

Adored



TILLY BAGSHAWE



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The Major Players

- DUKE MCMAHON** Legendary Hollywood movie star and Lothario. Autocratic patriarch of the McMahon dynasty.
- MINNIE MCMAHON** Duke's long-suffering wife.
- PETE MCMAHON** Their embittered son. A producer.
- CLAIRE MCMAHON** Pete's quiet, academic wife. Mother of Siena.
- LAURIE MCMAHON** Duke and Minnie's fat, useless daughter, Pete's sister.
- TARA** Pete's spiteful PA.
- CAROLINE BERKELEY** Upper-class English gold-digger, Duke's long-term mistress and Hunter's feckless mother.
- GEORGE and WILLIAM BERKELEY** Caroline's pompous, bigoted brothers.
- SEBASTIAN BERKELEY** Caroline's besotted, elderly father.
- HUNTER MCMAHON** Gorgeous, sweet-natured but neglected illegitimate son of Duke and Caroline.
- SIENA MCMAHON** Duke's feisty granddaughter, the only child of Pete and Claire McMahon. A raving beauty.
- MAX DE SEVILLE** Childhood best friend of Hunter McMahon. Sexy, blond cad in the finest English tradition.
- HENRY ARKELL** Max's beloved half-brother,

- farmer, family man and
all-round good guy.
- MUFFY ARKELL** His harassed but devoted, very
pretty wife.
- BERTIE, CHARLIE and
MADDIE ARKELL** Their children.
- TITUS and
BORIS** Their dogs.
- TIFFANY WEDAN** Hunter's actress girlfriend. Like
him, beautiful inside and out.
- LENNOX** A gay actor/waiter. Tiffany
Wedan's loyal best friend.
- JACK and
MARCIE WEDAN** Tiffany's parents, simple folk
from Colorado.
- RANDALL STEIN** Billionaire producer and biggest
Hollywood player since Duke
McMahon. A bastard.
- SEAMUS** Duke's old childhood friend,
now his valet.
- GARY ELLIS** Unscrupulous cockney property
developer.
- CHRISTOPHER
WELLESLEY** Charming old gentleman
farmer, owner of one of the
most beautiful estates in the
Cotswolds.
- MARSHA** Siena's diminutive but
powerful modelling agent. A
drunken dynamo.
- INES PRIETO
MORENO** Flame-haired Spanish supermodel.
- DIERK MULLER** Charmless but talented
German movie director.
- HUGH ORCHARD** Highly respected, discreetly gay
king of US network television.
Writer and creator of a

number of hit shows, including
Counsellor and *UCLA*.

JAMIE SILFEN The most powerful casting
agent in Hollywood.

CAMILLE ANDREWS Texan model/actress/whore. A
Sky Bar bimbo on the make.

MIRIAM STANLEY LA starlet. Has slept with
every successful producer in
town.

Prologue

England, 1998

Siena was going back to Hollywood if it killed her.

‘So you see, Sister Mark,’ she continued, carefully composing her features into an expression she hoped looked both remorseful and resigned, ‘I do realise this is an expellable offence. And I just want you to know that I *totally* accept responsibility for my actions.’

God, she almost sounded tearful. But then she always knew she was a terrific actress. The old witch might actually be falling for it.

‘I just don’t know what made me do it.’ She dropped her eyes shamefully to her lap – all nuns, she had learned, were suckers for a bit of humility. ‘But I quite understand that I have left you with no choice. I’ve let St Xavier’s down.’

Fabulous. This was working like a charm. Mentally, Siena began calculating how long it would take her to clear out her poky little dorm room. She’d have to say goodbye to the girls, of course, but if she really got her skates on she might make the six o’clock flight to LA. Or maybe there’d be formalities to go through? She’d have to see the Head of Governors perhaps? Even so, an early morning flight out would still get her there in time for a blow-dry at Zapata before she hit the bars on Melrose.

‘Miss McMahan.’ The headmistress’s softly lilting Irish voice belied a firmness of purpose that Siena recognised only too well. She had come to hate the way Sister Mark pronounced her name: ‘McMaaarn’. She seemed to stretch the word out, like torture. She wondered what sort of rambling lecture she was in for this time.

Looking around her, Siena took in the familiar

surroundings of Sister Mark's office for what she hoped would be the last time. It was simply furnished, as befitted a nun's rooms, but not austere. A full but slightly overblown bunch of peach-coloured roses dominated the desk, and their scent carried all the way to the window seat, which was lined with brightly coloured cushions, the slightly threadbare handiwork of generations of budding seamstresses. An unobtrusive crucifix hung against one of the whitewashed walls, while the others were plastered with photographs of St Xavier's girls past and present, commemorating various sporting or dramatic achievements. Siena, who was not much of a team player, did not feature, other than on the giant whiteboard displaying the detentions received by pupils, where her name made repeated appearances.

It was actually the third time this term that she had been summoned to the headmistress's eyrie of an office above the school chapel. In fact, in the seven years since Siena had first arrived at the school as a frightened ten-year-old, Sister Mark had lost count of the times she had peered across her desk at the beautiful, truculent, scowling little face of this most talented and yet most troublesome of pupils.

No matter how many times she looked at Siena, she never ceased to be struck by the uncanny resemblance: she really was the spitting image of her famous grandfather. As a young girl in Connemara, Sister Mark (or Eileen Dineen as she was then) had always had a bit of a soft spot for Duke McMahon. Well, it was hard not to. *Capri Sunset*, that had been his first big film, with Maureen O'Hara. Eileen and her pals must have seen it, what, nine or ten times? That dark flowing hair, that deep, rich, almost smouldering voice. Oh yes, in his day old Duke's romantic films had been quite an occasion of sin for half the teenage population of Ireland – not to mention the rest of the world. And now here she was, fifty years later, forty years a nun, wondering what in

heaven's name to do with his troublesome granddaughter.

Smoothing down her brown Viyella skirt – the nuns at St Xavier's no longer wore the habit, and the only thing that set them apart from the rest of the teaching staff was a plain silver cross worn at the neck – she moved her mahogany chair back a couple of inches and fixed her gaze once again on the enigma that was Siena McMahon.

For some reason, the child had never really settled in at St Xavier's. She was popular enough, that wasn't the problem. There may have been a touch of the green-eyed monster going on with some of the other girls, but as a rule they all wanted to be associated with Siena: granddaughter of a Hollywood legend and daughter of one of the world's most successful movie producers, she represented a glamour and excitement far beyond anything that these well-bred English gentlemen's daughters had ever experienced.

Siena had other advantages as well. She was undoubtedly a beauty, and fifteen years of teaching in a girls' boarding school had taught Sister Mark that this, sadly, was a sure-fire passport to popularity, with or without the McMahon name behind her. And despite her truly appalling lack of discipline and almost pathological aversion to hard work, Siena had sailed through her school career with straight As across the board. On the face of it, she had very little to complain about.

Even so, it didn't take Einstein to work out that, for all her advantages and talents, the girl was deeply unhappy at school.

Her complaint had been the same since the very first week she arrived, a belligerent, feisty little madam even then: she wanted to go home. It was this that Sister Mark found particularly odd, since it was obvious Siena profoundly disliked both her parents. Tragic really. Other than the yearly prize day, which they both religiously attended, Pete and Claire McMahon seemed to spend as little time with their only daughter as was humanly

possible. Six weeks in the summer holidays was the only time they spent together at the family compound in Hollywood. Siena never flew home for half-terms or the shorter holidays, spending her breaks instead in the charge of a Spanish housekeeper at her parents' Knightsbridge flat. To be sure, that was no life for a child. But it seemed only to make the girl more wilful, more determined and more desperate than ever to get back home.

Looking across at Siena, Sister Mark noticed she was biting her lower lip, a childish signal of nervousness that looked out of place on the womanly seventeen-year-old she had become. A previous generation would have described Siena as 'buxom', but nowadays the girls seemed to interpret that as 'fat'. In fact she had a small frame, dominated by a very curvaceous bust, to which her blue uniform jumper clung almost obscenely. Her small, rosebud mouth, pale skin and thick cascade of dark curls all belonged to another, more sensuous and feminine era. Only her eyes – two dark blue flashes of ruthless determination – gave her otherwise angelic face its modern, edgy twist. Today they were narrowed in wary anticipation. The headmistress sighed. She was almost as tired of this battle as Siena was.

This time she had been caught red-handed smoking marijuana in the prefects' common room. Actually, 'caught' was hardly the right word, as she had made no attempt whatsoever to conceal the offence. Under normal circumstances she should, of course, be expelled. But A-levels were only a few months away, and Siena was expected to do exceptionally well. Besides, after seven long years Sister Mark was damned if she was going to send the little horror home now.

Reluctantly dragging her thoughts from the duty-free Burberry coats at Heathrow – or perhaps a bag, to pacify her mother? – Siena turned to face the elderly nun. Could she just get on with it for once and skip the damn lectures?

‘Miss McMahan,’ resumed Sister Mark, ‘as you rightly say, you have indeed let St Xavier’s down.’

Thank God, thought Siena, she’s finally going to kick me out of this hellhole.

‘However, I feel it would be . . .’ a glancing smile flickered across the older woman’s lips ‘. . . precipitate – or shall we say rash? – to assume that you leave me with “no choice” in terms of your punishment.’

Siena swallowed hard. Fuck. What was she on about now? The spluttering roar of a broken exhaust pipe broke the silence for a moment, and Siena’s eyes were drawn down to the rickety old minibus belching its way down the school drive, its chassis seeming to shiver and shake in the biting January wind. It was supposed to be white, but was covered in a layer of grime so thick that it stood out as almost metallic grey against the backdrop of snowy lawns. Inside, giggling groups of girls huddled together, on their way to some hockey match or other. They all looked so fucking happy, so jolly bloody hockey sticks, it made her want to throw up.

‘It has not entirely escaped my notice, Siena,’ continued Sister Mark as the noise of the failing engine faded into the distance, ‘that you harbour a strong desire to leave St Xavier’s. Although I will confess I am not quite sure why this should be.’

Not sure why she would want to leave St Xavier’s? Jesus Christ, surely the question was why the hell would anybody want to stay? Chapel at 7.30 in the morning, lights out at 10.30, more fucking meaningless rules than the Gestapo? And the worst thing was, most of the girls became totally brainwashed. They actually *looked forward* to coming back to sixth form because they got to have their own toaster in the common room! Toast Privilege, that’s what they called it. Was Siena the only one who wanted to scream out loud: *EATING TOAST IS NOT A PRIVILEGE, IT’S A BASIC FUCKING HUMAN RIGHT?!* In LA, seventeen-year-old girls had cars. They wore designer clothes, not some dykey old uniform. They

went to parties. They got laid. They had *lives*, for Christ's sake. St Xavier's – in fact the whole of fucking England, grey, freezing, miserable England – was stuck in some kind of nightmare time warp.

'I am not prepared to be manipulated into expelling you when I know full well that this was the response you were hoping for,' announced Sister Mark. Siena glared at her openly now, all pretence at humility gone. The headmistress ploughed on. 'I have, instead, decided to revoke all your sixth-form privileges until the end of the year.'

Oh my God. Siena's stricken face said it all.

'Till the end of the *year*? You can't do that!'

'Oh, I think you'll find I can.' The nun smiled serenely. 'Furthermore, you will be gated for the next four weeks. That means no exeat weekends, no social events, no after-school activities. Other than Mass, of course.'

Oh, of course. Mass. Terrific.

'Siena. Listen to me.' Sister Mark's tone had softened, but Siena was oblivious. If she wasn't going home, then what was the point in listening? What else mattered? The nun reached across the desk for her hand and squeezed it with genuine kindness, ignoring the girl's look of revulsion. 'You are in the home stretch, my dear.'

Siena watched the sunlight glinting off her crucifix and shielded her eyes. She didn't want to hear this.

'It's January now. By July, your A-levels will be over and if you'd only start to apply yourself, well, you've every chance of a place at Oxford. Every chance.' She squeezed her hand again encouragingly, willing the child to look up.

But Siena had tuned out. Sister Mark didn't understand. How could she? Withdrawing her hand, she gazed out of the window, across the frosty convent lawns to the frozen hills of the Gloucestershire landscape beyond. It was so cold that icicles still clung to the twigs of the sycamores, and she could see the frozen breath of the group of third-years chattering animatedly on their way

to class, no doubt excited by the snow and the prospect of tobogganing at the end of the day.

Despite the beauty of the scene, Siena's mind was six thousand miles away. Not in her parents' home in the Hollywood hills but at Grandpa Duke's in Hancock Park, far back into her childhood. Suddenly she was eight years old again, bounding up the steps to the mansion and into his arms. Whenever she closed her eyes, she could feel the warmth and strength of that embrace as though it were yesterday. Sitting in the hard-backed mahogany chair in Sister Mark's under-heated study, she longed for that warmth with every breath in her body.

To her childish mind, it had all seemed so permanent. Grandpa Duke, the house, her happiness. But it had all melted away, all of it, like the Gloucestershire snow. And here she was, as far from that happiness and comfort as it was possible to be.

PART ONE

Chapter One

Hancock Park, Los Angeles, 1975

‘Forty-eight, forty-nine . . . fifty! Nice job, Duke, you’re looking great.’

Duke McMahon lay back on his workout mat and looked up at his trainer. Jesus Christ, these young guys all looked like shit. Sideburns like a pair of hairy runways, a brown velour jogging suit and more gold jewellery than the fucking Mafia. No wonder so much Hollywood pussy was out there looking for an older man.

Still, Mikey was right about one thing. He was looking great. Duke sat up and took a satisfied look at his reflection in one of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors that plastered the room. At sixty-four, he still had the body of a man twenty years younger, and he didn’t owe one inch of it to surgery. He hated working out with a passion, especially the goddam sit-ups, but was infinitely vain. In his six years with Duke, Mikey had never known him cancel a single session.

‘You still need to do some more work on your abs, you know,’ Mikey chided as he watched the old man untie his sneakers and head towards the shower.

‘Yeah, and you still need to do some more work on your fucking wardrobe, man. Not to mention your hair.’ Duke held up his hands in mock exasperation. ‘I’m telling you, buddy, you look like Cher with a three-day shadow. Get a fucking haircut!’

Mikey laughed and turned down the blaring roar of Mick Jagger on the record player. Duke loved his Stones.

It had been a long time since Mikey had seen him in such a chipper mood. Evidently the new girlfriend was working wonders. He knew he shouldn’t really like

Duke, but he couldn't help it. Sure, the old man was a bastard. An addictive womaniser, he treated his poor wife Minnie like dirt, and was so right wing – anti-gay, anti-women, anti-blacks, anti-taxes – it was totally outrageous. But he also had this incredible energy, a lust for life that seemed to draw people to him. Mikey had a lot of wealthy, famous clients – although none quite as wealthy or famous as Duke McMahan – and none of them could touch him for raw charisma.

Emerging dripping and naked from the shower, Duke strode over to the window and looked out at the California sunshine. He had had the gym built on the first floor of his sprawling hacienda in Hancock Park, a pale pink, Spanish architectural masterpiece known to the busloads of tourists that hung around outside the gates simply as the McMahan Estate. Although the estate itself had been built in the twenties, when Hancock Park was first starting to become popular with the swelling ranks of movie actors and musicians who had moved west to find fame and fortune, the interior was a bizarre mélange of modern and traditional styles.

Minnie, Duke's long-suffering wife, had impeccable, if rather conservative taste, and many of the public rooms reflected her refined and understated influence.

In striking contrast, Duke's unashamed vulgarity and love affair with all things modern had led to some gruesome decor decisions, of which the gym was only one. The state-of-the-art music centre, complete with eight-track tape deck and stereo speakers, was housed in an immense velvet-lined teak cabinet. A central 'work-out' square of polished wood was surrounded by a sea of cream shag-pile carpeting, fitted wall to wall beneath the ubiquitous mirrors, and a disco ball hung in pride of place from the vaulted ceiling.

'For the love of God, Duke, would you put some clothes on?' Seamus, Duke's oldest childhood friend and now his right-hand man, a sort of hybrid manservant, PA

and business manager, had stuck his flushed, permanently jovial face round the door, giving a brief nod of acknowledgement to the trainer. 'You have a meeting at eleven, you know. I know the dress code is casual in Hollywood, but I'm sure John McGuire would appreciate a pair of underpants at least.'

Duke looked over his shoulder at his old pal and grinned. They were almost exact contemporaries, but Seamus looked nearly old enough to be his father. His hairline had receded so far that he appeared completely bald from the front, and a lifelong penchant for 'the odd dram', as he put it, had contributed to both his florid complexion and his spreading waistline. In anyone else Duke would have been scathing of such a lack of self-control, but Seamus had always been a special case. Having battled his way through the viper's nest of scheming agents and unscrupulous studios in Hollywood, Duke knew just how rare loyalty and genuine friendship were. Seamus was a gem.

'Go fuck yourself, wouldya?' he replied good-naturedly, scratching his balls for added effect. 'I'm trying to enjoy the view here.'

And quite a view it was. Immaculately manicured lawns rolled down the hill away from the house as far as the eye could see. A blue, Olympic-size pool flashed and shimmered in the morning sunshine, surrounded by a haphazard collection of orange and lemon trees, all groaning with fruit. Tiny hummingbirds, their brilliant streaks of colour clashing with the unbroken blue of the sky, flitted from flower to flower, enjoying the sunshine. It was hard to imagine that such a Garden of Eden could be completely man-made; that without ceaseless irrigation, planting and tending, the whole of Hancock Park would have been nothing more than a lifeless desert swamp. But then that was precisely what Duke loved about LA. It was a place where you could turn a patch of dirt into paradise, if you worked hard and wanted it bad enough.

Any one of the legions of Mexican gardeners and handymen on the lawns below could have glanced up and seen the master of the house stark naked surveying his kingdom from the window, as they had on so many mornings before. Duke didn't care. It was his house. He had worked for every square inch of it and he could shit on the fucking floor if he wanted to. Besides, he liked being naked in front of the staff because it drove Minnie insane with embarrassment. Humiliating his wife was one of Duke's greatest and most enduring pleasures.

'Eleven o'clock.' Seamus raised a reprimanding finger in the general direction of Duke's naked rear view before scurrying off to prepare the paperwork for the day's meetings.

'Look at that, man.' Duke made a sweeping gesture towards the window for Mikey's benefit, once Seamus had gone. 'What a terrific day!'

'We're in California, Duke; every day's a beautiful day.' The trainer zipped up his sports bag and leant back against the mirrored wall. He wasn't in any rush to leave. His next client was a hopelessly overweight Beverly Hills widow who couldn't seem to get enough of his brown velour jogging suit and shoulder-length hair. Chewing the fat with Duke was a whole lot more fun. 'So what's put you in such a great mood all of a sudden? This wouldn't have anything to do with . . . is it Catherine? What's her name, your new girlfriend?'

'Mistress, my new mistress.' Duke grinned. 'I'm a hell of a lot too old for a "girlfriend".' To Mikey's relief, he pulled on a pair of white linen golfing trousers and sat down on the bench, warming to his theme. 'A girlfriend is someone you hold hands with, maybe go to the pictures with,' Duke explained. 'One day, if you find you really like her, then maybe you marry her and she becomes your wife. That's a girlfriend. Now a mistress . . . a mistress is something totally different.' He paused for dramatic effect, a slow smile spreading across his

hawk-like, predatory features. 'A mistress is basically pussy that you own.'

'Jesus Christ!' Mikey exploded into laughter, genuinely shocked. 'You can't say things like that! Nobody owns nobody else, Duke.'

'Ah, kid.' Duke shook his head. 'How little you know.'

Standing up to admire his chosen outfit – white pants, white patent-leather shoes and a tight chocolate-brown turtle-neck that was far too warm for the California climate but which accentuated his chest and biceps – he put an affectionate, paternal arm around his trainer. How come he could never talk like this to his own son, Pete? The boy was always so fucking uptight, a stuck-up little prig like his mother. Duke used to say that Pete Jr was a replica of Minnie, only with balls – but these days he wasn't too sure whether he even had that distinction.

'Anyway, in answer to your question, yes, my mood probably does owe just a little something to Caroline.'

'Sorry, yeah, Caroline, you told me.'

Duke was beaming like a drunk in a liquor store. This must be quite some girl. As if reading his mind, the old man continued.

'Not only is she a world-class fuck . . .' Duke noticed Mikey fighting to stifle a blush. 'Seriously, man, you should see her, she is the sluttiest little whore but she speaks like the fucking Queen. If you haven't screwed an English girl, I'm telling you, you gotta try it.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' said Mikey. 'Thanks.'

'But the best part is . . .' Duke looked at him triumphantly. 'She's agreed to move in with me. Permanently. As of today.'

Had Mikey missed something here?

'What do you mean she's moving in with you?' He knew it was rude to piss on Duke's picnic when he was so patently over the moon. But how could Caroline possibly be moving in? 'What about Minnie? Did you guys, like, separate or get a divorce or something? How come I never heard about this?'

'Nope.' Duke cracked his knuckles and smiled broadly. He was evidently enjoying himself, lapping up the younger man's discomfiture. 'No separation, no divorce. I just told her. This is my house and I want Caroline to live here. Minnie'll do what she's told if she wants to remain a part of this family.'

Mikey winced. Duke's brutality never ceased to shock him, especially where poor Mrs McMahon was concerned. He couldn't understand why on earth she tolerated it. Still, even by Duke's standards this was a bit extreme, moving the girlfriend into the estate right under her nose. He imagined Peter wasn't going to be best pleased either.

'We're having a welcome dinner tonight at eight,' continued Duke, unfazed. 'It's just family: Caroline and me, Laurie, Pete and his wife . . . and *my* wife, of course.' He sneered sadistically. 'But you're more than welcome to join us if you'd like. I'll have Minnie set an extra place.'

Jesus Christ, so Minnie was expected to play hostess at this charade? Suddenly Mikey felt awkward, guilty. He didn't want to be party to any of this.

'I can't,' he said, blushing. 'I'm really sorry, but I can't.'

For all his charm, Duke obviously had a huge hole right where any sense of morality or basic human compassion should be. And when you looked right into that hole, it was black. Frankly, it scared the shit out of him.

Sensing the old man's disappointment, he shrugged apologetically and weakly attempted to lighten the atmosphere. 'Dinner with my girlfriend, you know?'

'Sure. Of course,' said Duke with a mirthless smile. He reminded Mikey of the wolf grinning at Little Red Riding Hood. All of a sudden the room seemed to become terribly cold. 'It's not a problem, kid, really,' said Duke, heading for the door. 'I understand.'

Sitting at her dressing table in the east wing of the house,

Minnie fastened the clasp of her pearls with a steady hand. The sweet scent of the cyclamen creepers that grew around her dressing-room window never failed to relax her. She took a deep, calming gulp of the warm morning air and sighed.

Minnie adored her dressing room, her small, private sanctuary filled with the beloved and familiar reminders of a former life: her father's antique English writing table now served as her own bureau, and the richly faded Persian rug on the floor had once been the nursery rug back home in Connecticut, on which she and her brother Austin had crawled and squabbled and built elaborate cities out of bricks. Lavish vases of flowers covered every available surface, and a slightly battered but charming old bookcase beside the door was filled with books, not only collected but read, by generations of Millers. Some had belonged to her great, great-grandfather, and Minnie loved simply to hold them, stroking the spines and thinking of all of her ancestors who had held them and read them before her.

Thirty years in Los Angeles had done nothing to diminish her homesickness for the East Coast. But through her flair for interior design – Minnie had that rare ability to turn a house into a home without diminishing its elegance, with a style that combined traditional conservatism with real warmth – she had created a miniature East Coast oasis inside the estate, which had become a huge comfort to her in her frequent times of trouble.

Having arranged her pearls carefully in the mirror, she picked up the silver-backed clothes brush on the dresser and swept a few stubborn strands of lint from her skirt. Today would be a difficult day. But as her mother had always taught her, a lady never loses her composure, no matter how trying the circumstance. Whatever it took, she must maintain her dignity; draw it like a shield around her in the face of this . . . this . . . unfortunate event.

Ten years younger than Duke, at fifty-four Minnie had embraced middle age as enthusiastically as her husband had fought to keep it at bay. She looked like his mother. That is to say, she dressed like his mother; or like his mother *would* have dressed had she come from an old-money Greenwich family like Minnie's (rather than an impoverished New York Irish tribe of manual labourers and petty thieves). Her daily uniform had barely altered since she and Duke first married over thirty years ago. A khaki linen skirt to the knee, crisp white shirt with jauntily up-turned collar, tan pantyhose (no matter how stiflingly hot the weather, a lady never went bare legged), slightly heeled round-toed pumps and, of course, her grandmother's pearls.

Thanks to a rigorous, no-nonsense daily beauty routine, consisting of soap, water and a good dollop of cold cream at night, her handsome, patrician face was not excessively lined. The years of suffering she had endured through the latter stages of her marriage to Duke had etched themselves only faintly around the eyes, where other, happier women had 'laughter lines'.

Still, Minnie reminded herself grimly, she had a lot to be thankful for. Life as the wife of the world's most famous movie star had brought a lot of material comforts, which had certainly dulled the pain of some of her other marital disappointments. And of course, she had her children. Sweet, reliable Laurie and her beloved son Pete still lived on the Hancock Park estate, and along with Pete's young wife Claire they provided a daily buffer of emotional support against Duke's increasingly open hatred of her.

Her husband might be insisting on moving his cheap little tart into their home. But by God, if he thought he was going to drive her out with his vindictive little games, her or the children, he had another think coming.

'Mother? Oh, Mother, there you are.'

Laurie's forlorn face peered round the doorway. At twenty-eight, Duke and Minnie's younger child had

already adopted the appearance of a confirmed spinster. Her full gypsy skirt and loose, shapeless Moroccan blouse did nothing to conceal the rolls of fat acquired through decades of comfort eating. With her greasy brown hair scraped back into a severe ponytail and her face bare of make-up, it was almost impossible to believe that this timid, trembling mouse of a girl could be the natural child of such fine-featured parents. This morning her appearance was further hampered by a bright red shiny nose and eyes dreadfully swollen from crying.

'Well, of course I'm here,' said Minnie, her voice bright and businesslike. 'Where else would I be? We have an awful lot to do today for the dinner, and I'm going to need your help, Laurie-Loo, with the flowers.'

For the last week, Caroline's arrival had been referred to simply as 'the dinner'. No one could bring themselves to utter her name.

'Oh, Mother!' Laurie's swollen, twitching face finally gave way and crumpled into full-throated, childish sobs. 'How can you be so *calm* about it? I mean, how could Daddy *do* this to you, to all of us?'

'For the good Lord's sake, Laurie, pull yourself together,' said Minnie. If there was one thing she would not tolerate it was giving in to one's emotions. It really was disgracefully undignified. 'It's a difficult time for all of us, but we have nothing to be ashamed of, and certainly no reason to cry.'

She handed her daughter a white monogrammed handkerchief and patted the chair beside her. The rosewood creaked as Laurie eased her snivelling bulk into it. Minnie wished her daughter would show just a little more self-discipline when it came to food, but she smiled at her kindly and tried not to show it.

'Really, darling, you mustn't cry.' She stroked her daughter's hair ineffectually, as if she were an obedient dog. 'Believe me, your father will tire of this young woman soon enough. Just as he has of all the others.'

'I hope so, Mother.' Laurie sniffed. 'I really do. But

he's never moved any of the others in with us before, has he?' It was a good point. 'I mean, for God's sake, this girl is only twenty-nine. That's even younger than Petey.'

'I can do the math, sweetheart.' Minnie sighed. Squaring her bony shoulders into a stance of unshakeable determination, she squeezed Laurie's hand firmly. 'Try not to worry,' she said. 'It's going to be up to all of us, you, me and Peter, to make sure this young woman *does* go the way of all the rest of them. But I can promise you one thing, darling. I am your father's wife and the mistress of this household. And nothing, Laurie – absolutely nothing – is going to change that.'

Not for the first time, Laurie marvelled at her mother. Pete always insisted that a willingness to accept a lifetime of abuse from Duke was more of a weakness than a strength, but Laurie was in awe of Minnie's resolute calm in the face of just about any storm. She thought of her mother as some sort of tragic heroine, her unbreakable spirit emerging triumphant through all the batterings that fate and life could throw at her. If only she, Laurie, had inherited some of that spirit, that strength, then perhaps her life wouldn't be in such an unholy mess.

'So ...' Minnie smiled bravely, anxious to end this emotional interview with her daughter. 'Why don't we start sorting out those flowers for tonight? We want everything to look perfect for Daddy, don't we?'

To everyone who knew them, Duke and Minnie McMahon's marriage was a perpetual mystery.

When they'd first met, back in the late thirties, Minnie was the shy and incredibly beautiful teenage daughter of Pete Miller, the last in a long line of wealthy Connecticut landowners, and his wife Marilyn, a respected society hostess. Duke, who'd been brought by a casual girlfriend to one of Marilyn Miller's charity events, was a recognised young actor, still somewhere between up and coming and a major studio star, and already had

something of a reputation as a gambler and a womaniser who liked to party hard.

His attraction to the young Minnie Miller was instant and uncomplicated. Standing in the corner of the room, hiding awkwardly in the shadows behind her nerdy elder brother Austin, she seemed to represent everything that had been denied him in his own early life: beauty, fragility, innocence, wealth and breeding. She looked untouched, and untouchable, exactly the sort of virgin, Protestant princess that polite society considered completely out of bounds for a dissolute Irish Catholic boy such as himself.

He had asked her to dance that night – much to his companion's chagrin – and she had declined, blushing furiously and insisting she didn't know how to, clinging on to her brother's hand for dear life. Duke was charmed. He didn't know that such naive girls really still existed within a hundred-mile radius of Manhattan. Certainly he had never met one before. He decided there and then that he had to have Minnie Miller, and for the next nine months he set about the arduous task of seducing her.

For Minnie's own part, she had worshipped Duke from the moment she laid eyes on him. He was breathtakingly good-looking, with his hair the same shiny blue-black as a raven's, his firm, jutting jaw and his wonderful, deep, lyrical voice with its lingering hint of Irish brogue. There was also something dangerous about him, something adult, masculine and forbidden that set him apart from all her brother's preppy Harvard classmates, or the boys she was introduced to at her mother's carefully chaperoned society dances.

Both the strength and nature of her feelings for him frightened her. For her to be courted openly by Duke, a Catholic with no good family and what her mother referred to with shuddering disdain as 'a reputation', was quite inconceivable. On the other hand a secret romance was in Minnie's eyes a step of such seriousness and

gravity that for months she could barely sleep for thinking about it, tortured in equal measure by her passionate love and desire for Duke and desperate, all-consuming guilt.

Eventually, as is always the way, love and passion beat guilt hands down. She was still only eighteen when Duke took her virginity, in one of the old boathouses by the lake at her parents' summer house in Maine. For Duke, who was used to the more practised efforts of worldly Hollywood girls, the sex was, technically speaking, dreadful. She had lain rigid and shaking beneath him, her eyes wide open with terror like a rabbit about to be shot. And afterwards she had sobbed in his arms until his shirt was soaked through.

But his sense of triumph and elation, not just of breaking down her defences sexually, but of winning the heart of something so rare and perfect and precious, more than outweighed the disappointment of the event itself. There was something about Minnie that made him want to be a better man, the man she deserved. No one was more surprised than Duke to discover that he had, for the first time in his life, fallen in love.

They were married three months later in a little Catholic church off Broadway. An ashen-faced Pete Miller had led his daughter down the aisle: for Minnie to be marrying a scoundrel like McMahan was bad enough, but a Catholic wedding! His poor father and grandfather would both be turning in their graves.

For Duke, the day was one of unadulterated elation, and he couldn't understand it when, driving his new wife home from their rather subdued reception at the Millers' Manhattan townhouse, she had burst into tears.

'What on earth's the matter?' he'd asked her, handing her his handkerchief with a look of bewilderment and dismay. 'Don't tell me you're regretting it already?'

'Oh, Duke, no,' she insisted between sobs, 'of course I'm not. It's not that. It's just that tomorrow we're going

to be leaving for California. I've never been away from Mommy and Daddy before, not for more than a week anyway, and I'm gonna miss them so much. Oh, and Austin!

At the thought of her brother she began wailing again, and Duke fought down his feelings of annoyance. What the hell did she see in that chinless, judgemental, preppy little son of a bitch anyway?

'Come on now,' he said, reaching over and patting her thigh sympathetically. 'It's not like I'm taking you to Europe or something. Your parents can come visit. I bet you we see them all the time.'

Minnie shook her head sadly. 'I'm not so sure,' she said. 'You know how much they disapproved of us getting married. What if they never forgive me?'

'Sure they will,' said Duke. Although privately he wished his wife didn't already think of their marriage as some sort of sin to be forgiven.

The first year of the marriage was a happy one. Duke had bought them a large house in North Hollywood, back when LA property was still dirt cheap, and Minnie delighted in decorating it and playing house while her new husband was on-set. His career was going from strength to strength, and in 1941 he landed his first leading role, in a farcical comedy called *Check Mate*. The rift with her family remained strong, and she saw her parents only once in that first year, spending an agonisingly awkward long weekend with them at the newly developed resort of Palm Springs. But life with Duke was so blissful, and she was so caught up with establishing herself as a hostess among his new and exciting Hollywood crowd, that she found herself feeling less and less homesick, and less and less guilty, by the day.

Then came the war. And as for so many young couples, overnight it seemed everything changed.

Duke was sent to Asia, where he was to spend the

next three and a half years. He was, as he liked to tell people later, one of the lucky ones. He came home. But the home, and the woman he came home to, had changed out of all recognition.

For the first six months after he was conscripted, Minnie remained in Hollywood, trying to make a life for herself among the other army wives there. But loneliness soon overcame her and, encouraged by her mother and brother, she decided to return home to Connecticut. She missed Duke terribly, and wrote to him religiously twice a week. But she also found herself naturally slipping back into the old rhythms of life at home. Soon she was going riding with her father and out to lunches in Manhattan with her mother, just like the old days, and her married life back in California began to feel more and more like a distant dream.

Duke would come home on leave and stay with the Millers. His father-in-law was civil – now that he had seen active service, Duke had apparently become a smidgen more acceptable in the old man's eyes – but still always treated him with a patronising sense of social superiority that Duke bitterly resented.

When he complained to Minnie about it, she dismissed him. He was imagining slights and insults where there were none.

Duke wanted her to move back to LA, but the mere suggestion made her almost hysterical.

'What's the point of me being there when you're away?' she asked. 'I'm isolated and I'm lonely, whereas here I have friends and family to support me. Things are so much better now with Mom and Dad. Please, please don't ruin it all again.'

He couldn't really argue with her. Still, he returned to the front with a gnawing sense that he was somehow losing her. That she was no longer completely on his side.

After the war, they did move back home, and for a while

life got back to something approaching normal. Duke went back to work at the studio, and Minnie almost immediately fell pregnant with Peter. The cracks, however, did not take long to start appearing.

Minnie's parents' snobbery and East Coast prejudices seemed to have oozed into her personality in the last three years by osmosis. Whereas before she had been quite happy to have friends over for an impromptu kitchen supper in the evenings, she now insisted on full silver-service dinners every time they entertained, which Duke found pretentious and unnecessary. Worse, she began to show signs of embarrassment at his own social behaviour, reprimanding him in public for excessive drinking, and even on one occasion correcting his grammar in front of the whole crew on-set.

'It's "I should have", darling, not "I should of,"' she'd piped up brightly, overhearing him rehearsing some lines.

Duke was furious.

'Yeah? Well, maybe you should *have* stayed at home and minded your own fuckin' business, Min,' he snapped.

The worst of it was that Minnie herself could not perceive any of the changes Duke accused her of. In her own mind, she was just the same as she had always been, and she still loved her husband desperately.

'Of course I'm on your side, darling,' she'd protest tearfully. 'I love you so much, Duke. You must know that.'

But increasingly, he wasn't sure whether he did know it. With her love and approval, he truly believed he could be a good man, a good husband and father. Without it, there was nothing to stop him from going back to his old ways.

He began an affair with one of his co-stars. It spluttered on for a few months, after which, miserable and guilty, he came home one night and confessed to a distraught Minnie.

'I'm sorry,' he said, 'but I didn't know what to do. I feel like I'm not good enough for you any more.'

'Oh, Duke, that's nonsense! How can you say that?' she cried.

Even in her despair, she seemed to be dismissing him.

'Well, why won't you sleep with me, then? For Christ's sake, Minnie, it's been months and every time I come near you you push me away! You make me feel like some sort of fucking disease.'

'I've told you!' she shouted at him. 'It's because of the baby. I'm just scared, Duke, I want our baby so much, I don't want anything to go wrong.'

'And nothing will,' he said, pulling her to him and holding on to her tightly. What the hell was he doing, cheating on her? God knew he loved her, so much it scared the wits out of him.

That night they had made love, but it was a disaster. Duke, desperate for her love and forgiveness, had tried everything he knew to please her. But she was so terrified of losing the baby she remained rigid with tension throughout, suffering his attentions as a mother must tolerate the needy suckling of her child. The woman who had once filled him with such confidence and made him feel like such a strong, powerful man now made him feel useless, rejected and alone.

Things went from bad to worse. The baby was born, and instantly little Peter became the centre of his mother's world, leaving Duke feeling even more excluded. He began another affair, then another, each time hoping to shock Minnie into realising that he needed her.

She loved him, and was deeply hurt by his infidelities. But as the affairs became more and more frequent, she eventually stopped believing that she had any power to prevent them. Duke was rapidly becoming a huge star, with some of the world's most beautiful women literally throwing themselves at his feet. Obviously, Minnie thought, he no longer loved her. She learned to take

comfort and joy in her children instead of her marriage, and cloaked herself defensively in the stoic, reserved conservatism of her upbringing. Slowly but surely, she and Duke grew ever farther and more irreparably apart.

And yet, to the surprise of all who knew them, they never did divorce. In fact, they never even discussed the possibility. Some said it was Duke's almost superstitiously strong Catholicism which held the marriage together. Others saw Minnie as a masochist, who would put up with just about anything for her children's sake and to avoid a society scandal.

The truth, in fact, was much simpler. Somewhere, buried very deep in both their hearts, beneath the hatred, the bitterness and all the many betrayals, a tiny fragment of love survived.