

Praise for Natalie Meg Evans

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‘This story is as glamorous as the gowns it describes’ *The Lady*

‘A truly accomplished and delicious debut novel’

Laurie Graham

‘A delicious treat of a novel. I loved the setting in 1930s Paris and I was utterly charmed by the story’s delectable heroine, as she struggled to make her mark in this seductive but perilous world’

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Winner of the 2014 Festival of Romantic Fiction's
Best Historical Read award

Winner of the 2015 Public Book Awards

Shortlisted for the 2015 Romance Writers
of America (RWA) RITA Awards

About the Author

In the late 1970s, Natalie Meg Evans ran away from art college in the Midlands for a career in London's fringe theatre. She spent five years acting, as well as writing her own plays and sketches before giving it up to work in PR. She now writes full-time from her house in rural north Suffolk.

Natalie Meg Evans has been awarded numerous other accolades for her writing including the Harry Bowling Prize (2012). She was also nominated for a coveted Daphne du Maurier award and was named a finalist for a Romance Writers of America Golden Heart and RITA © award.

the
Milliner's
Secret

NATALIE MEG EVANS

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This book is dedicated to my sister Anna

Paris: Saturday, 13 July 1940

They would have been a spectacular sight in any city at any time. Bare shoulders, impish hats and upswept hair. One, a blonde in her mid-thirties, crossed the dance floor on a zephyr of sex appeal. A younger blonde walked as if she suspected the room was infested with snakes. The third, a redhead, followed like a sleepwalker.

A band pumped out a hot jazz version of 'La Marseillaise' – so loud, bottles on the bar shimmered. 'They know it's illegal to play that, don't they?' The younger blonde, whose name was Coralie de Lirac, glanced uneasily at the stage. 'Nobody's dancing.'

'It's too damn early,' said the older one. 'I can't get used to being in a nightclub at teatime.'

A month before, hours after they had marched into Paris, the Germans had moved the clocks to Berlin time and imposed a curfew that effectively sealed people into their homes. Then, realising Paris would grind to a halt, they'd relaxed the curfew to midnight. If you stayed later, you were stuck wherever you happened to be until five the next morning. But, then, Coralie reminded herself, the Nazis hadn't invaded France for the convenience of its inhabitants. 'Let's get a table,' she said. 'Don't make eye contact with anything male under ninety. Una? Keep your mind on the job.'

'Of course. Though we may have to kiss a toad or two before we find what we're looking for. Oh, don't take fright, Tilly dear.' Una McBride threw an arm round their redheaded companion, who had stopped dead at the word 'toad'. 'Coralie and I will take care of such niceties. Or "un-pleasantries", which will be closer to the truth.' Una's drawl marked her out as American.

Coralie indicated a table. 'Over there. Come on, or we'll be mistaken for the floor show.' Before they got much further, though, the club's proprietor spotted them and ushered them to a table of his choosing, closer to the music and the bar. A young man with a boxer's physique, he wore a white tuxedo and a rose in his buttonhole. 'Mesdames, enchanted. Welcome to the Rose Noire.' He kissed their hands in turn, lingering over Coralie's. 'Mademoiselle de Lirac, you have been away too long.'

'I'm flattered you noticed.' As she sat down in the chair he pulled out for her, Coralie undid and refastened her bracelet, to avoid meeting his smile. When she'd first started coming here in the summer of '37, Serge Martel had been a glamorous figure, oozing charm, taking care of customers' every whim. She'd been poleaxed when she'd heard he'd later been arrested for violently assaulting one of his female singers and sent to prison for seven years. Eighteen months he'd served. Nobody knew how he'd got out so early – who had greased the prison doors – but there was something new and unnerving in his manner. Coralie tried to catch Una's eye, but her friend was busy sizing up the clientele.

Martel, meanwhile, clicked his fingers at an elderly waiter shuffling towards them with a tray of champagne. 'Quickly, quickly, man. We have thirsty ladies here.'

The waiter called back, 'If I was younger and faster, Monsieur, I'd be in the army!' but he hurried forward nonetheless.

Félix Peyron poured vintage Lanson into three glasses, and Coralie noticed how his hands shook. An institution on boulevard de Clichy, he'd aged as though the shock of defeat and invasion had knocked the life out of him. It looked as if he'd taken to rubbing talcum powder into his cuffs to whiten them, but tonight his collar looked distinctly yellow next to Martel's tuxedo. How did Martel keep his tux so white, she wondered? It was easier to get to Heaven than to find washing soda these days, and laundries gave priority to German linen. Paris had not been bombed, like Warsaw or Rotterdam, but everything was running low: food, fuel . . . hope. For ordinary citizens, anyway. Counting the field-grey uniforms in the club, the caps with their silver eagles laid down on the best tables, Coralie formed her own conclusions about Serge Martel's recent good fortune.

Having placed the bottle in its ice bucket, Félix stepped back and bowed. 'You are welcome at the Rose Noire, Mesdames, as beauty is always welcome.'

'Why, Félix, you wicked seducer.' Una picked up her glass. 'We'll have to keep an eye on you, I can see that.'

Here we go, Coralie thought. If it wore trousers, Una fluttered her eyelashes at it, though tonight her attention was really focused on the stage. Specifically on the Romany violinist, whose sweaty curls obscured half his face and whose shirt hung off one shoulder.

'The Vagabonds are on good form tonight.' Coralie spoke lightly, watching Una's reaction.

'Aren't they just? But I wish they'd stick to jazz standards. Changing the time signature of "La Marseillaise" doesn't fool anyone.' Una blew tumbleweed kisses towards the stage, and the violinist broke off long enough to return one. Gentle applause spread around the room. People were looking their way,

women in particular. Coralie saw one pull a silk flower from her evening bag and pin it into her hair, as if she felt underdressed in comparison.

Félix, lighting their table candle, chuckled. 'People see a love affair flowering and it makes them happy, though we are at war.'

'No, sir, it's our hats that are stealing the show.' Una tapped the miniature Gainsborough confection pinned over her ear, ruffling its cascade of flowers and dyed feathers. She said to Coralie, 'I promised you these bijou babies would be a sensation.'

'I said they would be. I wish you'd stop pinching my ideas.'

'Oops.' Una took an indulgent gulp of champagne. 'I forget I'm only the muse and not the milliner. By next week, they'll be the rage. There'll be a queue from your shop to the river.'

Coralie waited for Félix to leave. 'Assuming we're still here next week. Tilly?' Their friend was staring into her glass as if she suspected prussic acid among the bubbles. 'Drink it or put it down. People will think you've got something to be scared of.'

'Have I not?' came the whisper.

'Well . . . try not to show it.' Then Coralie said, out of the side of her mouth, 'I don't think she can do this, Una.'

'What choice does she have? We can't risk taking her home because all our houses will be under surveillance. Her only chance is "over the line into the free zone and keep moving". And before you talk of putting her on a train to the border, imagine her negotiating timetables, not to mention police checks.'

Una was right. Ottilia had to escape Paris and a car ride was her only hope. They now had to acquire by charm what they couldn't get by queuing at a police station – her name on a road-travel permit. An *Ausweis*, to give it its official, German, title.

Una extracted a Chesterfield cigarette from an elegant case, her gaze never leaving the stage where the Vagabonds were polishing

off the last bars of 'La Marseillaise'. 'Stand and clap when they're done,' she instructed Coralie.

'Why don't we wave the French flag while we're at it? Then we could all get arrested and carry on the party in jail. I've never seen so many German officers in one place. I thought they hated jazz.'

'Your German friend liked it.'

'He was different.' *Off limits*, Coralie's tone warned. 'We shouldn't be here. Any of the regulars might recognise us.'

'Sure, but not Tilly. And, hey, we have a saying where I come from – "If you want to hide in the mustard, wear yellow."'

'We're not in the mustard but we could be in the soup.'

Una rose to clap and, reluctantly, Coralie did too. The Vagabonds acknowledged the applause, then retreated into the shadows at the rear of the stage. Ottilia seemed to have slipped into a trance. Sitting down again, Una fitted her cigarette into a cream-coloured holder and accepted a light from a man at a neighbouring table. She blew a little smoke on him. '*Merci mille fois*. I guess we'll catch up later.'

Once he'd retreated, she whispered to Coralie, 'Don't look round, but see those conquering heroes at the bar?'

'How, without looking?'

'Take my word for it, they exist. I sense they would like to buy us our next bottle of champagne. Shall we strike up a conversation?'

Coralie rolled a look their way and her stomach rose in revolt. The men wore black uniforms and lightning-strike SS insignia on their collars and they must have noticed Una smiling because their features suddenly sharpened in anticipation. Putting her hand against her mouth so that nobody could lip-read her words, Coralie said, 'They could be Gestapo. I can't be sure, but something feels wrong.'

'Gestapo means "secret police", right?' Una lit a second cigarette. 'Not *that* secret, lolling around in uniform, giving us the glad-eye. Hold your nerve and give this to Tilly.'

Coralie put the cigarette into Ottilia's fingers, finding them ice cold. Una was right, of course, it was too late to alter their plan. A car was leaving here at dawn and all Ottilia had to do was sit in it. Provided with forged documents, a change of clothing and a couple of months' worth of francs and occupation currency, she had every chance of getting to the Spanish border and freedom. All they needed was a German policeman of sufficient rank to apply his signature to the permit in Una's handbag.

All they needed . . .

Plaintive notes announced the Vagabonds' second set. The boys had changed into crimson silk shirts with Magyar sleeves and tight sashes. Their leader, Arkady Erdős, was tuning his violin, his dark gaze raking the audience. So he'd swung the forbidden 'Marseillaise'? *What do I care?* he seemed to be saying.

Trouble was, they *would* care, those rule-obsessed Germans. Coralie whispered, 'Does Arkady know he's taking an extra passenger?'

'Sure he does, and the others will find out when they snuggle up in the car together.'

Ottilia had put her cigarette straight between her lips and was drawing on it with such urgency that its end glowed amber. Forgetting to be cautious, Coralie scolded, 'You look like a factory hand after a night-shift!' Digging into her friend's beaded evening purse, she searched for the twenty-two-carat cigarette holder she'd reluctantly allowed her to bring with her. She'd just located it when breath on her shoulder made her jump. The holder flipped out of the bag, carrying with it a small, fawn-coloured booklet.

Her blood ran cold.

Serge Martel smiled down. ‘Ladies, some military gentlemen have asked permission to join you, if—’

‘Tell them no.’ Coralie covered the booklet with her palm. ‘Girls only tonight.’

‘You don’t understand, Mademoiselle,’ Martel said silkily. ‘They “ask permission” but they are not expecting a refusal. What are you hiding under your hand?’

‘Nothing.’

Martel lunged and, a moment later, was flourishing the booklet. It was an identity card. Nothing unusual in that. They all carried one, by law. But this was Otilia’s *true* identity, stating her real name and country of origin. She was meant to have burned it! Simply possessing it could mean lethal trouble. And not just for her, for all three of them. Coralie said slowly, ‘Monsieur Martel, please give it back to me.’

A playful eyebrow answered her. Martel shared the same platinum-gold colouring as many of the officers at his tables, but not their spare professionalism. His stock-in-trade was his affable manner, his sexy familiarity with women. Liked a joke, did Martel. As he tilted his head, Coralie saw that his nose was crooked, as if someone had once swung a granite-forced punch at him. Perhaps that was why he kept the lights in his club so low. Because he was vain. Even back in the old days, when she’d liked him better, she’d sometimes caught him preening.

In the lightest voice she could muster, Coralie said, ‘You know that technically ID cards belong to the state? And they are rather private.’

‘Do hand it back, Serge honey.’ Una exhaled smoke. ‘Don’t be a cad.’

‘But I wish a little peep, Madame. Maybe I am curious.’

'Remember what curiosity did to the cat.' Una delicately stubbed out her cigarette. 'There is above-top-secret information on that card that would oblige me to kill you should you become acquainted with it.'

Coralie shot her an appalled look.

'Secret?' Martel echoed.

'Uh-huh.' Una paused so long, Coralie was tempted to push her off her chair. 'It will reveal our friend's date of birth and thus her age, which she's lied about for ten years solid. We would be forced, one way or another, to silence you.'

'Have me arrested?' Martel's gaze travelled to the black-uniformed men three tables away. Just as Coralie was sure she'd forgotten how to breathe, he gave a belt of laughter. 'We're playing charades, but you win, Madame. *Voilà!*' He tossed the card on to the table and it fell open against the candlestick. They all saw an unsmiling snapshot of Ottilia with side-parted hair, curls clustering over her ears.

Line by line, the card revealed her. 'Ottilia Johanna von Silberstrom. Born Berlin, 19 December 1909. Auburn hair, light brown eyes. Profession, none.' In the upper right corner, blood red in the flare of the candle, was stamped –

'*Juif,*' Martel said softly. 'Or *juive*, I should say.'

Ottilia began to cry. Una pulled out a fresh cigarette. She was shaking.

'You've brought a Jewess into my club, Mademoiselle de Lirac? You are putting my licence, my reputation, *my life* at risk.'

Coralie heard real anger and another ingredient. She couldn't identify it until Martel began goose-stepping his fingers towards the card. He was imitating German boots. Even in his rage, he couldn't resist a joke. She pressed her palm down on the identity card, wishing she could melt it with her body heat.

‘Ladies? May we intrude?’

Her startled gaze met a trio of jet-black uniforms. Una’s ‘conquering heroes’ had made their move.

‘Ladies?’ the German officer seemed puzzled by their silence. He was the senior, to judge from his collar insignia of three diamonds. ‘Earlier you seemed very friendly.’

‘You’re mistaken.’ Coralie’s voice was a fingernail rasp. ‘If we gave that impression—’

‘You wish to join us? How delicious!’ Una sprang back to life, though she sounded as if she’d run upstairs fast. ‘Serge, dear, drag up more chairs. Don’t keep the gentlemen standing.’

Martel conceded an ironic bow. A minute later, the men were seated, delivering strained gallantries. All through it, the senior officer stared at Coralie’s hand.

‘What do you hide there, Fräulein?’ As Coralie stared back mutely, he snapped something in German. A junior officer responded by holding out his hand in silent command.

But Serge Martel got there first, snatching the card up only to drop it into the neck of Coralie’s gown. ‘Gentlemen, I was reprimanding this young lady for letting her *carte d’identité* fall from her bag. “Is not your identity your most precious possession?” I asked her.’ He spread his arms rhetorically and only Coralie caught his complicit wink. Still playing his games. ‘In these oh-so-difficult times, you risk others misapprehending not only what you are — a glance here for Ottilia — but also exactly *what you were*. Is that not so, Mademoiselle de Lirac?’

Coralie swallowed. ‘As you say.’

The senior officer shrugged. The danger had passed.

Reassuming his professional persona, Martel promised to send up the best champagne. ‘A magnum — and, *meine Herren*, oysters from the west coast —’ he kissed his fingers ‘— on ice,

with a mignonette sauce that is famed throughout Paris. You will honour me by enjoying a platter with these beautiful ladies?’

They would, it seemed. Pre-war, oysters would never have been served in July, Coralie thought scornfully. But, then, the occupiers were greedy for Parisian luxury, without understanding its subtleties. People like Martel provided it and pocketed the profit. Martel sauntered off, and the officers named themselves and gave their ranks. After which Una did too, adding, ‘As you already know, to my right is Mademoiselle de Lirac—’

Coralie forced a smile.

‘And Mademoiselle Dupont.’

Had Ottilia heard? Dupont was her new surname. Coralie nudged her. Honey-coloured eyes opened wide. Comprehension stole in. ‘Good evening,’ Ottilia said. In German.

Una covered the moment. ‘Shall we give our ranks too? We’re all chiefs. See? We have feathers in our hats.’ She gave her doll-hat a flirtatious flick, which made the men laugh. They seemed intrigued to meet a real live American. The United States remained neutral, making Una as safe in Paris as she’d ever been.

Coralie touched Ottilia’s wrist. ‘The Ladies. Follow me,’ she whispered. The ID card lodging uncomfortably between her breasts needed to be torn up and flushed away. She needed, too, to put Ottilia in front of the mirror and make her repeat her new name fifty times. But she also wanted to dissect Martel’s words. *Exactly what you were.* ‘Were’ not ‘are’. How much did he know about her own secret?

She was not Coralie de Lirac. She was not well-born, or French. Or even the Belgian émigrée her own identity papers declared her to be. Her origins were buried layers deep, known only to herself and one other. Or so she’d thought.

One thing was sure: the men preparing to toast them in Martel's over-priced champagne would have a simple enough term for her.

Enemy.

PART ONE



Chapter One



Three years earlier, south London

It was a well-aimed fist and it spun its victim into the gutter.

‘That’s for hiding money from me.’ Jac Masson laboured for breath as sweat ran into a moustache the same grey-gold as his hair. To his daughter, staring dazedly up into a smoke-tainted sky, he resembled a lion anticipating the taste of blood. Violence always came easy to Jac, but something had pushed him over a line today, borne out by the explosion of pain in her eye.

‘On your feet, lazy *pute*, and go back to earning a living.’ Jac raised a foot, but before he could deliver a kick, he was hit broadside by a young man pounding towards him in a blur of shirtsleeves. They both went down but the younger man recovered first. He stood over Masson, fists bunched.

‘You want a fight, you rotten Frog? Then take me on and leave Cora alone.’

‘Frog?’ Masson lumbered to his feet. All six feet two inches of him cast a menacing shadow. ‘I’m Belgian, not French. If you don’t know the difference, shut your mouth.’ He sneered at the fists raised against him. ‘Put those away, you scrawny Irish bean-pole. I do what I want with my own.’

‘His own’, meanwhile, was trying to crawl out of the gutter, using Masson’s waistcoat as a handhold. Masson caught the hand

and twisted it. 'Girl, I want your full wage packet at the end of the week, and I'll count every sixpence in front of you. Get back to work.'

He stalked away down Shand Street towards Tooley Street, which was clogged with slow-moving traffic and pedestrians, pausing briefly to toss an object into the road.

The young man, Donal Flynn, ran to pick it up. It was a leather purse, which he shook into his palm. Clucking in disappointment, he walked back to the gutter and hauled Cora to her feet. 'Are you all right?'

'My face . . . I must look like Joe Louis on a bad day.'

'Even if you had two black eyes, you'd never look like a heavyweight boxer.'

She managed a pained grin. 'Flyweight?'

'Just about. Lucky I was around, though. I'd just delivered a crate to the infants' school.' Donal poked a thumb at nearby Magdalen Street. It was noon and shrill playground noises reached over the factory roofs. 'I heard him bellowing your name, so I knew you were in trouble.'

'That's one way of putting it. I went down like a plank, the air knocked out of me.' She looked over her shoulder. 'Let's go, case he comes back.'

'He won't – not if he's going where he usually goes at this time. How much was in the purse?'

'Five pounds. He chased me round half Bermondsey and only caught me when I tripped. When I wouldn't hand it over, he started in on me.'

'He's got no right.'

'He's got the right, Donal. He's got the hardest punch round here and that's all the permission he needs.'

Cora Masson made use of Donal's shoulder while her lungs

recovered. Blood dripped from a cut above her eye, mixing with the grit on her cheek. Fanning out the skirts of her summer dress, she groaned. The printed rayon was smeared down one side with grime, and since they were outside a leather-curing works, she knew what that grime might contain. 'None of the factory hands came out to help. If you heard me, they must have done.'

'They're scared. People say your dad once pulled apart a man with his hands.'

'He did. He tells me about it sometimes.' She brushed the horrible image away. 'I'm supposed to be on my way to the Derby.'

Donal laughed, incredulous. 'You didn't think he'd let you have a day at the races? You'd be thinking miracles happen.' He shot a glance down Shand Street. No sign of Jac Masson. The Spotted Cow on Tooley Street had reeled him in, it seemed.

'I never told him I was going and I'd love to know who did.' Cora took Donal's arm. 'Walk with me to Bermondsey Street, then I'll be all right.'

'Back to work?' Donal sounded relieved.

'Back to the factory. The buses might still be there. They might!' she insisted, as Donal shook his head. 'They'll make a roll-call and it'll be pretty obvious I'm not on board because I'm the one who always leads the singing.' She burst into a music hall number; "He used to be all chuckles, now he'd rather use his knuckles. I'm the girl who gets a shiner from the old man every night."

'Save your breath,' Donal interrupted. 'I'll help you walk, but you're too much to carry. And the buses won't have waited.'

He was right. The kerb outside Cora's workplace was littered with cigarette butts and sweet papers, and a single rose torn off somebody's Sunday best boater. The mess told of a crowd surging

across the yard and cramming on to the buses. The hat factory was still going full-blast, its ducts belching out fully formed clouds, which turned yellow-brown as they met the smog that always hung above Bermondsey. Its unique smell, with keynotes of resin and wet dog, was less pungent than usual, thanks to a stiff breeze. It depressed Cora to think of the banks of machinery behind those brick walls, still turning, blowing, stamping, as if the only thing that mattered to the world was more blessed hats.

Donal helped Cora to a section of low wall, taking her weight more easily than his earlier comment had suggested. He carried no spare flesh, but he was fit from pushing laundry crates around the streets six days a week. And while Cora was tall – her height and fair colouring proclaimed whose daughter she was – she was lightly built. ‘Underfed’ was how schoolteachers had described her during her childhood. Having made sure Cora could sit unaided, Donal went to retrieve the barrow he’d abandoned earlier.

When he returned she asked for her purse.

He handed it to her. ‘Empty as a kipper’s socks.’

‘Not quite.’ She extracted a white ticket. Number 22, which happened also to be her birthdate and her age. ‘My lucky number. I knew I was going to get chosen in the raffle this year.’

Donal nodded. ‘My sisters were dead jealous.’

‘Well, they don’t have to be now. See, that’s how luck works. Fate delivers a parcel, all shiny, and it turns out to be horse sh—’

‘Don’t swear, Cora.’

Today, 2 June, was Derby Day, the pinnacle of the English flat-racing season and a high point in the Londoner’s calendar. Since early morning, buses, trains and private vehicles had been pouring out of London, heading for Epsom Downs. Pettrew & Lofthouse, Hat Makers of Distinction, where Cora worked, had

a Methodist board of directors who disapproved of horse-racing and, indeed, any form of mixed-sex gallivanting. But even they were forced to concede an annual tradition that allowed a lucky group of workers to join the outflow. This year – 1937, Coronation Year and, by definition, exceptional – they'd agreed that a hundred workers should be chosen to go, rather than the usual fifty. Last Friday afternoon, ticket number 22, with Cora's name on it, had been pulled out of Old Mr Pettrew's big top hat.

'Wouldn't have killed one of those buses to wait.' Cora gave the ticket to the breeze. 'I nipped home to change and my dad ambushed me.'

'Where'd you get that five pounds from?'

'Where d'you think?' Since Christmas, she'd worked evening shifts at the laundry owned by Donal's grandmother. Finishing at Pettrew's at six, she'd make her way to the Flynn's building on the corner of Tooley and Barnham Street to put in a further two hours' work before going home to prepare tea for her dad. 'Ten hours a week scorching my knuckles for a few bob and that bloody man thinks I'm going to drop it in his pocket?' She hurled the purse into Pettrew's yard. 'D'you ever wonder if life's worth living?'

'Here.' Donal offered his cap. 'Wipe your face. I don't mind if you get blood on it.'

'Haven't you got a hanky?'

'It's at home.'

'So what's this?' Cora flourished a square of linen.

Donal shoved his hands into his jacket and groaned because he always fell for it when she pickpocketed him. 'If you'd been alive fifty years ago, they'd have hanged you, Cora.'

'No. I'd have got away and they'd have hanged *you*.'

Strangers often took Donal for Cora's younger brother, though

he was actually three years older. While she was fair, he had the black hair of Galway but, for all that, they'd grown up to look a bit alike. 'Injured innocence,' as Cora explained it, 'and soupy blue eyes.' Donal had got into the Troc-Ette Cinema on Decima Street at child's rates until he turned seventeen.

Watching her dab her cheek, he said, 'I taught you how to throw a punch back at a bully.'

'Wouldn't dare.'

'My dad never hits my sisters, only us boys.'

'My dad is a gentleman – breeding is all in the fists, don't you know.'

Donal chewed over this ambiguous statement, before adding, 'Dad never laid a finger on my sister Sheila, not even before she became WPC Flynn, because she's halfway to being a saint. He threatens to wallop Marion and Doreen all the time, when they stay out late with their young men. Never does, though.'

A pair of motor charabancs were pulling out of a factory opposite, open backs crammed with women hanging on to their hats, men in flat caps and jaunty cravats. Another race-day convoy. Someone hoisted a banner bearing the legend 'Better stick with Bennett's Glue'.

Cora felt a wrenching jealousy. What must it be like to enjoy the moment, without having to store up excuses for daring to have a good time? She yelled above the growl of engines, 'I hope you stick to your seats.'

'We're the ones stuck,' Donal said glumly. 'Least you had the chance to go. My gran doesn't believe in holidays except on a saint's day, and only if it's an Irish saint called Patrick. Then she only gives us half a day and the halves get shorter every year. Same dirty streets, same dirty river. That's my life.'

Cora squinted into a sky that was blue with promise behind

the smoke. 'When the sun shines on the righteous, it rains on us.' She tugged his arm. 'Let's go anyway.'

But not in a torn rag of a dress. 'I'll have to borrow something off one of your sisters,' she informed Donal. They were walking by way of Tooley Street to Barnham Street, where they both lived, though at different ends. Donal needed to return his barrow to the laundry and put on a jacket. 'We'll sneak in and out,' she told him. 'By the time anybody realises we've gone, we'll be on the train to Epsom Downs.'

As they walked up the passageway to Flynn's Laundry, Donal pointed out that they were both broke. You couldn't go racing on less than ten shillings. As for borrowing a dress, Marion and Doreen were 'fearful protective' of their wardrobes. Sheila, he conceded, didn't care for clothes and dressed like a policewoman even when she was off duty. 'But you wouldn't want any of her battle-axe outfits.' He unlatched a gate, adding, 'If Gran sees us, I shall ask to go. I'm no good at lying.'

'Better make sure she doesn't see us, then.' Following Donal into a yard enclosed by low buildings, Cora ducked under a line laden with men's combinations, thirty pairs or more. Must be a new ship in. Many of Flynn's customers were seamen whose vessels came into Rotherhithe docks from Hong Kong, India and the South Seas. A contrary place, Bermondsey. A backwater on the doorstep of the world. Seeing movement in the window of one of the laundry houses, she told Donal to park his barrow quickly. Why did it have to squeak? Too late.

A woman in a green apron emerged from an outbuilding. Her sleeves were rolled, her white hair twisted up so tightly it stretched her eyes and the cords of her neck. Cora never saw Granny Flynn without thinking of a spring onion.

Granny glared at Donal. 'One hour to deliver one load?'

Taking in Cora, she mumbled something unintelligible. Shortage of teeth and an indelible Galway accent made Granny hard to follow even in these parts where a third of the population was immigrant Irish.

Donal translated: 'She's asking if you've come to help out.'

'Blast that,' Cora said. 'The heaviest thing I want to lift today is a race card.'

'I could use an extra pair of hands at an iron.' Granny eyed Cora's torn sleeve, her grazed arms. 'Even if they are both left hands.'

'Sorry, Granny.' Cora's first job had been here, when she was fourteen. Out of school on the Friday, arms deep in suds on the Monday. The best thing she could say for Pettrew & Lofthouse, it had got her away from endless washday. She'd never disliked Granny Flynn, and the other women had been friendly, but lifting sopping blankets out of boilers in fuggy steam all day had thickened her lungs. Her hands had peeled from the caustic, and the skin between her fingers had become so raw, it had bled.

She'd asked once, back then, 'Why should I be in agony so other buggers can have clean sheets?'

After clipping her ear for swearing, Granny had answered, 'Because you're working class, which means all work and no class.'

Cora had called at Pettrew's the day after and asked to see the hiring manager. Beaverling on the production line at a hat-maker's wasn't much of a step up socially, but at least her hands had healed.

She said now to Granny, 'Any other time I'd be thrilled to wield a flat iron in your company.' *Be polite.* She might need more casual work the way things were going. 'But I'm off to hobnob with the upper crust.'

Granny gave a cackle. ‘You won’t have seen yourself in the mirror, then?’

Cora muttered to Donal, ‘That green dress Sheila wore at the St Patrick’s Day party here, has she still got it?’

Donal shrugged uneasily but Cora led the way to the main house, saying, ‘It’ll be back in her cupboard before she’s finished her shift. She’ll never know.’

Donal closed the kitchen door behind them. ‘She’ll know. Sheila always knows who ate the last biscuit or who gave the gas money to a bookies’ runner. And, Cora, she’d say you ought to go back to work, like your dad ordered.’

‘Donal, if you ever want to do more than push a barrow down dirty streets, you need to stop taking orders. There’s a world out there and you’ve got a brain. You were the best at maths in school by a mile. You’re good-looking, too, when you’re not cocking your head and staring at your boots.’

‘Let’s see to that eye of yours.’ Donal ushered her down into a scullery. At weekends, the Flynn household was as noisy as a zoo, but today the younger children were at school and everyone else was working. Donal’s mother had died twelve years ago, in the same year Cora’s mother had left home. Molly Flynn, it was said, had dropped dead from exhaustion, ten babies plus her wash-house work. Whereas Cora’s mother, Florence Masson, had chucked her bloomers over a ship’s mast. Which was a fancy way of saying she’d scarpered with a sailor.

Inaccurate, as it happened. Florence had left England with a man called Timothy Cartland. An actor, not a mariner. They’d gone to New York to make their fortune on Broadway.

‘I’ve just realised,’ Cora said, as Donal dipped a napkin into cold pump water and added a slosh of witch-hazel. ‘It’s twelve

years to the day since my mum left. We went to the races, she stalked off after a row and we never saw her again.'

'Put this to your eye and I'll see if the range is hot. You could use a cup of tea.'

The pad stung, and she shouted after Donal, 'I reckon Mum had the right idea. Off to the Derby and vamoose. I'll do the same one day, jump aboard a ship and go.' She realised too late that Granny Flynn was standing halfway down the scullery steps.

'Go to sea, is it, Cora? I've heard you like the company of sailors.'

Donal's face appeared behind the old woman's shoulder. 'Gran, don't. That's how rumours start.'

'It's how other things start, too, and I'll say what I like in my own house.' Granny came all the way down and pulled the pad from Cora's eye, sucking a breath through her gums. 'Swelling like a bantam's egg. Give it an hour, you'll be seeing the world soft-boiled. Am I to take it you're off to the races?' When Cora confirmed it, she sniffed. 'Where does the money come from?'

Cora put a hand under her skirt. She fiddled with her stocking top before bringing her hand out triumphantly and waving notes at Donal, who was blushing and staring at the floor. 'Five quid, still warm. Count them, Donal.'

He did. 'Where'd you get it?'

'I stuck my hand in my dad's pocket.'

Granny looked scandalised. 'Stealing from your own father?'

'He was using me as a punch-bag at the time.'

Donal burst out, 'Had he seen, he'd have kicked the head right off you. And me.'

Cora grinned. 'He didn't, though, did he? We can have the day of our lives on a fiver. Give in, Donal.'

Granny folded her arms, the physical embodiment of the word

'no'. 'You'll hand it all back, Cora Masson. What's yours is legally your father's and you owe him your duty.'

Cora regarded the old woman thoughtfully. Granny liked to take a moral stand, but her sermons were generally strongest on Mondays, the day after she'd made her confession at church to Father O'Brien. This far into the week, the religious starch had usually been steamed out of her. 'Wrong on both counts. I'm over twenty-one. And if we're talking about conscience, yours should tell you to give Donal the rest of the day off.' She shoved a wispy curl behind her ear. She could go alone, but where was the fun in that? 'Derby Day is St Patrick's other holiday. There'll be more Irishmen on the Downs than you'd find in the Emerald Isle.'

Granny planted her fists. 'I need Donal here. We're flat out.'

'You're always flat out. And he needs a few rays of sunshine – look at his cheeks. What's one afternoon?' Cora sensed Granny was weakening. 'We might back a winner, bring home a fortune. Then you could retire to the primrose pastures of Penge or Catford and never have to look a pair of grubby combinations in the eye again.'

Granny leaned forward. 'Think you'll escape these streets, girl?'

'Why not? My mum did.'

'So they say, but you're like all the rest of us, stuck like a hobnail in a crack of the pavement.' She peered at Cora's ruined stockings, then at her shoes, with the little bit of heel that had stopped Cora outrunning her father. 'I'll say this for Florence Masson, she was always bandbox neat. Dainty, kept her figure. The consequence of being a retired actress, I suppose.' Granny pronounced 'actress' as if it were an indecent, foreign word.

'She wasn't retired, not in her mind. She was always saying, "when I return to the stage". But you're right. The day she left,

she looked like a bunch of spring daffodils, for all the sky was raining its eyes out.'

Granny's reply got stuck behind her remaining good tooth. Stumping up the scullery steps, she jerked a thumb at Donal. 'Have your day out and I suppose you'd better take him. He'll be company for you on the walk home when you've lost every penny.'

As the eldest of the Flynn girls and a steady wage-earner, Sheila had her own bedroom. She was no beauty – people hinted that she'd joined the police force because the only way she could get a man was to arrest one. So it was with little expectation of finding anything worth wearing that Cora tried the wardrobe.

Locked, but the key was easily found on top of the wardrobe. 'Lack of imagination, WPC Flynn.'

Then again, Sheila wouldn't be expecting anyone as tall as herself to be searching. Prepared to find serge skirts and limp cardigans, Cora gasped at the rainbow hoard. There were lace stoles, real silk evening dresses, some embroidered with metal thread. A gown of magenta velvet took up a quarter of the space.

The labels were from leading London department stores: Harrods, Debenham & Freebody, Liberty. The emerald-green dress, pushed to one end of the rail, was very much the poor cousin.

When she slipped it over her head, Cora was instantly enveloped in exotic perfume. Well, well. If she'd been asked to guess Sheila's favourite scent, she'd have said lily-of-the-valley or carbolic soap, not hot-house flowers and spice.

The green dress had ruched sleeves wide at the shoulder, drawing attention to a belted waist and slim hips. Cora twirled in front of a dressing-table mirror. Not bad, bit dull. What about one of those bright artificial silks? But Donal was pacing the

landing outside, terrified his sister might come home unexpectedly. So Cora helped herself to rayon stockings and a pair of cream crocheted gloves. Meeting her reflection, she searched for the guilt that should have been there. It wasn't. Sheila Flynn had enough dresses to clothe a chorus line. On a constable's wages? Cora thought of her own wardrobe: a couple of work outfits, a winter suit and the dress she'd just taken off. Could saintly Sheila be taking back-handers? Or maybe she stole from shops. 'Cora, get a move on!' Donal hissed through a crack in the door.

Hat. She'd lost hers, a cheap straw with artificial cherries, running away from her dad. She worked surrounded by hats, hat-makers and hat-trimmers, yet had never had a decent one of her own. Fact was, she couldn't afford Pettrew's prices and they wouldn't let you buy the rejects. Those got taken off to be pulped.

Another reason not to feel guilty, Cora told herself as she fetched a pink and grey hatbox off the top of the wardrobe. Ten to one it was Sheila Flynn who'd ratted on her. Sheila often called at Jac Masson's workshop after nightshifts at Dunton Road Police Station. They'd share a pot of tea in Jac's shed at the railway end of Shand Street, and Jac would pass on titbits of news. Who was stealing scrap iron around the place? Who'd just acquired a motor-van or a pair of shiny boots he couldn't rightly afford? As a foreigner, Jac didn't subscribe to the Londoner's code that said you'd rather cut out your own tongue than nark to the police. People hinted that Jac and Sheila were sweet on each other, but that couldn't be right . . . Jac must be thirty years older. No, it was a business deal. Tea and information.

Sheila doubtless dished out tales about Cora. How else had Jac known about the race-day ballot, and about her ironing money? Feeling quite justified in her theft, Cora lifted the lid off the

hatbox and made a noise of disgust. The mound of black feathers inside looked more like a dead crow than a hat. Lifting it out, she found it had a label stitched into its sisal lining. *La PasserINETTE*, Paris.

Her eyes widened. Paris was where she went in her dreams. Her favourite films of all time were set there and sometimes, when life scraped like a rusty wheel, she'd imagine herself as Jeanette MacDonald being fitted for new clothes by Maurice Chevalier and singing 'Isn't It Romantic?' in harmony with him. Cora put on the hat in front of the mirror, tilting it forward until it obscured her injured eye. It had a fishnet veil that dropped down to her top lip. Suddenly, the hat made sense. Not a dead crow, but a fantasy of iridescent feathers. It wasn't Cora Masson staring back at her, but a stranger whose face was composed of striking planes. She sucked in her cheeks and murmured huskily, 'She boards a train, blind to other passengers who gasp at her beauty and shake their heads, recognising the sultry—'

'Have you gone nuts?' Donal demanded from the doorway.

'I'm being Marlene Dietrich in *Shanghai Express*.'

'You sound like my sister Doreen after she had her tonsils out. Please, let's go.'

Her last act was to grab a handbag off a hook on the door. Olive green, cheap leather, but she needed something to carry her winnings home in.

As the train pulled out of London Bridge station, she and Donal travelling third-class to save money, Cora studied her borrowed feathers in the window's reflection. There'd be a price to pay for this. There always was.

Ticket number 22 had been pulled from the hat in the company canteen last Friday, during the afternoon break. Pettrew

& Lofthouse was progressive, allowing staff twenty minutes off during the long second shift. Giant teapots would pour out strong tea, resembling a line of silver swans dipping their beaks to feed. You could choose either a currant bun or a slice of bread-and-butter with your tea. When her winning ticket was pulled out, Cora had pushed back her chair, her bun half eaten, and struck up a Charleston in the middle of the floor. It was a dance her mother had taught her, and it lived inside her feet, ready to burst out at the smallest provocation. Scuffing and kicking, flashing her hands towards the iron-vaulted ceiling, she'd played to her audience. Even the cool regard of Old Pettrew and his fellow directors had failed to quell her.

'Go on, Cora, give us a shimmy!' her friends had roared, the moment she began to flag, and she would have done, had she not been brought out of her trance by a loud 'Ahem, Miss Masson?' It was her section forelady, Miss McCullum, indicating Cora should precede her out of the door.

In her private office, Miss McCullum had said, 'Cora, that display was most improper.'

'I know, miss, but I'm celebrating.'

'Quite so, but Pettrew & Lofthouse holds to the values of its founders. Singing quietly while we work is one thing. Impressions of Josephine Baker over the teacups is not what I expect from you.'

Cora conceded, though she really wanted to say, *Then you don't know me very well, do you?*

There was a brief silence while Miss McCullum consulted some recess of her mind. 'You have won a place on the Derby Day outing, but are you certain you wish to take an afternoon's holiday?'

Cora blinked. What a stupid question.

'We've been keeping an eye on you, Miss Lofthouse and I.'

Miss Lofthouse was sister to the joint-chairman and a director. 'What sort of eye?' Cora demanded warily.

'We consider you a candidate for promotion, as demonstrated by the recent discretionary pay increase we awarded you.'

'Oh.' Cora didn't understand 'discretionary', but last month, four shillings extra had appeared in her pay packet. Kindly meant, no doubt, but not as welcome as the forelady might imagine. News of pay rises always leaked out and favouritism was poison in a close-knit environment. As for promotion, that meant walking up and down the aisles, checking her friends' work, carrying the can for their mistakes as well as her own. All for a bit of extra money she'd likely never see anyway.

Miss McCullum continued crisply, 'I tell you in confidence, Cora, that my position in ladies' soft felt may soon fall vacant.' A raised eyebrow invited response, but Cora couldn't think of one. Everyone knew that foremen and ladies had to have been millinery apprentices, schooled in the arts of blocking and fine finishing. Pettrew & Lofthouse hats adorned the heads of politicians, lords and ladies, even royalty. The directors were gentlemen, arriving for work in chauffeur-driven cars – except for Miss Lucilla Lofthouse, who came on a bicycle. But that, apparently, was because she'd been a suffragette and was still making a point. Supervisors spoke with rounded vowels and correctly applied aitches. And they dressed the part. Take Miss McCullum's cigar-brown costume and lace collar, the spectacles suspended from a thin gold chain. Whenever she walked into the make-room, where Cora worked, everyone stopped talking.

'I've only ever worked on ladies' felt and woven straw,' Cora blurted out. 'And I never could block a hat, not one anybody would want on their head, because I'm cack-handed.' She waved

her left hand. ‘They forced me to be right-handed at school, so now I can’t do anything properly, not even peel a spud. A potato, I mean. And I’ve never touched buckram nor sisal, nor plush. I’m just a trimmer. I couldn’t be forelady.’ *I’m not a lady.*

‘Indeed, you are many years from such a position. I was about to say that Miss Lofthouse and I have considered creating a subordinate post, that of assistant forelady, and we consider you suitable for such a role. You would learn on the job.’

What had that got to do with her going to the Derby, Cora wondered? The question must have shown because Miss McCullum said, ‘Absenting yourself in pursuit of rowdy pleasure ill befits a future supervisor. You will wish to withdraw from the party, I dare say.’

Seriously? In talking of future promotion, the forelady was dangling a very thin jam sandwich on the end of a very long fishing rod, whereas the Derby was six days off, and the best fun Cora was likely to have all year. She wouldn’t say it to Miss McCullum, but the work here was stupefyingly boring. Always the same grosgrain ribbon to work with, always in navy, gray or bottle green. Once in a while, a new line might demand a rosette or even a tiny feather, but Pettrew’s hats were essentially dull. Oh, yes, smart and hard-wearing, but dull. That was the point of them.

‘There’s a world out there, Miss McCullum, with wonderful colours in it. I want a bit of time off, so I get to see them.’

The eyes beneath the level brows turned cool. All Cora knew of the very private Jean McCullum was that she’d followed the Lofthouse family from Scotland when they bought out the old firm of Pettrew’s. Miss McCullum shared the family’s unadorned Methodism, so would never raise her voice or resort to intemperate language, but she could convey a sermon just by looking

at you. And the brown dress made Cora feel that her own red polka-dot and yellow cardigan was shouting something undignified.

‘By “time off”, Cora. I presume you mean “freedom”?’

‘Nothing wrong with that.’

‘No.’ Miss McCullum clicked her tongue. ‘Under firm regulation, freedom is a good thing. And this is my point. Name another respectable trade where a girl such as yourself can rise to a level where she may eventually draw a salary of two hundred pounds a year. As much as a well-paid man. Don’t settle for a life of low-paid manual labour, Cora. Seize your chances.’

‘I do seize them.’

‘The *right* chances. I began at the milliner’s bench too. And Miss Lofthouse is one of only a handful of female board directors in the whole of London, and she’s a trained milliner. You could be a forelady by the age of thirty. You’d not run from that?’

Cora didn’t know. Her thirties felt centuries off. But Derby Day was here now. Her gaze strayed to the window, to a vista of scudding clouds even factory smoke couldn’t dim. Who liked rules, except the people who made them? Everyone had ideas about what she should do with her life and they all led her through the factory gate. She knew Miss McCullum was being kind and didn’t want to seem ungrateful. So why not tell the truth? ‘I fancy my chances in Paris, Miss McCullum.’

‘Paris? Goodness, why?’

‘*Love me Tonight.*’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘It’s a film. And you have to see *Roberta* with Irene Dunne. So glamorous. The dresses, the hats . . . I’d be in Heaven in Paris.’

‘Films are not real life, Cora.’

‘Oh, they are, Miss McCullum. They’re other people’s lives, that’s all.’

‘You really want to live somebody else’s life?’

‘Every minute of every day.’

Miss McCullum blinked. ‘I don’t think you can have thought it through, dear. Assuming you arrived in Paris, what would you do?’

‘I can sing a bit, and you’ve seen me dance. I could go on the stage, like my mum.’

‘No. You aren’t small or pretty enough.’

Cora nearly opened her mouth to point out that that hadn’t stopped Joan Crawford, but in the end, said nothing. Being an actress was a red herring. She didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life, only that she couldn’t bear the idea of growing old at a workbench, or marrying some bloke called Albert or Bill just to get away from her dad’s fists and the factory whistle.

Now, as the Epsom-bound train chugged past the cramped backyards of New Cross, Forest Hill, Croydon, Cora reran that conversation and finished it: ‘The thing is, I don’t *want* to stay at Pettrew’s. I want to go to Paris. Or Timbuktu or China. Anywhere, Miss McCullum. But I haven’t got the courage. I’m a coward, see, like Granny Flynn says: stuck like a hobnail in a crack in the pavement.’

Donal and Cora bought passes for the public grandstand. Standing only, but you got a decent view of the racecourse. The other side of the white rails was The Hill, where the public roamed for free, a mosaic of spectators, cars and open-top red double-deckers. Sunlight bounced mercilessly off metal and Cora was glad of her shadowy veil. ‘What race is next?’ she asked Donal. A squadron of jockeys was cantering towards the backfield.

Donal checked his card. ‘That’ll be the two thirty going down to the start. Half an hour to the big one.’ The betting rings were

heaving, tic-tac men signalling coded messages. Odds were being bellowed, starting prices chalked up, rubbed out, rewritten. Each time the price of a horse changed, a roar went up. She'd given Donal two pounds. They'd each bought their fares and grandstand passes and kept back a few shillings to feed themselves. Everything she had left was going on one horse, to win.

'Here's the plan,' she shouted, over the roar that heralded the start of the two thirty. 'You get us a drink and something to eat and I'll maggot into the crowd. I'm going to find out which horse is the best outsider for the Derby Stakes.'

'Outsider? Are you sure?'

'I like outsiders, Donal. I feel like one myself.'

As Cora got near the runners' and riders' board, the two-thirty thundered past. Deafening, and when the winners were declared, the crowds went wild. It was a quarter of an hour before the boards were wiped clean and the Derby runners were chalked up. She read the list.

Cash Book and Perifox were joint favourites at seven to one. After that, it was Le Ksar and Goya II at nine to one. Cora rolled their names on her tongue, waiting for the jolt that would tell her she'd pronounced the name of the winner. Her eye stopped at number ten: Mid-day Sun. She felt . . . not electricity, just an emotion, the roots of which she couldn't find.

Mid-day Sun was on at 100 to seven, as was a filly, Gainsborough Lass. Those were mile-long odds. She looked for Donal, but all she could see were men and women scanning their race cards. She'd have to make her own choice. Her eye kept going back to Mid-day Sun. One hundred to seven, *if* he won. For a stake of two pounds ten, she'd win . . . she felt her brain grinding . . . between thirty and forty pounds. That would get her away from her father and keep her while she found herself a more pleasant

job. *Cora, you can stop getting your hopes up*, she admonished herself. The chance of Mid-day Sun winning the Derby was about the same as her dad coming home with a fish-and-chip supper and a big bunch of flowers. Even so, she couldn't shift the fizzy-sick feeling in her stomach.

A man in a group in front of her was saying that his choice, Perifox, came from Kentucky and that he liked the going firm. Kentucky . . . was that a posh name for Kent? Cora dug her heels into the grass. It felt pretty firm. What about Mid-day Sun? Did he like firm going? She stamped and a yowl filled her ear. She turned to see a man in full morning dress hopping in apparent agony. She moved towards him, ready to catch his top hat if it fell off. He glared at her. 'Why the devil did you stamp on my foot?'

'To know if the ground was hard or not.'

'The heel of your shoe is, I promise you.'

She was desperate to apologise, but all she managed was an inappropriate grin. He was ridiculously good-looking. Light-haired, brown eyes, with a glint of green. Hazel, a colour she'd always craved for herself. His mouth was long and firm with the promise of humour, though she'd have to wait for proof as his teeth were clenched. It said volumes about her background that she was admiring a man for being well-shaven and clean, but so it was. How often did she look at a man's collar and find it pearly white, unless it had just come through Granny Flynn's laundry? How often did she see a suit that fitted, none of the seams gasping for breath? A dark grey morning coat, top hat with a black band – good enough to be from Pettrew's – and striped twill trousers advanced the impression of good breeding. The most striking thing about him was his beauty. *Beauty*. She'd never used that word about a man, ever. Suddenly, she had a feeling she'd seen him before.

'There is something amusing about me?' He spoke in the clipped way the Pettrew's directors did when they stood up in their silk plush hats to address their workers.

'Sorry, I was trying to pick a horse.' It came out as 'an 'orse'. You can take the girl out of Bermondsey . . . Her mother, whose finest hour had been playing Gwendolen Fairfax at the Prince of Wales Theatre, had taught her that to speak nicely, you must start by lifting your nose as if smelling a rose, and saying, 'an egg'. Saying 'an egg' now would make her sound barmy. *Just don't say anything beginning with H*, she told herself. 'I didn't realise anyone was behind me.'

'Did you not think in a crowd there would be someone behind you?'

'I was trying to picture the winning . . . er, runner. To feel a spark.' Her new, cultured voice seemed to do the trick. The man looked intrigued.

'Did you? Feel a spark, I mean?'

'Sort of.' She was feeling one now and it wasn't just this man's looks doing it: it was his smell, reminiscent of empty spice jars. 'I get it in my belly. I mean, stomach. I mean, in my middle.' She patted the place. 'I fancy Mid-day Sun.'

He glanced at her waist and, for the first time, smiled. She'd tucked her gloves into her belt, not wanting a barrier between her hand and her borrowed bag. Thieves were rife at race meetings. The gloves had curled over, like begging paws.

'Interesting. To say he's unfancied would be an understatement.'

'Stupid choice, probably,' she agreed.

'Not wholly. He won at Lingfield, at the Derby Trial Stakes, so he's proved himself over a mile and a half in good company.'

'Blimey, has he?' Lingfield wasn't Newmarket or Ascot. It wasn't even York . . . Actually, Cora couldn't have found Ling-

field on a map if her life depended on it, but that didn't matter. Mid-day Sun had form, so her funny feeling wasn't so funny. 'I wouldn't be surprised if he turned out to be a bomber.'

'Now you've lost me – bomber?'

'Comes from behind.' As Cora spoke, an auburn-haired woman did just that, slipping a cream-kid hand under the man's arm. With a fleeting glance for Cora, she said something in a breathy voice. Not in English, in German.

Lots of foreigners came to Pettrew & Lofthouse, and because she'd learned French from her father, Cora was often asked to show them around the make-room. French was the language of the hat trade, but she'd picked up a smattering of German, too, because some of the best Berlin department stores regularly sent their buyers.

So she knew that the woman disliked being in a crowd and hated the smell of frying food. And when she gazed up at her companion and murmured, '*Nicht so, Dietrich?*' Cora sucked in her cheeks, assuming they were saying how much like Marlene Dietrich she looked. It was only when the man replied without looking at her that Cora realised *he* must be called Dietrich.

He hadn't sounded foreign. Though, now she thought of it, he did choose his words carefully, the way a stamp collector picks rare pieces from a box with tweezers. It explained why they were there, alongside the suburban matrons and stripy-suited commercial men, instead of swanning in the members' enclosure. Poor saps must have bought the wrong passes.

The man called Dietrich recalled Cora's presence. He said, in English, to his companion, 'This young lady thinks Mid-day Sun could be a bomber.'

Auburn brows lifted. 'Really?' She sounded bored. Like many women there today, she wore white from head to toe. A silver

fox collar made a sumptuous frame for her face and her clutch coat revealed a dress of snowy chiffon. She wore silk stockings and kid shoes that the grass hadn't yet marked. A triple row of pearls closed the gap between glove and sleeve. As for her hat, Cora couldn't take her eyes from it. White beaver belly, its crown formed two V-shaped peaks, like yacht sails at different points on the horizon. Or, if you were being fanciful, it was a trifle topping. It would have looked silly on virtually every woman in the world, but on this one, it was almost perfect.

Almost. Impelled by an impulse she couldn't explain, Cora spoke: 'Your hat's crying out for a brim. It's too narrow to balance your collar. Either you need more hat, or less fur.'

Had they been anywhere else, deafening silence would have greeted this remark, but as the Derby runners were now parading past the stands, her impudence went no further than Dietrich and the woman, who asked in heavily accented English, 'You are a hat-maker?'

'Yes . . . I'm – I'm a milliner. Quite a famous one, actually.'

'Indeed?' The woman appraised Cora's black-feathered hat so intently, she wondered if it had slipped back, revealing her bad eye. She knew it when the woman said, 'You have had an accident, perhaps?'

'I tripped getting out of my automobile.'

'And you were in Paris recently?'

'I . . . um . . . not that recently.'

'Because your hat comes from La Passerinette, in boulevard de la Madeleine.'

Cora felt the ground shift. How did the woman know? 'Boulevard . . . as you say. I don't always wear my own hats.'

'Why not? Surely, at the Epsom races, a good milliner wears her own designs.'

‘No.’ Cora dug for a credible reason. ‘I’m here incognito. That’s why I’m not in the members’ enclosure. Ladies are always wanting the hat off my head.’ Only she said “at off my ’ead’. *An egg, a bloody egg.*

‘If you are well known, I will have heard of you. What is your name?’

She could have said Cora Masson. But ‘Cora’ had always felt like a charwoman’s name and ‘Masson’ was marred by her dad’s knuckles and his drunken breath. A swift glance at the runners’ board showed her Le Grand Duc at odds of 100 to nine. When he wanted to impress the butcher or the coalman, her father had his bills sent to ‘Jacques Masson de Lirac’, claiming descent from some ancient French dukedom. If he could pretend, so could she. ‘My name is Coralie de Lirac.’ ‘Coralie’ had been her mother’s pet name for her.

‘You have a card?’ the woman asked.

‘A race card?’

‘Business card. I am curious about this La Passerinette hat. I have – I *had* – one very similar and would like to know if somebody is copying it.’

Anticipating questions she couldn’t answer, Cora improvised, ‘I dropped my cards when I fell out my motor-car but tell me your address and I’ll send you one in the post.’ The anticipated snub finally arrived.

‘One presents cards only to social equals. Dietrich,’ the woman touched her companion’s arm, ‘I am very bored now. Take me away.’

Donal chose that moment to return, clutching jars of ginger beer and two paper parcels reeking of fried onion.

‘Extra mustard, Cora!’ he shouted, over the heads of the crowd. ‘By the way, some geezer in the queue reckoned the

Kentucky horse is a banker.' Reading her crushed expression, he stared hard at the departing man in immaculate morning dress, the lady in her silver fur, and blared, 'Ruddy hell, *they* didn't try to pickpocket you, did they?'

Cora took a long swig of ginger beer. Its sweet gassiness made her feel empty and sick at the same time. Too long since breakfast. Donal pointed at the runners' board. 'Perifox. He's the one.' When she sniffed, he said, 'He's an American champ, goes like a bullet.'

'If he's come over on an Atlantic liner, he'll be wanting a lie-down. Epsom's a rogue's course. Any horse can win if it's ridden well and has a bit of luck. I'm backing Mid-day Sun.'

Dropping fried onion in shock, Donal listed all the reasons why she was idiotic, ending with '*And* he's owned by a woman. Women don't win classic races.'

'She isn't running, is she? She's not riding either. She just owns him.'

Donal's face closed. 'Women don't own Derby winners.'

'Says who?'

'Everyone.' He cast his head from side to side, searching for a reason. 'Women can't buy the best horses – they never have enough money. And men won't sell them good horses because women pick horses like they pick hats. They want the chestnuts and the greys or the ones they feel sorry for. It's a man's game. Men ride, men train, men win.'

That sounded like life in a nutshell, but Cora flicked a speck of mustard into Donal's face. 'Times are changing.' *I could be a supervisor at Pettrew & Lofthouse, on two hundred pounds a year.* And a woman could be leading the winner into the ring in half an hour's time. Anything can happen. She belched delicately behind her hand, the ginger beer doing its usual trick. She still felt sick, and

still hungry. 'I need to dash – Donal, you put my money on for me.' She handed him two pounds ten shillings. 'On the nose, to win. Don't go all soft and do an each-way.'

'You'd be mad not to back him each-way. He could come third, just, but he won't win. You'll lose the lot.'

'My money, my risk. You're going with Peri— What's his name?'

'I might. Or the one with the Russian name.'

'Le Ksar?'

'That's it. But probably Goya eye-eye.'

'What?' Cora checked her race card. 'Goya the Second, nitwit. You want to give the bookies a laugh?'

Donal gave a superior sniff. 'You never give the bookies the horse's name, Cora, only the number.'

'Yeah, well, get in that queue. I've got to run.'

Cora was violently sick in the ladies' lavatory. After she'd pulled the chain, she leaned against the cubicle wall. Her tumble in Shand Street had finally caught up with her. After washing her hands and rinsing her mouth at the basin, she went out into sunshine that seemed to have doubled in strength. By the time she found Donal, it was eight minutes past three, but the race had been delayed.

'Couldn't get the horses in a line.' Donal threw her an odd glance. 'You all right?'

'Did you put my money on?'

'I still think you're mad. To be honest—' Someone bumped into him and, as wary as Cora of thieves, he clamped his arms to his sides. A roar like a flock of invisible birds rose from the blind side of The Hill. The Derby Stakes was under way.

The first five and a half furlongs were run on the far side, so

they couldn't see a thing. Then everyone was looking to the left. Those with binoculars raised them. An instant later, the field was peeling round Tattenham Corner. Someone adept at reading jockeys' colours cried out, 'It's Renardo, Fairford and Le Grand Duc.'

Cora and Donal stared at each other in dismay.

'Fairford's leading,' their informant shouted. Cora strained to catch the first sight of horses coming onto the straight, only Donal was jumping up and down because the cry had gone up that Goya II was challenging Fairford for the lead. 'Go on, my son!' he bellowed.

'Where's mine?' Cora wailed. 'Where's Mid-day Sun?'

'Fairford's lost it,' somebody shouted. 'It's going to be Goya the Second or Le Grand Duc.'

'It's Perifox!' somebody else countered.

'Goya!' Donal beat the air to drive his horse home. 'I backed him nine to one.'

Cora felt sick again. Donal was right: she was a sentimental sop who had no place on a racecourse. But she'd been so sure.

Horses swept past, two bays locked in a private challenge.

'Who's won? Donal, who's won?'

'It could have been Goya. Holy Mother, I'll buy myself a bicycle if he's done it.'

'Who was coming up on the outside?' But nobody could answer her, not even the know-all behind them. It was a painful wait, until a new roar went up and the winner's name appeared on the board.

Cora's shriek hurt even her own ears. 'He's done it! Mid-day Sun! I could kiss him. I'm going to kiss you!' Reaching for Donal, she was surprised to find herself grabbing a complete stranger. Donal was already heading away, through the crowd.

★

Mid-day Sun first, Sandsprite second, Le Grand Duc third. When Cora finally collared Donal, his face resembled cold suet pudding.

‘Oh, God,’ he said.

She gave him a hug. ‘I’ll share my winnings, then you can have another go. The way my luck’s going, we’ll win enough to get you two bicycles.’ She’d have danced a jig had Donal not been a deadweight. So she jigged on her own. ‘Miss McCullum can stick her promotion. I can give notice. I’ll leave home tomorrow. What’s that poor bookie going to say when I tell him he’s got to hand over thirty-five quid or more?’ She waited, waited longer than she liked. ‘Donal? Give me the betting slip.’

At what point did she realise it wasn’t disappointment crushing Donal? ‘Where’s my betting slip?’

‘I—’

Looping her arms round his neck, she kicked his right leg from under him. He went down, herself on top, her knee on his chest. Never mind that people stared in shock. ‘Where is it, you dimwit?’

‘Cora, I didn’t place the bet. I thought Mid-day Sun would lose and I could give you your money back and you’d be pleased. I didn’t want you to be disappointed.’

Disappointed? She swung the olive green handbag, whacking him until somebody shouted, ‘Lay off, love. Only a few shillings, eh? Your brother was only trying to help.’

She took her rage out on the stranger instead. ‘It’s not a few shillings, it’s everything! Everything! And he’s not my brother. He’s a snotty-nosed git who pushes laundry because his own granny thinks he’s too useless for anything else.’

She strode blindly away and within minutes was in a country lane, her shoes streaked with the white chalk that surfaced the road. If

wrecked shoes was the price of solitude, so be it. She'd honestly wanted to break Donal's nose when he was on the ground – which frightened her. That was her father's temper coming out.

Up ahead, men were clustered around a pair of piebald horses. One horse was rearing while the other squealed and kicked. The men were Gypsies. On Sundays, back in the days when her parents had loved each other, they'd often taken a bus to the Sussex Downs. There'd be Gypsies there selling lucky heather and giving donkey rides. While her dad ran alongside Cora on a jogging donkey, her mother would step into a wagon for a crystal-ball reading. 'Superstitious tosh,' was how Jac Masson denounced it, but Florence had held firm.

'They see things, Jac, and you don't want a Romany curse on you. I don't, any rate.'

The last time they'd done that trip, Cora recalled her mother walking back to them, saying, 'I'm to have another baby, Jac. The old woman said I had two daughters in my palm. What d'you say to that?'

Her dad had groaned but he'd looked pleased. Maybe he should have popped into the wagon himself. Then he'd have discovered that his palm had just the one daughter in it and he could have worked out a thing or two. Cora wondered if the men up ahead were selling the piebalds, or preparing to race them. A few yards on, she realised she'd walked into one set of travellers buying the services of a stallion from another. The squealing horse was a mare. The rearing one was definitely a lad.

Cora turned. She'd never got on with horses. In Barnham Street, one long-ago summer, a tinker's stallion had tried to mount a rag-and-bone man's mare. Sparks flying from iron shoes, the rag-and-bone man fighting the stallion off with his whip.

Donal, no taller than the side of the cart, started trying to help. He'd been dragged twenty yards when the mare bolted.

Donal would be searching for her. Maybe she'd go and find him. She had to sooner or later as he had their return tickets . . . but instead she walked through a gateway into a field ringed with wagons. Barefoot children scampered around the remains of campfires. Women sat on wagon steps, smoking pipes, knitting. One called, 'Wait, lady!' but Cora turned away, only to be brought up short by an extraordinary vision.

It was an open-topped car parked between two wagons, its radiator grille, headlamps and wire wheels so highly polished that sunlight lanced off them. Paintwork as red as lipstick had lured a group of boys, who stared the way children do, wanting to touch, fearful that the man lounging against a scarlet wing would chase them off.

She recognised him by the Ascot hat on the car's bonnet, and the fair hair lifting like feathers in the breeze. Dietrich. First or last name? Did he have a taste for slumming it? And where was his stuck-up friend?

Just then, her left hand was taken in a business-like grip. Cora spun round to find a pickled-walnut face staring at her from under a hat resembling a dented stovepipe.

The woman turned Cora's hand palm up. 'Tell your future, lady.'

'I've got no money.'

The Romany woman chuckled. 'I know that. All you had has been taken.'

That took the wind out of Cora. If this woman had the gift, and was offering a palm-reading for free . . . Cora put her handbag on the grass and splayed her fingers. 'All right, Mother. Will I get out of the hat factory? Will I ever get a spark of fun in life?'

The woman stared down intently. 'You've a long life path. You will spend your life making.'

'Making what?'

'With your hands. Stitching. Shaping. For others.'

To Hell with that, Cora swore. Today had taught her something. She wanted to wear hats such as the one she had on, or like the German cow's trifle topping. *Wear*, not make. She wanted to swan about with nice-looking men. Wanted money in her purse and some in the bank.

The Romany said flatly, 'You will pursue love.'

'Pursue it how far?' Sheila Flynn must have a much bigger head than hers, Cora thought, because the feather hat was slipping backwards again. She couldn't straighten it without breaking the gypsy's grip. 'Take a look at my love-line.'

'It is unclear. It is severed.'

Cora blew a stream of air upwards. Feathers were tickling her brow.

'I see children.'

They always said that, these women. *I see a cradle, a blue one and a pink one.* It was all tosh.

'You will kill.' Eyes sharp as vinegar met Cora's.

'That's enough.'

The woman dropped Cora's hand and walked away. A second, even older, woman came forward, hand out. 'Shilling.'

'I said at the start, I've got no money.'

The crone pointed to the grass. One of Sheila Flynn's gloves lay beside the bag and Cora realised she was expected to hand it over. And its twin, obviously. 'They're not mine,' she said.

'A shilling for a palm reading,' the woman insisted.

This could go on all day. Cora gave up the gloves – they were

the sort easily bought at a draper's, after all, but the crone thrust them back, rasping, 'Betrayal!'

Cora inspected them. They looked pretty innocent to her.

'Can I help?'

She greeted Dietrich like an old friend. 'I'm embarrassed, but you wouldn't have a shilling on you?'

He took a two-shilling piece from his pocket and the crone pocketed it, then stumped away. Obviously they didn't give change round here.

'She wouldn't take my gloves so it would have been my shoes.'

Dietrich considered her in silence. The sun burnished his hair and it burst on Cora that, yes, she *had* seen him before. In the Catholic cathedral of St George, Southwark, where her father had taken her as a child. There'd been a little side window she'd loved to stare at while the rituals of the mass went on over her head. A golden chalice had stood in the embrasure, bathed in light streaming through stained glass. The window depicted a knight entangled with a dragon. 'You're my St George,' she said.

'Riding to your rescue with a shilling? You were right about Mid-day Sun. I take it you did not back him in the end? Otherwise, you would not be short of cash.'

She groaned. 'It's a long story. What about you?'

'Each-way on Le Grand Duc. Only a few pounds, though.' *Only a few pounds. How the other half lives.* 'You believe that fortune-telling nonsense?'

'Just a bit of fun.' Cora shrugged.

'It did not seem so much fun a moment ago. You looked sick, like a wounded raven.' He lifted her feathers and she flinched.

'"Raven" isn't very complimentary. Ever seen one close up? Beady eyes and a bloody big beak.'

He laughed. 'They are majestic and intriguing birds. And

highly portentous. Don't they hold the survival of the Tower of London under their wings? But, all right, not a raven, a blackbird. Decidedly inferior. I'd rather be a raven.'

'Where's your lady-friend?'

He nodded towards a yellow wagon. 'Learning her fate. She is consumed by a burning question and the only person who can answer it is an illiterate stranger who spends her life moving pots and pans from field to field. You women always want to know the small detail of your future, when, really, it is all written clearly enough.'

'In the stars?'

'In the newspapers. Politics forges destiny, not Fate or chance.'

Cora frowned. Politics hadn't drawn ticket number twenty-two out of the hat. It wasn't politics that had stopped Donal putting her stake on Mid-day Sun, either.

'Why must women be passive? Cannot they steer their own lives?' he pressed.

'Don't know.' 'Passive' was a new word, but she dug out its meaning. 'I've never been behind a steering-wheel.' She looked at his motor-car. 'Does that go fast?'

'It is a Mercedes Roadster and it goes very fast. You would like to try?'

'I wouldn't dare. But—' Words were lining up on her tongue, words that might earn her a snub. 'I'd like to sit next to you while you drive it, the wind blowing the curls out of my hair and the smog out of my lungs.'

'Smog?' He frowned at the word.

Fair exchange, Cora thought. *I'll keep 'passive' and you can have 'smog'*. 'Dirty London air,' she explained.

An idea seemed to root in his mind. 'Where would you like to go?'

'Brighton for a pint of cockles on the beach.' Then she remembered she was supposed to be a fashionable London milliner. 'I mean, for champagne and crab, um, sandwiches. Then over to France, not stopping till we hit Paris.'

'You want to go to Paris?'

'Not half. See, I've decided to run away.'

'How extraordinarily apposite. Tomorrow I am going to Paris.'

'No! On holiday?'

'Holiday and business. I have work, but I also have tickets for the Expo.' He explained: 'Exposition Internationale, where the world comes to Paris to discover architecture, technology and exotic food. You've heard of the Expo, surely?'

'Of course.' Never.

'I have a reservation on the Pullman. The boat train? Two seats. You may have one, if you like.'

Cora stared. He must realise she couldn't pay her way. And what about Miss Snowdrop? 'Isn't your friend going with you?'

'Ottilia? No, no. She was in Paris all of April. She's making her home in London now. Her husband insists.'

Her husband? 'Who was the other seat for?'

'The other seat,' his gaze raked over her face, her wide cheekbones and pointed chin, 'is for my man. But he can get another train.'

'Your man?' Oh, Lord. There were chaps who went in for funny business with their own sex. Not in Bermondsey. God help them, they wouldn't survive half an hour there, but in the theatrical districts of London. Her mother, when she was still getting work, had brought one or two fruity-voiced types home until Jac had put a stop to it.

'My man, yes. My servant.'

'Servant. That's what I thought.'

'So, you wish to come?'

To Paris, with a total stranger? Tomorrow was . . . well, it was tomorrow. Which left no thinking time, no packing time. No time for goodbyes. Though who to . . . apart from Donal? A practical obstruction hit her. 'I don't have a passport.'

'I do, and mine allows my wife to accompany me.'

'You have a wife?' Had these people never heard of marriage vows?

'Certainly, and you could easily be her, as you match her colouring and build very closely. Though, I hasten to add, you are much younger. All you need do is give your name as—' He broke off as a figure in white stumbled out of the bow-top caravan. Cora braced herself for unpleasantness. Otilia – was that her name? – would likely object to Cora being in the same field as her lovely self.

But Otilia didn't see her. Or Dietrich. She stopped to pull on her gloves and her pearl bracelets were hampering her. Dropping a glove, she stared down as if she hadn't the resolve to pick it up. Suddenly, the invitation for the Pullman struck Cora as outrageous. Cruel, even. 'How can I come to Paris with you? I have moral standards, even if you don't.'

He smiled, as if her about-face amused him. 'Otilia is a friend. As for my wife, she and I live separate lives. She remains at home in Germany.'

So he was definitely German. And that was another thing. Throw in her lot with him, and she'd never be able to set foot on home territory again. The war to end all wars had finished almost twenty years ago, but there wasn't a house on her street that hadn't lost a son, brother or father. Her dad, who had come to England as a refugee and joined an infantry regiment, still had

nightmares about the trenches and the invasion of Belgium. He couldn't say the word 'German' without spitting.

Yet, German or not, this man was offering to grant a wish expressed not two hours earlier. 'I'd have to go home, leave a note. I can't just hot-foot it.'

'Sounds like good sense.'

Good sense that was to alter the course of her life more profoundly than any Gypsy seer could have imagined.