



# THE STONE HOUSE

MARITA  
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TRANSWORLD  
BOOKS

## About the Book

Everything changes for Kate, Moya and Romy when Maeve, their mother, falls critically ill. They return from Dublin, London and New York to Rossmore and the old stone house overlooking the Irish Sea where they grew up - but ancient jealousies surface as each sister confronts the past and the decisions they have made.

For Kate it is time to re-examine of her role as a high-flying lawyer and single parent. Moya must take a good look at her marriage to the charming but unfaithful Patrick. Romy, who hasn't set foot on Irish soil for years, has to find the courage to face her family. Over the years Maeve labelled her daughters; Kate the brains, Moya the beautiful, and Romy the bold one. Now it is time for all three to break out of the box.

A gripping story of love, loss and the power of sisterhood and family relationships to survive the deepest hurts and secrets from one of Ireland's best-loved writers.

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About the Author

Also by Marita Conlon-McKenna

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# The Stone House

Marita Conlon-Mckenna

For Mandy, Laura and Fiona,  
my own three wonderful daughters.

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## RELATIVE TIME

*(for my mother)*

Towards the end, my mother would regularly bid me wind the clocks she couldn't reach - how little time I felt I had, how slow to respond, bipolarized like a pendulum that's stopped.

Younger, I'd rushed to do it, directing from the stool the ticking and the tocking with a wave of each hand, gleefully flitting with each ding and dong as I had paced them, clock succeeding clock.

When time ran out between the chores of my own motherhood and my lost name, all it became was the tighter twisting of keys in yet more faces without doors, each effort a rehearsed piece played for my mother who thought me younger than she.

She's gone. As has my own young family. And I've inherited the clocks, and the time to wind them in. I keep their faces within reach of mine. Sometimes their chimes bring memories of lighter days. Sometimes all they can say is GONE GONE GONE.

Maria Grech Ganado



Maeve Dillon walked down the gravelled driveway and across the main road, before turning through the gap in the hedgerow on to the narrow lane that led to the Strand. She savoured the solitude and quiet of the empty beach as she kicked off her flip-flops and wriggled out of her loose grey tracksuit. She loved to swim at this time of the morning and she walked across the bleached sand to the beckoning curve of swirling foam. The tide was in and she waded out to the tops of her thighs, her screams like that of a five-year-old as the freezing chill of the waves enfolded her and she dived in. The water was so cold it almost took her breath away. A good swimmer, she took long even strokes as she swam along the shoreline. Back and forth, five times, six times, the sea water invigorating her, sending the blood coursing through her veins, making her feel young, alive. She floated, letting the rhythm of the waves take her. There was nothing like it. Ever since she was a small girl she'd been swimming on this stretch, and now that she was getting older it was one of her great pleasures. Light and ageless she floated. Her daughters fussed and told her it was dangerous to swim alone but she ignored their concerns - it beat going to a gym or aerobic classes any day! Two more stretches, backstroke, over-arm. She ran out and grabbed her towel, scrubbing at her limbs and shoulders, trying to dry herself, warming as she pulled the fleece sweatshirt over her mottled blue and pink tinged skin as she set off back up the beach, nodding to Philip Doyle, who was walking his two golden Labradors.

She walked briskly, turning towards home.

She crossed the road to the Stone House, the granite-clad house, where she had grown up, and where she and Frank in turn had raised their own family. The house built by her grandfather was set on a slight slope overlooking the beach,

and provided magnificent views of the Rossmore coastline and the shipping lanes, the sound and smell of the sea a constant in the lives of its inhabitants.

A shower, then breakfast, for she had a busy day ahead.

She pottered around the kitchen. Porridge oats, milky tea, and some toast with bramble jelly. A solitary breakfast; she was still unused to this empty kitchen, children grown, Frank gone. She sat inside the window perusing yesterday's edition of the *Irish Times*, Jinx, the cat, mewing for attention. She let him out and watched him chase a daring robin across the patio.

She loved this house, this garden, and drew comfort from them. Since she had been widowed she had resisted pressures to sell it and to move somewhere smaller. This was her home and she had absolutely no intention of selling it. The place held far too many memories for her to even consider leaving it. Growing up, her daughters had filled the house with their laughter and stories and parties and Frank and herself had hatched so many plans together at this very table. They had fought and cried, loved and grieved under this roof, struggled at times to keep their marriage together. Good and bad times, all shared between the bricks, roof, floors and polished wood of this old house. But now Frank was gone, her daughters caught up in their own lives and she was for the most part alone. She did her best to keep herself busy, create new routines, enjoy simple things: the garden, the church choir, lunches, the bridge club.

Maeve stirred herself. She had a few things to do before meeting her sister for lunch.

# Chapter One

KATE DILLON CONSIDERED the notes, letters and stacks of files on her desk. She'd been far too wrapped up in the Bradley and Hughes merger, and look where it had got her. A backlog of cases to deal with and a senior partner breathing heavily down her neck, looking for some kind of date and time strategy that he could use to appease his mighty corporate clients. She rubbed at the back of her neck, hoping the circular movement of her fingers might ease off the tension of her impending headache. She stretched and, moving her head sideways, gazed from the tinted windows of her office to the quays below. A soft sunshine speckled the dark waters of the River Liffey, the late-afternoon traffic already building up. Like a princess in a shimmering glass tower Kate looked down over the city below her. She loved Dublin with its mix of old and new, ancient streets and modern contemporary architecture. Patterson's, the huge law firm where she worked, was situated right in the heart of Dublin's busy International Financial Services Centre in the redeveloped docklands. Old warehouses and derelict buildings and yards had given way to glass and steel and concrete; the dollars, pounds, euro and yen of banking and finance had created an artistic landmark. She had fought hard to work in such an environment and soon hoped to reach the level of junior partner, a title few women of her age had achieved.

'Kate, have you looked at that paperwork for Hughes's yet? They want a contract drawn up now!' interrupted her boss. Bill O'Hara, a former Irish rugby star, was now an eighteen-stone legal powerhouse who usually had the

charm and wit to soft-soap the most truculent of clients. 'Colman Hughes wants it all wrapped up by next Monday.'

Kate let out a whoosh of breath. There was at least twenty-four hours' solid work in it and she had to collect Molly from the crèche in an hour and a half.

He looked down at the pile of work on her desk.

'Just leave the rest and concentrate on this. It's too important,' he said.

'I know.'

At Patterson's, everyone knew that even the best and most loyal client could be fickle as hell if someone didn't jump through hoops to get their work done and on time. Their competitors were waiting with open arms.

'Promise I'll do my best but . . .'

'Good girl, Kate. I knew I could rely on you.' A smile lit up his broad face as he walked away from her in his immaculate Louis Copeland suit.

'I'm out to dinner with those two Americans but I'll be home by ten, so you can e-mail me with a draft.'

Kate cursed her own ambition and need to be appreciated as she phoned Derry to tell him yet again that she had to work late and to ask him if he could possibly pick up their three-year-old daughter.

A smile relaxed her face as she heard his calm and unhurried voice.

'It's all right, Katie. I was just in the middle of some designs. But it's no problem. I'll see you later.'

'I'm sorry, Derry. Really I am. It's Bill, he's put me in a spot. I'll try and get home in time for bedtime, OK?'

'Sure. Molly and I will mind each other so don't worry, and I'll make her pancakes for tea.'

Kate laughed. Molly was going through a pancake stage, demanding them at every opportunity.

'Save me some!' she said.

Putting down the phone she said a mental prayer of thanks for Derry's easy nature and the fact that he was self-employed. He worked from a small mews office close to her apartment, designing yachts and boats for a number of clients, including boat-builders and yards. Their three-year-old daughter was the result of a passionate fling. Derry was a good father who paid her some support money and had insisted on playing his part in raising Molly, a wild bundle of mischief who was a perfect balance of their two separate personalities.

Kate, a single mother, had fought hard to develop her legal career and establish her financial independence. She had seen too many of her colleagues put their career on the back boiler as they gave in to the demands of self-centred husbands or demanding young families. She had worked too hard to throw in the towel and give up the position and respect she had earned at Patterson's. She had no rich husband or family to support her: everything she and Molly had, she had earned. She had learned the hard way when she was younger not to rely on men and had no intention of ever being dependent on anyone. No, she was quite capable of taking care of herself and her child, but at this minute was very glad that Derry had agreed to help out.

Free to concentrate, she cleared her desk and opened the file on her laptop, making notes on the yellow pad as she read through the minutiae of the agreements of undertaking that were to form part of Colman Hughes's latest acquisition. Funny, it reminded her of something she had worked on three years ago . . . Leaving her desk she headed down to the third floor to the company's library of back cases and legal opinions, where she hunted for the exact documents she needed and the letter from the inspector of taxes she had dealt with.

Vonnie Quinn sat snug in the window seat of Lavelle's, looking out over the seafront and harbour.

Putting on her reading glasses she studied the menu, noticing the daily specials written in chalk on the blackboard over the busy serving counter as Sheila O'Grady the owner ambled over.

'How are you, Vonnie?'

'I'm fine, Sheila, fine. I'm just waiting for Maeve.'

'Can I get you something while you're waiting?'

'I'm sure she'll be along in a few minutes.'

'Then I'll give you time to make up your minds. How's Joe and the family?'

'They're all grand. The boys are big as houses now, all grown up. What about your own children?' enquired Vonnie.

'Lisa's doing her finals and Anna's just started working for one of those fancy French banks in Dublin as an economist. Deirdre and Tommy are in the business here with me, and Brian's just moved back from Manchester.'

'Brian's the married one?' said Vonnie. She wondered if Sheila had any grandchildren yet. She could sense a reticence in the other woman at the mention of her older son. Years ago Brian had dated her niece, they'd been childhood sweethearts, mad about each other. Then all of a sudden it had broken up. She couldn't remember why, but perhaps it had been for the best.

'Brian and his wife divorced a while back.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.'

'Well these things happen nowadays. He works for that big engineering firm Jameson's. They're doing all the work on the new bypass road and motorway.'

'That's a big project.'

'Aye, but he seems to like building roads and bridges, and it's good to have him back home.'

Vonnie smiled. She was full of admiration for Sheila, who had worked so hard in Lavelle's over the years to put her children through school and college and given them every opportunity. The two women had both attended Rossmore local Convent of Mercy and were classmates. Sheila, a

bright girl, had married young, too young, and by the time she was thirty had been left a widow with five small children to raise and no income. She had never complained and instead of whining about her misfortune had gone to Hazel Lavelle's looking for work. Rolling up her sleeves she'd set to, her hard work and intuition a huge factor in turning the small coffee shop into one of the finest restaurants in the county with a huge local trade, and the humble bakery into one of the main suppliers of gourmet breads and pastries and desserts in the South-East.

Vonnie settled down to watch the passers-by and hoped to catch a glimpse of her younger sister. She smothered a flicker of annoyance. It was so like her sister. Of late, Maeve always seemed to be delayed, caught up in something. Ever since the death of Frank over four years ago, Maeve was constantly trying to lose herself in things. Bridge, book clubs, gardening, the choir. No doubt she was attending to her plants or typing up a letter for one of the charities she volunteered for, had forgotten the time and would arrive in a few minutes, hair flying, all flustered.

The restaurant was filling up and a queue was forming for tables as she lifted up the hand-painted menu. Carrot and parsnip soup with a hint of ginger, that sounded good, then perhaps the vegetable bake and a side salad with a glass of wine.

'Still no sign,' smiled Sheila as she took her order.

'You know Maeve!'

She watched as Sheila walked back to the kitchen, envying her trim figure and her short hair, a subtle shade of highlighted ash blond. She was an attractive woman and yet had never remarried. No wonder there were still so many rumours about her. Years ago the small town's gossips' tongues had wagged and she'd been linked with a local married businessman: Vonnie's brother-in-law's name was among those mentioned. Maeve had steadfastly never said

a word to deny or confirm the accusation and had kept coming to Lavelle's for coffees and lunches until gradually over time the innuendoes were forgotten.

The soup was delicious, served with freshly made brown bread, and she tried to stifle her annoyance with Maeve as she began to eat. She hated sitting alone while all around her people were immersed in conversation. Sheila diplomatically brought her over a copy of the *Irish Independent*. She called Maeve's number: no reply. At least she must be on the way.

Annoyance gave way to alarm as her main course was served, and she ate the leek, mushroom and pepper mixture, not even bothering with coffee as she paid the bill.

'Maybe she just forgot?' consoled Sheila as they said goodbye.

'Maybe.'

As she got into her silver Volvo, a feeling of concern overwhelmed her and shifting her car into gear she turned out of the Rossmore Road instead of heading home, determined to give her sister a piece of her mind for standing her up as she drove towards the Stone House.

Forty minutes later Lucy, the senior secretary in Patterson's Mergers and Acquisitions Department, broke the peace and quiet of the Research Library room.

'Kate, there's an urgent message on the phone for you. I didn't know where you were and thought maybe you'd gone home early.'

Home early! Kate raised her eyebrows. Some chance. She jumped up. Maybe something had happened about collecting Molly.

'Was it Derry?'

'No. It was a Mrs Quinn. She's insisting on talking to you.'

'Did she leave a number?'

'She said she's not at home in Rossmore but will phone you straight back. It's urgent.'



Aunt Vonnie. What was her aunt doing phoning her at work? Her aunt hated going through switches and secretaries and much preferred long rambling calls at night with a cup of tea or a glass of wine as they chatted. She was barely back at her desk when the phone went again.

'Kate, is that you?'

'Auntie Vonnie, what is it? Is everything OK?'

'No, love. I'm sorry. It's your mum. We were meant to meet in Lavelle's for lunch today. She never turned up so I drove out to the house. She's unconscious, Kate. They're not sure if it was a fall, some kind of bleed into her brain, a stroke even. She's in the Regional.'

Kate felt the coldness in the pit of her stomach as she asked, 'Is she breathing? Has she regained consciousness?'

'She's on oxygen. And no. The doctors are with her. They want to do all kinds of brain scans. They're very worried about her, Kate. They asked me to contact her next of kin.'

'God, Vonnie. Don't say that. Mammy's going to be fine.'

'I don't know, Kate. You need to get down here. See her. Talk to them.'

Kate gripped the phone, not believing. Her mother was as strong as an ox, and never got sick. She hated hospitals and doctors.

'Kate, you'll come immediately! Your mother needs you.'

'I'll be down straight away. I'll phone Moya and Romy, so don't worry.'

'I'll stay with her, but you just get here as soon as you can, pet.'

'Thanks, Vonnie. Thanks.'

Kate put down the phone. Lucy was staring at her.

'Are you all right, Kate? Is it bad news?'

'It's my mother. She's been taken to hospital. My aunt is with her. I have to leave for Waterford immediately.'

'Don't worry. I'll look after things at this end.'

Automatically Kate began to clear her desk of sensitive documents and switched off her computer. Realizing she'd

better tell Bill she had to leave early, she went to his office. He'd already gone and the sun was beating on his high-backed leather chair.

She'd go home, grab a bag and some things before heading to Waterford, thanking God it was *en route*. Pulling her diary from her handbag she searched for her sisters' numbers as she began to dial the 044 code for London. She cursed her sisters, wondering why they couldn't be more like other families who supported and cared for each other. What had happened to them all? Moya so wrapped up with her own life in London and Romy who had simply taken off when she was not more than a kid and turned her back on the family. She'd never even bothered to keep in touch. Selfishly she had broken their parents' hearts years ago. Worst of all, her youngest sister had made absolutely no effort to come home for their father's funeral, something that Kate would never forgive her for!

Moya had her mobile turned off, so she tried her home number instead, leaving a simple message telling her what had happened and promising to phone later.

Kate eyed the row of modern silver and steel clocks on the wall. Hong Kong, Tokyo, New York and London. It was midday in New York, Romy should at least be up, she thought as she began to punch in the international code.

Romy Dillon whisked the free-range eggs together, fluffing them up as she turned them into the hot pan. A little cheese, tomato and onion and she had the perfect breakfast. Outside the daylight teased her as New Yorkers rushed to work and shops in the bright sunshine. She would eat, work for a few hours and then call on her friend Diana. She switched on the coffee-maker just as the phone in the living room shrilled. Barefoot she raced across the bleached floorboards to get it.

'Romy?'

She almost dropped the phone, recognizing the voice instantly.

'Romy, please don't put down the phone. I need to talk to you.'

'Is it Molly?'

'No, Molly's fine,' answered Kate. 'It's Mammy. She's in hospital, in the Regional. Vonnie just phoned me. She's unconscious. They're not sure what it is but the doctors told her to contact us. It's serious, Romy.'

'I heard you.'

The distance between them lay empty, desolate.

'Romy!' screamed her sister. 'You are a cold-hearted bitch. I don't give a damn about you and what's going on in that crazy head of yours. Mammy's sick, dying, and the least you can do this time is to come home and see her.'

'Don't you dare tell me what to do!' Romy said coldly, the pain ripping through her, for she had no intention of getting into an argument.

'I'm not telling you what to do. I'm simply informing you about Mammy. It's up to you if you want to come home or not to see her.'

Romy's mind was racing. She couldn't think, didn't know what to say. She would not make promises she couldn't keep. Be pressurized by her sister into a knee-jerk response. She wasn't going to be pushed into an automatic reply. She tried to gather her thoughts, protect herself.

The silence lay heavy between them, harsh and cold as the Atlantic Ocean, worse than any distance.

'Thanks, Kate. Thanks for letting me know,' she said slowly as the phone went dead on the other end.

Back in the small galley kitchen she scraped the burnt eggs into the sink, pouring herself a cup of coffee as she curled up on the padded window-seat. There had been no pleasantries, no niceties between them. How could she go back home? Return to the place she had left so long ago!

Nothing had changed, so why should she even consider going back and dragging up the hurt and pain of the past and a time she still tried so hard to forget?

## Chapter Two

THE RUSH-HOUR DART was crowded and Kate was fortunate to find a seat. The commuter train seemed to take an age as it crossed the river and pushed out along Dublin's coastline passing Ringsend and Sandymount and Booterstown, Kate almost jumping out at her usual Monkstown stop. Molly had already been collected and the minute she entered their apartment she was greeted with a flying hug.

'Mummy! Mummy, you're home. Look what I made today.'

Her daughter disappeared into the kitchen and emerged with an enormous painted pink and yellow butterfly that looked like it still might be wet.

'It's beautiful, pet. You're a great little artist,' she said, scooping her up and burying her face in the curly dark hair. Molly giggled as Kate pretended to bite her.

'I have to get changed, darling, and drive down the country to see Granny.'

'Can I come too?'

'Not tonight, pet. Granny's sick. She's in hospital.'

'I want to see her,' pleaded Molly, putting on her begging face.

'No, I'm sorry, Molly. Little girls aren't let in the hospital. You have to stay home with Daddy. OK?'

She could see the look of consideration pass over the child's face as her lip wobbled and she decided whether to cry or not.

Derry looked up from working on his laptop, papers spread out around the table. 'Just trying to catch up. I've a big meeting tomorrow. Listen, I'm sorry about your mum.'

She felt guilty for dragging him away from clients and his own work at the design yard, but was relieved to know that Molly was so well taken care of as Derry doted on their small daughter. Emotion washed over her as he wrapped her in one of those big bear hugs that still unsettled her. She clung to him for a second, almost wishing that they were something more to each other than Molly's parents and that she could stay exactly where she was for the rest of the night instead of driving down to Waterford.

'You get changed and I'll make you a cup of tea and something to eat before you leave,' he offered.

'Thanks.' Tears welled in her eyes and she rubbed at them so Molly wouldn't get upset too.

In the bedroom Kate kicked off her shoes and hung up her black suit, pulling on a pair of beige corduroys, a long-sleeved T-shirt, a wool zip-up jacket in a creamy white and a pair of comfortable decks for driving. She grabbed a change of clothes, her pyjamas, some toiletries and her toothbrush, shoving them all into the green overnight bag. Molly was engrossed in the TV when she came back in the room and she slipped into the kitchen.

'Don't worry about anything, Kate, honest. Molly and I'll be fine,' reassured Derry. 'You just stay with your mother. She's the one who needs you. I'll be able to collect Molly tomorrow if need be, and I can reschedule the next day if I have to. The O'Reillys might be a bit annoyed, but they can wait! I'll have their brief finished next week.'

She drank the hot sweet mug of tea, and ate the thin golden pancake with a shake of sugar and squeeze of lemon quickly; Molly came in to sit beside her. She watched Derry wipe Molly's sticky hands, his sandy hair bent down over hers, infinitely patient. Not minding that his beige chinos had a layer of sugar on them. Minnie and her friends were always telling her that she was lucky to have Derry on the scene and that he was so different from most guys. He wasn't one to shirk the responsibilities of fatherhood. She

knew that, but sometimes she longed for more. Perhaps to feel that his weekly visits to her apartment and his involvement in her life were not just because of the dark-haired bundle of mischief the two of them had managed to produce. Funny, the only female that he could totally commit to was a three-year-old!

She got up to go and made Molly swear to behave.

'Listen, I'm sorry having to call on you like this. Are you sure you're OK about it?'

'We'll manage.'

'I don't know what I'll do if she dies!'

'Hey! Come on, don't talk like that. Maeve's strong. She's a tough Dillon woman. You'll see, she'll get through this.'

'I'm not sure if she will,' Kate said, trying to compose herself as she grabbed her car keys and kissed Molly goodbye.

She cursed the heavy traffic and overcrowded roads and prayed that she would soon reach Waterford's main hospital and find her mother much recovered. Aunt Vonnie wasn't usually an alarmist but sometimes falls and head injuries looked a lot worse than they were. Her mother could be sitting up in bed talking by now, for all she knew.

At the Wexford lights she checked her phone: still no reply from her older sister. Putting her foot on the accelerator of the Golf she passed a slow truck hauling cattle for the ferry, the animals staring balefully at her.

She eased the car into fifth gear as she followed the Dublin to Waterford road hoping she would make good time. She put on the radio but couldn't concentrate on the news so she switched to her Coldplay CD, the familiar music soothing her.

It was almost dark by the time she reached the city. The shops and banks were shut. The streets were empty as she drove through it and out past the college and the glass

factory to the Tramore road to the hospital, where she easily found a spot in the almost empty car park.

'Kate! Oh, thank God you're here.'

Her aunt looked as if she had aged ten years in a few hours. Her naturally curly dark hair was standing on end, her face pale and strained as Kate hugged her tight.

'How is she?'

'There's no change. I keep asking but that's all they'll say.'

'Can I see her?'

'There's a nurse in the station there. Nurse Kelly. She's expecting you.'

The nurse was calm and gentle as she explained how they still had not fully ascertained what had happened to Kate's mother. A massive bleed to the brain but the extent of the damage, and her chance of recovering, it was still far too early to say.

'Can I talk to her doctor?'

Dr Healy had gone home for the night but would be on again in the morning when her mother would be fully assessed by a neurologist and the team.

Nurse Kelly passed Kate a gown and led her into the intensive care ward where her mother lay.

Kate felt a chill pass over as she entered the long narrow room. She was unable to ascertain which of the high narrow beds held her own mother. Fear choked her as she realized they all almost looked like corpses attached to machines that forced air into lungs and monitored every minute change of rhythm and pressure. The nurse led her to the woman in a bed down on the right. It was her mother, her face calm, eyes closed, her skin cold to touch. She looked so different with the colour drained from her skin, her hair brushed back off her face, her grey roots showing. She was wearing a simple printed tie-back hospital gown. Kate automatically bent forward to touch her.



'Why is she cold?' she blurted out, trying to rub her mother's arm and shoulder and warm her.

'It's better she is cool than hot with a temperature. The air here is kept at a regular temperature to make it easier for the patients.'

'Mammy! Mammy!' she whispered. 'It's Kate.'

There was no response. She watched her mother's face: closed, her effort now concentrated on breathing, the machine making a slow whooshing sound beside her. It scared her. She had never seen her mother like this.

'She just looks like she is asleep. How long will she stay like that?'

'We'll know better tomorrow, be able to judge. For the moment she's best left quiet, totally still. The brain is delicate, there's still swelling.'

'How much?'

'We're not sure of the extent of it yet.'

Kate looked at her mother and wondered how she could have taken her life so much for granted. Her mother was never sick. Everyone in Rossmore knew that. Maeve Dillon was a woman with a fine constitution who kept herself healthy and fit with walking and cycling and swimming all year round. She didn't smoke, didn't overeat and only drank the odd glass of wine or pint of beer. She'd always looked after herself and following their father's death had kept occupied with the Vincent de Paul work as well as playing bridge and helping with the local meals on wheels. Kate struggled to compose herself.

'Can I stay with her?'

'You can sit with her for a few minutes if you like, but as you see the nurses and doctors need to be able to get easy access to patients here quickly so there aren't the same facilities for visitors as in another ward. There is a special waiting room just outside the door with coffee and tea and a place to put your feet up. Your mother is being totally

monitored and if there's even the slightest change in her condition you'll be informed.'

The nurse left her for a few minutes. It felt unreal balanced on the narrow stool waiting for her mother to wake up. When Kate was small she would grab at her mother and shake her and roll on top of her to wake her when she needed her, and her mother would reach and pull her daughter into her arms even when she was asleep or having a nap, the two of them laughing.

'Mammy, I'm here with you. You're in the hospital but you're going to get better. I promise.'

All around silence, except for the machines. She wanted to scream and shake her mother. Rouse her.

'Mammy, please wake up.'

Nurse Kelly appeared silently at her shoulder, suggesting it would be better if Kate wait outside for the moment. She followed the nurse out, hanging the gown on a hook.

'Did you contact Maeve's other children?' the nurse asked.

'Yes, I left a message for my sister in London and I spoke to Romy in New York.'

'They realize the seriousness of your mother's condition!'

'I told them what my aunt said. I'll phone Moya again.'

'I'm sure you've done your best,' smiled the tall dark-haired nurse. 'You go and have a seat in the waiting room with your aunt and I promise to get you if you're needed. You'll be tired after the drive.'

'I'm bunched,' she admitted, feeling that every ounce of energy had drained out of her.

'A cup of tea'd do no harm. Your mother is in the best of hands.'

Aunt Vonnie sat pretending to read an old copy of *Image* magazine in the magnolia-painted room.

'Well what'd you think, Kate?'

'I don't know,' she admitted honestly. 'I just don't know. Do they think she's going to die?'

Her aunt's pale blue eyes welled with tears.

'I hope not,' she said firmly. 'Maeve's a fighter. She won't give up easily.'

'But they were saying about swelling in her brain, what does that mean?'

Her aunt shook her head. 'We must pray for her. Prayer is what's needed now. We must ask the Lord to spare her.'

Kate didn't know what to say. She hadn't the same faith or belief as her aunt.

'Would you like some tea or coffee?' she asked.

'A mug of tea would be grand, pet.'

In the far corner of the room there was a sink and an electric kettle, mugs and cups, spoons and plates, and an assortment of different types of teas and coffee, packets of biscuits and milk and sugar.

Kate was glad to busy herself, wiping around the sink with a cloth and cleaning the worktop.

Her aunt looked wretched, she thought, as she passed her the hot mug of tea. 'It must have been a shock for you finding Mammy like that,' she said.

'All I can say is thank God we'd arranged to meet for lunch and that I was so mad with her I drove over, otherwise God knows what would have happened!'

Kate couldn't help but feel the reprimand in her aunt's voice. Her mother lived on the outskirts of the town and if it wasn't for her friends and activities could go for days without seeing anyone.

'I'm so glad you were there,' she said, squeezing her aunt's hand.

Her mother would be lost without her older sister, the bond between them still strong.

'When I got to the house it was too quiet - you know your mother, she always has the radio or music blaring - then I found her. I thought she was dead at first. I came with her in the ambulance. Once we got here they all took over, but I kept talking to her. You know Maeve, she loves talk.'

'I don't know what we'd do without you, Aunt Vonnie. You and Mammy are so close.'

Her aunt took a packet of tissues from her bag and blew her nose. She looked absolutely exhausted, her face drawn, a ladder in her tights, and her pale blue and cream suit crumpled.

'Maybe you should go home for a while and have a rest,' Kate suggested gently. 'You've had such a shock today, and contacting me and the ambulance and everything.'

'Maybe you're right,' agreed her aunt, rubbing her eyes. 'I'm all done in.'

'I'll stay here with Mammy.'

'What did the girls say? Are they on their way?'

'I spoke to Romy, but,' she shrugged, 'I don't know.'

'This time she has to come home, Kate. Give me her phone number, I'll phone her when I get home and tell her to come immediately. Your mother needs her!'

'I know.'

'And what about Moya?'

'She's probably getting a flight. I don't know.'

'A mother needs her children around her at a time like this, and you girls should be together if anything were to happen.'

'Please, Aunt Vonnie, don't say that.'

Kate was too tired and upset to get into any kind of argument or deep discussion with her aunt, who was far too overwrought herself.

'There's a payphone outside the door. I'll go and phone Joe. I won't be long.'

A few minutes later her aunt reappeared. 'He's on his way. He's so good he'd already left to come and get me.'

Kate smiled. Her uncle was one of the nicest men put on the planet: caring and protective and still mad about her aunt after thirty years of marriage.

'He wants to look in on Maeve anyways. Maybe you should try Moya again?' Vonnie said.

'I'll use my mobile. I've got the number in that.'

'You'll have to go outside or downstairs where we came in to use it. There's signs everywhere here.'

Kate sighed. Her aunt wasn't going to give up on it. Getting up from the low, tweed-covered couch she made her way down in the lift and out past the night porter's desk to the automatic doors.

She redialled Romy's number. No answer. She didn't bother leaving a message. She went down through her address book and called Moya. The number rang and rang and was finally answered by her niece Fiona. Rock music pounded in the background.

'Hi, Fiona. It's your Aunt Kate, is your mum there?'

'She's out.'

'Oh, is your dad there?'

'He's out too,' she said slowly. 'They're together.'

'Did your mum get the message I left earlier about Granny?'

'I don't know.'

Kate could almost hear the uninterest and confusion in the teenage voice.

'Listen, did she check her messages?'

She fell silent. It was no use.

'Fiona, I need to speak to your mum, urgently. Where is she? I need the number.'

She knew that Patrick would insist on privacy and not being disturbed, mobiles switched off, but that her sister was the type of mother who always left the number of where she was going pinned up somewhere in case her children needed her.

Her bet paid off. Minutes later she had the number. Dinner party or not, she didn't give a damn. She was phoning Moya and telling her to get herself home as soon as possible.

## Chapter Three

THE HOUSE IN Ovington Gardens was warm, hot even, for the Mitchells always seemed to have the thermostat of their heating turned up and the boiler at full blast. A huge fire burned in the magnificent Adams fireplace and Moya Redmond thanked heaven that she was wearing a Synan O'Mahoney scooped-neck black-frilled top and figure-hugging black skirt, a classic with a little bit of oomph that she'd picked up the last time she'd visited Dublin. If she'd worn wool she'd have expired.

Patrick looked handsome as ever but a bit warm about the gills and she hoped by the time they sat down to eat that the men would be able to relieve themselves of their jackets. Why, even the champagne was warm!

Moya knew almost everybody at the dinner party so she should be able to relax and enjoy the night.

'Moya, don't tell me you're hiding yourself!' joked Hilary Mitchell their hostess, her plump face red with excitement.

She was fond of the older woman and hugged her warmly.

'I was wondering where you were.'

'I was just in the kitchen checking on things.'

They smiled, both knowing that checking on things meant checking on Poppy and Rachel Belling, the caterers. The girls ran a polished operation from a small shop on the corner of Granville Street, and with word-of-mouth recommendations now needed to be booked almost a month in advance.

'Everything is in hand and we should be ready to sit down and eat in about twenty minutes or so.'