

Prologue

21st June 1908

The air was charged with excitement. Beth lifted her head and stood tall at the front of a long line of women waiting to begin what had been predicted to be a 'Monster Rally'. There was an array of ladies, all wearing white dresses with purple, white and green sashes around their waists, or hats and scarves in the same hues. Mrs Pankhurst's words had clearly been heeded. She'd urged her supporters to wear the colours for the first time in public, to show solidarity for their cause. They were joined in their unity by men; who all wore the shades on their ties or badges and either assisted the stewards, or waited to play in the band. Standing amidst the spectacular scene that surrounded her; the deafening buzz of female noise that filled the air, Beth felt both proud and privileged to be part of such a momentous day.

As soon as they stepped off the omnibus at London Bridge station, Alice had taken charge and was now flitting from person to person making sure everything was in order. Beth felt the familiar admiration for her friend as she watched Alice find order in the midst of chaos, relieved that their recent differences seemed forgotten.

At last Alice returned to Beth, satisfied it seemed, that everyone was ready to begin. She looked magnificent the emerald green in her silk scarf exactly matched her eyes, and her hair hung down her back in a mass of red curls. Looking across at Beth she raised her banner high into the air, as every woman in the march took her lead and lifted theirs. A sea of words filled the landscape: 'VOTES FOR WOMEN, DEEDS NOT WORDS or HOPE IS STRONG' were emblazoned across the material, embroidered by women devoted to their cause. For a moment, silence filled the air as everyone waited for the command. Then Alice turned towards them and shouted at the top of her voice: "Ladies, advance forwards!" A loud cheer went up, the band began playing 'Land of Hope and Glory' and the parade began.

The first faltering steps gave way to a determined march, as everyone put one foot in front of the other, keeping time with the band as its music swept above their heads. To be part of such an event filled Beth with a feeling of euphoria such as she had never felt before. For an instant she thought of her mother and wished that she too could be marching beside her and standing up for womanhood across the country.

All along the route crowds lined the streets. Many of the women were cheering at the tops of their voices as they walked past them. But Beth noticed a more mixed reaction from the men, some were jeering or just watching the procession, shaking their heads and frowning at such boldness. She tried to look at the horizon ahead, but sometimes felt compelled to regard the people around her, where occasionally a hostile gaze met her eyes. On the edge of the pavements there stood many female flower sellers, who were out in abundance today. They were a familiar sight in London's streets, selling their wares of small bouquets of pansies, lily-of-the-valley and fern. The obvious poverty they suffered showed in the threadbare shawls that barely covered their bony shoulders. Sad looks were etched onto their lined faces.

After what seemed hours, the procession made its way past Green Park and Beth was relieved to see Marble Arch coming into view. Her arms were aching from holding up the banner and her feet had begun to protest in their laced up boots. The crowd started to squeeze through the arch and Beth felt herself panic at the sheer number of people heading in the same direction. Alice caught her hand and they managed to stay together amidst the jostling of the masses. Beth noticed a woman who'd been carrying a bouquet of flowers drop them onto the ground, where their pretty petals were soon crushed underfoot.

Beyond the arch all order was dispelled as the marchers, mixed with spectators, swarmed like ants towards the park. The area had been transformed to accommodate processions from seven different locations across London. Twenty temporary platforms had been erected in a circle to enable the speakers to address the crowds.

"Beth!" Alice's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Keep hold of my arm, I hope they all remember we're meeting at stage Number Four."

"Yes, I'm sure they will, it's what we agreed." Beth was surprised her voice sounded steady because her heart was leaping about wildly in her chest. Looking around, she couldn't see any of the ladies with whom they'd marched. But as they approached the stand, familiar faces began to appear.

Alice, Beth and a few others fought their way through the hordes of people and clambered up onto the platform, where there was space to breathe again. Beth looked down at the activity beneath her. People were pushing towards the front and there didn't seem to be a square inch between them. The noise was deafening. Alice took her place on the platform, Beth could see the anguish on her face as she fought to get their attention. Then a bugle call

sounded loud across the park. A hush fell over the audience as everyone turned their attention to Mrs Pankhurst, who was standing on a stage nearby. Her voice resounded above their heads.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Prime Minister Asquith has asked for proof that women truly want the vote!" She spread her arms wide spanning the expanse in front of her. "Surely he could not possibly need more confirmation than the multitude of people standing before me, and the enormous amount of support that both men and women are offering our cause. This is a day which will go down in history! I cannot thank you all enough and so without further ado I pass you over to our host of speakers waiting eagerly for your undivided attention."

A loud roar filled the air. Mrs Pankhurst stepped aside as all attention focused on the spokeswomen. Alice pulled herself upright, glanced down at her notes and began her speech.

Chapter One

November 1907

Realisation

Through the hum of a retiring audience, a woman's whispered tones reached Beth's ears. She was sitting in the first row of the dress circle at the Queens Theatre with her eyes fixed on the now empty stage.

"That was Hugo Somerfield, wasn't it?"

Hugo had just gone off to the saloon bar, after voicing his discontent that Beth would rather stay seated in the interval than accompany him. It hadn't taken more than a moment or two, however, for him to get over his disappointment. Before he had even reached the bar he was consoling himself with the nearest attractive female. Beth's brows creased in a frown as she heard him laugh uproariously. Turning her head she watched him whisper into the woman's ear.

Beth racked her brains trying to fathom why she had thought that Hugo's offer of marriage was acceptable. At first she shunned him, for Hugo was like the others and he certainly had nothing except money to tempt her. He was overweight and did not have a handsome face, his nose was too long, his moustache hid thin lips. His dark unkempt hair was already greying at the temples, for he was ten, nearly eleven years her senior. His complexion was florid she thought, where he overindulged too much in drink. Thoughts distracted Beth's head as they had done last night when sleep had eluded her far into the night and she wrestled with herself over the truthfulness of Hugo's promises. Now she knew it was time to face the truth and move on with her life, she could no longer push the doubts away. She had turned down every other suitor her parents' had presented her with so why had she agreed to marry Hugo? It had come; she attempted to justify, at a vulnerable time in her life. At a time, her beloved grandmother had just died. Beth ached now as she thought how intensely she missed her.

Rubbing her fingers across her forehead where she could feel the beginnings of a headache, Beth looked down at the programme in her hand. She hadn't really taken in what the play 'Beau Brocade' was all about. The programme merely provided the convenience of avoiding the gaze of some of her mother's circle of socialites, and allowed her thoughts to be far away. Having already sat through the first act which had seemed interminably long to Beth, she was

not enthusiastic about the next. It would no doubt be accompanied by more instances of Hugo sidling up to her, attempting to touch her in one way or another and making her feel sick with revulsion.

Her thoughts returned to Florence. Her grandmother had definitely been an influence in Beth's life with the stories she used to tell Beth of when she was a young girl. Of course it was even harder then, when Florence was young, to have a say in anything. But she was a woman of spirit and was known as a formidable force to be reckoned with. She was a woman used to speaking up for herself and getting her own way. It was just a few weeks after her death and at her parents' instigation that Hugo had approached Beth to begin their courtship.

It was his expressive eyes that had charmed Beth into thinking she could marry him. Hugo's one redeeming feature, they were dark brown almost black, with long eyelashes. They seemed to hold the promise that Beth sought, which was to still maintain a certain amount of independence in marriage. This was something she valued above everything else. She had long ago given up on fairy tale dreams of marrying for love, and knew the choices left to her amounted to little more than making the best of what was on offer.

Beth's thoughts returned to the day Hugo proposed. They had sat in the morning room. He'd stroked her hand and gazed with those large eyes into her face.

"I know," he said softly, "that you want more from marriage than mere companionship, and I am willing to offer you that."

Beth had stifled the desire to laugh, wondering what he could possibly mean. Then he told her all about the printing business he was running for his stepfather. He hinted that she could play a valuable part in it if she were to marry him. Beth could hardly believe her ears. "How," she had asked him, "How would that be possible?" His reply had been that he knew she needed more in her life than just socialising and that she could help him, not run the production floor or anything like that, but perhaps play a part in maintaining the business's success. Beth said she'd think about it, but next he'd offered to take her to the printing works to show her around. Beth began to feel excited by the prospect of helping Hugo with the apparently successful business, where books - the one love of her life since childhood, were printed. She had begun to think she would have a purpose to her life if she married Hugo, now though she could see he was not all he seemed.

His flirting with other women was the first thing she noticed. Whenever they went out Beth was often left alone and unattended, while he made a beeline for the prettiest woman in the room. She had often heard him lie or stretch the truth while they were out with other people. Hugo's charm was easily turned on. Beth would try to reassure herself by asking Hugo questions about how their lives would be once they were married. Hugo had taken to ignoring her pleas to tell her more about what exactly she would be doing, barely answering her and telling her not to worry her head about the business yet. She was being lied to she could see that now, and the realisation that her life would probably not be much different from her mother's had dawned. Beth could see now that Hugo would have used her as decoration at social functions and still carry on with other women; even the gossips could see that. He would have excluded her from helping with the business despite his promises.

"I see Mr Somerfield has his young lady with him tonight."

"What do you think of her? I don't know how he does it myself, apparently he's going to marry this one!"

Beth could hardly believe that the two women had the audacity to talk about her when it was obvious she could hear every word. Every instinct told her to turn round and confront them, but she also felt compelled to listen to their ramblings for a moment longer.

"Well, he can certainly lay on the charm when he wants to."

"I think that fools the young ladies into thinking he's genuine. But mark my words, a leopard doesn't change its spots."

"No, not if the way he treated his wife is anything to go by..."

"I know. Look what he was up to the other night..."

"And at the musical evening with that woman..."

"And drunk as a lord too!"

Beth had heard enough. She swung round to face the two gossips sitting just a few seats behind her. But she only glared at them, for any words she wished to say were drowned out by the audience acknowledging the orchestra entering the pit beneath the stage.

The women did have the good grace to look quite embarrassed, one of them going quite red in her over-made-up face. They obviously hadn't realised just how loud they had been talking and that the object of their conversation could hear their gossiping.

Beth turned her back on them and focused her eyes on the stage where a woman had just walked on and begun singing. The words of the gossips behind still rang in her ears and she knew they were right.

The singer's voice rang loud and clear across the theatre interrupting Beth's reverie. All at once she sat upright and took notice of the familiar words of the popular song being sung.

She's only a bird in a gilded cage

A beautiful sight to see

You may think she's happy and free from care

She's not though she seems to be

Beth's spine tingled as she sat riveted to the young woman, who was singing as if her life depended on it. For a brief moment, hot silent tears slid down Beth's cheeks.

Tis sad when you think of her wasted life

For youth cannot mate with age

And her beauty was sold for an old man's gold

She's a bird in a gilded cage

Beth quickly brushed the tears from her cheeks and straightened her back. The singer, in her sparkling gown seemed to be looking straight at Beth from her position on the stage. It seemed it was a warning to change things now before it's too late. Beth knew that she was that bird in her own gilded cage and that her life would always be that way if she married Hugo Somerfield. A new determination filled Beth to change her destiny. She thought of the recent pressure from her parents to name the day and knew what she had to do. Beth would end her engagement to Hugo as soon as was humanly possible.

The song finished just as Hugo returned to his seat, he sat down and leaned towards her, the smell of alcohol strong on his breath. "Were you enjoying the singing, my dear?" He said in a

patronising tone, his hand running up and down her thigh and his eyes focused on her slightly protruding bosom.

Beth smiled at Hugo swallowing her anger. Now that she had made her decision to end their engagement she would soon be rid of him for good she reminded herself. She so wanted to tell him here and now, wanted to see the shock on his face. Instead she bit back the words that threatened to spill. This was not the time. Taking hold of his hand she lifted it up and placed it back in his lap. She was rewarded with a beaming look from Hugo, who had taken her smile as encouragement. Fixing her with his large dark eyes he mouthed the word 'later' to her. It took all her determination to keep from showing the disgust on her face as Hugo slowly ran his tongue over his lower lip while lifting his eyebrows suggestively. Over my dead body she thought, turning her head to watch the next act of the play.

During the rest of the performance, Beth worked out in her mind how soon she could displace Hugo from her life. The play had been given good reviews and was being described as 'a captivating romance of a chivalrous highwayman,' but Beth barely heard a word being said. The chorus of the song kept ringing in her ears and she knew in her heart it was the sign she had been waiting for.

At last the four acts had all been played out and it was finished. As Beth made her way down the handsome marble staircase, she found herself behind the two gossips she had confronted earlier. Leaving Hugo loitering on the stairs, Beth swept past the two older ladies with her head held high. An unfamiliar feeling of sympathy and kinship filled Beth for the two women, for despite all their finery they too were living in a gilded cage devoid of any kind of freedom and personal choice.

Chapter Two

Finn

Finn McGuinness was indeed an intoxicating sight as he gazed out to sea. His broad shoulders were covered by workingman's clothes; his flaxen curls lifted gently in the sea breeze. Two women walked in a leisurely fashion on the deck of the cargo ship the 'SS Golden Eagle,' turning their heads they brazenly stared at this lone man who stood on the lower deck. Their female attention went unnoticed, which was unusual for Finn; a man with copious amounts of Irish charm and a certain fondness for a pretty face.

The ship was destined to arrive at the Royal Albert Docks in London having set sail from the U.S. state of Virginia laden with a cargo of spices and tea. Finn had embarked at Cork where the ship had stopped to pick up passengers and stock up with the final few days' food supplies.

It was now the last day of the voyage and Finn's amber eyes were fixed on the horizon. Inhaling deeply, he filled his nostrils with the exotic smells that wafted over from the cargo hold. Whilst watching the swell of the waves, a shrill voice jolted him out of his daydream.

"Good afternoon there, Mr McGuinness."

Finn swung round to see Mrs Lane, an American woman he'd met at dinner the night before, standing behind him. Remembering how she'd not stopped talking, Finn had been surprised she'd managed to consume any food at all.

"Gee, it's a lovely afternoon for March, wouldn't you say, if a little chilly out on deck?" Mrs Lane pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders. She graced Finn with a toothy grin from beneath the large brimmed hat that she clutched firmly against the wind.

"It sure is a beautiful day," Finn agreed, lifting his face towards the spring sunshine. Before he had time to say another word the woman's husband came rushing up to her.

"There you are, Millicent!" He gasped, clasping her arm. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Millicent seemed none too pleased to see her short stocky husband interrupt their conversation. "Oh for heavens sake, Howard, how far away can I be on a ship of this size?" she scolded, snapping at him like a crocodile.

It was only then the other man noticed Finn standing next to his wife. A dark look appeared on his face and straightening his back he looked Finn up and down rudely. "Good day, Mr McGuinness." He said curtly.

Finn couldn't help smiling at the poor man's demeanour, which seemed to make matters worse. "Good afternoon, Mr Lane. Your lovely wife and I were just passing the time of day." Finn's eyes sparkled with mischief and Mrs Lane beamed at him.

Mr Lane huffed loudly. Pulling on his wife's arm, he began leading her away in the opposite direction away from Finn McGuinness.

Finn turned back to his view of the horizon and anticipated the next day's arrival in London. How would he find the city he wondered? He knew it would be very different from Dublin, his hometown for these past twelve years. A part of him was already homesick for his native country as Dublin was a great place to live. But he wouldn't be sorry to say goodbye to the vastly growing unrest of the last few years. Strikes were now commonplace across the country. The worst so far had been this very year, nineteen hundred and seven. Now the middle of November, since January Dublin had seen over five hundred dockers out on strike.

Finn sighed as he remembered the general atmosphere rippling through the country. Despite all this his decision to leave Ireland and come to London hadn't been an easy one and on the day of his departure he heard again his friend Patrick's parting words. "Are you sure you're doing the right thing, Finn? After all the English are our sworn enemy." Finn had shrugged off Patrick's observation, knowing that Patrick was very different to him and would never leave Ireland. Besides it was too late now he'd made his decision and he was sticking to it. But Finn hadn't been able to shake off the feeling that he was betraying his roots by moving to England, leaving behind his own people for a big city full of danger, inhabited by unfriendly hostile people.

Focusing on the calm waves, an image came into his head of Aisling, the woman he'd left behind. It would have been so easy to stay, especially with the memory of her long chestnut curls, curvaceous figure and soft skin constantly forcing him to doubt whether he'd made the right decision. But something inside Finn told him she wasn't the woman for him. Despite this, guilt was Finn's constant companion on this trip. No stranger to guilt, he'd never

stopped fighting against its heavy weight. Ever since that terrible day, the summer he'd turned fourteen, it had clung to him like an octopus's tentacle curled around its prey.

Suddenly the sound of the ship's bell rang high into the air. For a brief moment all those passengers enjoying the spring sunlight stopped to listen. They were trying to ascertain the reason for its sound for it was too early for the dinner bell. Finn's experience of working in the Dublin docklands stood him in good stead however. He immediately realised the significance of the five second ring, followed by one more ring.

"Fire!" Finn shouted as loudly as he could to the passengers. They were all standing agog watching him run towards the ladder. He began climbing the bridge deck. "There's a fire at the front of the ship!"

Everyone immediately scattered and panic broke out among the women. Mr Lane's white shocked face twitched repeatedly at the terrifying revelation that the SS Golden Eagle was now on fire. He did his best to calm his wife who clung to her husband crying. "We are all going to die!"

Chapter Three

Mary

Mary Davis slowly entered the darkened bedroom. The hour was early so there was a good chance Master James would be sleeping off his folly from the night before. Glancing nervously towards the bed, she could see his tousled head of dark hair protruding from the mound of covers as the soft sound of his snoring filled the room.

Heaving a sigh of relief Mary crept across the room, knelt before the fireplace and with shaking hands began hastily sweeping ashes from the night before. Behind her James slept soundly, but the young maid shivered as she remembered times past when his unwelcome advances had haunted her dreams.

As Mary toiled at her early morning chore her hands blackened with soot, her mind returned to her first day at Richmond House. Mrs Stokes had given her the instructions needed for her duties to be carried out and Mary had vowed to work hard every single day. She had made a promise to herself when she'd left her overcrowded and impoverished home just a few short months ago. A promise that she would make something of herself and already that promise was being fulfilled. Pride filled Mary as she thought back to the day before. Mrs Stokes had drawn her aside and told her that due to her hard work she had been promoted from scullery maid to housemaid.

As Mary dipped her head to concentrate on cleaning the fireplace she felt her white cap slip down across her eyes, momentarily blinding her and causing her to drop the dustpan with a clatter. The sound echoed across the room and Mary's heart almost stopped. She froze then glancing across at the bed she was relieved to see that the master's deep sleep hadn't been disturbed and so continued her work.

A moment later and without warning Mary was pulled violently backwards and pinned to the carpet beneath her feet. The dustpan with its retrieved contents was knocked flying and Mary felt herself choking uncontrollably on the dust from the ashes caught in her throat. James tugged at her corset and forced one hand down her chemise. His other hand had hold of her hair. Despite the pain being inflicted on her scalp, Mary was trying in vain to escape. Kicking up her legs, she attempted to ram her knees into his groin. But to no avail. Now devoid of their cap her blonde curls were in disarray on the floor and her face was a mask of horror.

James's quiet strength held her down as the room swirled around her. "Stop fighting. You know you want this, I've seen the way you look at me." His breath reeked of stale alcohol, his steady voice cutting through her panic. His eyes glowed like hot coals in the dark, his face was only an inch from hers. "You don't need to pretend now my comely maid. Give into the pleasure I'll give you."

Mary felt him looking deep into her soul as terror gripped her.

"Help, please...!" At last a sound had managed to find its way out of Mary's mouth.

James's lips touched Mary's ear. "Come on, Mary, it's only a bit of fun," he cajoled. Tears of frustration streamed down Mary's face as thoughts spun through her head of times past, when she had to resist this man's advances. James took advantage of her brief moment of hesitation and pulling her bloomers aside, he pushed himself deep between her thighs. Pain tore through Mary's unwilling body at this violation and an agonised scream escaped her lips. As James slumped forward, Mary truly thought the end of her days had come, for his partially clothed body was a dead weight on hers. As air was once again forced from her body, she felt a black void sucking her deep within its depths. Into that vacuum came an image of the door opening. The formidable Mrs. Stokes was standing in the doorway staring at Mary sprawled on the floor, her legs locked in fear and entwined with those of the young master.

"So, is it more pleasure you want, my fair maiden?" James taunted as the housekeeper's shocked face disappeared from the half open door.

Mary fought to breathe as the realisation that she might lose her position forced her into fighting for her life. With what little strength there was left she began pummelling and punching James for all she was worth.

James raised himself up, still holding onto her flailing arms. A look of amusement played around his lips. "Hey. Enough! It's too late for that my 'not so fresh-faced,' little maid." You're a dark horse aren't you?" he quipped. "I think you enjoyed that as much as me. Maybe another time, when I have you in my grasp, we can enjoy these pleasures again."

"No...It weren't like that!" Mary declared between ragged breaths as James let go of her arms and sat back laughing. She struggled clumsily to her feet, trying desperately to pull her chemise back into place. Glancing towards the door at the space where Mrs Stokes had stood only a few moments earlier, Mary was filled with mortification that the older woman had

witnessed her shame. Hanging her head she turned her back on James and began doing up the few buttons that hadn't been broken. Behind her she sensed him walking back towards the bed.

Anger filled Mary like molten lava and her face burned as she pulled up her bloomers and dabbed at a trickle of blood running down her leg. She felt sick to her stomach as bile rose in her throat mixing with the taste of dust that had earlier made her choke. She remembered how months earlier James had cornered her in an upstairs room, his words once again rang in her ears. "You know you want this; I've seen the way you look at me."

Now he had carried out the threats he'd made that day and Mary knew for sure that what had just happened was all her own fault. Even though, for the life of her, she couldn't recall ever looking properly at his face before today.

The fastenings on the back of Elizabeth Hamilton-Green's moss-green gown were proving difficult to do up. Determined not to call a maid to help her with this most menial of tasks Beth wondered why her fire hadn't been made up, usually the room was warm even at this hour. Restless and unable to sleep Beth had risen early. The house was deathly quiet, but as she opened the bedroom door a muffled sound reached her ears, causing her to hesitate in the doorway. Silence once again reigned. Beth decided the noise must have been imagined and so continued on her way. With her foot on the top step of the stairway, she heard it again, penetrating the early morning stillness. Stopping to listen, Beth's eye caught a movement in the shadows at the far end of the corridor. A huddled figure was hiding in the doorway. Beth recognised Mary, the young servant girl who was rarely seen by the family as she crept about the house carrying out her duties. Beth found it hard to accept the rule that the lower servants were not worthy to look upon their superiors, and whenever she saw members of staff she continually tried to acknowledge their presence. Beth approached the young maid with caution. "Mary? It is, Mary, isn't it? What's the matter... are you ill?"

Mary slowly twisted round to face her mistress and Beth was shocked by her appearance. A river of tears ran down her pale cheeks, dishevelled hair sat in ugly clumps around her head and shoulders, her eyes were red and swollen and her white housemaids cap was missing. The front of Mary's dress was partly undone, revealing the soft white flesh of her bosom.

Beth saw that the girl was holding her cap in sore and grazed hands, staring down at the head covering as if her life depended on it.

Beth tenderly reached out a hand towards Mary's shoulder knowing that something terrible had befallen her. "Good Lord, Mary, what on earth has happened to you?"

Mary visibly flinched. Pushing herself further back into the doorway, she fixed her wide fearful eyes on Beth's concerned face. "Sorry...M...Miss...E...Elizabeth."

Waving away her apologies, Beth took matters into her own hands. Gently; but firmly, she took hold of the girl, who was shaking uncontrollably. At the same time she glanced around the expanse of corridor to check they were alone, before quickly steering Mary away from her hiding place and into Beth's own bedroom.

Beth quietly shut the door behind them and led Mary over to the bed. She pushed Mary's pliable body down onto the edge of the mattress and took a step back. A fear clutched at Beth's stomach as she assessed Mary's vacant expression. "If the eyes are the window to the soul," Beth thought, "then Mary is surely already dead."