

MAGGIE MASON

The
Fortune
Tellers



SPHERE

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In remembrance of Thalia Proctor, an editor with an insight of my work that was second to none, a kind and considerate lady, always ready to encourage and inspire. A joy to work with. Will always be remembered and missed. Rest in peace.

PART ONE

A Lasting Friendship is Forged

ONE

Martha
Dublin, 1916

‘Whist, woman, a man can’t hear himself think!’

Martha cringed. She hated to hear her pappy angry and wished her granny would stop nagging him. She’d seen Mammy tense as she stood at the sink drying the dinner pots, her back to them as they sat around the kitchen table.

This room, their living-kitchen, in a small farm cottage outside Dublin, was a place Martha loved. It was bright and welcoming with its constantly roaring fire flickering behind the thick iron and glass door of the stove – the beating heart of their home, kept so by her pappy’s long treks to Kilbarrack to find driftwood, and on to the bogs to bring home peat to make briquettes.

The fire not only served to keep them warm but heated the hotplate for cooking and kept the kettle boiling for the umpteen cups of tea the family drank. Then, once a week, Mammy would boil the washing in a huge tub of water on its almost white-hot plate, before filling the tin bath for their weekly ritual.

Martha sighed as she looked around her. To her, the walls were pitted with the memories of happy, funny times, and dark times too, when Pappy was in drink. For then his mood could swing from dancing around the table to throwing things at anything and anyone.

His anger always centred on the British and their treatment of them and their fellow Irishman. Today, he hadn't taken a drink, but was tense like a coiled spring.

'It is that I see a bad outcome, Michael, and want you to be calling off the rising.'

'I can't, Mammy. For the love of God, will you listen to yourself? It is time, Mammy. We must get rid of the British pigs and be regaining what is ours.'

Granny sighed.

Martha loved her granny. At sixteen years of age, she took after her with her hair a vibrant red – the colour Granny's used to be. And the same flashing green eyes – all-seeing eyes, people said.

This was true of Granny as she saw things before they happened and could tell anyone's fortune.

'I'll not be quietened, Michael, for I know it won't go well.' Granny shivered. Turning to Martha, she said, 'It is for being true what I say, isn't it, me wee child?'

The thump on the table made them all jump.

Mammy dropped her tea towel and came over to Pappy. She patted his shoulder gently. 'Sure, it is that your mammy knows, Michael. Will you listen to her?'

Martha felt her granny's eyes burning into her. A shiver slithered down her back. She didn't want to see the vision that was trying to come to her. Pappy's angry voice broke

the spell. 'I'll not be standing for her filling our daughter with her witchcraft nonsense. Martha, away to your room.'

Martha couldn't move. She stared into the leaping flames of the fire.

'Close your eyes, Martha. Be telling us what it is that you see.' Granny's voice, gentle and yet compelling, became a surreal echoey presence. Martha closed her eyes. Visions flashed, like an incomplete jigsaw. Everything glowed red. Faces, dripping with blood. Burning buildings . . . and her pappy and mammy standing holding hands. Their clothes scorched, their faces a fleshy mass of torn skin. They stared ahead. Gunshots rang out. They dropped to the floor.

The scream filled the space around her. Martha knew it had come from her. It rasped her throat and stretched her mouth wide.

Arms grabbed her, held her. But they couldn't stop her mind shutting down or her knees sagging as she sank into the terrifying blackness that consumed her.

When she came to, she was lying on her bed. Granny sat on the wooden chair next to her and Mammy lay on the bed with her, still holding her as she had done before the dark place had claimed her.

Unsure of what had happened, Martha could only stare up at the ceiling, wanting the blankness of the whitewash that covered it to be all she saw.

'To be sure, it is that you're all right, me wee darling. It is the gift that your granny always knew you were for having.' Granny took hold of her hand. 'It's a curse the women of me family are clothed in. Use it for the good of folk,

Martha. Then it will be for being a blessing. That is, if they have a mind to listen to the sense you try to tell them.'

Mammy sighed. 'We have to be doing what is right for our family and for our fellow countrymen, Mammy.' The strength of this conviction told Martha that the doubt Mammy had expressed to Pappy was gone without trace. 'The British are weakened by their fighting in France, and now is the best time for us to rise up.'

Martha looked at her mammy. Slender and dainty, her dark hair held off her face in a bun at her neck, her vibrant beauty in her sculptured face showing nothing but love. How could she speak such words of hate – even think of killing others, or of holding a gun in her delicate hands?

'When?' Granny's voice sounded resigned. Martha didn't want her to give in.

'You will die, Mammy, please don't do this. Do as Granny says: let us all leave tonight on the ferry for England. Granny is for knowing of a lovely seaside town – Blackpool. She has heard that the streets are lined with gold ... Please, Mammy.'

Mammy's gentle stroking of her hair didn't soothe Martha. She didn't know how she knew, or why the horrific pictures had come to her and given her an insight into the future, but she believed what she'd seen in the vision, and was desperate to stop it happening.

'England is at war, me wee darling. None of their streets are lined with gold, only poverty and dilapidation. They are a nation of suppressors, they are for taking all we have – our farms, our food. Our own have been dying of the hunger at times and no mercy was shown. Mammy and Pappy

must be taking up the fight for a better Ireland for you and all the folk of our Emerald Isle.’

Martha lay her head on her mammy’s breast. Her heart was heavy with the knowledge that soon she would lose her, and the thought was unbearable. And yet, there was truth in what Mammy was saying. ‘The Cause’ was a worthy one. But that didn’t help to alleviate her fear.

How she wished for everything to be normal. But then, what was normal? Living in a cottage and her father working his fingers to the bone on what used to be his father’s land but was now owned by a rich English family – the same family that she worked for, helping the upstairs maid?

Martha shuddered as she thought of how her many duties included the emptying and cleaning of the pots from under the beds – a stinking job she hated. Her favourite was helping to keep the clothes of all the ladies of the house clean and in good repair. She loved sewing and was exceptional at it, often chosen to carry out any delicate stitching on a special frock that had a tear in it.

Granny interrupted these thoughts. ‘Martha, me lovely, it is the gift that you have that is telling you the future. But I want you always to remember that people’s destiny is their own. You can try to help them to change it, but you cannot change it for them.’

‘Oh, Granny, I’m not wanting to see the happenings of the future.’

‘I understand.’

Tears filled Granny’s eyes. Martha felt lost between the world she lived in – a sometimes troubled, but happy world, as though poor and downtrodden, the folk pulled together

– and the life that was to come that she felt helpless to do anything about.

Two days later, Martha stood on the deck peering down into the depths of the Irish Sea as it lashed the side of the boat seeming to angrily mock her. For her granny's sake she'd agreed to go with her and live in Blackpool until it was safe to return home.

It seemed to her that life had suddenly been turned upside down. Her heart was heavy with fear and sadness.

An urge took her to jump into the Irish Sea and let the swirling water win her soul and tear her body to shreds.

Looking heavenward, she called on whatever God ruled those like her – for surely it could not be the good, loving God that the priest told her of? He wouldn't give this cursed power to her . . . Maybe it was the devil? Was she a daughter of the devil himself?

'Come away from the railings, Martha. I fear a sudden lurch will take you.'

Martha glanced over her shoulder at her granny, saw the fear in her face – had she seen that happening? Shaking herself mentally, she told herself that this new part of her was possessing her and she mustn't let it. Older folk were wary of anything happening to those they loved; that's all this was. But she moved away, suddenly fearing that she might be swept away, as now she didn't want to be.

'Come and sit with your granny and keep me warm.'

Sitting huddled into her granny's soft body, she asked, 'Granny, is it that I can rid meself of this curse?'

‘No, child. It is with you till you die. But it won’t always be present. You’re not seeing anything this good while, until now, are you?’

‘No, Granny.’

‘No. Everything must be in its place. When you had your vision, you were open to it. You were imagining what it was that your mammy and pappy proposed to do. This left your spirit guide a clear path and she was after taking her chance. She gave you the future of the two people who you were focusing on.’

Granny had told her about her spirit guide many times. Martha hadn’t really understood, but now she did. ‘So, if I want to see something, I have to concentrate on the person it is that I want to read the future for?’

‘That’s right, but suddenly, at times, it can happen when you’re not asking for it to. Me own granny told me that those times are for when it’s important for you to be having a message.’

But for the vision happening, Martha wasn’t sure she believed all her granny told her. It sounded like a lot of mumbo jumbo. Often Martha heard her pappy say, ‘Mammy, it is that you think you are like your gypsy forebears, but you’re not, for didn’t you up and leave the clan? No true gypsy would be for doing that.’

A week later when they came out of the boarding house where they had been staying in Liverpool, a man called her name. ‘Martha! Will you be Martha O’Hara then?’

Granny’s face turned deathly white. Martha felt her grip on her arm as if it was a vice.

‘She is, and I am her granny. What is it you want, Eamon Finlay?’

‘You’re remembering me then, Mrs O’Hara?’

‘You’ll not be forgotten, Eamon. Wasn’t it you who always took the coward’s way out and that is why you’re here now and not fighting alongside your fellow men?’

‘Not the coward’s way, it is wrong that you are. But come, I have news, and this is not the place.’

Martha wanted to yell at the man. Tell him that she didn’t want to hear what he had to say, but in the depths of her heart, she was already grieving as she knew her vision had come true.

A strange howling noise came from her. She had no control over it. It sprang from her deep shock and despair.

‘Will you come with me now? It is that the young lady has guessed me mission and it isn’t good for us to draw the attention of others to us.’

They learned that everything had happened as Martha had known it would. Her lovely mammy and pappy had been killed in what amounted to an execution in broad daylight.

The following weeks were a blur of pain and misery for Martha. Granny kept herself together and had somehow managed to find them a terraced house in Blackpool to rent, even though Martha knew her hurt was just as deep as her own. And now, they were on their way to take up their new residence.

The train would take them to Preston and from there they had to catch another to Blackpool.

Villages whizzed by the carriage window. None of them registered with Martha.

The only thing she noticed was that there wasn't the destruction Mammy had spoken of. No sign of poverty, only a noticeable number of young men in uniform to give any hint of this country being at war. The everyday folk she saw seemed to be going about their business as if life was the same as it had always been.

The names of the villages declared proudly on signs on each station platform as they either stopped or passed through sounded strange to her – Wigan was one and Leyland another. They seemed to mark in her that this had truly happened, and she was being taken further and further away from all she'd ever known.

At last, they reached Blackpool. The hurry and scurry of people, either alighting from or boarding trains, zinged an excitement through the air. How different from any station atmosphere she'd ever known as everyone lugged cases and excited children were shouted after to bring them to order.

Though tired and hungry, this all lifted Martha for a while, but her spirits plummeted when she saw that they were a long way back in the queue for a cab. She felt drained, but Granny still looked strong and fresh. 'Nearly there, me wee darling. Our new home and a new beginning.'

Martha didn't want a new beginning. She wanted to go back to the only home she'd ever known. To have her mammy hold her and her pappy call her his wee Irish *colleen*.

She swallowed back the tears. Tears didn't help, they only made her feel wretched.

She didn't stay this way for long. Swept away by all around her as the horse and cart taking them to their new house swayed and bobbed down the promenade, she felt as though life had burst into being. The noise of the waves breaking on the beach a backdrop to the vendors calling out their wares from gaily coloured tent-like constructions. The people, some strolling, some sitting on the promenade wall, giving off a happy, relaxed feeling and yet an air of anticipation.

It all served to transport Martha from her doom and gloom to a place of hope, and she had the feeling that this was where she was destined to be.

She looked at her granny and smiled. Slipping her hand into Granny's gnarled one, she told her, 'Sure, it is that everything's going to be all right, Granny. I'm going to look after you.'

Granny grinned a one-tooth grin. 'It is, me wee darling. I can see it in me mind. *Beidh an ghrian ag rís ar maidin.*'

With these words, Martha felt even safer and more settled in her heart as Granny had said, 'The sun will rise on the morrow' – words she always spoke to combat sadness. And Martha knew that her granny could always make happiness happen.