The Narrow Gate

A Novel By

Julianne B. McCullagh

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First Edition

To Gene, for all the love.

About the Author

Julianne McCullagh is a Mayborn Literary Conference First Place winner, has been published in Rose and Thorn Literary Journal, Ten Spurs Journal, is a Writer's Digest Literary Fiction winner, wrote a series for Loyola Press, and has been a writing instructor at The Writers Garret, Dallas. You can read more of her work at www. gracenoteslive. com .

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Part One

2004

Chapter One

ROSE WAS WARNED.

She felt the slow rise of light and peace. Her hearing keened, tuned to a higher frequency. A subtle shift, from here to there. A correction on the dial.

She'd had these feelings before. At first it feels like a gift, a consolation. The light, like the rising of the dawn. Peace spreading out from the center. Her center, the center, it was the same.

Years ago she had learned that the peace and light were a warning as much as a consolation. Still, she welcomed the translucent moments; they were a reminder that she was not alone, that the promise was still in effect.

So when the recent consolation wrapped itself around her she thought it was a gift against the coming death of her father. He'd been dying for months since his stroke last August. He made it through Christmas, a sad little affair in the common room of the nursing home. Patients like her father were wheeled in, some with IV bags attached to a pole, some on beds cranked to a sort of sitting position. The lucky ones made it in on their own legs, with only a cane or a walker to keep them from falling.

An artificial tree was decked out in tinsel and bright hanging things weighing down the branches. A CD player blasted carols, both devotional and juvenile. Staff in their multi-colored scrubs

clapped their hands and smiled as they sang the lyrics. Some wore Santa caps with mistletoe or jingle bells dangling near an ear.

Rose was a little afraid that he would boil over at this childishness. That he would pull himself up straight and object, defending the residents, the captives, against the infantilizing of the old and dying.

But he didn't. Or couldn't.

They wheeled him back to his room because the next phase of the celebration was Christmas dinner and he was on a feeding tube. Rose thought the smells of turkey and cranberry and pies would be a torment to him. He would never taste these things again. The little pleasures in life. The little bits that make life, life.

A few weeks after the New Year is when the gift opened in Rose.

On a Sunday morning, after she wheeled her father back from Mass in the chapel to his room, she noticed he had a little more pep, a little energy and almost, almost, a touch of happiness.

"Dad, you're looking good. Do they have a pretty new nurse on the floor?"

His answer came slowly, garbled in the saliva he could not swallow.

She had to put an ear near his mouth to get the words.

"Jenny came. She brought Paul. A son to be proud of."

That's when it came. A power. A protection. Light filling her from the inside, bringing her to the thin place.

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His wake went well, pretty much. A good sendoff. He would have liked it. A respectable showing of mourners and well-wishers. Enough funny stories from old cronies from his school and work days. Neighbors, friends and colleagues of Rose and of her husband Dennis talked in near whispers, introducing themselves, threading thin connections in this ancient ritual of common fate.

For generations people have held themselves in the same
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posture, dropping smiles or laughter at the front door, resuming them only when some time has passed and the visitors have viewed the body and said a quick prayer in front of the paint daubed corpse. Then there are pockets of laughter when an old friend tells a story of boyhood pranks, shared remembrances, and then, inevitably, that shaking of the head in the acknowledgment that life goes by too quickly, silently wondering who will be the next one laid out in a box with a rosary twined through rubber like hands.

Rose and her brother Jimmy were the hosts of this event, the official mourners. Jimmy managed to act sober throughout the proceedings. Pockets come in handy for the shakes, and moving from person to person, just a little chat here and there, and an excuse, "I'll be right back, never did kick the habit, you know," as he pats the rectangle in his jacket pocket while heading for the door to light up.

He showered and shaved and his shoes weren't too badly scuffed. No one would have to actually know that he's spent the last twenty something years lost in a bottle. They can exchange glances and raised eyebrows, but they don't have to know.

Rose found one of their father's suits to fit him, enough. Jimmy tells the well wishers that his son Kevin lives out of state, in Kansas, working for a big firm. He fumbles for a name. He recalls John Deere as the sort of middle of the country company that people might believe, so that's what he says.

"Recently accepted a job at John Deere—big company out West, ya know, that's why he couldn't make it to his granddad's funeral."

"If anyone would understand the importance of work, it was your father, Jimmy. Isn't that the truth? Yep, that Philip Banfry knew about the value of work, he did. And could he work a room. Never met a stranger. Made everyone feel like his best friend." The hearty man with a beef red face pats Jimmy on the back as he says this.

"And, of course, after such a long illness, such a long time in the nursing home, hooked up, neck too weak to hold his head, it

was a blessing, wasn't it? Now he can be with your mother, with his Maureen. Together after, what, five years?"

Betty Lawrence, founding member of the Rosary Society, shakes her head, just a little, and pats at the corner of her mouth with a delicate, embroidered handkerchief.

"And don't forget their little angel Priscilla waiting for her mom and dad. What's it been now? More than thirty years. My, where does the time go?"

This other woman, grey-haired, knuckles enlarged with purple veins riding the top, chimed in. Jimmy thinks he should know her name, but the only thought that comes is that her dress and her veins match.

Jimmy and Rose smile their way through the inanities of the well-wishers, playing their parts in this scripted ceremony.

Then Rose saw Jenny.

Jenny, the pretty secretary from Philip Banfry's practice. Smart, pretty, *young* Jenny.

What, she was about ten years older than me, right? Yeah, that would make her about twenty-three when Cilla died. Twenty-three when my mother retreated from life once the casket was lowered holding her youngest child, my baby sister. Twenty-three with her whole life ahead of her.

She married someone from Dad's office and had a child, a son. And here he is at my father's funeral. Handsome young man. Shake his hand.

"Paul Cellio. Sorry about your loss."

"Do I know you, Paul?"

"I don't think we've ever met, Mrs. McGuire."

"Oh, call me Rose, please."

"Jimmy, come here and meet Jenny's son Paul. You remember Jenny."

Jimmy turned to Jenny. A smile lightened his face. "Of course,

how could I forget? I had a crush on you once. So funny, after all these years. Your son, Paul? Nice to meet you."

The two men shake hands.

Jimmy, gray around the eyes, skin soft on his jaw and this young man Paul, who looks so familiar. So familiar. Shaking everyone's hand like a pro. Like a star. A natural, like he was born to it.

The hushed, convivial chatter fills Rose's ears, shakes her brain. As the two men extend their right hands to meet, Rose cannot look away. The hands are nearly identical, the dark hairs on the knuckles, the square, neat nails, the same. She uses every ounce of will she has to not cry out, to not object. She pulls the question that contorts her face back in, back down. Unclench the brow, relax the eyes. Her hand closes over the back of a folding chair, her balance is off.

She looks to see if she can catch Dennis' eye, but he's absorbed in his own little conference with a woman from his office.

She excuses herself, goes outside. The frigid air with the promise of snow in those dark gray clouds whips her face, drives the water from her eyes. She wipes her cheek with the back of her hand. She has to move, has to run, but no, what would that look like?

Would they think she is running because her father, her dear daddy,is gone? That's what they would think, and no, she cannot give him that, not now.

No, her father, her daddy, left her alone years ago and had this other life while Rose stayed home with her mother who fell deeper and deeper into her own silent world.

Two pictures flash in her mind:

Jimmy and Paul shaking hands. Jimmy, the cuckold, if that word can apply to a father's betrayal of a son, shaking hands with his rival.

And Good Friday, the temple curtain ripping from top to bottom. What she thought was their covenant, her family, her story, has been a lie. Her life, a lie.

Chapter Two

Rose pushes against cold wind through the canyons of lower Manhattan. She wipes her gloved hands against tears. Down the hole she goes. And waits.

It's been a week since her father's funeral. She returned to work the next day. She didn't want to take the time she was allowed for a family funeral. But spending the last few days trying to work has been useless. It's a little before noon and she's headed home.

Subways in the middle of the day are strange and ugly places. The smell of garbage and urine, the sound of rats scurrying under the platform, and the fine black soot that covers the rails and hovers in the air coating nostrils and lungs seem less personal in the crush of rush hour. She inhales, and is abruptly aware of the dust of commuters that have made this descent for years.

Straddling her foot over the faded yellow line, a touch of vertigo warns her that she is close, too close, to falling into the dark ugliness.

She is almost alone. A man with his head submerged in the collar of a large stained parka sits on a bench across from tiles proclaiming this destination: Broad Street. *Enter by the narrow gate, for the road to perdition is broad.* These words startle her. He is muttering to himself. Did he just speak out clearly? A transit cop comes down the stairs, nods at her as he walks slowly by.

She stands far enough from the man to be able to run up the

stairs if he stirs, but not so far as to be rude. He draws his head from the turtle's collar fashioned from the top of his coat, muttering as he turns toward Rose.

His face is cast in a pale charcoal against the shadow of a dark beard. His blue eyes are surprisingly bright. If he has asked something of her, she doesn't know what it is. She doesn't want to know.

The J train screeches to a halt, the doors open. Her companion stays put on the platform. She can have any seat on the empty train. She chooses the one directly across from him.

They look at each other through the scratched and filthy window, safe, she hopes, in this metal cocoon. When the train pulls out, she is relieved to be away from him. And slightly ashamed.

She left him on the bench at Broad Street. But he is there in the *whoo, whoo, whoo* flash of tunnel lights behind the speeding train.

She doesn't want to think about him. She wants to simmer in her agony; pound her fists at the lies she was pulled into, the blinders forced on her while she tried to balance it all, keep them happy so their lives would not dissolve like sugar in water, like snow in sun, like black slush under tires in dirty puddles.

But no, Rose sees that man in the dirty coat, probably crazy, probably drunk, probably stupid. Just because he looks like he stumbled out of the tunnels doesn't make him John the Baptist. He didn't look at her with vision that could read her heart and know her deepest fears, did he? He was probably just condemning her for her bourgeois ways and the crime of possessing a clean coat.

As the J train chugs its way under the East River and up the scaffolding of the elevated rails through Brooklyn, she stares out the window at the barren trees and wrecked schoolyards.

Her eyes are open; the familiar landscape a backdrop. She is arguing. With God. Well, not arguing, because she doesn't give God a chance to answer or defend himself.

You promised me!! Were you lying to me? Just laughing at me? All the times I defended you, and you leave me here by myself. You

promised me grace and protection!

A fat tear forms in the corner of her eye. Oh no you don't, she orders herself. Not here. Not now.

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Dennis and the kids are gone to work and school. She says nothing about her plans for the day.

Rose climbs back into bed, wraps herself in the big quilt. Dappled streams of light come in through the blinds.

The naked limbs of the big oak outside the window are silhouettes on the wall; the weak sun lights on the Miraculous Medal hanging around her bedpost.

It was Cilla's, then her mother's. Her mother took it from Cilla's neck before the casket was closed, then fastened it around her own neck. Rose took it from her mother the day she died. For a long time Rose wore it, then retired it to her bedpost.

She reaches for it now. She holds this small oval in her hand, finger tips going over the familiar Mother figure like a blind person reading a face.

She presses the gold into the soft tissue below her collar bone, willing it to leave a blessing on her heart.

Mary conceived without sin pray for us who have recourse to thee. Over and over she says the prayer she has memorized since infancy.

This is her mantra, her charm, her shield against pain. She does not care if this is sentimental or superstitious or childish. She wants her miracle.

She wants a *Touched by an Angel* miracle, glowing and white and unmistakable, writ large so she cannot dismiss it as mere coincidence.

At 10:42 a rumble of thunder pokes her out of her stolen nap. The room is darker than when she went to hide this morning and her fingers are stiff from holding the medal tight while she slept, still murmuring the prayer as she falls out of sleep.
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Rain is beating against the windows and the branches of the oak are scratching the house. She rolls over and tries to go back to sleep, but cannot. She needs to get up.

So down the back stairway to the kitchen to put the kettle on. Her favorite china cup for Blackberry Sage tea is just inside the cabinet.

It's delicate china, left over from her grandmother's set, with red roses around the rim and one inside the lip, with accents of royal blue and gold. Taking it into the living room she pulls her knees up to her chin in the stuffed rocker.

Not once in high school or college did she play hooky. Of course in those days, she didn't have her own home to hide in.

My own home. Hmm. It is my grandparent's house with the whispers of the years there under that fresh layer of paint, in the old tile floor, or the boxes in the cellar.

The steam in the pipes kicks and spurts, sending heat into the chilly room. The aromatic tea warms her face. The storm has quieted; sunlight falls on her from the side window.

She could be hiding in a cave, in a cabin in the woods in a fairy tale, waiting, waiting. For what, she doesn't know. Right now she doesn't care. She just knows she's waiting.

I want the light and warmth of the thin place back. I want it back with no strings attached, just a comfort, not a warning.

I want it to wash over me, over the pain, to loosen the knot in my gut that has been my companion for days beyond counting.

From somewhere deep—words of pain, of anger red hot glaring—*Was it all a lie? Was I so stupid* as *to believe that?* Her cup of tea rests on the wide arm of the chair. As she pulls her knees up closer to her chest, her left arm slips. Sunlight breaks through a moment's opening between masses of clouds. The cup falls, shattering on the old oak floor, bits of china dust sprinkle like snow. The red and blue and gold shards of delicate porcelain catch the sunlight in their pool of blackberry tea.

Part Two

1954 through 1967

Chapter Three

Meg

March 1954

MEG RUNS HER HAND over the bristles of the green mohair couch, back and forth, back and forth. How many years had they sat here, reading the paper, curled up with a book, her head on his chest, his arm around her shoulder? Stiffer than velvet, yet soft and inviting. Quite a remarkable fabric, she thinks.

She sits in the curve where back turns into arm, draped in Gerald's sweater. His scent is in the wool, his shaving cream, his aftershave, him. She knows this will dissipate, but she doesn't want to preserve it in a bureau drawer.

Mass cards and late arriving funeral bouquets clutter the house. Just two days ago he was laid out here, where the couch has been returned, under the bay window, drapes pulled closed behind the bier and the casket covered in a blanket of flowers.

His head, mostly bald, with silver hair that ran from ear to ear in a partial tonsure flattened and lacquered by the beautician's craft, lips daubed a pasty pink, wrinkles dusted with heavy powder, and glasses over his closed eyes.

Why do they put glasses on a man who can't see? Did he fall asleep in his best suit in this box, with a satin pillow and a rosary

entwined in waxen fingers?

They came and arranged it all. Calls made, by whom, she's not quite sure, but someone called and someone took care of these things. All done so smoothly, quickly, neatly, and there, her husband is in the living room, laid out for all to see. She answered questions and gave them a suit, she thinks she did, maybe it was one of her sons, Phil or John. A shirt, a tie, cufflinks. All fixed up. So dapper, so right, so wrong.

That night, he came in from work, tired, a bit gray in the cheeks and under his eyes. He tried to eat the chicken Meg had roasted for them.

He managed a few bites and said *I need to lie down, Meg. I'll just go to the couch.* Meg kissed him on the head and squeezed his hand. He was wearing the sweater. It was chilly that night.

Someone sent a large carnation shamrock, sprayed in an odious green paint. It was delivered this morning, but she would let it in no further than the vestibule. It stands on a wire easel draped with a purple ribbon and gold cardboard letters that spell out *Friend,* adorned with a few cardboard shamrocks for good measure.

Her irritation with this leprechaun schlock gives way to the realization that it was sent with good intent. Someone whose name probably ends in a few vowels thought it would be just the right thing.

But no, the card says *Condolences from O'Malley's Pub*. Every St. Patrick's Day they color the beer green and affect some unidentifiable brogue. Gerald held union meetings there. She can't stand the sight, or the smell, of it. She can't look at another mass card or read another letter of condolence, a testimonial to what a great man, what a blessing her husband was.

She is alone in the house where they raised their sons, entertained on so many Saturday nights, held meetings that ended with strikes planned and from which riots erupted and other men, maybe not great in the eyes of the world, were hurt, and some killed.

Alone in the house where they first heard FDR announce

the war which took her sons off. Alone in the house where the commotion in the yard shook her out of her light sleep the night the Mob goons came looking for Gerald, met him at the back door and left him bloody and bruised. *Just a warning*, they told him, *next time, next time you won't be so lucky, you stupid Mick.*

They were sitting on this couch that other night, the night they came, lights flashing in the black and white outside the door.

A detective flipped a badge and entered their home. He may as well have stolen all their silver and china while he was there. He stood on her floral patterned rug, the rug where her sons ran their trucks and built their block castles when they were little boys. He left a muddy footprint on the vines in the pattern. The detective read out some words from the paper he was holding while a uniform put cuffs on her husband, led him out on that cold night, coat draped around his shoulders, his head bare against the wind.

Words like embezzlement, misappropriation of funds from the union accounts, were a distant echo, like whispers off stage in someone else's play. It must all be a misunderstanding, a lie. None of this was possible. Who would have accused him of such a thing? His life threatened so many times. The terror they endured. Every time a door slammed or glass broke, they jumped, nerves at the edge, frayed and electric.

She studied the pictures in the paper of that dark and ugly face, the face of a murderer who reigned from Chicago, who promised that Gerald was next. Maybe found in an alley. Maybe not found ever. And that smug and ambitious District Attorney who built his reputation on the backs and souls of men trying to fight corruption, trying to gain justice for the perpetual pawns in these ugly games.

They sent him to jail. Justice bought and paid for by criminals, some with records, some with law degrees. Gone two years in prison. Now gone forever.

All the years this house was filled with life, with tears, with joys, and not yet three days before the body of her husband was laid out in grand fashion.

Lines of mourners and gawkers filed through while Meg and her sons took hands and cheeks offered in sympathy.

So much chatter filling every corner of the house, guests eating the food that friends and neighbors brought, drinking what the men carried in crates and set up on the kitchen table.

Some women took a measure of the quality of the drapes, the furniture, the silver laid out on the table for their use.

He did pretty well for himself, didn't he? Not such a common man as those he blathered about, now, was he?

The kinder ones buzzed *What a shame, what a shame* through their house, their home. *After all she's been through, then he's taken, leaving her alone again. Poor Meg. Poor Meg.*

The doorbell rings. She sees through the blinds that it is the florist, but she will not get up. After a minute he goes, leaving another bouquet, another testimonial.

Mail has piled up in the vestibule. How many days has she just let it fall through the slot, not able to touch it? Bills mixed in with sympathy cards, newspapers on the porch. Her sons had to get back to work and their wives are busy with their small children.

She doesn't want them here anyway. She wants to sit, just sit and cry without anyone saying *oh dear it will be all right.* She wants to scream *It won't be all right and just let me cry, haven't I the right?*

She realizes she has been on the couch for more than two hours. A cup of tea is what she needs.

Pushing off the couch Meg goes through the swinging kitchen door, fills the kettle, turns on the gas, lights the stove with a match, then sets up a cup. The kettle whistles just as Millie puts her hand to knock on the back door. Millie is the only one Meg will welcome.

"I've taken your papers in, and put the flowers in my cellar. We don't want anyone thinkin' the house is empty and come breakin' in surprising you to your death, now do we?" Meg gives Millie a tired smile and gets out another cup for tea.

"I'm givin' you one week Meg. And then I'm takin' you out."

Millie looks for Meg to disagree, to protest, but Meg smiles and says "have your tea, Millie. Oh, can your son take that awful shamrock to a pub on the boulevard? It might sell a few more beers to the thirsty men staying out all night."

"Sure, Meg. Frank'll come by after supper. He'll take it to Woody's."

Chapter Four

Millie was almost true to her word. One week she gave Meg. Yesterday she called in the afternoon and told Meg that she would be preparing lunch at her house.

"I've got in a lovely canned ham from the A & P, Meg. Since we cannot have it on Friday, you'll have to come for lunch tomorrow. I don't much like fish and I want to make an occasion of it. So, I'll expect you at one."

"One? Alright, Millie. Only because it's you. Don't you dare have any one else there."

"Just us, Meg."

"Just the two neighbor widows."

"Just two old friends."

Thursday morning Meg is up at 6:30, same as she's done for years.

She doesn't look at the empty side of her bed. She slips on her blue chenille robe and heads down the stairs to make coffee. One slice of toast, with a little butter and jam.

The coffee perks in the glass button of the aluminum pot on the stove. Meg turns off the gas, gets the milk and sugar and pours herself a cup.

She will wait until the coffee cools before pouring the rest down

the sink. She thinks she might buy one of the small percolators she has seen in the A &P.

The right size for one person. Maybe. Or maybe I'll just learn how to measure out enough for me.

As she washes up the few dishes, round and round with the dishcloth on the small plate that only had crumbs to dirty it, she sees the note, as if it is right in front of her, as close as the faucet.

Typed unevenly: Banfry—79 Forest Parkway. Blue shutters, loose knob on front porch banister. Careful.

Tucked under Gerald's undershirts, wrapped in a handkerchief. The Holy Family on a prayer card was lying on top of the note. Gerald's touch of protection. For her. Whatever he did, he did for her.

The running water has been getting hotter as she stands with the cloth in her hand, watering the flowers on the plate. Just before it scalds her she pulls away.

She sweeps the kitchen floor, dusts the living and dining rooms, then starts up the varnished banister.

Once upstairs she goes into the little bedroom that Gerald had used as an office. Papers are piled on the narrow bed against the wall. She sits in the chair at his desk.

She is too tired to cry. Wrung out. She never did ask him if he were guilty or innocent.

He didn't use those words. He used the word 'betrayed'. Betrayed by his assistant, someone he trusted. Trusted with the fact that Capone had a gun to his head. That this wasn't bribery, it was life insurance. All the salary Gerald never collected, that was rightfully his, was nothing compared to this bit of life insurance. Justified. There was no question. He was an honorable man.

After the police took him that night, during the trial and when he was sentenced, the papers were full of him.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. The whispers in church, in the shops on the avenue.

The sympathetic smiles, the sneers. They almost looked the same. But she always rose above. Always held her head up. She would not play victim for them. She would not be disgraced.

There are always those who love to see a local hero fall. Too big for his britches. Tsk, tsk-ing from their comfortable well-stocked kitchens, with their tight mouths and even tighter hearts.

'Better the trouble that follows death than the trouble that follows shame.

Nasty, narrow minded fools!

All the years he was on fire for justice for the working man, the oppressed, those on the edges of the world who cleaned up after the rest of us.

She thought of all the good he did. All the jobs he saved. The working conditions and wages improved. The speeches he made that got them fired up and emboldened to change things, to claim their rights. She was proud of him then. She will be proud of him now.

Meg knows that her husband was framed.

Framed by the District Attorney looking to make a name for himself. Framed by the Mafia, angry that they couldn't make him fall in line. Framed for holding out so long when others caved to the pressure.

They don't know how long he resisted. How long he would not get dirty. Even with the threats against his life. When they left another man the goons thought was him for dead in a dirty alley in Chicago, then, he compromised. Compromised, not colluded. Real life was not spelled out in a textbook. Real life was lived threat to threat, power play to power play.

Meg wonders why he kept that note with their address. They both knew he could be killed at any time. But wrapping that note inside a handkerchief with a prayer card of St. Joseph, that was not only evidence, it was a plea.

That gave her a chill. He was brave. *He was protecting me. I will protect him. My beloved. My husband.*

Over the years, though, she saw him wear down, the fire go out of his words.

Little resentments at the lack of gratitude, the men who did nothing to further their own state but expected him to carry their burden.

The deserving poor. She knew that sometimes he said the deserving poor with the emphasis on deserving rather than poor.

Yes, she could see that sometimes, when he was tired and spent, when he had no money left because he had given so much away, sometimes, then he fell from his ideals and thought they deserved to be poor.

For drinking their paychecks and living in squalor. For not wanting something better for their children. For not seeing a bigger picture. And then he would recover and begin again.

Meg sits there a little while longer. She smiles and wipes away a few tears, good tears.

He was vain. Oh, yes, he was vain. He liked a new suit. He liked his shoes polished and sharp.

A good silk tie with a gold bar. He liked the way he sounded, the echo in the halls and the roar of applause, the standing ovations, the press write-ups.

He liked seeing himself on the front page with the mayor. Yes, he was vain.

Meg and Gerald had a deal, a pact. For better or for worse. The better was worth the worse. She will remember that.

Meg takes the crimpers out of her hair and carefully places them in her top drawer.

Purposefully, carefully she works her fingers through her hair that is more silver than it was last Easter.

She hadn't noticed it so much until now. She rather likes it; it suits her.

She slips her navy dress with the white piping from the

cushioned pink hanger, then chooses two stockings from her lingerie drawer. She unwinds the red lipstick from its gold tube and dabs, dabs, smacks her lips, then blends it with her right pinky.

She smoothes the front of her dress, sweeps two fingers of white cream that smells of roses and caresses it into her hands, corrects a twist in her left stocking. She is almost ready.

Meg walks down the stairs to the living room, standing taller than she has these several days. Her black wool coat, white silk scarf tucked artfully over the lapel, and gloves pulled over her fingers.

Now she is ready.

Chapter Five

Sheila

August 1954

Darlin', wouldya mind very much bringin' me beer?"

"Of course, Mr. O'Grady."

"Well, that's a good lass, then."

Sheila Lynch smiles at the old man with the exaggerated brogue. He came over decades ago, but he lays it on thick for the girls in O'Riordan's as if he's stepping into a play set among the rolling hills of Eire.

She plays along because he's a good tipper and a regular customer; at least three times a week he chats up the girls and plays the ole' boyo with Mr. O'Riordan.

Sheila shares an apartment with four girls who came over while the visas were easy and the Irish had plenty of sponsors.

This was the first part of her adventure. She was tired of life in her slow moving town where young men turned soft from too many evenings at the pub and young women, in their very short youth, town beauties, grew old and sloppy with several children in tow before they hit their thirtieth birthday.

Not for me. No, she shook the dust from her feet at the airport, determined to not look back.

"You think it'll all be like those movies you fill your head with. But it's not. There are gangs and crime and young girls like you're not safe anywhere. Who'll watch out for you? Who'll keep those American lads who think they can have anything they want away from you?"

Sheila bites her tongue and doesn't confess to her mother that she hopes some American boys will swagger her way and think she's a bit of something.

A week after her twenty-first birthday, she arrives. An aunt's cousin, or a cousin's aunt, she didn't pay attention to the details, sponsored her visa. From Idlewild Airport to Jackson Heights, the boys who pick her up are some degree of cousins of her cousins. Willie, the driver, barrels his way on to the Van Wyck Expressway and honks and curses like he was born here. They pull in front of a six-story apartment building.

Four girls are crowded into a two-bedroom apartment. Sheila gets the couch since she makes five. They have a job lined up for her at O'Riordan's Pub in Times Square. Broadway tourists and young actors are the regular clientele. She borrows a uniform from Colleen, who is trying on a new American name every week or so, to see which one stuck. Last week she was Audrey. Lana is her latest alias.

Years of dreaming and saving, now she is here. Lying on the couch that smells like cigarettes and beer with the street traffic and sirens blaring through the dusty screens, she feels part of some drama.

With the sun creeping up the side window through blinds she awakens to a concert of doors banging and spoons clanking against cups of coffee. Colleen is demanding that Mary Margaret get out of the bathroom so she can get in. Each of the girls sleeps in rollers and then spends twenty minutes spraying AquaNet on their immovable hair.

America. Home of the brave. Land of opportunity. Noisy, smelly, crowded, and oh how she loves it.

Colleen's cast off uniform is so tight Rose spends her whole shift sucking in her belly hoping the zipper doesn't break. She knows she has to do something about this situation fast. And it has nothing to do with buying a larger skirt. Colleen shares some of her little white pills, so tiny that a hundred of them fit in a little compact.

Here, these'll help you lose some of the potato around your middle and get the lumps off your backside.

That and seven cups of coffee get her through her shift each night and down two sizes in six weeks. It has an added benefit of keeping her alert and edgy on the subway from Times Square to Jackson Heights after midnight.

A butterfly shedding her cocoon, that's what I am.

She's a little frightened, but bigger than that is her determination to not turn into her mother and all the women at home. Their entire lives revolve around church, kitchen and nursery. She wants something more alive, more dangerous, more real.

She wants to dance with a handsome stranger. She wants to go to cocktail parties and stand on a balcony overlooking the lit up city with a martini in one hand and a cigarette in the other, laughing and being clever with people whose lives are bigger, shinier: better.

Since she doesn't know how to make that happen, she decides to learn by observing the women in New York who know how to walk and dress so men notice. Those women seem to shrug it off with complete indifference. She practices her 'couldn't care less' face in the mirror.

The girls in the flat do the tease and sprayed look, with regular doses of peroxide to various shades of unnatural blonde. Sheila though, aspires to a darker look, sleek and angular. She wants to move like a dancer, like Leslie Caron. She buys red lipstick and black eyeliner and leaves off the rouge.

Her hair is a problem, though. She's an ordinary brunette with an unruly wave held in place by a barrette. That has to go. Black hair dye and V-O 5 along with a short haircut of elfin wisps move her toward her new look.

She needs a black pencil skirt, black tights, a white tailored blouse with an oh-so snug fit and a collar she can snap to rakish effect. Shoes, hmm. Heels or flats? Both, of course, one for the more beatnik look, and one for here-I am-boys look. All she needs now is to learn how to smoke and drink. Sheila figures this is part of her education in becoming a real American girl.

She practices flirting with the middle aged old men who stop in for a drink and a look around before heading to Penn Station or Grand Central to catch the trains to the suburbs where a wife and a couple of kids are waiting dinner in a new development. She imagines they are accountants or insurance agents or bankers. There is a uniform grey look to them: inexpensive suits, wingtip shoes, a newspaper tucked under an arm and a sigh when the beer is done.

Sheila pictures them walking out of O'Riordan's on their own yellow brick road of mortgage payments, braces and pushing a lawn mower across a yard every Saturday morning for the next thirty years.