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Betrayal

Written by Martina Cole

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**BETRAYAL
MARTINA
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Mother Courage and Her Children © Bertolt Brecht, 1939

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Book One

Behold my mother and my brethren!

Matthew 12:49

When lovely woman stoops to folly
And finds too late that men betray,
What charm can soothe her melancholy,
What art can wash her guilt away?

The Vicar of Wakefield,
Oliver Goldsmith (1728–74)

Chapter One

1981

Reeva O'Hara's voice was loud and harsh as it always was when she had what she considered to be an audience. Even at 8.15 a.m. in her local Co-op, Reeva never failed to entertain. Her saving grace was she could be very funny when the fancy took her.

'So I said, "Go and find your fucking fathers and get some sweet money off *them!*"' She screeched with laughter at her own wit and a few of the other mothers in the busy shop joined in.

Reeva's ever-present cigarette was dangling from her red-stained lips and her distended belly told anyone who cared to look that she was nearly on her time.

Jack Walters, the manager of the Co-op, liked Reeva. She wasn't a bad girl really – she had just been badly used in her time by the many men she seemed to attract. She attracted *him*. She was a good-looking young woman with a warm and generous personality and clearly a healthy attitude towards sex – unlike his wife, Doris, who thought it should take place in the pitch dark and as fast as humanly possible. Jack kept that gem of wisdom to himself though; Doris was as narrow-minded as she was skinny. It was like shagging a skeleton.

Doris Walters was looking at Reeva with barely disguised contempt. Reeva was everything she thought was wrong with the modern world.

‘Can I help you, Reeva?’ Doris’s voice said it all and no one was in any doubt that Reeva understood the tone completely.

Reeva smiled a big encompassing smile that completely transformed her face and said loudly, ‘Whatever happened to service with a smile? You’ve got a boatrace on you that could stop a fucking clock!’ Reeva leaned forwards as if they were alone before she bellowed, ‘Caught him with his cock out again, have you?’

Jack Walters closed his eyes in distress as the shop erupted into gales of good-natured laughter.

‘Don’t worry, Doris, it happens to the best of us, mate!’ someone shouted from the queue behind.

Doris looked at the young woman who she loathed with all her being. Hearing the laughter around her, she turned and walked into the back of the shop, as Reeva screamed out once more, ‘I’ll take that as a yes, then, shall I!’

She turned to Jack Walters and said kindly, mimicking his wife’s voice, ‘One will have ten No. 10, my good man!’

The laughter started up again. Jack served her silently, but everyone could see that he was trying hard not to laugh with her.

That was Reeva O’Hara; she was like Marmite – you either loved or hated her.

Chapter Two

Doris Walters felt sick with humiliation. Trust the whore to bring *that* up in front of the other customers.

Her eyes were burning with unshed tears. She had to swallow the urge to go back out front, pick up a piece of wood and fell that painted trollop to the floor. That's exactly what she was with all those bloody kids! All different colours, all with different fathers! Yet Reeve O'Hara walked around like she was *someone*. Hair done, make-up on, attracting attention – Doris saw her own husband looking at her – even though she was ready to drop another bastard on the Welfare State.

But that was it these days: have kids and let everyone else pay for them – honest, hard-working people like herself. They got a council house and furniture provided. It was disgraceful the way these young girls carried on. Whereas people like Doris, who had finished her education, worked, and done it right, were left childless, having to watch as the Reeves of the world dropped chavvies like it was nothing. Which it was to her, obviously. What was this one? Doris screwed up her eyes in concentration for a few seconds. It would be Reeve's fifth child in twelve years. She had had the first one when she was fourteen years old! Brazen as you like, she'd been – belly on display like she had done something good. She had given birth to four

handsome sons, one after the other – and even Doris had to admit in her more charitable moments they were always clean and well turned out. They were polite too which was amazing considering what they had to listen to on a daily basis; that girl had a mouth like a city docker.

Doris Walters's jealousy knew no bounds when it came to Reeva O'Hara. She was everything Doris loathed, and Reeva O'Hara had everything Doris wanted: good looks, an open personality, and the ability to produce children even after a one-night stand.

Chapter Three

Aiden O'Hara was watching his mother as she doled out sweets to her boys. She was as mad as a box of frogs but she did her best for them – he knew that better than anyone, and he loved her. She embarrassed him at times with the way she carried on, although he knew that it was her way of coping with the world – with her life, in fact. She was a very loving, caring person and, as Aiden saw it, people took advantage of her because of that. He swore that once he was older he would take proper care of her, and look out for her – especially where men were concerned. As young as he was, he saw a lot more than he let on, but he could only do so much until such time as he grew up. For now, he helped her out in any way he could and he looked out for his brothers too.

He was aware they made a strange-looking family – a mixture of different colours and heritages – but they were still that: a family. His mum made sure of it. Father Hagen had once described her as 'a kind and generous soul' and, even at twelve, Aiden knew exactly what that meant in street parlance!

She seemed to attract wrong 'uns, as his nan would put it, but she had a spark about her that made people want to be near her. Her kids adored her, and a lot of the women on their street admired her – as much for her stance in keeping her numerous children as because she was clean as anything.

He rounded up his brothers and they kissed Reeva before he shepherded them towards school and another day of drudgery.

Reeva watched her three eldest go. Then, taking her youngest son by the hand, she said with a big smile, 'Shall we have a cup of tea and a bun in the café? Be a lovely treat, won't it?'

Porricks grinned happily; he loved being the youngest because he had his mum to himself all day and that was paradise to him.

Chapter Four

Eugene O'Hara, at seven, was already big for his age. His skin was deep black, his eyes were blue and he wore his hair long. He was a quiet lad, but not shy as such.

His teacher, a tall, heavily built woman from Trinidad called Mrs Bonasara, loved him – and she knew that he would have his own crosses to bear as he grew older.

Eugene always sat with Caroline Alba, a tiny, elf-like child with wide, blue eyes and long, blond hair. They were rarely apart but they made for strange bedfellows – not least because Caroline's father was a dyed-in-the-wool skinhead and racist.

Mrs Bonasara could see the two of them talking to Peter Jones, a tall lad who was already overweight, with the makings of a fine bully. From his prominent eyes to his small, mean mouth he looked exactly like what he was – and his teacher had a feeling he would fulfil this early promise by becoming a vicious and uncompromising man if he wasn't curbed soon. None of the other children liked him, and that appeared to suit him down to the ground. Peter was a born loner.

Mrs Bonasara sighed with sadness. If only parents really took an interest in their children now and again, how much hurt and sadness could be avoided. She could see Peter saying things to little Caroline and she quietly made her way round the classroom

so she could hear what was being said – whatever it was was obviously distressing the poor child. She sighed heavily once more when she heard a whispered, ‘Nigger lover’. No doubt one of Peter’s family’s favourite expressions, seeing as he used it at every available opportunity, but before she could open her mouth to reprimand the lad, Eugene O’Hara, who had also heard the quip, was already launching himself at the much bigger boy.

The noise was loud and frightening to the majority of the children in the classroom. Mrs Bonasara had to use all her considerable strength to part the two boys and it did not surprise her that the one she really had to keep hold of was Eugene O’Hara. She could see the shock and fear on Peter Jones’s face and, against her principles, she felt a small feeling of satisfaction at seeing the bully for once the frightened party.

Mrs Bonasara was holding Eugene against her with great difficulty, so she was relieved beyond measure when Father Hagen burst into the room and took over from her.

Father Hagen was a huge Irishman with a penchant for Irish whiskey and the Bible – in that order. The fact that he was a dedicated teacher saved him from being outed on a regular basis – that and because the children liked him. Without his black clothes and his white collar, he could have passed for a boxer – or a tramp, depending on who was looking at him. But he had a natural affinity with children and he could often get the best out of them.

Mrs Bonasara explained the problem and Peter Jones looked up fearfully at the huge priest who, with a well-timed scowl, could put the fear of Christ up even the older boys.

Father Hagen looked at young Eugene O’Hara and felt a deep sadness. This child had more than his share of burdens

and he was a good kid, intelligent and nice natured – it would have taken a lot to make him lose his temper. Although, as with all the O’Hara boys, it was a sight to see when he erupted.

He marched the two offenders from the classroom, aware that it was deathly quiet now. He could feel both boys trembling as he pulled them unceremoniously along to the headmistress’s room. One was shaking from anger and the other from fear. And, just like Mrs Bonasara, he thought it would do Peter Jones good to get a taste of his own medicine.

Chapter Five

Peter Jones had experienced one of the worst days of his life. Not only had he been beaten in a fight, but also his mother and father had been called from work and home respectively and told that he was on his last warning. Racist language and violence would not be tolerated and, on top of that, his mother and father had been subjected to a ten-minute screaming match from Reeva O'Hara that had been heard all over the neighbourhood. Reeva, as usual, was the victor – she could whisper and you would hear her in Silvertown.

He was feeling depressed and frightened of what awaited him at home. His dad was a dope dealer who sat in their council flat all day with his cronies, drinking beer and selling drugs. His mum, in contrast, worked in a factory in Romford and, from her daily complaints, it seemed she worked fucking hard. It was a difficult household to relax in, and he hated both his parents for different reasons. That was why he was in no rush to get home.

The pillowcase filled with baked bean tins hit him full in the face and he dropped to the ground. When he looked up and saw Aiden O'Hara, his heart sank right down to his scruffy, unpolished shoes, but it was when he felt the liquid being poured on him that he really began to get frightened. He couldn't

move, he was paralysed with fear. And when Aiden lit a match and threw it at him, he felt panic and tears erupt amidst Aiden's laughter.

'It's water, you fucking plank! But next time it will be petrol.'

He was punched hard in the head, and Aiden's voice was serious as he threatened quietly, 'You ever touch my brother again and I *will* fucking harm you, do you hear me?'

Aiden left the big fat lump crying bitter tears and he made his way home happy as a sandboy.

Chapter Six

Reeva was over her upset about Eugene; she was a realist and thought it was best to leave it – it would sort itself out naturally.

She was cooking them a big tea – she liked to cook and her children were always given a decent meal in the evening. Tonight she had made them a family favourite: shepherd's pie with cheesy mash on top and fresh cabbage. The smell was appetising, and she had no doubt they would all want second helpings.

After they had washed their hands and faces, she surveyed her sons as they sat quietly at the table waiting for her to serve them their meal. She felt a sudden rush of love for them – they were so alike yet so different.

The baby kicked and she absent-mindedly rubbed at her belly for a few seconds before she dished up. She watched her Eugene, who was really a sensitive soul, eating his food slowly and quietly. He broke her heart sometimes. Unlike her Patsy – who'd inherited his handsome Jamaican father's looks – her Eugene, bless his heart, looked more African than the Nigerian bastard who had left one morning with her purse and her heart. She had really loved him for some reason, but then she had loved each of their respective fathers in her own way. She had a great capacity for love or – perhaps more to the point – sex.

But she feared that out of all her kids, Eugene would be the

one to suffer the most because he wasn't just dark, he was black as night and as handsome as the fucker who had swept her off her feet one winter's night in the Beehive in Brixton. He had looked like an African prince, and tried to bullshit her he was one. He was studying medicine and they had enjoyed that winter together. Then he had disappeared, leaving her with her two kids, another on the way and without a penny to cross herself with. *That* had been what really hurt her.

She shrugged and pulled herself together; she had learned early on in her life that regrets were pointless. They just depressed you and, whatever else she might have regretted, her boys were never included. They were her life's blood and without them she would go mad. As she ate her own food, she looked happily at the pile of ironing she had done that day and, as the smell of the apple pie she had made wafted out of the oven, she smiled in contentment. Whatever else she might want in her life, the mainstay of her existence was in this kitchen with her.

She finished her food and rolled herself a joint; she allowed herself a little puff in the evening – it mellowed her out and relaxed her. And after today she needed it.

Two hours later, the boys were bathed and in their pyjamas, and the kitchen was once more as clean and neat as a new pin.

She put the youngest two to bed and allowed Aiden and Patsy to stay up to watch TV with her for a while, snuggled up on the sofa. That was when her waters broke – and she knew that the latest addition to her family was finally on its way.

She sat up quickly and told Aiden to first get himself next door and let Mrs Obana know that she was on her time, and then run around to his nan's and tell her the same thing. He rushed to do her bidding.

Then, telling Patsy to go up and keep an eye on his younger brothers, she hauled herself up off the sofa and went into the kitchen. She knew that Vera Obana loved her cup of tea, and she smiled as she popped the kettle on.

Vera, a tall, thin woman, with fine, blond hair, was married to a guy from Guyana and they made a lovely couple. Vera had been a midwife by trade, and she was always called in whenever Reeve was on her time. Reeve prided herself on having given birth to all her boys at home with the minimum of fuss.

While she boiled the kettle, she rolled herself another joint; she would need it once the pains really started. Reeve didn't like hospitals – they scared her and she felt that a healthy young woman like herself shouldn't need to go there unless it was absolutely imperative.

Up until now, giving birth had been like shelling peas so she wasn't too perturbed about the coming labour; in fact, she welcomed it. She was dying to have this baby. She hated the last few weeks – they dragged and she always felt tired and fat. She loved babies. They were helpless and they depended on you for everything – it was the only time she ever felt wanted in her life. Each of her children had made her feel important, made her feel she had some kind of purpose. And they made her feel complete – as if she had finally got something right in the chaos that was her life.

She liked Vera and the way she kept so cool and calm. She would always chat to her in a friendly way about nothing and then, before she knew it, the child would be lying on her belly, and that would be that.

Twenty minutes later, her mum had arrived and was taking charge over the household. Reeve finally relaxed. Annie O'Hara's

voice was soothing and, as Reeva lay in her large double bed, on a pile of newspapers, she allowed herself a little smile.

‘I’ll slap the fuck out of you lot if I hear one more word!’

Yes, her mum was here, and she could hear her sons laughing at their grandmother as she scolded them. The trouble with Annie was her bark was always much worse than her bite and the boys knew that, just as Reeva had always known it.

Vera laughed gently and said quietly, ‘She’s loud, but they know she’s all talk.’

Chapter Seven

It was after one in the morning and Aiden was worried. There was an air of tension in the house that he had never experienced before, and that frightened him more than he cared to admit. Even his nan had gone quiet and that was a first in itself.

Vera had phoned for an ambulance, and that meant something was going wrong. He swallowed with difficulty.

He had popped his head around the door and seen his mum lying there white as a sheet, with her eyes closed with exhaustion. He had also seen the blood everywhere that Vera was trying so desperately to stop.

There was a situation here all right and he was getting more and more frightened by the minute. It occurred to him that if anything happened to his mother they were on their own – he knew his nan could not cope with all of them. She had trouble finding her way to Bingo; she would never manage four boisterous lads. For the first time in his life he was experiencing real terror. He didn't like the feeling one bit. He wanted to cry, but he knew he couldn't, otherwise it would alert his little brothers to the seriousness of the situation. He had to be strong for all of them.

When the ambulance finally arrived, he breathed a sigh of relief and, despite the protests from the adults, he insisted on

going to the hospital with his mum. He was scared to leave her side, in case something happened when he wasn't there. He sat in the ambulance with her, holding her hand and willing her to regain consciousness. She looked so white and so vulnerable lying there with that huge belly and the black rings under her eyes, he had to swallow down the tears once more.

Suddenly all hell let loose, and he was pushed out of the way roughly as the ambulance men rushed to perform CPR. He found himself praying as he watched his mother finally open her eyes and look into his. She smiled at him, and he threw himself at her, holding on to her tightly, the tears flowing now and the fear subsiding in his chest.

Ten minutes later, his little sister came into the world in all her brutal glory and he watched, fascinated, as she was cleaned up and placed in his mother's arms. His mum was crying with happiness. That was the secret strength of women – even at his young age he knew a man, no matter how hard he might be, could not give birth and then smile like nothing had happened.

His mum motioned for him to come over to her and he sat beside her, looking in awe at the new baby she had produced amidst so much drama.

The ambulance man ruffled his hair and said kindly, 'Little sister for you, mate. You make sure you look after her – you're the big brother, don't forget.' Then he said to Reeve jovially, 'Picked her time, all right! Thought we lost you there for a minute!'

Reeve smiled tiredly as she answered him, 'Take a bit more than having a baby to finish me off! Tough as old boots, me.'

'Bleeding has subsided anyway, but my guess is you will need a blood transfusion before they let you go home. You'll need a few stitches as well. But, all in all, I think you had a result.'

Reeva looked down at her new daughter and said gently, ‘Oh, Aiden, my son, might have known it was a girl, eh? All that fucking drama!’

‘Takes after you, Mum!’

Even the ambulance men laughed at that quip.

‘Do you want to choose a name, son?’

He nodded, suddenly shy. Then, looking down at the wrinkled red face of his new sister, he said seriously, ‘She looks like Sister Agnes at school! All screwed up and miserable.’

Reeva laughed gaily and said, ‘Agnes is it then! Agnes Marianne O’Hara. That’s got a ring to it, I reckon.’

She placed his sister into his arms, laid back and closed her eyes; this was the first time she had experienced problems while giving birth and she had to admit it had scared her. She made up her mind there and then that this little lady would be her last one. She had five kids and she was still only twenty-six years old – even she knew when enough was enough. No matter what her neighbours might think about her, she wasn’t as silly as they believed.

She watched as her eldest son nursed his new sister and she felt content. Whatever happened in her life from now on, she had her kids and that was all she really cared about at the end of the day. They were the real constant in her life, and she was sensible enough to know that they were the only people who would ever really love her.

And Reeva needed love so very much.