courage began to waver.

'So! Here you are at last, eh? Took you long enough to make your way back, didn't it?' he said smoothly, in the softest tone that made her shudder. 'You needed to punish me, was that it?' He traced her jawline with his finger and she felt hypnotised by his touch.

'That's not true, Steve, and you know it,' she whispered.

'So why don't you tell me what the truth is, then.' He stepped closer, his eyes boring into hers. 'You've not been singing else-where, or I would have heard. So where have you been hiding? Got a bit on the side, is that it?'

'Will ye leave her be!' Sensing trouble, Alice quickly intervened. 'Go easy on her, for heaven's sakes,' she urged in a low voice. 'There's a million an' one eyes trained on the pair of youse.'

Steve's display of temper had not gone unnoticed by the regulars, some of whom did not believe the holiday story. They had seen the way he acted with her, controlling and possessive. So who could blame them for hoping she might have escaped, found a new life, a new man, one who might cherish her the way she deserved.

Impatient, they called out to her now. 'Come on Madeleine, we've missed you! Get up there and strut your stuff!'

The clapping rose to a deafening crescendo. '*We want Songbird! We want Songbird!*'

'All right, all right!' Laughing, she gestured towards the stage. 'I'm on my way.'

As she turned from him, Steve caught her by the arm. 'What do you mean?' he demanded. 'Surely you're not thinking of performing *tonight*?'

'Why shouldn't I?'

'Because you've only just walked in, dammit! We need to go somewhere quiet, somewhere we can ... talk.' Although he had other things on his mind than talk. 'You'll want to rehearse – decide the songs, organise the musicians. It all takes time.' He gave a lazy smile. 'Besides, we've already booked a comedian for tonight.'

'He's been cancelled,' Alice interrupted.

'Cancelled!' Steve swung round to face her. 'What the hell are you talking about, woman? Who cancelled him?'

'I did. And if ye want to make something of it, I'm ready.' The little woman had a look in her eye that Steve knew all too well. If it wasn't for the fact that Alice ran the club in his absence, was totally trustworthy and knew how to keep her mouth shut about his business deals, he would have thrown her feet first out the door long ago.

Instead he issued a stark warning. 'Be careful, lady. You don't want to overstep the mark.'

There were many ways of being rid of people like Alice, and he knew them all.

Defusing the situation, Madeleine told him hastily, 'It's not Alice's fault. It was *me* – I arranged it all. And now the boys are backstage, ready when I am.' She smiled, pleased with herself. 'You see, I haven't just walked in,' she admitted. 'I was here this afternoon while you were at the races. Me, Dave and Dino rehearsed all afternoon.

'You did what! And why the devil wasn't I told?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I asked them not to let on,' she replied boldly. 'We timed it for when you wouldn't be here. I'm sorry, but, well ... we all thought it would be a nice surprise for you.' She peeped at him from her soft dark eyes. 'But it's all right, isn't it, Steve?' Most times she could wheedle her way round him, and thankfully this proved to be one of those times.

He studied her a moment, wanting to hit her, aching to love her. 'You're a witch!' His desperation to have her was all he could think of. 'Well, all right. But I won't pretend I'm not rattled at being hoodwinked.' The sound of hand-clapping and foot-stamping was deafening. 'Your fans are getting restless. You'd best go.' He took another moment to study those mesmerising dark eyes, then warned her, 'Don't think you've got the better of me. I can take you or break you.' But his cutting remark was a lie, and they all knew it.

Without a word and giving him no time to change his mind, Madeleine hurried away to the dressing-room,



Steve took his drink to the small table at the side of the stage which was reserved for him. On the way, he paused to exchange a word or two with his clients.

'She's back then?' The well-dressed man who spoke was a known thug. 'If she were my woman, I'd never have let her get away in the first place. Not losing your touch, are you?'

'You'd best mind your tongue.' After Madeleine's sudden disappearance, Steve Drayton had been made to suffer many such comments. 'You'll never see the day when I lose my touch,' he retaliated. 'Keep them on a string but cut them a bit of slack now and then ... they'll always come running back. Steve Drayton will never be short of women. What's more, I'll still be making money, long after you and your kind are finished so you'd do well to remember that!'

Moving away, he placed his drink on the table, lit up a Dunhill and settled back in his chair, the beginnings of a smile crossing his face as he swept his gaze over the many customers, so flush with money he could almost smell it.

He was no fool. Since Madeleine had been gone and the clients had begun to drift away, the vultures were circling, biding their time in the hope that he might be forced to sell. The club was in a prime location, and in excellent nick. There were many competitors who would just love to walk in and take over.

Yes, it was true, Madeleine was the star attraction and there was no one else like her; she was the one who drew people from every corner. He had been in business long enough to know she was the magic money-spinner who kept him at the top. But he mustn't let *her* know that. Nor must he let her forget that it was *he* who had given her the chance to show what she could do.

Over the past two years he had built her up. *And if she didn't play his game*, he thought fiercely, *he could so easily knock her down again*.

He would too. Without a second thought.

Looking about, Steve was pleased with what he saw. Every manjack here was thrilled that Madeleine Delaney was back in town!

Like himself, they were settling down, confident that they were about to enjoy a very special performance.

And as usual, they were not disappointed.



It was twenty minutes before Madeleine appeared onstage. Prior to that it was organised chaos behind the scenes, with Alice helping her choose from the three dresses she had brought earlier. 'You'll be wanting to knock 'em dead tonight.' Alice was beside herself with excitement. 'Ooh now! This is the one to send 'em wild!' Whipping the shocking pink dress from its hanger, she held it against the girl. 'What d'ye think, me darling?'

Madeleine thought Alice had chosen well. 'OK, let's go for that one,' she agreed. 'Pink dress, black belt and shoes ...'

'And that sparkly diamond clip in your hair?' Alice suggested.

The two women worked methodically in front of the big illuminated mirror, with make-up, perfume and hairspray until finally, Maddy Delaney – the Songbird – was ready to face her public.



When she emerged onstage, the punters went wild, and who could blame them? In the sexy knee-length gown with its sweetheart neckline, long skinny sleeves and back kick-pleat, she was both classy and glamorous.

Her long thick locks were swept off-centre to the top of her head, so as to cascade naturally down one side; the diamond clip accentuated the depth and sparkle of her eyes, and the stiletto heels gave her legs a long, slender appearance.

When the music started up and her pure, powerful voice rose to the rafters, the crowd fell silent. Maddy had chosen to sing The Beatles' new hit, 'Yesterday' – a song which the public all over the world had taken to their hearts. The hush was complete as she sang to a sea of upturned faces about the sorrow of lost love and loneliness.

Each haunting song that followed was a story, and when finally she bowed and thanked them, the audience gave her and the musicians the rapturous applause they deserved.

And so, the evening was finally over. As Steve Drayton watched the punters go, a celebratory cigar drooping from his mouth, his hands were itching to count the takings. 'I reckon we've done all right,' he boasted, as Alice closed the outer door. 'Now that Madeleine's back, there'll be no holding us.'

'If you want her to stay, you'd best mend your ways,' Alice declared. 'You almost lost her because of your bullying. Next time, it might well be permanent.'

None too pleased at her unwelcome advice, he bit back, 'When I need your opinion, I'll ask for it. And if I find you've been trying to turn her against me, well now ...' He nodded affirmatively. 'I'll have no choice but to deal with it ... if you know what I mean?'

Alice knew well enough what he meant, but she played him at his own game. 'Whatever makes you think I might try and turn Madeleine against you?' she asked sarcastically. 'When you're doing a perfectly good job of it yourself!'

'This is the last warning, Alice. Just keep your nose out of my business.' He caught the defiant look in her eye and shook his head. 'You need to listen to what I'm saying! Oh, I won't deny you're worth your weight in gold here. But like I said before, you are *not* indispensable.'

'I never thought I was,' Alice said, beginning to empty the till. 'Though you won't find better than me.' We'll 'Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't. We'll just have to see, won't we? So now, if it doesn't go against your high principles, d'you think you could close up and see yourself off these premises? I'll cash up tonight. Tell everyone they can go home – you've all done very well tonight.'

Steve sank into a reflective mood as he mechanically counted the takings. The sight of Madeleine on stage, her slim curves draped in silk, had reminded him of what he had been missing; twice he'd been to the flat he'd bought for her in Battersea, but there was no sign of her, and so he began wondering where she was, and who with. And yes, there had been others to satisfy him in Madeleine's absence, but they were just filling in, until she came back ... as he knew she would.

Hearing a noise behind him, he swung round. 'What! Are you *still* here?' Alice had become a thorn in his side, and if he had his way, it would be a mere matter of time before she was permanently removed.

On his words, Alice picked up her handbag which she'd left by the till and hurried away. There was no need to antagonise him further, she wisely decided. But she vowed to make Madeleine see sense; if not today, then soon.

Before something really bad happened.

With that in mind, she set off in search of Raymond, a shy, bumbling giant of a man who worked like a dog, and was solely responsible these days for keeping the club clean and shipshape.

Being another fortunate 'find' for Drayton, Raymond kept himself to himself, avoiding company and speaking only when spoken to. An orphan raised in a strict children's home, he had been a wanderer sweeping the streets when Drayton came across him. Within a week, he had him working at the club.

Poor Raymond was forever grateful to his new boss. Given a windowless room where he could lay his head, free food from the club and a measly wage on a Friday, he thought himself a fortunate man.

'Ray, where are you?' Alice looked about, but could see no sign of him. Going to the bar, she asked one of the barmen there, 'Jack, have you seen Raymond anywhere?'

Jack was genuinely friendly, honest as the day was long, and deeply fond of Madeleine – not in any sexual way, he was not that way intended – but he was prepared to stand up and defend her. Alice had seen the way his boyish features tightened whenever he saw Drayton bullying her. Hard-working and ambitious, Jack nevertheless remained untainted by the world of Soho; in fact, he wanted to run his own club one day.

In answer to Alice's question, Jack gestured to the far side of the room. 'Last time I saw him, he was clearing the back tables.'

Alice thanked him. 'The boss is especially keen to have the club emptied and locked for the night.'

'Why? What's got into him? Most nights he's here till all hours, him and his cronies, gambling and drinking. What's so different about tonight?'

'Sure, it's no good asking me!' Alice rolled her eyes to the heavens. 'Best do as he says though. Ye know what a vile bugger he can be.'

'Alice ...' Jack lowered his voice to a whisper. 'He doesn't know, does he?'

'If you mean, does he know Madeleine was with you all that time, the answer is no – at least I don't think so. He hasn't said anything.'

Jack was concerned all the same, 'You and I both know, he'd go mental if he found out. Not because anything would have happened between me and Madeleine.' He smiled a sad little smile. 'He knows the way things are with me. It's just that I care about her! When I caught her crying in the back alley that night, I knew she needed to get away from him ... if only to send him the message that she's not his sole property to do with as he pleases!'

Alice understood his frustration. 'The trouble is, she loves him – though God only knows why.'

'I'm well aware of that,' Jack sighed. 'It was plain enough – the way she kept mentioning his name, even wanting to get back to him from the minute she came in through the door.'

'Well, it was Drayton who put her up there in front of the crowds,' Alice conceded. 'Unfortunately, she seems to think she owes him for that for all eternity, when all the time any self-respecting club-owner would have cut his arm off for the chance. Anyways, all we can do is hope she comes to her senses, sooner rather than later.'

'I did right, didn't I?' Jack asked worriedly. 'I mean, offering her my spare room for a while?'

'Of course you did the right thing,' Alice assured him. 'No way should we have let her come to me because, as we suspected, it was the first place *he* came looking.'

Jack pursed his lips, folded a bar-towel and placed it over the pumps. 'For her own sake, I wish she could see him for what he really is. A complete bastard!

He knew how fond Alice was of her. 'She's too trusting, and he knows it.' The anger trembled in his voice, 'I tell you, Alice, if it wasn't for her asking me not to, I'd have tackled him long before now. But she won't have it. As it was I pleaded with her to stay on at my place – even offered to move out for as long as she wanted. I tried all ways to stop her from coming back here to him, but she wouldn't be told.'

Alice chuckled. 'That's the way she is – headstrong and independent. But I'm keeping an eye on things, don't you worry.'

'Alice, promise me. If he hurts her, you will tell me, won't you? I can't abide bullies.' Jack's face darkened. 'I swear to God I'll swing for him if he touches her again.'

'I will.' Alice could lie convincingly when necessary.

And she was lying now.

The last thing she wanted was to involve Jack any deeper. He was a sensitive young man, albeit strong and able, and no doubt in a fair fight he could easily take on a man like Drayton. But there were others – ruthless criminals and villains who, if paid enough, would snuff his life out like a candle.


Alice could never risk that happening.

Losing no time, Jack went away to instruct the others, 'The boss wants us off the premises – like now.'

'Why the hurry?' The old barman had been with Drayton these past four years.

Jack shrugged. 'Who knows?'

'Another closed game with his mates, is it ... losing their ill-gotten gains at the table.' The man gave a snort of disgust, 'Bloody fools. More money than they know what to do with.'




Having located Raymond, Alice asked, 'How long before you're done?'

Six foot tall, with shoulders wide and strong as an oak door, Raymond often doubled as a bouncer, evicting the undesirables. 'Half an hour tonight,' he answered shyly, avoiding Alice's eye. 'Back at eight in the morning to finish off.'

Alice nodded, and then gave a stifled yawn. 'It's been a long tiring day, and I need my sleep.' Bidding him farewell, she hurried away to get her coat.

Before leaving, she intended to have a quiet word with Madeleine. She was deeply suspicious. Steve Drayton was acting out of character and it worried her. What with Maddy taking off the way she did, without so much as a word, and then turning up out of the blue like that ... and all he had done was give her a gentle chiding. It was not like Drayton to suffer public humiliation quietly. There would inevitably be some kind of retribution.



In her dressing-room, Madeleine had changed into a robe and was seated before the mirror, removing the make-up from her face.

Engrossed in what she was doing, she did not hear him come in. It was only when he stepped forward that she saw his image in the mirror.

'God Almighty, Steve!' she exclaimed. 'You scared the daylights out of me.'

Before she could turn round, he was on her, his long lean fingers toying with her hair, caressing her slender shoulders, then sliding down towards her breasts. When she raised her head, he leaned forward to kiss her on the neck.

Suddenly, without warning, he clenched his fingers about her throat and squeezed.

When she began to struggle, he increased the pressure until she could barely breathe.

Then, just when it seemed she might pass out, he released her.

‘You’ve been a bad girl,’ he murmured. ‘You walked out on me without a word.’ He tutted. ‘That was so cruel.’

Cursing her to hell and back, he began to pace the floor, madly ranting on about what she had done to him. ‘Weeks you’ve been gone, and not one word! I went to the flat twice, and it was empty, so I knew you hadn’t been staying there. Then you just walk back in, as though nothing has happened. Did you never think how *I* felt? Christ! I was almost out of my mind, not knowing what was going on, not to mention being slagged off by the regulars with their smartarse remarks. “Where’s your woman? Frightened her off, have you?” Laughing at me behind my back!’ His face looked wild.

‘I’m not your woman,’ Maddy said hoarsely. Shaken by the brutal way he had gone for her throat, she recalled Alice’s warning that, ‘One of these days he’ll lose control, and Lord only knows what he might do!’

Her open defiance stopped him in his tracks. ‘What – did – you – say?’ he whispered.

Holding her head high, she shakily repeated the words. ‘I said, I’m not your woman.’

‘Is that so?’ Throwing his head back, he startled her by laughing out loud. In an instant, the laughing stopped. ‘So, if you’re not *my* woman,’ he demanded, ‘whose woman *are* you?’

‘I’m my own woman,’ she answered. ‘That’s who I am.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ he sneered. Dropping into the nearest chair, he regarded her with suspicion. ‘Explain!’

Sensing the onset of a fierce argument, Madeleine chose not to answer. Instead, she put her hands up to her neck, remembering what he had done; remembering what Alice had warned so many times.

‘I’m talking to you, bitch!’ He was out of the chair and standing before her. ‘Answer me!’

Ignoring him, she hurried to the door. ‘I had something important to tell you,’ she confided angrily, ‘but I can see you’re not in the mood for talking. Not to worry. It can wait till tomorrow – if I can still speak, that is, let alone sing.’

‘Where the hell do you think you’re going?’ In two strides, he was across the room, where he slammed shut the door and thrust her against the wall. ‘Don’t fight me, sweetheart,’ he murmured. ‘You know I don’t like you to fight me.’ His tongue was rough against her skin as he licked the length of her neck, where the marks of his fingers still showed, and downwards, towards the rise of her breast.

Against all her instincts, Madeleine felt herself succumbing to his touch. ‘No! Let me go,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t want ...’ But her words fell on deaf ears.

Even as she protested, she could not help but love him. Yet it was an uncomfortable love, a love that she knew deep down was not returned in the way she needed it to be, and never could be. Steve Drayton was too damaged a person to know what love meant.

Yet she would have given anything for him to love her completely, to care for her as a woman. And especially now, when she desperately needed him to see her as a future wife.

‘Don’t ever tell me you’re not my woman.’ The tip of his tongue encircled her ear. ‘You will *always* be my woman,’ he murmured passionately. ‘And God help anyone who tries to come between us.’

‘Steve?’ His nearness was intoxicating.

He stroked her breast, curving it into the palm of his hand. ‘Ssh.’

She stiffened against him, making him draw back slightly. ‘Do you love me? I mean, *really* love me?’

‘You know I do, otherwise why would I go crazy when I see other men ogling you?’ Cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her full on the mouth. ‘I’d kill anyone who tried to take you away from me.’

‘But are you *in* love with me?’

He laughed. ‘Haven’t I just said I love you?’

‘Yes, but there is a difference. I mean, you can love a mother or a sister, but being *in love* is something else.’

‘You’re talking in riddles.’

When he began peeling off her robe, she held him away. ‘No, Steve. I really need you to listen to what I have to say.’ The time was right and she had to tell him now – while she had the courage.

‘What the hell’s wrong with you?’ His need of her was driving him crazy. ‘I know you want it as much as me, I can feel it.’ He slid his open palms over her buttocks. ‘Come on, stop teasing.’

Maddy laid her hands over his. ‘No, Steve! Not until you’ve heard what I’ve got to say.’

Inching away, he looked at her for a moment, at the tears in her eyes, and the nervous way she was fidgeting with her fingers. It puzzled him; a wave of paranoia swept over him. What was she hiding? Why did she look so guilty? ‘What’s going on?’

For weeks, she had dreaded this moment, but it had to be faced – and so had the consequences.

‘I’m pregnant,’ she confessed. ‘That’s why I went away – I needed time to think.’ At the look of horror on his face, she began to gabble, ‘I thought you might be angry. I was planning to get rid of it ... I even went to see somebody – an abortion clinic in Harley Street. In the end though, I couldn’t go through with it! I couldn’t kill an innocent baby ... *our* baby.’

Seeing the look of astonishment on his face, she took hold of him, pleading, ‘It’ll be all right, Steve. You said you loved me. We can get married and be a family.’ She giggled nervously. ‘It’s what I’ve always wanted.’

For what seemed an age he stared at her in disbelief then, with one mighty swipe of his fist, he sent her flying across the room.

‘You’re nothing but a slut!’ he shouted. Grabbing her arm, he yanked her to her feet, twice slapping her hard across the mouth. ‘A filthy little slut! What d’you take me for, eh? I’m no fool, I know why you went away. You’ve got yourself a new man, haven’t you, eh? And now he’s got you knocked up and the pair of you think you can offload his bastard onto me?’

‘No!’ Taken aback by his violent reaction, Maddy tried to explain. ‘There is no other man ... there’s only ever been you. I swear to God, Steve, it’s *your* baby. Yours and mine.’

Picking up her hair-drier, he sent it crashing into the mirror, shattering it into a million airborne fragments. Some of the glass splinters cut her face and arms, sending sprays of blood across the wall.

Turning to her, Steve spat out, ‘It sickens me to touch you! You dirty little cow, shaming me in front of everyone. I expect they all knew what was going on – and all the time they were laughing at me behind my back. Bastards, all of you!’

He was like a madman. ‘GET OUT OF HERE – OUT OF MY SIGHT, AND OUT OF MY CLUB! GO ON – CLEAR OFF OUT OF IT!’ As he slung her out the door, his voice was raised to the rafters. ‘*He* can have you. Who’d want to touch you now? And when I find out who he is, that bastard you’re carrying won’t have a father. Make no mistake, I’ll find out who you’ve been with if it’s the last thing I do. D’YOU HEAR WHAT I’M SAYING! Nobody makes a fool out of Steve Drayton and gets away with it!’ He stormed off into his office, trampling on the broken glass, and kicking it across the room.

From the cloakroom, Alice heard the commotion and came running. Horrified at the sight of Madeleine spattered in blood, she took her by the arm, and led her away. ‘I knew this would happen, I could see it coming,’ she muttered to herself. Glancing up, she saw Drayton peering at them through his office window. ‘Look what you’ve done to her, you lunatic!’ she cried. ‘You should be ashamed! Only a coward would hurt a woman like this!’

Afraid that Alice might enrage him further, Madeleine stopped her. ‘Alice, don’t! He’s gone crazy.’

‘He’s always been crazy,’ Alice said loudly. ‘It’s just that you’ve never believed it.’ Taking her behind the bar, she ran the cold tap and with a clean bar-towel, dabbed at the cuts until they were cleaned, then she went to the first-aid box and smeared them with antiseptic ointment. ‘Thank goodness they are only superficial,’ she consoled her friend. ‘But they’ll take a while to heal,

nevertheless. In a minute or two, we'll get a taxi and go to University College Hospital, to get them seen to properly.'

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Drayton in his office, pacing up and down like a wild animal. 'Whatever sent him off on the rampage like that?' she asked worriedly.

Maddy blamed herself. 'I should never have gone away for all those weeks. I thought it might make him value me more; instead, it made him think I had a lover.' She was shivering with shock, she was grateful when Alice took off her coat and wrapped it round her.

'But that's ridiculous! You've always worshipped the ground he walks on – though *why*, I'll never know. Look! I'll tell him how it was, that after the big row you had, it was me who persuaded you to put some distance between you for a time. I'll tell him there was never any other fella, that there was nothing underhand going on.'

Jerking away, Madeleine shook her head, and the pain made her cry out. 'I don't want you to go anywhere near him,' she said. 'He wouldn't listen anyway.'

'Oh, he'll listen to me. We've clashed many times, and he's threatened to be rid of me – but I'm still here. That's because I keep this club operating smoothly where previous people have almost run it into the ground, robbing him blind in the process.' She squeezed Maddy's hand gently. 'Unlike you, my girl, I've learned to stand up to him.' She dialled the local taxi firm. 'A cab will be here in a minute.'

Madeleine kept a hold on her. 'No, Alice. Leave him be for now. It was my fault for telling him tonight, after me just turning up without warning. I should have told him tomorrow morning in the light of day maybe, when he might have been more rational.'

Alice's curiosity was growing. 'Told him what? It must have touched a nerve, whatever it was, for him to blow up like that.'

Madeleine was still dwelling on Steve Drayton's reaction. 'I hoped he might be pleased,' she said, and began to sob.

Exasperated, Alice tried again. 'So, what was it you told him?' Then the truth hit her like a ton of bricks. '*My God! You're pregnant!*' She understood it all now. 'I should have known, what with you refusing food and cutting out the alcohol. Yes, and the other week, Jack told me you'd been sick all morning.' She recalled the moment. 'You'd been looking peaky of late, so I did wonder.'

Sobbing, Maddy admitted that yes, she was pregnant, but, 'Steve refuses to accept that he's the father. He's convinced I've been with somebody else ... called me a dirty little slut.'

'You're well shot of him,' Alice said gently. 'And don't you worry, everything's going to be all right.' Her face was wreathed in the widest smile. 'Oh Madeleine, you're going to have a baby – isn't that wonderful?'



At the Emergency department of the local hospital, a nurse cleaned the cuts again and removed a tiny sliver of glass from the biggest one. She warned Maddy to only wear her stage make-up for the shortest time – to take it off as soon as possible, to allow the skin to breathe and to heal.

After a cup of tea and some biscuits, Maddy was feeling a lot better. Alice's excitement was infectious, and by the time they'd taken another taxi to Whitechapel, where Alice lived, Maddy had promised herself that everything was going to be all right.

Alice herself was not so sure. In spite of promising Maddy that things would sort themselves out, she had a murmuring dread that more trouble was bound to come out of all this.

Yet, even now, after witnessing the violence he was capable of, neither Alice nor Madeleine fully realised the true evil that was Steve Drayton.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALICE HAD ALWAYS been a light sleeper. She couldn't tell whether it was the sound of Maddy crying that had woken her, or whether she had just woken like she normally did, after a few

short hours of sleep. Either way, she was now wide awake and concerned about the younger woman. 'Poor little devil,' she yawned. 'What's to become of her?'

Taking her robe from the bedside chair, she slung it on and crept into the kitchen of her two-bedroomed flat to make a cup of tea. It was a bright summer morning, and even in this busy area of London, near the big roundabout at Aldgate East, she could hear the blackbirds calling to each other.

Coming into the kitchen, she found Maddy hunched across the table. Red-eyed and sorry-looking, the girl immediately apologised. 'I didn't wake you, did I?'

Alice laughed and filled the kettle. 'Away with you! Sure, the walls are so thin, I can hear the man next door pulling on his trousers,' she joked. Looking to see if there was an empty cup on the table, she gently chided her young friend, 'I see you've not yet made yourself a cup o' tea then?'

Maddy shook her head.

'Hmh! Well, let's have one together now – you're bound to be thirsty, all the tears you've cried. Then I'll make us a good breakfast. Remember that you're eating for two now.' She bent to look at Maddy's face. 'Ye look awful, so ye do. There's not a man this side of the Irish Sea who would want to kiss that sorry little face, and who could blame them, eh?'

Her cheeky words had the intended effect, for they made Maddy laugh out loud, even though it hurt to do so. 'Well, that's not very nice, is it?' she chuckled.

Alice gave her a hug. 'Tea then, is it ... with a dash of milk and one sugar?'

'Thank you – yes, I'd like that.' Heartened by this darling woman who always seemed to say the right thing, Maddy drew the dressing-gown Alice had lent her tighter about her. 'I really am sorry if I woke you,' she murmured.

Alice prepared two cups and opened the biscuit tin. 'The thing is,' she answered cheerfully, 'I'd have woken up sooner or later, and if I didn't wake up it wouldn't matter, would it, because I'd be dead and gone, so I would.'

'Don't say that!' Maddy didn't believe in joshing about such things.

It was like tempting Fate.

Having made the tea, Alice brought the tray to the table. 'And I'll thank ye kindly not to eat all them custard creams,' she warned drily. 'There's two for you, an' two for me. And I won't be pleased if there's crumbs all over the table neither.'

Her banter had done the trick, and soon Maddy was brighter. 'You're such a good friend to me,' she told the older woman, 'letting me stay with you like this.'

Alice brushed away her comments, saying, 'What are we going to do with you, that's what I'm wondering. You can't possibly go back to him – not after what he did. Like as not, if he takes another bad mood, he could finish you off. Think of the baby, my love.'

Maddy took a sip of her tea and sighed. 'I'm sure he'll be in a better frame of mind today,' she said hopefully. 'When he's had time to think, he might realise what he's done.'

'Don't you believe it, me darling! That'll be the day, when Steve Drayton admits to being in the wrong. No.' Alice was emphatic. 'I can't let you go back to him, at least not until we're certain he really wants to take care of you and the child.'

'Oh, if only he would ...' Maddy said wistfully. 'Tell me the truth, Alice. Do you think there's a real chance he might come to terms with the idea of a baby?'

Alice was silent for a moment, chewing on her biscuit and washing it down with another swig of her tea. 'D'ye want the truth?'

Maddy nodded. 'Please.'

Leaning forward, the older woman secured the girl's full attention before saying bluntly, 'I don't think there's a cat in hell's chance of him accepting the baby.'

'But he is the father!'

‘Oh yes, he may be the father, but he will *never* admit that the child is his. And I can’t see a child playing any part in his life. You know as well as I do, he’s a bad lot – along with the other villains he keeps company with. And not a single one of them has any scruples or conscience whatsoever.’

She paused, all manner of images going through her mind; of late-night visitors to the club, shady deals and vicious arguments, often ending in violence. Steve Drayton lived in a dark world, one in which she feared Maddy might get swallowed up.

‘We both know the rumours that circulate about him and his cronies, and you know what they say – there’s no smoke without fire. That’s no environment in which to bring up a child.’

‘I know all that,’ Maddy admitted soberly. ‘And I still can’t help but love him.’ She was well aware of all the warnings that Alice was sending out. ‘I wish I *didn’t* love him, but I do. I want to live with him and for us to bring our child up together.’

Dear God in heaven! What would it take for the girl to see the truth about Drayton? Alice insisted, ‘You must stay here with me for a while, until we know for sure he wants the two of you. Will you do that for me, if only for *my* peace of mind?’

For what seemed an age, the air was thick with silence.

Maddy had never seen Alice so agitated and, to tell the truth, she was beginning to wonder if her friend could see more badness in Steve than she could see herself. Oh, she knew he had a shady reputation, and she had witnessed at first hand how cruel he could be. But how could he not love her, when she loved him so much? She wanted to understand him, to heal his unhappy past, to restore his faith in womankind.

Her first impulse was to tell Alice that she was going back that very day. She had to reason with Steve, and the sooner the better. But something in Alice’s warning made her cautious. ‘Very well, I’ll promise not to come back with you today.’

‘And what about tonight? You’ve got to teach him a lesson! Don’t turn up. Hit him in his pocket – where it hurts most.’

‘I don’t know if I can let him down again.’ Maddy was in turmoil. ‘I’ve only just got back onstage. Me being away has already cost him money. Besides, it’s Saturday – his best night. The place will be full to bursting. I need to think on it.’

‘Well, while you’re thinking on it,’ Alice said, ‘think about the way he attacked you. Think how he beat you up, even after you told him you were carrying his child. And even though you might by some miracle talk him into family life, just think what the future would be like – never knowing when he might turn on you or the child. God knows, he’s capable of it.’

‘I know he’ll probably turn his back on me,’ Maddy answered quietly, ‘but I still have to try and win him round, for the baby’s sake, if not for mine.’

‘Then I’m not going to work.’

‘Why not?’

‘Sure, if I can’t make you see sense, and you insist on going in tonight, so soon after he’s done this to you, then you give me no choice. I’ll write my letter of notice and send it in. I can’t stand back and see him play you for a fool any longer.’

Maddy was horrified. ‘You can’t send in your notice! You love your work. Besides, it’s not so easy to find a job in the clubs. You know how they are a closed shop.’

‘Don’t you worry, me darlin’.’ Alice could see her little ploy beginning to work. ‘I’ll find a job, even if I have to move away.’

‘I can’t let you do it,’ Maddy said. ‘Promise me you won’t send in your notice?’

‘I’ve made my decision,’ Alice answered.

‘No!’ Maddy knew from experience that when Alice said something, she meant it. ‘I can’t let you lose your work and possibly your home, on account of me.’ She bit her lip. ‘I’ll do what you ask, then. I’ll stay here tonight and make him sweat.’

‘Well, all right then,’ Alice said, after a pause. ‘And I’m not saying you shouldn’t go back at all, because clearly you still have things to decide between the pair of youse. But not tonight. Let the bugger calm down and think it through.’

Maddy threw her arms round the little woman’s shoulders. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘But I may go in tomorrow. You do know I can’t stay away too long?’

‘I understand that, so I do. But if you were to go in tonight, he’ll think he can do whatever he likes and you’ll always be there at his beck and call. And when you *do* get to talk it out with him, be prepared for him to give you an ultimatum.’

‘What kind of ultimatum?’

Alice did not mince her words. ‘He could ask you to get rid of the baby.’

‘NO! I would *never* do that! I tried – and I just couldn’t do it.’ The idea went against every instinct in her body.

It was the answer Alice had expected. ‘Good girl.’ Reaching across, she took hold of Maddy’s hand. ‘Listen to me,’ she urged. ‘London is full of unsavoury characters and Steve Drayton knows each and every one of them; no doubt they’re all on his payroll. What I’m saying is ... be on your guard. You’ve already seen a glimpse of what he’s capable of.’

‘I know.’

Sensing her hesitation, Alice assured her, ‘If you’re worried he might bring somebody else to take your place on stage tonight, I can tell you now, that won’t happen. While you were away, he trawled the clubs and agents, looking for a replacement. He managed to find two girls, but neither of them could hold a candle to you. In fact, they were so bad, Dave and Dino threatened to leave. Sure, there are talented girls about, but they’re all tied up in secure contracts.’

Up until then, it had not crossed Maddy’s mind that she might be so quickly replaced. Instead, she still harboured the illusion that Steve might yet feel proud at having fathered a child, and that in time he might even put a ring on her finger.

She relayed all this to Alice, but as ever Alice was noncommittal. ‘Let’s wait and see, me darlin’,’ she said encouragingly, ‘Who knows? Possibly you and the wee one can make him change his ways, after all.’

Deep down though, she knew it would never happen.



When Alice left for her duties at the club after lunch, Maddy reflected on their conversation. This time, she was less optimistic. ‘What if she’s right and I can’t talk him round?’ she asked herself. ‘What if he throws me out? What if he changes the locks on the flat and turns his back on me altogether?’

It was a frightening thought. She couldn’t put all her troubles on Alice, and she couldn’t afford a place of her own, as Steve only paid her a pittance, so where would they go, and the baby? How would they live?

A shocking thought rippled across her mind, and it brought her up sharp. Whatever happened, she would *not* have a termination. If Steve didn’t want her, she’d find a way to manage without him.

Yet the thought of making it on her own, with a baby in tow, was a terrifying thing. She was a singer; since the age of sixteen, when she was orphaned, she had always been a singer, scratching a living in shabby pubs and clubs until Steve had discovered and promoted her. It would be hard to sing in the clubs, as a single parent, impossible almost.

A sense of outrage coursed through her. ‘This is his baby, and he can damned well face his responsibilities!’

Determined either to win him over, or fight him tooth and nail, Maddy found herself regretting her promise not to go in tonight. What if ‘making Steve sweat’ just got him in such an awful rage that he went and did get himself another singer – and then she would never be able to talk him round!

Pacing the floor, she could not rid herself of all these doubts and fears, until eventually, her instincts decided for her. Making herself believe that Alice would understand, she came to a decision. 'I'll play him at his own game,' she decided. 'I'll turn up tonight as usual, wear a gown to knock him out, and go onstage as though nothing has happened. Steve will come round to my way of thinking. I know he will.'

Her spirits uplifted, Maddy ran a hot bath and soaked in it for a time, until her thoughts were formulated and her wounds soothed.

After towel-drying her long hair, she then let it fall into its natural wave. She applied more antiseptic cream to her cuts, wincing as she rubbed it in, then quickly dressed in the clothes she had worn the previous day.

After making sure everything was secure, she put on her coat and left, deciding to catch a tube down to Clapham Common station and walk the rest of the way to the Battersea flat to get some fresh air.

If all goes well, I should be travelling back to the flat with Steve tonight, she thought, but she remained apprehensive. After all, she had learned the hard way how easily he could lose control.



The journey across town seemed to take forever. She felt oddly isolated and unsure of herself, and wondered if the confrontation with Steve had affected her more than she realised. Thankfully, by the time she had walked to the flat from the tube station, her confidence had grown.

Her key went into the lock easily, much to her relief. At least he hadn't had the locks changed. That must mean something. Perhaps he had had time to think, and was regretting what he had done. The thought of making up brought a smile to her face.

The flat was a credit to her – though, as he enjoyed reminding her, the money she'd spent on making it both smart and cosy had been Steve Drayton's, not hers.

The cream-coloured carpet was of finest wool, as were the many different-coloured rugs laid throughout. The elegant navy and cream colour scheme varied from room to room; creating an effect that was unifying yet individual.

The leather settee and chairs set around a large fireplace in the lounge were warm and squashy, with a scattering of oversize cushions. The whole place was stamped with Maddy's friendly and open personality, though with a discreet dash of elegance.

Encouraged by the fact that Steve had not changed the locks or thrown out her things, Maddy made her way to the bedroom and went straight to his wardrobe. Throwing open the doors, she stood a moment observing the expensive tailored suits hanging there. She roved her hands over them. 'Are you really as bad as Alice says?' she murmured. 'Would you really turn your back on your own flesh and blood?' She persuaded herself that somehow, she would make him love the child she carried inside her.

For herself, she laid out fresh lingerie, along with a smart cream-coloured shirt with stand-up collar; then a short brown skirt and matching fitted jacket. Next she fished out her silk stockings and high-heeled cream-coloured shoes. Although the skirt was rather tight, since her tummy was acquiring a rounded shape, she looked very fresh and pretty in the outfit.

Almost ready, she sat at the dressing-table and skilfully applied foundation to her face, hiding the scratches. Eye-shadow and mascara followed, then a touch of coffee-coloured lipstick and a generous spray of lightly scented perfume.

She gave her hair a final brushing, then checked herself in the full-length mirror. 'Right, my girl!' The merest smile lit her face. 'You're about as ready as you'll ever be.'

For the first time today, she felt good. It was off to the shops now, to find the ultimate glamorous outfit, with maybe an extra-long split to show off her legs and avert people's eyes from her midriff. Or a low top to show off the bits of herself that he hadn't marked. The smile fell from her face as she

recalled his vicious attack on her. How could she risk her safety, and that of their child, with such an unpredictable man? When he fell into one of his rages, Steve Drayton became a monster.



Being Saturday, the Underground was busier than usual, the pavements heavy with people, and the Oxford Street shops full to bursting. At every pedestrian-crossing, there was a long wait before the road was clear.

'I hate coming into London on a Saturday,' said a grey-haired woman, who was almost lifted off her feet when a gaggle of girls came rushing past. 'I can't stand all this pushing and shoving!'

Taking the pensioner by the arm, Maddy helped her across the road, to receive the loveliest smile for her trouble. 'I'm glad not all young people are loud and selfish,' the woman said, ambling away with a tut and a grumble.

Maddy headed straight for Liberty's on Regent Street. They had such fabulous evening wear there, suitable for showbiz.

'I want to open Steve's eyes and make him see what he might be losing,' she told herself. 'No more pink ladies. I'm going to get a fiery red dress! Yes, that's it – I'll go for red and be a scarlet woman instead.'

The saleslady looked at Maddy, at her voluminous golden-brown hair and her striking dark eyes, and said, 'Oh no, my dear! Not red. With your colouring, you should wear the palest ivory.'

Maddy was amazed. 'I've never even considered wearing ivory,' she confessed. 'I've always thought that it would make me look washed out.'

The woman persuaded her to give it a try.

The first dress she put on was nipped in at the waist and full-skirted. 'No, it's definitely not me.' Maddy was unhappy with the style, but amazed by how flattering the colour was.

The second one was straight-skirted and fitting, but the neck was high and the sleeves too full.

The third was stunning – low-cut at the top, but with straps instead of sleeves. 'Good heavens, what on earth did you do to your arms?' The woman was shocked by the bruises.

Maddy stammered an excuse, and returned to the cubicle where, both disappointed and embarrassed, she began quickly dressing to cover up the bruises where Steve had gripped her last night.

She was reaching for her blouse when there came a knock on the cubicle door. 'My dear, I've found a dress I think you really should try.' The door inched open and an arm reached through, over which hung the loveliest-looking gown. 'You looked wonderful in the ivory,' the saleslady explained, 'so I went away and searched through another batch of stock that's just arrived from Italy. This one is absolutely right for you ... trust me.'

Suspecting the woman was trying hard to make a sale, Maddy agreed to try it anyway.

Five minutes later, she emerged from the cubicle, looking a million dollars.

'Oh my dear!' The woman's mouth fell open. 'I knew it was the one for you!'

The ivory-coloured dress was plain and elegant; with long, slim sleeves, small silk-covered buttons at the cuffs, it hung exquisitely. In fact, it could have been made for her.

'It simply flows over you!' The attendant was delighted. 'And the ivory ... so beautiful.'

Maddy was pleased to note the discreet split in the skirt, running down the left side from thigh to hem, which opened only when she stepped one leg forward. The punters at the Pink Lady adored it when she wore something a little bit sexy but still ladylike.

Wondering what Steve might say, she looked at herself in the long mirror. Against the ivory, her eyes and hair seemed richer, deeper in colour, and more importantly, the long slim sleeves hid the marks he had made on her arms.

And so she bought it, though it was more than she could easily afford. Steve liked her to have decent stage outfits, but the money he gave her for them was on the mean side. But this was a special

dress. A dress on which her whole future depended. Thanking the woman, she left with her precious cargo, and went home to Alice's flat.

She could hardly wait for the evening, when she would walk out on that Soho stage with her head held high.

Seeing her in that dress must surely melt her lover's heart? Even a hard man like Steve could not turn away the woman who loved him; the singer who brought in the bulk of his money. And the fact that she was carrying his child must surely mean the world to him. Shouldn't it?

She was both nervous and excited. Was she taking a chance too far? Was Alice right ... would he still reject her, and his child?

There was only one way to find out.

CHAPTER FIVE

IN THE EVENING, dressed in her new finery, Maddy took a taxi to the club. She was desperately nervous about Steve's reaction, but was hoping that tonight she could make him see sense.

She felt ashamed and worried at having broken her promise to Alice, even if it *was* for all the right reasons. Later, she would explain it all to her friend, convinced that she would understand.

Her heart beating fifteen to the dozen, she carefully inched open the door and peeped inside. As usual, the club was busy, with Jack and the others rushing about behind the bar. It was difficult to see clearly across the room because of Raymond's sizeable frame as he meandered about, clearing tables and shyly answering the occasional remark from a client. She smiled. No wonder they all love him, she thought. He's a real gentleman.

In that moment when Raymond stooped to collect something from the floor, she saw Dino and Dave sitting having a quiet drink at the side of the stage. Steve was standing at the far end of the bar, leaning forward, glass in hand, the usual Dunhill cigarette drooping from his lips.

At the sight of him, her heart leaped, and all kinds of bittersweet memories flashed through her mind: of the wonderful times they had shared – the many occasions when she was made to feel like the most beautiful woman in the world, and other times when he was so tender and loving, she thought it would never end. But then there was his explosive jealousy, the inquisitions, and the recent beatings she had suffered at his hands, with Alice's premonition of worse to come. Steve was like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, and Maddy wondered if she could really face a future with this constant battle on her hands.

For a moment, she was deeply troubled; unsure of whether she should go inside, or turn about and never come back. It was a strange, unnerving sensation.

Needing to think clearly, she closed the door and stood on the pavement, her back against the wall and her thoughts in turmoil. She felt incredibly sad, and lost – and for a moment, all the belief she had in him and their life together seemed to ebb away.

'Pull yourself together, my girl,' she reprimanded herself sternly. 'You can't turn back now – not when you've come this far.'

As always, the pull of her feelings for Steve proved to be stronger than her fears, and as she swung round to enter the building, a mischievous smile lit her eyes. 'I'll sneak in the back way,' she murmured, 'have a quick check of my makeup, and then I'll let him know I'm here.' The idea of taking him by surprise was thrilling.

Hurrying down the alleyway, she hoped the back door was not locked.

Good. The door pushed open at the touch of her hand. Excited and hopeful, she slipped into the building and made her way through the corridors which led directly to her dressing-room.

As she neared it, she heard a door slam, and then footsteps hurrying away. Not wanting to be seen, she pressed herself into the doorway of the store-room, emerging only when the footsteps had died away.

With the coast clear, she hurried on, agitating over who those footsteps might have belonged to. She knew it wasn't Alice, because that dear woman's light steps were as familiar to her as her

own. She was equally certain it wasn't the man who looked after the stage-lighting because he had a distinctive limp. Nor could they have belonged to Raymond, whose lumbering tread rocked the building. And as far as she was aware, the barmen hardly ever came back here.

Of course, it could have been someone looking for the loos and taking a wrong turn. Yes, that must be it! Someone had taken a wrong turn and got lost.

Nonetheless, for some strange reason, Maddy was filled with a sense of foreboding.

'You're beginning to imagine things,' she told herself, and gave a harsh little laugh. 'It's Alice's fault, for putting the fear of God into you.'

Having reached the dressing-room, she went quickly inside, instantly taken aback by the odour of a heady perfume, quite different from her own. 'Raymond's been at it with a new cleaning wax,' she thought. He's always trying some new product or another.

She glanced about. There were no signs of the struggle from last night, she observed wryly. All had been neatly swept aside ... like herself!

Going straightway to the new mirror that had been secured to the wall, she stared at herself, feeling like a kid on her first date.

He won't be able to resist me, she beamed. Then, reaching for her lipliner, she was amazed to see that her own hairbrush and cosmetics were gone, and in their place was an expensive range of powders and lipsticks, together with a beautiful silver-backed hairbrush.

While her mind was reeling with the shock, she heard the musicians strike up and then the sweet uplifted voice of a woman in song. It was a voice she had not heard before, and it was really good.

At first she would not let herself believe the obvious, but when she was made to accept the truth, her hopes of a reunion with Steve were cruelly dashed. He's found another singer to take my place, she thought, and her heart lurched. It seemed that Alice was right, after all. Steve really did want to get rid of her. She had let herself believe that her love was strong enough to bring him round to the idea of family and commitment. But now, she realised that it was never meant to be.

Not only had he beaten and humiliated her by throwing her out onto the streets, but hardly was her back turned than he had brought in another singer to take her place.

That was the final turning-point.

If there had been the slightest hope that he might come round to wanting her and the baby, that hope was gone; she had no illusions now. It was over. Steve Drayton had wiped her out of his life, as though she never existed.

Slumped in the chair, she let the emotions flow, and when sorrow flared to anger, she picked up the silver-backed hairbrush. For what seemed an age she examined the beauty of it; with the fine, curved handle, it was a magnificent thing.

The sight of a few delicate strands of blonde hair caught in the bristles was like salt in the wound. *He* gave her this, Maddy thought – and no doubt he told her the same wicked lies he told me. It wasn't all that long ago since he gave *me* a hairbrush not too different from the one I am holding. The man is a liar and a cheat. No good to anyone.

Gripping the hairbrush so hard it hurt, with one vicious swipe Maddy sent the entire collection of cosmetics crashing to the floor. She glanced at the wreckage and thought how like her own life it was.

Taking a moment to compose herself, she reached into the bottom drawer, took out a box of her own make-up, and dabbed a shower of cream-powder over her cheekbones. She then tidied her crumpled dress, and fluffed her thick, dark hair. 'You don't need him.' She spoke to her reflection in the mirror. 'But you can't let him get away with it so easily. Don't let him think he's broken you.'

Striding from the dressing-room, she made her way to the top of the stairs; from here she could view both the stage and the bar area.

She saw him straightaway. Leaning against the bottom of the stage, he was looking up at the singer. Long-limbed and youthful, her slim figure draped in darkest silk, she made a striking image.

From below, his eyes ogling her every move, Steve Drayton was like a dog drooling over a juicy steak. With every wink and 'come-on' gesture, he was not ashamed to let her know he wanted her ... in the same way he had once wanted Maddy.

When all of a sudden he straightened up and turned towards the stairs, Maddy fled to the safety of the alcove, where she remained until he walked by, blissfully unaware of her presence.

She knew exactly what he had in mind, because of the countless times he used to give her the 'come-on' from the foot of that very stage – and hadn't she always answered his call by making straight for his office after finishing her set? The minute she was in the door he would draw the blinds and they would make love.

She recalled these times with a surge of pleasure, because she had believed in him, believed every lie he uttered. But now, after learning the truth, these times would be shut out of her mind forever. They meant nothing to her now, just as they had meant nothing to him then.

As she made her way to his office, the rage she had felt dissipated, meeting under a rush of fear. What would he do when he saw her? How would he try and explain himself away? Or would he throw her out as before ... treating her with the contempt she now knew he felt for her?

As she approached the office door, her fears deepened and for a moment she hesitated. She could see him closing the blinds in anticipation of his new woman's arrival. She heard the telephone and watched as he answered it, and all the time he remained unaware that she was just outside.

He seemed agitated by the conversation. Pacing up and down beside the desk, he was threatening the person at the other end of the line. 'You heard what I said, and let that be an end to it. Now, I suggest you make other arrangements. In fact, from where I'm standing, you don't have any alternative!' With that he slammed the phone back into its cradle, at the same time thumping his other fist against the desk. 'Bastards! If they think they can get the better of me, they'd best think again!'

It was then she made her move. As she flung the door wide open, he glanced up, astonished to see her there. 'What the devil do *you* want?' Crudely staring her up and down, he laughed out loud. 'All glammed up and nowhere to go, eh?'

Closing the door behind her, she boldly approached him, determination etched in the set of her features. 'I want to know why you took on another singer.'

'Because I'm done with you, isn't that reason enough?' His spite was cutting. 'I needed a new face, a younger woman who would know better than to come crying to me, after she's been knocked up by some other bloke who's cleared off and left her in the lurch.'

'I was never with any other bloke, and you know it.' It was time to speak her mind and to hell with it. 'It's *your* child, Steve. The reason you won't admit to it, is because it might hamper your precious lifestyle with a woman and child in tow.'

'You've said enough. Now get out!' Taking a step towards her, he gestured to the door. 'You're a dirty little tart, and everyone will know it soon enough. And even if this ... *thing* ...' repulsed, he prodded her in the stomach, 'even if it is mine, which it most definitely is not, you and I both know I would never admit to it.'

'Tell me why not.' Hurt and angry, she stood up to him. 'I need an explanation. You owe me that much.'

'I don't owe you anything! The hard truth is, you've had your fun and now it's over. It wouldn't bother me if I never clapped eyes on you again. What would I want with you anyway? Like I said – you've had your day. It's time to move over for someone more talented.'

Maddy understood his thinking. By 'talented', he meant young and pliable.

She stood her ground. 'You can try every which way you like to get out of it, but in the end I promise, you'll be made to face the consequences. You know as well as I do, I never loved anyone but you. And now, you want rid of me. All right, that's your choice.'

Looking him straight in the eye, she calmly warned him, 'I also have a choice, so understand this: whatever happens between the two of us, I will not let our child grow up without knowing who their father is.'

The smile slid from his face. 'Are you threatening me?'

Unflinching beneath his hostile gaze, she promised, 'I'll do whatever it takes, to give our child a name. I'll make sure it's common knowledge that you're the father, and that through no fault of ours, you've washed your hands of us.'

She smiled at the look of disbelief on his face. 'You wouldn't like that, would you, eh? The great Steve Drayton – no one ever got one over on him, did they? But I give you my word, I'll fight tooth and nail, until you're made to admit that you're our baby's father. I'll make you take your responsibilities seriously, you see if I don't!'

No sooner had she finished issuing the warning than she felt the full force of his fist, and when her lip split open and the blood spattered over his hands, he was like a madman.

'Bitch!' Ripping at her new dress, he tore it from neck to waist, leaving her desperately clutching the remnants with both hands. 'I've seen off more threats and danger than you could ever imagine. So don't make the mistake of thinking you'll come out on top, lady, because you won't.'

Holding her trapped with one hand, he fished into her evening bag, drew out the keys to the flat and thrust them into his pocket. 'You won't be needing these again.'

When she struggled to get away, he held her there. 'I swear to God, if you show your face here again, or try to get in touch with me, I'll have you done away with. Make no mistake, I will do it!' Taking her by the arm, he dragged her through the door and down the back stairway; halfway down, with one great heave, he sent her careering down the remaining steps.

Then, coming down the steps two at a time, he went after

her, grabbed her by the neck and threw her out onto the back alley, tossing her handbag after her. Wiping his hands together as though ridding himself of something dirty, he warned her, 'If you bother me again, I won't hesitate to have you and the kid set in concrete. Do you hear what I'm saying?' When she didn't answer, he raised his foot and kicked her in the groin. 'DID YOU HEAR WHAT I SAID!'

With her lip swelling, and her body bruised and battered, she could only nod, which thankfully was enough to appease him.

And then he was gone; only at the top of the stairs did he momentarily turn, to look down on the fallen woman with contempt.

Through tears of shame, Maddy watched him go, and for a moment she felt nothing, no hatred or desire for revenge; all the love she once felt for him was as though it had never been.



After a while, she levered herself up and felt her way along the wall, managing to stumble a short distance. Just when she was beginning to believe she might make it to safety, the wall caved into a doorway; she fell inside, and for a moment she feared as though she might never be able to get up. Faintly, she could hear the sound of a Latin beat coming through the wall, as the club carried on with its usual Saturday-night party mood. But for Madeleine Delaney, the party was well and truly over.

When she made an effort to stand, her legs crumpled beneath her. 'Alice!' Twice she sobbed out her friend's name, before her senses began to fade.

Yet somewhere in the dark recesses of her mind, she drew strength from the knowledge that Alice was never far away.

CHAPTER SIX

THOUGH IT WAS only minutes, it seemed an age before she opened her eyes. She must have passed out, she thought. The cold was numbing; and even when she drew the fragments of her dress about her, she could not stop trembling.

With determination, she took stock of the damage Steve had done to her. She had taken a hard beating, yet she was relieved to find she could move her arms and legs, and thankfully, she still had her wits about her.

She slid the tips of her fingers over her face; it was bruised, and the cuts from yesterday had reopened, but as far as she could tell, nothing was broken.

Her fears were for the child inside her. Was it harmed in any way? Had he hurt the baby when he had kicked her in the groin? How could she tell? She needed help ... she *had* to get away from here.

Thankfully, her legs took the weight when she uprighted herself. It was then that she heard a flurry of girlish giggling, and a voice asking, 'Why are we out here? It's so much cosier in your office, Stevie.'

Steve Drayton's low, thick voice was unmistakable. 'Too many interruptions,' he said huskily, 'but you needn't worry about the cold.' There was a sexy chuckle. 'I'll keep you warm enough, I can promise you that.'

There was a moment of silence, then another burst of giggling and the man's voice urging her to, 'Keep quiet, eh? We don't want them coming out to see what's going on, do we?'

'Was it true, what you said earlier?'

'You'd best remind me.' His voice was soft and persuasive, and then there was the wet, smacking sound of a long kiss. 'What was it I said?'

'That you'd never seen anyone as beautiful as me, and that you would always look after me – even when I'm older and not so pretty.'

'Hmh!' His laughter echoed through the alley. 'You really are a little worrier, aren't you? Well, you can stop worrying, because I meant every word.' Steve Drayton had enough experience to know that a little flattery and a few cleverly placed lies would melt any young fool like her.

'And what about ...' the girl hesitated, 'the singer before me – the one they called Songbird.' She paused again. 'Did you say all these things to *her*?'

'*Never!*' Maddy heard him light a cigarette, the soft glow from the lighter flickering through the darkness. 'Why would I say those things to her? She meant nothing to me.'

'I was told she was a wonderful singer.'

'Were you now?'

'Was she? A good singer, I mean?'

'She may have had a passable voice, but she could never hold a candle to you. Besides, she was a slut – a cheap tramp who would go with anybody.' Disgust trembled in his voice.

'I've made you angry now, haven't I?'

He laughed – an angry sound, and then his voice thickened as he said, 'You'd best make it up to me then, hadn't you?' Tossing his cigarette butt to the cobbles, he ground it out with the toe of his shoe.

A long silence followed, during which Maddy eventually managed to manoeuvre herself into a position from where she could see them. And what she saw only deepened her shame, because hadn't she been equally besotted with this vicious man, who had turned his back on her when she needed him most? She thanked her lucky stars that at long last, she could see the badness in him.

Out there, in the darker shadows of the alleyway, Steve Drayton had the girl pressed against the wall, his trousers round his ankles as he pushed into her. The girl was wrapped round him, her skirt above her waist and her shrill voice emitting little gasps of pleasure.

Maddy wanted to look away, yet somehow, finally seeing him for what he was, the sight of his fornicating had a mesmerising effect on her. She needed to keep the moment, so never again would she be deceived by him, or any other man. She stood, hurt and bleeding, agonising with herself as to whether she ought to tell the girl what she was letting herself in for, or whether to stay quiet, out of sight, and make a hasty retreat once they were gone.

In that moment, after a final surge, Drayton thrust the girl from him. 'Get back inside before they miss you.' He hastily pulled up his trousers. 'If they ask where you've been, tell them you had to get out for a breath of air.'

'I'd rather stay out here with you.' Hopelessly infatuated, she clung to him. 'I've never loved anyone like I love you.'

Impatient, though clever enough to keep her sweet, he replied teasingly, 'You don't know me enough to love me.'

While they dressed, they talked, she offering herself again and he trying to worm himself out of a difficult situation; though mindful of the fact that if he intended using her, he'd have to play it smart.

Maddy was sickened at how easily he manipulated the girl, and was torn two ways. She wanted to warn the girl as to the monster Steve Drayton really was. On the other hand, if she took another beating, it could well be her baby who paid the price this time.

So, she waited for her chance to escape, hoping that even now, the girl might see the wrong side of him; though from the way she continued to throw herself at him, it did not seem likely.



While Steve Drayton had been satisfying his lust outside in the alley, something more sinister was unfurling inside the club.

The four men were eager to find him. Having barged in through the front door, ignoring the ticket desk and cloakroom counter, they made straight for the bar, where Raymond was dumping a crate of bottles. 'You! Drayton – where is he?' Smartly dressed in an expensive dark suit and overcoat, the leader had an air of authority.

Raymond placed the crate on the bar and glanced around, searching for someone else who might deal with the situation. However, the older barman was pulling a pint at the far end of the bar, and there was no sign of Jack.

'Look, sunshine,' prodding his finger into Raymond's chest, the man leaned forward. 'You deaf or what? I'll ask you again. *Where can I find that thieving bastard Drayton?*' He had the look and manner of a man who always got what he wanted.

'I've n-no idea where he is,' Raymond answered nervously. 'M-matter of fact, I don't think he's been about this p-past hour or m-more.'

'Think again.' This time, the man took Raymond by the throat and drew him close until their faces were almost touching. Raymond was more than capable of teaching this nasty piece of work a lesson, but he doubted he could take on the other three as well. Fearing he might be blamed if the club was trashed, Raymond thought twice.

'Give me a minute,' he said gruffly. 'I'll find out where he is. What name is it, please?'

With one of the men keeping a wary eye on him, he repeated the gang boss's name, to make sure he'd got it correctly. 'Den Carter. Right you are, mister.' And he went away to the office, to find Steve.

Unaware of what was happening upstairs, Jack was down in the cellar, changing barrels.

He was surprised and pleased to see Alice. 'Raymond said you were looking for me earlier,' she told him.

'That's right.' Straightening from his task, he conveyed his concern over Maddy. 'What's been going on?'

'What do you mean?'

'Aw, come on, Alice. Don't shut me out. If Maddy's in trouble, I need to know.'

'What makes you think she's in trouble?' Her calm expression gave nothing away.

Jack was incredulous. 'You mean you don't know?'

Alice tried to put his mind at rest. 'If you're talking about what happened last night, there was no real harm done.'

‘How can you be so sure? Raymond found broken glass, and things scattered everywhere ... there was blood on the walls and over the floor.’ Coming to stand before her, he pleaded, ‘For God’s sake, Alice, what went down? Was it Maddy – did they have a row?’ His face darkened with rage. ‘If that twisted bastard has hurt her, I swear I’ll cut his hands off.’ Jack had been bullied by his stepfather as a child, and could not tolerate it. ‘Where is she now? I need to know she’s safe.’ Jack was beside himself. ‘Does she know he’s taken on a new singer?’

Alice gave him as straight an answer as she could, without betraying Maddy’s secret about the child. ‘You’re not to worry. Yes, they had a set-to, but Maddy is fine. I took her home with me, and as far as I know, she has no idea he has taken on a new singer. Even *I* didn’t know, until I saw her up there on the stage tonight. Look, Jack, with any luck it’ll make Maddy finally see the light where Drayton is concerned.’

‘What about the blood?’

Alice chose not to answer this, merely repeating, ‘I can assure you, Maddy is fine. She’s keeping her distance for a while – trying to teach him that he can’t just take her for granted.’ She had seen how her words were calming him. ‘Look, Jack, she intends coming in tomorrow. You can talk to her then.’

‘I’d rather come round to your place tomorrow morning before work and see her there, if that’s all right with you?’

‘Yes, I don’t see why not. You’ll be very welcome.’

‘I’ll tell her about this new girl, if you like. She’s bound to be upset,’ Jack said protectively.

Alice nodded; she too had concerns as to how Maddy might react to the news of another singer taking her place. It was a cruel thing to do.

But then Steve Drayton had always been a law unto himself.



In the alley, the girl was proving difficult to appease.

‘Move yourself, Ellen.’ Taking her by the arm, Steve Drayton drew her towards the back door. ‘They’ll be wondering where you’ve gone. Besides, I’m paying you good money to entertain the clients.’ She giggled. ‘I’d rather entertain you.’

He sighed, bored. ‘And you shall. But there’ll be time for all that later, when I get you home.’

An idea struck him as being profitable. He had seen the way his clients had drooled over his new singer. She was pliable enough; she was also besotted with him, so if he played his hand right, there was money to be made. No doubt his rough and ready counterparts would give a handsome sum for a few hours’ playtime with her.

The idea grew. I can’t see her refusing, the insatiable little slapper, he thought greedily, especially when she’s so keen to please me. Oh, yes! Putty in his hands, that’s what she was.

Her voice startled him. ‘Tell me you love me, Stevie, and I’ll go back inside.’

Irritated, he studied her for a minute, wanting to give her a slap and shut the bitch up, but controlling himself with an effort. He’d had as much woman trouble as he could take. ‘Of course I love you,’ he lied. ‘Why do you think I brought you out here?’

Her resolve melting, she looked up at him. ‘You’re not just making a fool of me ... playing me along to get your own way?’

‘I would never do that!’ He cupped her small features and kissed her soundly on the mouth. When he released her, the smile on her face told him she was his for the taking.

‘So, we’re a couple then?’ She wanted so much to believe that.

‘Oh, absolutely.’ He had her right where he wanted her. ‘But we have to be discreet.’

‘Why’s that?’

While he fought to find an answer that would satisfy her without compromising himself, Maddy realised the girl was falling into his cleverly woven trap. She had seen how easily he had twisted her

words. Moreover, she could almost read his mind with his ideas of how he might eventually make money from this innocent.

With that in mind, she knew that even if it meant getting another beating, she could not keep quiet.

Taking a few deep breaths, she gathered her strength and began walking towards them, slowly at first, but then with purpose.

When Drayton glanced up and saw her, his face opened in astonishment. Pushing the girl aside, he turned, legs astride in that antagonistic stance she had come to know so well. 'What the devil are you playing at? I thought I told you to sod off.' His mean eyes boring into hers, he took a step forward. 'Get the hell out of here before I lose my temper!'

'That's *her*, isn't it – Songbird – the singer whose job I took?' The girl's cry pierced the tension. Curiosity turned to anger. 'You said she'd left for foreign parts! You told me she would never come back – that she didn't want the work. So, what's going on? Look at the state of her – she needs an ambulance! Jesus, Steve, what have I got myself into here?'

'Shut your trap!' Turning on her, he issued a warning. 'Do what you're paid to do – get back inside and entertain the clients. *I'll* deal with this.'

Unsettled, the girl looked from Steve to Maddy and back again. 'So, you and me, Steve – *are* we a couple, or not?'

The sight of Maddy had been a shock. Why was she here, and why was her dress torn like that? She looked like a tramp off the streets. Was she ill, or drunk maybe?

Either way, there was something going on here that made her deeply uneasy.

Maddy turned her gaze on the girl and for a moment their eyes met. Recognising herself when she was younger and more foolish, Maddy offered her a warning. 'Don't trust him,' she urged quietly. 'He's a liar and a thug. He'll hurt you, just like he hurt me.' She patted her stomach. 'I'm carrying his child, but that didn't stop him from beating me. Listen to what I'm saying – I've no reason to lie. He'll promise you the world, but he'll use you in every way imaginable. If you have any self-worth at all, you must get away from him – *now*. While you still can.'

Suddenly, he was on her. With the back of his hand he lashed out, knocking Maddy hard against the wall.

What he didn't expect was the girl's reaction. 'LEAVE HER BE!' she shouted, and clawed at his face. Steve was like a wild animal. Spinning round, he took Ellen by the shoulders and threw her towards Maddy.

With murder in his heart, he hissed, 'You're welcome to each other,' and took a step towards them; but then was made to stop when a man's voice called out to him.

'You can deal with your women later, Drayton. For now, you and I have more important business to attend to.'

Swinging round, Drayton found himself confronted by four thugs. The big one, Den Carter, addressed himself to Ellen. 'Get away from here, slag. And keep your trap shut if you know what's good for you!'

Recognising her former boss, the girl didn't need another warning. With Maddy leaning on her, she led her away. 'I worked for him before,' she whispered as they stumbled down the alley. 'He's a bad lot. He'll make that scum Steve pay for enticing me away.'

At the top of the alley, they paused, long enough to see two of the minders pounce on Drayton and twist his arms up behind his back. Then as the big man approached, Drayton began blustering and threatening all manner of retribution. Suddenly, he broke free.

There was a lot of shouting and scuffling, followed by the unmistakable sound of gunshot; the big man stumbled backwards while the others fought with Drayton to secure the gun.

Seconds later, the club doors were thrown open and the alley was alive with people; some keeping a sensible distance and others too curious to stand off. 'He's got a gun!' Trying

to herd them away, Raymond yelled a warning. 'Keep back, all of you!' But it was like trying to hold back a burst dam, as with morbid curiosity and a lot of drink inside some of them, the people surged forward to get a better look at the drama that was taking place.

Jack was up at the front, with Alice not far behind, though he urged her to keep her distance. 'I don't want you getting hurt,' he said. Concerned for her safety and increasingly worried that Maddy might somehow be caught up in this too, Jack was taking no chances.

The whole terrible event seemed to happen in slow motion, and yet it was over in seconds. Mortally wounded, the big man was lying groaning on the ground, with Steve Drayton locked in fierce combat with his henchmen. When Alice and Jack came running forwards, Drayton was like a madman as he struggled to free himself. In the mayhem, two more shots rang out. Jack was the first to go down. Then Alice.

With no thought for his own life, Raymond ran to Jack, who appeared lifeless. Desolate, he turned his attention on Alice, taking her in his arms and comforting her as best he could until the older barman, Ted, tried to drag him away. 'You can't help her now, mate,' he said kindly, and glanced down at Alice; bathed in her own blood and lying so still, she seemed beyond earthly help.

At first Raymond resisted Ted's attempts to take him from her. But then, in tears and deeply saddened, he let himself be led away.

From the first day he had spoken with Alice, something had taken hold of his lonely heart. He had loved her from afar, waiting for his chance, hoping that one day she might see him

in the same light. And now, because of a man who did not deserve to wipe her shoes, his dream of taking care of Alice, and hoping she might come to love him, were ended.

At that moment, all hell was let loose as the shrill scream of sirens heralded the arrival of speeding police cars. People were running all over the place – it was chaos. And Steve still had the gun.

From a doorway at the top of the alley, the two women had seen it all. 'My God!' Shocked to the core, Maddy could think only of Jack and Alice. 'They've been shot! I've got to go to them!'

Holding onto her, the girl kept her safe. 'There's nothing you can do now. Come away, there's bad stuff going down. The police are everywhere. We'll be interrogated. They won't give us a minute's peace.' Desperate to put a distance between themselves and the authorities, she kept a tight hold on her new friend. 'We need to get away before they see us. If we go now, they'll never know we were here!'

But Maddy wasn't listening to reason. All she could think of was her injured friends. 'Let me go!' Frantic, she tore herself away. 'I need to go to them.' And no matter how hard she tried, the girl could no longer restrain her.

As Maddy rushed down the alley, total confusion was unfolding all about her. Police were everywhere; some grappling with the thugs, others handcuffing Drayton, and people were being ordered to get inside, where they should remain for questioning.

The first ambulance drove in and attendants tumbled out, armed with all manner of equipment. Maddy saw how one of them went straight to the big man, now lying silent in a pool of blood, looking up and shaking her head to indicate there was nothing to be done for him. And then they moved on to Jack, who was crumpled against the far wall.

Maddy got to Alice first. 'Alice ... it's me, Maddy.' Tenderly holding her hand, she looked down on that dear, still face and her heart broke. 'You'll be all right,' she promised brokenly. 'They're here to help you.'

Turning, she shouted over the chaos, 'OVER HERE – please hurry!' But her cries fell away in the wake of all the confusion. Through the hordes of people being herded back to the club, she could see ambulancemen tending to Jack, and others bringing out more equipment and stretchers.

Terrified that assistance might come too late, Maddy sobbed, 'Alice, please don't leave me,' devastated when it seemed that the injured woman was beyond hearing her. 'We need you,' she pleaded. 'Me and the baby.' Giving the limp hand a little shake, she said, 'Alice, wake up. *Please!* You can't leave us now. What will we do without you?'

When Alice grabbed her hand in reply, Maddy thought her heart would stop. For a moment she couldn't speak. Then she quietly thanked the Almighty for sparing her friend, and carried on gently patting her hand, like a mother soothes her child; and now she was telling her softly, 'You'll be alright ... you'll see. Help is on its way... you'll be alright my darling.' Turning her head she gave another frantic shout, 'OVER HERE ... SHE'S HURT ... HURRY ... PLEASE HURRY!!'

'Go from here.' Alice's voice was almost inaudible, gasping. 'No more contact with *him* ...' Slipping fast away, she could hardly make herself heard. '*Promise me.*' When she now took a breath, it was a rasping, frightening thing for Maddy to hear.

'Be still,' the younger woman pleaded. 'Be still, be still.'

But Alice would not be still. With a huge surge of strength, she had slightly raised her head and was looking the girl straight in the eye.

'*Promise,*' she said, then fell back again.

Desperate, Maddy shouted again, this time her voice charged with anger. 'Hurry! For God's sake, hurry!'

In that moment, one of the ambulancemen looked up from treating Jack and spoke to his colleague before making his way over to them.

With Alice's flickering gaze trained on her, Maddy gave her her word. 'I promise,' she whispered, holding her close. 'I'll never come back ... I swear it. Just hold on, please, Alice. Help is on its way. Don't die, please don't leave me all on my own. I can't bear it.'

As the medics took over, Maddy clambered up on shaky legs, and looked *straight into the face of the devil himself*.

Two policemen had arrested Drayton. Handcuffed, he was being marched towards the waiting squad car. Before they managed to get him inside, however, he turned and spat a message at Maddy, the words of which would haunt her for the rest of her days. '*Your card is marked, you bitch. Keep looking*

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