

The Girl on the Cliff

ALSO BY LUCINDA RILEY

The Orchid House

The
GIRL
on the
CLIFF

A Novel



LUCINDA RILEY

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For Stephen

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back
ceaselessly into the past.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

Aurora

I am I.

And I will tell you a story.

The words above are the most difficult for any writer, so I'm told.

Put another way: how one begins. I have plagiarized my younger brother's first attempt at storytelling. His opening line has always stuck with me for its simplicity.

So, I have begun.

I must warn you that I'm not a professional at this. In fact, I can't remember when I last put pen to paper. I've always spoken with my body, you see. As I can no longer do that, I've decided to talk with my mind.

I'm not writing this with any intention of presenting it for publication. I'm afraid it's more selfish than that. I am at the stage of my life everyone dreads—that of filling my days with the past, because there is little future left.

It is something to do.

And I think that my story—the story of me and my family, which began almost a hundred years before I was born—is an interesting one.

I know everyone thinks that about their story too. And it's true. Every human being has a fascinating existence, with a big cast of good and evil characters in each.

And almost always, somewhere along the way, magic.

I am named after a princess in a famous fairy tale. Perhaps that's the reason I've always believed in magic. And as I've grown older, I've realized that a fairy tale is an allegory for the great dance of life we all undertake from the moment we are born.

And there is no escape until the day we die.

So, Dear Reader—I can speak to you as such because I must presume that my story has found an audience if you are one—let me tell you mine.

Since many of the characters died long before I was born, I will do my best to use my imagination to bring them back to life.

And as I sit here mulling over the story I will tell you, which was handed down to me by two generations, there is one overriding theme. It is, of course, love, and the choices we all make because of it.

Many of you will immediately think I refer to love between a man and a woman, and yes, there is plenty of that. But there are other precious forms which are equally powerful; that of a parent's love for a child, for example. There is also the obsessive, destructive kind, which wreaks havoc.

The other theme in this story is the vast amount of tea people seem to drink—but I digress. Forgive me, it is what people who feel old do. So I shall get on with it.

I will guide you through and interrupt when I feel it is necessary to explain something in further detail, for the story is complex.

I think I will begin, to complicate things further, somewhere toward the end of my tale, when I was a motherless child of eight years old. On a clifftop overlooking Dunworley Bay, my favorite place in the world.

Once upon a time . . .

I

Dunworley Bay, West Cork, Ireland

The small figure was standing perilously close to the edge of the cliff. Her luxuriant, long red hair had been caught by the strong breeze and was flying out behind her. A thin white cotton dress reached to her ankles and exposed her small, bare feet. Her arms were held taut, palms facing out toward the foaming mass of gray sea beneath her, her pale face looking upward, as if she were offering herself as a sacrifice to the elements.

Grania Ryan stood watching her, hypnotized by the wraithlike vision. Her senses were too jumbled to tell her whether what she was seeing before her was real or imagined. She closed her eyes for a split second, then reopened them, and saw that the figure was still there. With the appropriate messages sent to her brain, she took a couple of tentative steps forward.

As she drew nearer, Grania realized the figure was no more than a child; that the white cotton she was wearing was a nightdress. Grania could see the black storm clouds hovering out over the sea and the first saltwater droplets of impending rain stung her cheeks. The frailty of the small human against the wildness of her surroundings made her steps toward the child more urgent in pace.

The wind was whipping around her ears now and had started to voice its rage. Grania stopped ten yards from the girl, who was still unmoving. She saw the tiny blue toes holding her stoically to the rock, as the rising wind whipped and swayed her thin body like a willow sapling. She moved closer to the girl, stopping just behind her, uncertain of what to do next. Grania's instinct was to run forward and grab her, but if the girl was startled and turned around, one missed footfall

could result in unthinkable tragedy, taking the child to certain death on the foam-covered rocks a hundred feet below.

Grania stood, panic gripping her as she desperately tried to think of the best way to remove her from danger. But before she could reach a decision, the girl slowly turned around and stared at her with unseeing eyes.

Instinctively Grania held out her arms. "I won't hurt you, I promise. Walk toward me and you'll be safe."

Still the girl stared at her, not moving from her spot on the edge of the cliff.

"I can take you home if you tell me where you live. You'll catch your death out here. Please, let me help you," Grania begged.

She took another step toward the child, and then, as if the girl had woken up from a dream, a look of fear crossed her face. Instantly, she turned to her right and began to run away from Grania along the cliff's edge, disappearing from view.

"I was just about to be sending out the search party for you. That storm's blowing up well and good, so it is."

"Mam, I'm thirty-one years old, and I've lived in Manhattan for the past ten of those," replied Grania drily as she entered the kitchen and hung her wet jacket over the AGA stove. "You don't have to mind me. I'm a big girl now, remember?" She smiled as she walked toward her mother, who was setting the table for supper, and kissed her on the cheek. "*Really.*"

"That's as may be, but I've known stronger men by far blown off the cliff in a gale like this." Kathleen Ryan indicated the wildness of the wind outside the kitchen window, which was causing the flowerless wisteria bush to tap its twiggy brown deadness monotonously against the pane. "I've just made a brew." Kathleen wiped her hands on her apron and walked toward the AGA. "Would you be wanting a cup?"

"That would be grand, Mam. Why don't you sit down and take the weight off your feet for a few minutes, and I'll pour it for both of us?" Grania steered her mother to a kitchen chair, pulled it back from the table and sat her gently onto it.

“Only five minutes, mind, the boys will be back at six for their tea.”

As Grania poured the strong liquid into two cups, she raised a silent eyebrow at her mother’s domestic dedication to her husband and her son. Not that anything had changed in the past ten years since she’d been away—Kathleen had always pandered to her men, putting their needs and desires first. But the contrast of her mother’s life to her own, where emancipation and equality of the sexes was standard, made Grania feel uncomfortable.

And yet . . . for all her own freedom from what many modern women would consider outdated male tyranny, who was currently the most content out of mother and daughter? Grania sighed sadly as she added milk to her mother’s tea. She knew the answer to that.

“There you go, Mam. Would you like a biscuit?” Grania put the tin in front of Kathleen and opened it. As usual, it was full to the brim with custard creams, bourbons and shortbread rounds. Another relic of childhood, and one that would be looked on with the same horror as a small nuclear device by her figure-conscious New York contemporaries.

Kathleen took two and said, “Go on, have one yourself to keep me company. To be sure, you don’t eat enough to keep a mouse alive.”

Grania nibbled dutifully at a biscuit, thinking how, ever since she’d arrived home ten days ago, she’d felt stuffed to bursting with her mother’s copious home cooking. Yet Grania would say that she had the healthiest appetite out of most of the women she knew in New York. *And* she actually used her oven as it was designed for, not as a convenient place to store plates.

“The walk cleared your head a little, did it?” ventured Kathleen, making her way through her third biscuit. “Whenever I have a problem in my mind to be sorted, I’ll be off walking and come back knowing the answer.”

“Actually . . .” Grania took a sip of tea. “I saw something strange, Mam, when I was out. A little girl, maybe eight or nine, standing in her nightie right up on the cliff’s edge. She had beautiful long, curly red hair . . . it was as if she was sleepwalking, because she turned to look at me when I walked toward her and her eyes were”—she searched for the right description—“blank. Like she wasn’t seeing me. Then she

seemed to wake up and scampered off like a startled rabbit up the cliff path. Do you know who she might have been?”

Grania watched the color drain from Kathleen’s face. “Are you OK, Mam?”

Kathleen visibly shook herself. She stared at her daughter. “You say you saw her just a few minutes ago on your walk?”

“Yes.”

“Mary, Mother of God.” Kathleen crossed herself. “They’re back.”

“Who’s ‘back,’ Mam?” asked Grania, concerned by how shaken her mother seemed to be.

“Why have they returned?” Kathleen stared off through the window and into the night. “Why would they be wanting to? I thought . . . I thought it was finally over, that they’d be gone for good.” Kathleen grabbed Grania’s hand. “Are you sure it was a little girl you saw, not a grown woman?”

“Positive, Mam. As I said, she was aged about eight or nine. I was concerned for her; she had nothing on her feet and looked frozen. To be honest, I wondered whether I was seeing a ghost.”

“You were of a fashion, Grania,” Kathleen muttered. “They can only have arrived back in the past few days. I was coming over the hill last Friday and I passed right by the house. It was gone ten in the evening and there were no lights shining from the windows. The old place was shut up.”

“Where would this be?”

“Dunworley House.”

“The big deserted one that stands right on the top of the cliff up past us?” asked Grania. “That’s been empty for years, hasn’t it?”

“It was empty for your childhood, yes, but”—Kathleen sighed—“they came back after you’d moved to New York. And then, when the . . . accident happened, left. Nobody thought we’d be seeing them around these parts again. And we were glad of it,” she underlined. “There’s a history there, between them and us, stretching back a long way. Now”—Kathleen slapped the table and made to stand up—“What’s past is past, and I’d advise you to stay away from them. They bring nothing but trouble to this family, so they do.”

Grania watched her mother as she walked over to the AGA, her face set hard as she lifted the heavy iron pot containing the evening

meal out of one of the ovens. “Surely if that child I saw has a mother, she would want to know about the danger her daughter was in today?” she probed.

“She has no mother.” Kathleen’s wooden spoon stirred the stew rhythmically.

“She’s dead?”

“Yes.”

“I see . . . so who looks after the poor child?”

“Don’t be asking me about their domestic arrangements.” Kathleen shrugged. “I couldn’t care and I don’t want to know.”

Grania frowned. Her mother’s attitude was totally contrary to the way she would normally respond. Kathleen’s big, maternal heart beat hard and loud for any poor thing in trouble. She was the first round to a member of the family, or friends, if there was a problem and support was needed. Especially when it came to children.

“How did her mother die?”

The wooden spoon ceased its circling of the pot and there was silence. Finally, Kathleen gave a heavy sigh and turned to face her daughter. “Well now, I suppose if I’m not telling you, you’ll hear it soon enough from someone else. She took her own life, did Lily Lisle.”

“You’re saying she committed suicide?”

“It’s one and the same thing, Grania.”

“How long ago?”

“She threw herself off the cliff four years ago. Her body was found two days later, washed up on Inchydoney beach.”

It was Grania’s turn to stay silent. Finally, she ventured, “Where did she jump from?”

“From the sound of things, probably where you set eyes on her daughter today. I’d say Aurora was looking for her mammy.”

“You know her name?”

“Of course. ’Tis hardly a secret. The Lisle family used to own the whole of Dunworley, including this very house. They were the lords and masters round here a long time ago. They sold off their land in the sixties, but kept the house up on the cliff.”

“I’ve seen the name somewhere—*Lisle* . . .”

“The local churchyard is filled with their graves. Including hers.”

“And you’ve seen the little girl—Aurora—out on the cliffs before?”

“That’s why her daddy took her away. After *she* died, that little mite would walk along the cliffs calling for her. Half mad with grief she was.”

Grania could see her mother’s face had softened slightly. “Poor little thing,” she breathed.

“Yes, it was a pitiful sight and she didn’t deserve any of it, but there’s a badness that runs through that family. You listen to what I say, Grania, and don’t be getting yourself mixed up with them.”

“I wonder why they’re back?” Grania murmured, almost to herself.

“Those Lisles are a law unto themselves. I don’t know and I don’t care. Now, will you be making yourself useful and helping me set the table for tea?”

Grania went upstairs to her bedroom at just past ten o’clock, as she’d done every night since she’d arrived home. Downstairs, her mother was busy in the kitchen laying out the table for breakfast, her father was dozing in the chair in front of the TV and her brother, Shane, was at the village pub. Between the two men, they ran the 500-acre farm, the land mostly given over to dairy herd and sheep. At twenty-nine, the “boy,” as Shane was still affectionately called, seemed to have no intention of moving into his own home. Women came and went, but rarely across the threshold of his parents’ farmhouse. Kathleen raised her eyebrows over her son’s still-unmarried status, but Grania knew her mother would be lost without him.

She climbed between the sheets, listening to the rain battering the windowpanes, and hoped poor Aurora Lisle was tucked up inside, safe and warm. She turned the pages of a book, but found herself yawning and unable to concentrate. Perhaps it was the fresh air here that was making her sleepy; in New York she was rarely in bed before midnight.

In contrast, Grania could scarcely remember a night as a child when her mother had not been at home in the evenings. And if she had to go away overnight on a mission of mercy to care for a sick relative, the preparation to make sure the family did not go hungry or the clothes unwashed was a military operation. As for her father, Grania doubted he had *ever* spent a night away from his bed in the past thirty-four years of his marriage. He was up at five thirty every morning of his life and

off to the milking shed, coming home from the farm whenever dusk fell. Husband and wife knew exactly where the other was at all times. Their lives were as one; joint and inseparable.

And the glue that bound them together was their children.

When she and Matt had moved in together eight years ago, they'd taken it for granted that one day there would be babies. Like any modern couple, until that suitable moment presented itself, they had taken their lives and careers by the throat and lived fast and hard while they could.

And then, one morning, Grania had woken up and, as she did every morning, had thrown on her track pants and hoodie and jogged along the Hudson to Battery Park, stopping at the Winter Garden Atrium to enjoy a latte and bagel. And it was there that it had happened; she'd been sipping her coffee and had glanced down into the pram parked by the next table. Inside was a tiny newborn baby, fast asleep. Grania was beset by a sudden, overwhelming urge to pick the baby up out of its pram, to cradle its soft, downy head protectively against her breast. When the mother had smiled nervously at her, then stood up and pushed the pram away from her unwanted attention, Grania had jogged back home, feeling breathless at the emotion that had been stirred in her.

Expecting it to pass, she'd spent the day in her studio, immersing herself in molding the malleable brown clay into her latest commission, but the feeling hadn't alleviated.

At six, she'd left her studio, showered and changed into something suitable for the opening of an art gallery she was attending that evening. She'd poured herself a glass of wine and walked to the window that looked across to the twinkling lights of New Jersey on the other side of the Hudson River.

"I want to have a baby."

Grania had taken a hefty gulp of wine. And giggled at the absurdity of the words she'd just spoken. So she'd said them again, just to make sure.

And they'd still felt right. Not only right, but completely natural, as if the thought and the need had been with her all her life and all the reasons "not to" had simply evaporated and now seemed ridiculous.

Grania had gone out to the gallery opening, made small talk with the usual mix of artists, collectors and envelope-openers that made

up such events. Yet, in her mind, she was running through the practicalities of the life-changing decision she had made earlier. Would they have to move? No, probably not in the short term—their TriBeCa loft was spacious and Matt’s study/spare bedroom could easily be turned into a nursery. He rarely used it anyway, preferring to take his laptop into the sitting room and work there. They were up on the fourth floor, but the freight elevator was quite big enough to take a pram. Battery Park, with its well-equipped playground and fresh river air, was easily walkable. Grania worked from home in her studio, so even if a nanny had to be employed, she’d only be a few seconds away from the baby if she was needed.

Grania had climbed into the big, empty bed later and sighed with irritation that she’d have to keep her plans and her excitement to herself for a while longer. Matt had been away for the past week, and wasn’t due home for another couple of days. It was not the kind of thing one could just announce over the phone. She’d finally fallen asleep in the early hours, imagining Matt’s proud gaze as she handed him his newborn child.

When he’d arrived home, Matt had been just as excited about the idea as she was. They’d made an immediate and very pleasurable start on putting their plan into action, both of them loving the fact they had their own secret joint project, which would bond and cement them, just as it had her own parents. It was the missing piece that would unite them once and for all into a homogenized, codependent unit. In essence, a *family*.

Grania lay in her narrow childhood bed, listening to the wind howling angrily around the solid stone walls of the farmhouse. She reached for a tissue and blew her nose, hard.

That had been a year ago. And the terrible truth was, their “joint project” had not united them. It had destroyed them.

2

When Grania woke up the next morning, the storm of the night before had blown away like a memory, taking the gray clouds with it. The sun was making a rare winter appearance, lighting the rolling landscape beyond her window, giving definition to the endless green of the fields that surrounded the farm, interspersed with the white, woolly dots of the sheep that grazed on it.

Grania knew from experience that this state of affairs was not likely to last long; the West Cork sun was akin to a temperamental diva, gracing the stage for a cameo appearance, bathing all in her glory and then disappearing as quickly as she had arrived.

Having been unable to complete her normal routine of a morning jog because of the incessant rain of the past ten days, Grania jumped out of bed and rifled through her still unpacked suitcase to find her hoodie, leggings and sneakers.

“Well now, you’re up bright and early this morning,” commented her mother as Grania arrived downstairs in the kitchen. “Porridge?”

“I’ll have some when I come back. I’m going for a run.”

“Well, don’t you be tiring yourself out. I’d say the color on you isn’t healthy—no flush in those cheeks of yours.”

“That’s what I hope to achieve, Mam.” Grania suppressed a smile. “I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t be getting a chill now, will you?” Kathleen called to the disappearing back of her daughter. She watched from the kitchen window as Grania ran down the narrow lane cut into the fields by an ancient drystone wall, which led eventually to the road and the path up to the cliffs.

She’d been shocked at the sight of her child when Grania had arrived home; in the three years since Kathleen had last seen her, her beautiful, bonny daughter—always a head-turner, with her peaches and cream complexion, curly blond hair and lively turquoise eyes—

seemed to have diminished in vitality. As she'd commented to her husband, John, Grania currently resembled a bright pink shirt that had been put by mistake in a dark wash. And emerged a dulled, graying relic of its former self.

Kathleen knew the reason. Grania had told her when she'd called from New York to ask if she could come home for a while. She had agreed, of course, delighted at the unexpected opportunity to spend time with her daughter. However, Kathleen could not understand Grania's motive—surely, this was a time when she and her man needed to be together, to support each other in their grief, not have half the world separating them.

And that lovely Matt telephoned every night to speak to her, but Grania stubbornly refused to take his calls. Kathleen had always harbored a soft spot for him; with his clean-cut good looks, soft Connecticut accent and impeccable manners, Matt reminded Kathleen of the movie stars she'd mooned over as a girl. A young Robert Redford—that's what Matt looked like to her. Why Grania hadn't married him years ago was beyond her. And now her daughter, always stubborn, was surely on the verge of losing him altogether.

Kathleen did not know much about the ways of the world, but she understood men and their egos. They were not built as women—did not have the same capacity for rejection—and if there was one thing she was certain of, it was that his phone calls would soon stop coming nightly and Matt would give up.

Unless there was something that Kathleen didn't know . . .

She sighed as she cleared away the breakfast dishes and dumped them in the sink. Grania was her golden girl—the one Ryan of the clan who'd fled the nest and done everything possible to make her family, especially her mother, proud of her. She was the child the relatives wanted to hear about, poring over the cuttings Grania sent from various newspapers detailing her latest exhibition in New York, fascinated by the well-heeled clients who commissioned Grania to immortalize their children's faces or animals in bronze . . .

Making it in America—it was still the ultimate Irish dream.

Kathleen dried the bowls and cutlery and stowed them away in the wooden dresser. Of course, no one had the perfect life, Kathleen knew that. She'd always presumed that the patter of tiny feet was

something Grania had never hankered after, and had accepted it. Did she not have a fine, strong son to give her grandchildren one day? Yet it seemed she'd been wrong. For all Grania's sophisticated lifestyle, living in New York, at what Kathleen saw as the center of the universe, the babies were missing. And until they came along, her daughter would not be happy.

Kathleen could not help thinking Grania had brought it on herself. For all those newfangled drugs, used to help and abet the miracle of nature, there was no substitute for youth. She herself had been nineteen when she'd had Grania. And brimming with the energy to cope with another baby in the space of two years. Grania was thirty-one. And whatever any of these modern career women believed, it was impossible to have everything.

So, although she felt for her daughter's loss, it was her way to accept what she had and not pine after what she didn't. And on that thought, Kathleen climbed up the stairs to make the beds.

Grania sank down on to a damp, moss-covered rock to catch her breath. She was puffing and panting like an OAP; obviously the miscarriage and a recent lack of exercise had taken its toll. Grania put her head between her legs as she caught her breath and kicked at the coarse clods of rough grass beneath them. They stubbornly refused to be dislodged from the strong roots which held them fast beneath the ground. If only the little life inside her had done the same . . .

Four months . . . when she and Matt had finally thought they were fine—everyone knew you'd usually reached a safe place by then. And Grania, paranoid up until that point, had begun to relax and give in to the fantasy of becoming a *mother*.

She and Matt had announced the news to both sets of grandparents; Elaine and Bob, Matt's parents, had taken them out to L'Escale, near their enormous house in the gated community of Belle Haven, Greenwich. Bob had asked bluntly when the two of them would get on with their long-awaited marriage now that Grania was expecting. After all, this was their first grandchild and Bob had made it blatantly clear it must take the family name. Grania had stonewalled—when

pushed into a corner her hackles rose, especially with Matt's father—and she'd replied that she and Matt were yet to discuss it.

A week later, at their TriBeCa apartment, the intercom had announced the arrival of a Bloomingdale's van, delivering the contents of an entire nursery. Grania, too superstitious to have the goods placed inside the loft, had directed them down to the basement, where they would be stored until nearer the time. As she'd watched the assortment of boxes being stacked into a corner, Grania knew Elaine had forgotten nothing.

"Bang goes our trip out to Bloomie's to choose a cot, or which brand of diapers I'd like," Grania had murmured ungratefully to Matt later that evening.

"Mom's only trying to help us, Grania," Matt had answered defensively. "She knows I hardly earn anything and your income is healthy, but sporadic. Just maybe I should consider going into Dad's business after all, now that the little one is on the way." Matt had indicated Grania's tiny but visible bump.

"No, Matt!" Grania had expostulated. "We agreed you never would. You'd have no life or freedom at all if you went to work for your dad. You know how overpowering he can be."

Grania gave up trying to dislodge the grass from its roots and stared out to sea instead. She smiled grimly at the understatement she'd used in that conversation with Matt. Bob was a full-time control freak when it came to his son. Although she understood the disappointment he must feel that Matt had no interest in taking over the family investment business, she couldn't understand his lack of interest or pride in his son's career. Matt was doing very well, and had become a renowned authority in the field of child psychology. He held a chair at Columbia University, and was constantly asked as guest lecturer to other universities across the States. Bob also patronized Grania constantly, making small but pointed comments about her upbringing and level of education.

Looking back, Grania was at least relieved they'd refused to accept handouts from Matt's parents. Even in the early days, when she was trying to make her name as a sculptor and Matt was completing his Ph.D. and they'd struggled to pay the rent on their tiny one-bedroom apartment, she'd been paranoid. And with good reason,

Grania thought; the shiny, immaculately dressed Connecticut girls whom she'd met through Matt and his family could not be a greater contrast to an unsophisticated, convent-educated girl from a small Irish backwater. Maybe it had been destined to fail . . .

"Hello."

Grania jumped at the sound of the voice. She looked around her, but could see no one.

"Hello, I said."

The voice was behind her. She turned one hundred and eighty degrees to view the owner. And there was Aurora Lisle, standing at her back. Thankfully, dressed today in a pair of jeans, an anorak that hung from her thin frame and a woolly hat hiding all but the occasional wisp of her magnificent red hair. Her face was tiny and prettily heart-shaped, her huge eyes and full pink lips out of proportion to the miniature canvas in which they were set.

"Hello, Aurora."

Grania's greeting engendered a look of surprise in Aurora's eyes. "How do you know what my name is?"

"I saw you yesterday."

"Did you? Where?"

"Here on the cliffs."

"Really?" Aurora frowned. "I don't remember being here yesterday. And certainly not speaking to you."

"You didn't speak to me, Aurora. I saw you, that's all," Grania explained.

"Then how do you know my name?" Aurora spoke in a high, clipped English accent.

"I asked my mother who the little girl with the beautiful long red hair might be. And she told me."

"And how would she know?" the child asked imperiously.

"She's lived in the village all her life. She said you'd gone away years ago."

"We had. But now we're back." Aurora looked out to sea and swept her arms to embrace the coastline. "And I love it here, don't you?"

Grania had the feeling Aurora's question was a statement with which she was not allowed to disagree. "Of course I love it. It's where I was born and where I grew up."

“So.” Aurora settled herself gracefully on the grass next to Grania and her blue eyes bored into her. “What is *your* name?”

“Grania, Grania Ryan.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever heard of you.”

Grania wanted to smile at Aurora’s adult way of expressing herself. “I suppose there’s no reason why you should have done. I’ve been away from here almost ten years.”

Aurora’s face lit up with pleasure and she clapped her small hands together. “Then that means we have both come back to a place we love at the same time.”

“I suppose it does.”

“So, we can keep each other company! You can be my new friend.”

“That’s very kind of you, Aurora.”

“Well, you must be lonely.”

“Maybe you’re right . . .” Grania smiled. “And what about you? Are you lonely here too?”

“Sometimes, yes.” Aurora shrugged. “Daddy always has so much work to do and is often away, and there’s only the housekeeper to play with. And she isn’t very good at games.” Aurora wrinkled her delicately freckled retroussé nose in displeasure.

“Oh dear,” commented Grania, for want of anything better to say. She was both disarmed and discomfited by the child’s quaintness. “You must have friends at school, surely?”

“I don’t go to school. My father likes me at home with him. I have a governess instead.”

“So where is she today?”

“Daddy and I decided we didn’t like her, so we left her behind in London.” Aurora giggled suddenly. “We simply packed up and left.”

“I see,” said Grania, although she most certainly didn’t.

“Do you have a job?” Aurora asked.

“Yes, I do. I’m a sculptor.”

“Isn’t that someone who makes statues out of clay?”

“You’re along the right lines, yes,” answered Grania.

“Oh, do you know about papier-mâché?” Aurora’s face lit up. “I *love* papier-mâché! I had a nanny once who showed me how to make bowls, and we’d paint them and then I’d give them to Daddy as

a present. Would you come and make some papier-mâché with me? Please.”

Grania was charmed by Aurora’s eagerness and genuine excitement. “All right.” She found herself nodding. “I don’t see why not.”

“Will you come now? We could go up to the house and make something for Daddy before he goes away.” Aurora reached out her hand and tugged at Grania’s hoodie. “Please say yes!”

“No, Aurora, I can’t just now. I’d need to go and get the things to make it. And besides, my mammy might think I’d gotten lost,” Grania added.

Grania watched Aurora’s face fall, saw the light disappear from her eyes and her body sag. “I don’t have a mummy. I did once, but she died.”

“I’m so sorry, Aurora.” Instinctively, Grania reached out and patted the child gently on her shoulder. “You must miss her a lot.”

“I do. She was the most beautiful, special person in the world. Daddy always says she was an angel, and that’s why the other angels came to take her, so she could go to heaven where she belonged.”

Grania quailed at Aurora’s obvious pain. “I’m sure your daddy is right,” she agreed. “And at least you have him.”

“Yes, I do,” agreed Aurora, “and he’s the best father in the world, and the most handsome. I know if you saw him, you’d fall in love with him. Every lady does.”

“Well then, I shall have to meet him, won’t I?” Grania smiled.

“Yes.” Aurora jumped up suddenly from the grass. “I have to go now. You will be here again at the same time tomorrow.”

This was not a request, it was an order.

“I . . .”

“Good.” Spontaneously, Aurora launched herself into Grania’s arms and hugged her. “Bring all the things for the papier-mâché, then we can go up to my house and spend the morning making bowls for Daddy. Bye-bye, Grania, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Good-bye.” Grania waved, and watched as Aurora skipped and danced like a young gazelle along the cliffs. Even in her anorak and sneakers, her movements were graceful.

When Aurora had disappeared from view, Grania drew in a long

breath, feeling almost as if she'd been under an enchantment; held in thrall by a small, ethereal being. She rose, shaking her head to clear it, wondering what her mother would say when she announced that tomorrow she was going up to Dunworley House to play with Aurora Lisle.

3

That evening, when her father and brother left the table—and their used plates and cutlery upon it for her mother to clear—Grania helped Kathleen with the washing-up.

“I met Aurora Lisle again today,” said Grania casually as she dried the plates.

Kathleen raised an eyebrow. “And was she out in her nightdress again, masquerading as a spirit?”

“No, she was fully clothed. She’s an odd little girl, isn’t she?”

“Well now, I wouldn’t know how she was.” Kathleen’s mouth was set in a firm, hard line.

“I said I might go up to her house and make some papier-mâché with her. She seems lonely,” Grania volunteered.

There was a pause before Kathleen said, “I’ve told you, Grania, warned you not to get involved with that family. But you’re a big girl now and I can’t stop you.”

“But, Mam, she’s simply a lonely, sweet little girl. She seems lost . . . she has no mother. Surely, it can’t do any harm to spend a couple of hours with her?”

“I’m not discussing it again with you, Grania. You’ve heard what I think and you have to make your own decisions. And that’s an end to it.”

The sound of the telephone ringing broke through the ensuing silence. Grania made no move to answer it, nor did her mother. On the seventh ring Kathleen put her hands on her hips. “You realize who that is, I’m sure.”

“No,” said Grania disingenuously, “Why should I, Mam? It could be anyone.”

“We both know who that is at this time of night, my girl, and I’m too embarrassed to be speaking to him again.”

The telephone continued to ring, the abrasive urgency of the

sound in direct contrast with mother and daughter's contrived stillness. Finally it stopped and the two women stared into the whites of each other's eyes.

"I'll not be having this, Grania, this rudeness under my roof. I've run out of things to say to him. What has that poor man done to you anyway, to deserve this kind of treatment? You've suffered a loss, but that's hardly his fault, is it?"

"I'm sorry, Mam." Grania shook her head. "But you just don't understand."

"Well, that's the first thing you've said that I agree with. So why don't you tell me?"

"Mam! Please! I can't . . ." Grania wrung her hands in frustration. "I just *can't*."

"To my mind, Grania, that's not good enough. Whatever's happened is affecting everyone in the house and we all need to be put right on the situation. I—"

"It's Matt, darlin'," said her father as he strolled into the kitchen holding the phone. "We've had a nice chat, but I think it's you he wants to speak to." John grinned apologetically and offered her the handset.

Grania threw her father a killer stare and snatched the handset from him. She moved out of the kitchen and headed up the stairs toward her bedroom.

"Grania? Is that you?" The soft, familiar tones of Matt's voice brought an immediate lump to her throat as she closed the door behind her and perched on the end of the bed.

"Matt, I asked you not to contact me."

"I know you did, baby, but Jesus! I can't figure out what's going on. What have I done? Why have you left me?"

Grania ground her free hand into her jean-covered thigh to keep her calm.

"Grania? Are you still there, honey? Please, if you can explain what it is I'm meant to have done then perhaps I can defend myself."

Still Grania did not answer.

"Grania, *please*, talk to me. This is Matt, the man who loves you. Who you've shared a life with for eight years. And I'm going insane here, not knowing why you've gone."

Grania took a deep breath in. "Please don't call me. I don't want to

speak to you. And it's upsetting my parents, you bothering them every night."

"Grania, please, I understand it was real hard on you losing the baby, but we can try again, surely? I love you, honey, and I'll do anything to . . ."

"Good-bye, Matt." Grania pressed the appropriate button to end the call, unable to hear any more. She sat where she was, staring unseeingly at the faded flowers on the wallpaper of her childhood bedroom. It was a pattern she had looked at night after night as she'd indulged in her girlish dreams of the future. In which her own Prince Charming would appear and carry her off to a life of perfect love. Matt had been all those things and more . . . she'd adored him from the first moment she'd set eyes upon him. And it *had* been a fairy tale.

Grania lay down on the bed and hugged her pillow. Now, her belief that love could conquer all—could leap over any boundary, reign victorious over any problem that life might present and emerge triumphant—was gone.

Matt Connelly slumped on to the sofa, his cell phone still resting in the palm of his hand.

In the past two weeks since Grania had upped and left, Matt had racked his brains to think of any reason why she should have gone. None was forthcoming. What could he do to solve this? Grania had made it blatantly clear that she currently wanted nothing to do with him . . . seriously, was their relationship over?

"Goddammit!" Matt hurled the cell phone across the room, watching the battery splay out of the back of it. Yes, he understood how devastated she was about the miscarriage, but surely that was no reason to cut *him* out of her life too? Perhaps he should just get on a plane and go to her in Ireland. But what if she wouldn't see him? What if he made it worse?

Matt stood up, coming to an instant decision. As he marched toward his laptop, he knew anything was better than the uncertainty he was suffering just now. Even if Grania told him point-blank it was all over, it had to be preferable to being in the dark.

Matt logged on and was starting to explore flights between New

York and Dublin when the intercom buzzed. He ignored it. He wasn't expecting any visitors and certainly wouldn't welcome any either. It continued to buzz insistently until, out of sheer irritation, Matt walked across the sitting room and pressed the intercom. "Who is it?"

"Hi, hon, just passing by, thought I'd check in to make sure you're OK."

Matt pressed the entry button immediately. "Sorry, Charley, come up." He left the door ajar, and went back to his perusal of flights. Charley was one of the few people he could stomach seeing. A childhood friend, she'd moved off his radar—along with many of his old buddies—when he and Grania had gotten together. Grania had felt uncomfortable with his old Connecticut group, so he'd given them a wide berth for her sake. A few days ago, Charley had called out of the blue and said she'd heard from his folks that Grania had disappeared back to Ireland. She'd come across town and taken him for a pizza. It had been good to see her.

A few minutes later, a pair of arms snaked around his shoulders and Charley planted a soft kiss on his cheek. A bottle of red wine was deposited on the desk next to his laptop.

"Thought you might need this. Shall I get us a couple of glasses?"

"That would be just great. Thanks, Charley." Matt continued to compare and contrast timings and costs as Charley uncorked the wine and poured it into two glasses.

"What are you looking at?" she asked as she threw off her boots and curled her long legs beneath her on the sofa.

"Flights to Ireland. If Grania's not coming back here, I gotta go to her."

Charley raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "You think that's sensible?"

"What the hell else am I meant to do? Hang around here, going half out of my mind while I try to figure out the problem, and hitting a blank wall time and again?"

Charley threw back her mane of glossy dark hair and took a sip of wine. "But what if she just needs some space? To get over . . . well, you know. You might make things worse, Matty. Has Grania said she wanted to see you?"

"Hell, no! I just called her and she asked me to stop contacting

her.” Matt rose from the laptop, took a large slug of wine and joined Charley on the sofa. “Maybe you’re right,” he sighed. “Perhaps I should give her some more time and eventually she’ll come to her senses. Losing the baby was such a blow to her. You know how eager Mom and Dad were for the next generation to make an appearance. Dad hardly did much to hide his disappointment when he showed up at the hospital after the miscarriage.”

“I can imagine.” Charley rolled her eyes. “Subtlety was never one of your dad’s qualities, now was it? Not that he’s ever offended me, but then you guys have been like family, so I’m used to him. But I suppose to an outsider like Grania it might have been hard for her to cope with.”

“Yes.” Matt rested his elbows on his knees and put his head in his hands. “Maybe I just didn’t do enough to protect her. I know how uncomfortable she’s always been about the difference in our backgrounds.”

“Matty, honey, really—you couldn’t have done more. You even put me in the garbage can when Grania came along.”

Matt looked at her and frowned. “Hey, you’re not serious, are you? That time when we dated could never have worked out long-term, could it? We both agreed on that, if you remember.”

“Sure, Matty.” Charley gave him a smile of reassurance. “It was always something that had to happen at some point, wasn’t it?”

“Sure it was.” Matt was pacified by her mirroring of his own thoughts.

“You know,” mused Charley, “sometimes, as I watch my girlfriends go through relationship traumas like this, I thank heaven I’m still single. I hardly know anyone that’s in a good space with their partners these days, although I really thought you guys had got it right.”

“So did we,” he replied sadly. “You’re not seriously considering spinsterhood for the rest of your life, are you? Out of our Greenwich crowd, you were ‘the one most likely to’; Sorority Queen, straight-A student and the most beautiful girl in your class. Now successful magazine editor . . . hell, Charley, you know you could have anyone.”

“Yeah, and maybe that’s the problem.” Charley let out a sigh. “Maybe I’m too darned fussy and no one is good enough. Anyway,

now is not the time to be discussing me. You're the one in a real mess. What can I do to help?"

"OK . . . should I get on a plane to Ireland tomorrow to try and rescue my relationship?" he asked.

"Matty, it's so up to you"—Charley wrinkled her nose—"but if you want my opinion, I'd give Grania some space and time. She's obviously got stuff to work out. I'm sure she'll come back to you when she's ready. She's asked you to leave her alone, hasn't she? So why don't you do the lady's bidding, and then maybe think again in a couple of weeks? Besides, I thought you were up to your eyes with work."

"I am," breathed Matt. "And maybe you're right. I gotta give her the space she's asked me for." He reached out a hand and patted Charley's outstretched shin gently. "Thanks, li'l sis. You're always there for me, aren't you?"

"Yes, honey." Charley smiled from under her lashes. "I'll always be here for you."

A few days later, there was another buzz on Matt's intercom.

"Hi, sweetie, it's Mom. Can I come up?"

"Sure." Matt opened the front door for her, surprised at the impromptu visit. His parents rarely graced this part of town, and never unannounced.

"Darling, how are you?" Elaine kissed her son on both cheeks then followed him inside.

"I'm OK," Matt replied, too low and tired to make more of an effort. He watched his mom shrug off her fur coat, rearrange her subtly highlighted blond hair with a quick toss of her head and sit her perfect size six body elegantly on the sofa. He quickly removed his sneakers and a couple of empty beer bottles away from her tiny, stilettoed feet. "What brings you here?"

"I was up in town at a charity lunch and you're on the way home." Elaine smiled. "I wanted to see how my boy is doing."

"I'm OK," Matt repeated. "Can I fix you anything to drink, Mom?"

"A glass of water would do fine."

"Sure."

Elaine watched him as he went to the refrigerator and poured the water. He looked pale and tired and his body language betrayed his unhappiness. “Thanks,” she said as he brought her the water. “So, any word from Grania?”

“I called and spoke to her briefly a few days ago, but she sure doesn’t care to speak to me.”

“Have you found out why she left?”

“No.” Matt shrugged. “I don’t know what I’ve done. Christ, Mom, that baby meant everything to her.”

“She was real quiet when we saw her that day at the hospital, looked like she’d been crying when she came out of the bathroom.”

“Yeah, and the next day I arrived to visit her after work to find she’d checked herself out. I came back here and found a note saying she’d gone home to Ireland to stay with her parents. She hasn’t opened up to me since. I know she’s hurting, but I don’t know how to reach her.”

“You must be hurting too, honey. It was your baby as well as hers,” Elaine commented, hating the sight of her precious son in pain and suffering alone.

“Yeah, it doesn’t feel too good just now. We were gonna be a family. It was, like, my dream . . . shit! Sorry, Mom.” Matt did his best to try and stem the tears. “I love her so much, and that little one, who didn’t make it, who was part of us . . . I . . .”

“Oh, honey.” Elaine stood and reached up to take her son in her arms. “I’m so, so sorry. If there’s anything I can do to help . . .”

Matt wished his mother hadn’t caught him at such a low moment. He dug deep to find the strength to pull himself back together. “I’m a big boy now, Mom. I’ll be OK, really. I only wish I knew what it is that’s made Grania run away. I just don’t understand it.”

“How about you coming to stay with us for a while? I don’t like to think of you all alone here.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I’ve got a heap of work. I just gotta believe that Grania will come back in her own time, once she’s licked her wounds. She’s always been a law unto herself. I guess that’s why I love her the way I do.”

“She’s certainly unusual,” agreed Elaine. “And doesn’t seem to care for the rules most of us abide by.”

“That’s maybe because she wasn’t brought up with them,” countered Matt, not in the mood for any snide parental comments or “I told you so’s” about his choice of love.

“Oh no, Matt, you got me wrong,” Elaine said hastily. “I really admire Grania, and the two of you, for stepping outside the box and being together simply because you love each other. Maybe more of us should follow our heart, rather than our upbringing.” Elaine sighed. “I’ve got to be getting back. Your father has his golfing buddies coming round for their annual winter dinner.”

Matt duly collected then held out Elaine’s fur coat for her to put on. “Thanks for coming, Mom. I appreciate it.”

“It was good to see you, Matt.” She kissed him on the cheek. “You know I’m proud of you, don’t you? And anytime you want to talk, I’m there for you, honey, really. I understand . . . how you must feel.” A hint of sadness appeared in her eyes, then disappeared as quickly as it had come. “Bye, Matty.”

Matt closed the door behind her, sensing that she really did empathize with him. And, loving her for it, he realized for the first time how little he knew of the woman beneath the shiny veneer of perfect Connecticut wife and mother.