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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Crimson Rooms**

Written by Katharine McMahon

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The  
*Crimson*  
*R*ooms

KATHARINE McMAHON

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# Chapter One

*May 1924, London*

I followed my brother across a plateau where a bitter wind howled and flashes filled the sky. A sudden glare revealed churned earth and a monstrous coil of metal. My brother marched ahead, immaculate in cap and pressed uniform. I tried to keep up but floundered thigh-deep in mud. Though I thrashed and scrambled there was nothing to hold on to, neither root nor rock.

At last I wrenched a foot free but James was now yards ahead, far beyond my reach. I clutched at my other thigh with both hands and hauled until it was released and I could crawl forward. The front of my nightgown was a sheet of freezing sludge.

'Jamie.'

He trod lightly, springing from one dry patch to another. The sky flickered again and this time I saw a man fallen like a puppet on the wire, back arched, legs splayed. And in the next flash there was another boy, perhaps fifty yards ahead, waving. Tears made runnels down his filthy cheeks, his mouth gaped and the lower half of his body was a mash of blood and bone.

I faltered again. 'James,' I cried through lips clogged with mud, 'come back,' but he didn't hear me. His arms were extended towards the boy.

The sky roared. Above a shudder of gunfire came the ear-splitting whizz and crack of a shell. I yelled again, 'James,' but my voice was drowned by an explosion that swiped my brother off his feet, plucked him up and crucified him against a violent flare of light.

He thumped back to earth.

Silence.

He was face down, one arm torn away at the shoulder. When he raised his head I saw that the side of his face had been blown off and an eyeball dangled by a thread in the space where his right cheek should have been.

He looked at me with his good eye, a chip of ice.

‘It’s me, Jamie. Don’t you know me?’

The eye went on staring.

‘I’ll be there in a minute, Jamie. One minute. Please wait . . .’

But the mud held me fast. If only I could reach him, press his face to my breast. Then he would be covered and made warm, healed. Another shattering racket of shellfire. I fought the grip of the mud that was dragging me deeper, deeper, away from James, filling my mouth, nostrils, and eyes.

Another pause, this time prolonged. I was hot, breathless, shaking, my eyelashes wet. Moonlight shone through the thin bedroom curtains. My skirt and jacket hung ghostly on the wardrobe door, my heap of underclothes shimmered.

From two floors down came a knock on the front door.

I fumbled for my watch, carried it to the window, and found that it was two thirty-five. Though I yearned to be back inside the dream – this time I had so nearly reached my brother – my hands were already struggling with the sleeves of my dressing gown, my feet had pushed into their slippers.

The landing was quiet. Thank heavens nobody else had heard the knocking, no sign even of Prudence, jowls aquiver, hairnet remorselessly pinned to thinning hair. Stairs groaned under my bare feet, my hand, still trembling from the dream, skimmed the banister and my heel caught on the last stair rod. In the hall the trapped smells of the house fluttered like moths: dinners, rose water, endurance.

Knock, knock, knock-knock. ‘Oh please be quiet,’ I muttered. A seepage of yellow from the lamp outside oozed through the fanlight and fell across the hats on the hallstand – James’s boater, father’s trilby – and the silvery haze of the looking glass. As I grasped the latch, my jaw tightened to conceal whatever emotion, other than outrage (surely permissible in the circumstances), this sudden intrusion might provoke.

A child of about six stood on the doorstep, his face upturned; a

neat, rectangular brow, shadowed eyes, lower lip drooping from fatigue. My body sagged so that I had to cling to the door frame for support. Dear God. James stepped out of my dream, whole, a child again. In a moment his clenched fist would unfurl to reveal the best, the shiniest, the weightiest marble.

My voice was a thread. 'No. No, it can't be.'

'Forgive us if we woke you,' came a voice from further down the steps and dimly I registered a transatlantic twang. 'Evelyn, is it? I would have known you anywhere. You are so like your brother and he described you so fondly, especially your hair.'

A woman's head appeared just behind the child's shoulder, her face bony, with neat features and a pointed chin. Despite her confident words she seemed as highstrung as a cat; the sinews in her neck were taut and her eyes were too wide open. Extending a small, gloved hand she said, 'I'm Meredith Duffy, and this is my boy Edmund. Perhaps we should not have woken you but the boat got in very late and though I thought of looking for an hotel in the end I decided to come right on here.'

I stared at the exhausted boy, who swayed slightly. 'James,' I murmured. 'Jamie.'

'Yes, he really is so like his father, it's uncanny. I'm hoping that you might have some photographs of James when he was a child so we can compare father and son at the same age.' She took another step towards me and I noted a trim ankle beneath a daring hemline. Behind her on the pavement was a collection of compact though shabby travelling bags. 'Oh, this isn't *all* we have,' she exclaimed. 'I have another trunk and assorted boxes, I'm afraid, but we couldn't manage them in the cab. The shipping company will send them on tomorrow morning.'

Mother and child were like a tide coming in up the steps, lapping against the threshold.

'I absolutely do not understand,' I said.

The woman gasped and put her hand to her mouth. 'Don't say you never got my letter. Oh, the post from Canada is so unreliable. No wonder you're surprised to see me. I must admit I was puzzled that nobody was there to meet us off the boat but now I understand completely.'

‘But don’t you see,’ I said, still blocking the way, ‘I have no idea who you are.’

She frowned. ‘But you must. I’m Meredith and Edmund here is my son, your brother’s child.’

The boy’s eyes were fixed on my face, occasionally losing focus as his eyelids fluttered. Brown knees stuck out from beneath flannel shorts: my brother, at precisely the height when, if I knelt, his head was level with mine as he gripped me with monkey arms and legs. We used to call it a *cling*. But here, on the doorstep, in the small hours of Monday, 19 May 1924, with the dream of the real James still fresh, this other child seemed to exist out of time.

‘I didn’t know James had a son,’ I said.

‘Well, surely you must have done. Unless . . . don’t tell me your father kept it from you all this while?’

‘My father died last year.’ The boy’s hair, I noted, sprouted up at the crown in a backward quiff, and his lips were moist and full.

‘Ah, that explains a great deal. I’m sorry. I would so like Edmund to have known his grandpa. But listen, I must get this child to bed. We don’t mind where we sleep,’ Meredith was saying. ‘After the ship we’re just grateful not to be afloat, on *waves*. A sofa and a blanket would do.’

Surrendering, I leaned forward to take the child’s hand – I knew that it would feel warm and a little sticky in mine – but he hung his head and held back so instead I picked up the luggage. Now I was terrified he might disappear, but mother and child came tripping into the house hand in hand, she with her little purse hanging from a chain over her shoulder while I struggled with a cluster of bags. ‘We must be very quiet,’ I whispered. ‘I don’t want anyone else to be woken.’

We crept upstairs, past James’s hat and blazer on the hall stand, the urn of dried flowers on the half landing, the sleepers on the first floor and the gallery of Victorian Giffords above the dado, to my own landing, where the door to James’s bedroom was kept tight shut but in the spare room next door a couple of empty beds were covered by candlewick bedspreads. I took armfuls of mothball-smelling blankets from a linen chest and starched sheets from the airing cupboard, although when we set to work I was put to shame: Meredith was an expert bed-maker who could create

angular corners and shake a pillow dead centre in its case first time whereas I hadn't made a bed since Girton.

I showed them the bathroom but told them not to flush the lavatory at this hour. Meredith only gave me a preoccupied smile and it was clear that I was now expendable. She lifted the child's shirt over his head; I glimpsed pale, smooth skin, the little discs of nipple and navel, the fragile collarbone. My boy, my Jamie, how I would have kissed him between neck and shoulder.

They ought to be fed, I realised, and crept down to the kitchen to find something suitable. A hot drink was impossible as it would mean lighting the range, which was beyond me at the best of times. In the end I took up cold milk and biscuits, but by the time I'd climbed three flights of stairs there was no light under their door, so I went back to bed and lay picturing the boy tucked up under the white sheet, his palm beneath his cheek. In a little while he would turn onto his back and throw his arm across the pillow.

The house seemed to sag under the weight of these new arrivals whilst I, rigid as an effigy, relived the last half-hour: the dream of James, the child on the doorstep, James's child. As dawn thinned the darkness, I tried to work it out. James had written regularly, right up to a fortnight before his death, and never mentioned this woman Meredith. I thought he confided everything in me. Was it possible that he had time, in the midst of war, to conduct a love affair? And had my father really known? Why had nothing been said? And what did this woman, now installed with her son in the spare room, want from us?

At six o'clock, abandoning any attempt to sleep, I got up. Above me on the attic floor our maids Min and Rose (collectively known as 'the girls' despite both being nearly sixty) were astir. The light, reflected off the white tiles in the bathroom, was pitiless when I risked a glance in the mirror. The Canadian woman, Meredith, had been lying: I was nothing like my clear-eyed brother. My thirty-year-old face was all hollows and angles, my gaze haunted.

Fumbling with the small buttons of my blouse, I tried to decide how best to alert the household to our visitors' arrival. The process would be a tedious one and I was bound to be held responsible for the shock. The maids were straightforward: they must simply

be told that, for the time being, there were two extra mouths to feed – without additional housekeeping money. Grandmother (maternal), nearly deaf and partially blind, would be agog with interest but slow to comprehend the complexities of the situation. Prudence, father's elder sister, would have a hundred remarks and accusations. And mother would weep.

But she, after all, was father's widow and nominal head of the family. James was her son and Edmund her grandson. It was Monday morning and I was due to leave the house at eight. There was nothing for it but to break the news at once so I went down to the kitchen, had Rose make a pot of tea, and carried it up to mother's bedroom.

She had the infuriating habit, blamed by Prudence on poor circulation and lack of exercise, of being cold even in the height of summer. At any rate, I found her sound asleep under a winter quilt, the room a fug of sleeping female flesh and lavender. As I swept back the curtains she raised herself on one arm, grey-brown hair falling away onto the pillow, a hand shielding her eyes. In her youth, when a soft chin, melting eyes and tight lacing were all the rage, mother had been considered a great beauty. Now in her mid-fifties she was too thin and her lips drooped at either end as if weighted down by abandoned hope. 'What is happening? What's the time?'

'I've brought you some tea because I need you to wake up properly so I can talk to you. You'll need to be very strong, mother.' I perched on the edge of the bed, allowed her a sip of tea and then removed the cup and saucer because I was afraid her hand might jolt when she heard the news. 'We have a visitor whose name is Meredith. She has come with a small boy called Edmund whom she claims is James's son. From what I can gather, she and James had a love affair during the war. There now, that's all I know.'

I had seen her receive shocking tidings before, of course, and knew she did not manage it well. On this occasion she fell back on the pillow, arms taut on either side, shut her eyes and took gasping breaths while I studied the greasy film made by the milk on the surface of her tea and wondered if I might have been less brutal. Yet I was irritated by these dramatics, which were all too



predictable and ensured that the rest of us felt we had to protect her from bearing her responsibilities.

Mother covered her face with both hands and moaned, 'I can't believe it. I can't ...'

I had always disliked her bedroom, which as a child I regarded as a distastefully private place to which I was summoned for little chats while mother put up her hair or fastened her corsets. At the very centre of the room, on a strip of Turkish rug, stood a round table covered by a lace-trimmed cloth upon which a writing box with brass fittings was placed, like a reliquary. This was the repository of James's school reports, his letters and the appalling telegram. On the mantel were twin oval photograph frames, one containing a picture of James aged thirteen when he started at Westminster, the other my father in his prime, dressed in top hat and tails, his belly round and his smile hearty between beard and moustache. Father, before James's death, had been powerful and noisy with a glint in his eye that spoke of a hunger to earn, own, conquer. The only photograph of me was relegated to a side table. Aged twelve years, I had been decked out in frothy gown and ringlets for a studio portrait in which my mutinous eyes and thrusting jaw were strikingly at odds with the soft curls and girlish throat.

'They woke me at about three,' I told the prostrate figure in the bed, 'so I put them in the spare room. I've asked Rose to grill extra toast when they get up. I'm about to leave for the office but I expect our visitors will sleep late and then they could go for a walk or something. That will keep them occupied until I get home.'

Mother's round eyes widened. 'Oh no. No, no, you can't leave me.'

'I must, I'm afraid.'

'But you can't ask me to deal with them on my own, Evelyn. I can't take in what you're saying. A boy? James's son? But how can we believe them? They might be impostors. What proof is there?'

'The child is unmistakably James's son, I would say. You've only to take one look at him to know that. Meredith says she was in correspondence with father but lately, of course, he didn't reply. Do you know anything about this?'

Mother's eyelid gave the merest flicker as she shrank down under the quilt. She had known of the boy's existence and had kept it from me; that much was clear. The knowledge diminished my sympathy still further.

'Well, I'm off to work now. Be prepared for the fact that Edmund is so like James it's as if James were a child again.' The image hovered between us, an echo of the miniature Jameses that hung from ribbons in the alcove by her bed: baby James in a bonnet on her knee, James the schoolboy in cap and over-tight tie, James in cricket whites. For a moment I thought I might reach her. I ached for her to recognise that I was suffering too, that I had been struck by the savage disjunction between one child and another.

Instead she wept. 'Ah no, don't leave me. Oh Evelyn, what shall I tell mother and Prudence? How could you be so cruel?'

'I can because I must. I am needed elsewhere.' I ran swiftly downstairs to the hall, where Min was passing through with a breakfast tray, bottom lip caught between her teeth as a sign that she was suppressing comment with difficulty. 'Please make sure that our visitors have everything they need, Min. I forgot to give them towels last night.'

Then I rammed on my hat, skewered it with a pin, buckled the belt of my jacket and seized briefcase and gloves. As I set off into a warm, breezy morning I thought, Thank God I have my work.