

Chapter One

London. January. Heavy rain drives sideways, drivers squint through a blur of water. Pewter puddles mirror charcoal sky.

Judith Corrigan walked slowly out of the building, oblivious to the rain that was darkening her light brown hair and flattening it against her skull. When she got to her car she paused for a moment, staring blindly into the distance, then slid into the driving seat and shut out the rest of the world.

The news she'd just received wasn't a total surprise but still she'd hoped . . . foolish as that was . . . and now her last hope had just been destroyed.

It hurt.

She fumbled for the car keys, which she'd dropped into the lap of her sodden skirt, knocked them to the floor and didn't bother to pick them up. The tears welling in her eyes overflowed and with a soft mew of pain she rested her head on her hands and wept.

When someone knocked on the car window she turned her head, saw a police uniform and tried to roll the window down. But the keys weren't in the ignition, so she had to open the door to a flurry of chill raindrops.

The policeman bent down, concern on his face. 'Are you all right, madam?'

It took her a moment to find any words, so she nodded, then nodded again. 'Yes. Just – some bad news.'

'You've been sitting here for a while. Are you all right to drive home?'

'Yes. I'm – um – coming to terms with it now.' As he nodded and stepped backwards, she closed the car door, mopping her face, twisting sideways to look at herself in the rear-view mirror and realizing suddenly how wet she was. She glanced at her watch. There was just time

to get home and change before Des came back from the office. A little make-up would hide the signs of tears.

Bending down, she fumbled for the keys then with hands clenched tightly on the steering wheel, she drove out of the car park and made her way home through a winter world so lacking in light and colour she felt as if she were trapped in an old sepia photograph.

Which suited her mood perfectly.

Des Corrigan didn't notice the weather or the traffic. As his chauffeur drove him home, he spent most of his time talking on his mobile phone.

When he entered the house he went straight into the living room to announce, 'We signed today. She doesn't know it, but this is the beginning of the end for my dear sister.'

Judith gave him a long, level look. 'So you decided to go ahead, in spite of all I said?'

'I told you I would. What I do in my business is *not* your concern. You're my wife, not my damned accountant.'

'I meant what I said, Des.' She stood up and walked across to the doorway. 'I'll go and pack my things.'

He followed her out into the hall, grabbed her arm and dragged her back into the living room, not without a struggle that left him breathless, because she was not a small woman and she fought with the extra strength anger can lend.

As he slammed the door shut behind them, he yelled, 'We've been married for nineteen years, dammit, and you've never even met my sister. What can she possibly matter to you?'

Judith wrapped her arms round herself, rubbing the soreness where his fingers had dug into the skin of her upper arms. She could smell the wine on his breath and knew that made him reckless sometimes. Beneath the anger she felt deep sadness. This, on top of everything else!

‘I don’t have to meet her. It’s *you* I’m leaving, Desmond Corrigan, because I don’t like what you’ve become.’

‘I won’t let you leave.’

‘How will you stop me? Tie me up? Set one of your security people to guard me day and night?’ She could hear that her laughter was a mere rasp of sound, totally unconvincing, but it was the best she could manage. As she tucked a lock of still-damp hair behind one ear she felt her fingers tremble and made a huge effort to speak steadily. Though she wasn’t sure she’d succeeded. ‘You can’t stop me leaving you any more than you could stop your first wife from doing the same thing – and she probably left you for similar reasons.’

Judith knew how few morals he had when it came to either business or his own desires. Well, she’d known it for a while, really, but it had taken time for her to admit to herself that she’d had enough of it, because he could be charming when he wanted and was very good in bed.

The main reason she’d stayed was not because she was still in love with him but because they had a son. Mitch mattered more to her than her husband now, far more.

Des stared at her for a moment then stabbed a forefinger towards the trio of white leather couches which had been delivered only the month before. She sat down because she couldn’t fight him physically, but she hadn’t changed her mind about leaving and wouldn’t, whatever he said or did.

He sat on the next couch to hers, at right angles, eyes watchful. ‘Stop playing silly buggers, Jude. We’ve disagreed before. You didn’t walk out on me then.’

‘Maybe I should have done. I’ve thought about it a few times.’

‘Surely Maeve can’t matter more to you than—’

‘Haven’t you been listening to me? I don’t give a stuff about your sister. It’s *you* I care about. What you’re turning into. What sort of an example you’re setting our son.’

His expression grew sulky. ‘Maeve stole the family business from Leo and me, you know she did.’

‘She paid out your shares in full. That’s not stealing. And the business wasn’t big enough to support the three of you then, you know that. She’s the one who’s made it what it is now. Besides, this all happened thirty years ago. Get over it!’

‘But she *forced* us to sell them to her, cheated us of our birthright. She was determined to be top dog there. Corrigan’s is known all over the world for precision engineering of small, specialist parts. And look how rich she’s become on it, yet she never paid us a penny for the potential. I swore then that I’d get the family business back from her one day and now I have done, or I will have once the paperwork goes through.’

Judith had argued about this before but for her own peace of mind, she tried again. ‘You don’t need that business, Des. And doing it this way, with trickery and lies, stinks. Does your brother know what you’re doing? Have you even asked Leo if he wants the family business back? He seemed happy enough running his hardware shop when we visited him.’ Leo was the unambitious one, a taciturn man more interested in his family than the world outside his small country town. Judith had only met him once, given how far away he lived, but she’d liked him and his sensible wife.

‘Leo’s grown old and lazy – that’s what Australia does to you. Life’s too easy there. Anyway, he always was too stupid to help himself. I’m not.’

‘You haven’t told him, have you? For all your big talk about family, you’re doing this purely for yourself, out of sheer spite.’ She lifted her chin to stare him out. Gone were the days when Des could intimidate her with an angry look – or make her bones melt with a loving one. He was married to the business nowadays – and to that damned mobile phone of his. Their marriage had been over for a long time, except as a useful social arrangement.

He folded his arms and leaned back. ‘Just for that you’d leave me? Get real, Jude.’

‘No, not just for that.’ She hesitated but after what she’d heard today it was more than time to get everything out in the open. ‘There is also the question of your current, live-in mistress. Your previous one was, you swore blind, a temporary madness. The existence of Tiffany Jane Roberts makes infidelity seem more like an ingrained habit to me.’

After one twitch of surprise, he became very still. ‘How the hell did you find out about Tiff?’

‘I paid a private detective. Five mistresses you’ve had in the past ten years, he tells me, not to mention the odd one-night stand when the opportunity has presented – like last month in Manchester. You even *boast* about it to your business friends. They all *know* you’re unfaithful to me. How do you think that makes me feel? And I’m sick to think of the diseases you might have passed on to me.’ She slapped her open palm down on the couch and hurled at him, ‘*Years of it!*’

‘Maybe I wouldn’t have needed the other women if you’d been more accommodating, Judith. You’re not exactly the world’s greatest lover, you know. Not even in the also-rans.’

She picked up a cushion and hurled it at him before he realized what she intended. ‘Your infidelity has nothing to do with my skills in bed. You’re just greedy.’ She paused and swallowed hard. She’d promised herself not to scream at him, to tell him quietly then leave. It was proving harder than she’d expected.

He flapped one hand sideways in a dismissive gesture. ‘Ach, they meant nothing, those women. You know I’ve got a higher than average sex drive. It’s often the way with successful businessmen – and politicians.’

‘*They mean nothing?* This Tiffany female has been with you for five years. And your first long-term mistress bore you a child. A daughter. Whom you still support. Is all that *nothing?*’

‘How the hell did you find out about that?’ His expression lost its geniality – its humanity, too. He looked like someone from a Breughel painting, a man with a brutal, lumpy face made

insensitive by the harshness of daily life. But Judith knew that Des had not had a hard life, he had just lived life to the full.

‘I wonder what we’d find if I had a detective look into *your* life?’ he muttered when the silence dragged on.

‘No infidelities, that’s for sure.’ She watched him force a smile. He could always pull out that particular smile, but she could spot it a mile off now and knew it wasn’t genuine. ‘You’re a fine-looking man, with that head of silver hair. And you’ve kept yourself trim, too –’

He nodded, as if she were complimenting him.

‘ – but you’ve gone rotten inside.’

He jerked upright and glared at her. ‘And you’re a fat old sow. You’ve even let your hair go. It used to look good, now it’s just ordinary.’

‘You hate that, don’t you? Other men have wives who don’t look like stick insects – and they still manage to love them, but not you. Desmond Corrigan’s wife has to be fashionable in every way, a visible sign of his success. Well, next time you marry you can get yourself a skinny young trophy wife – preferably a blonde, because you clearly prefer them. But don’t forget to write it into the marriage contract that she mustn’t put on any weight.’

‘I don’t want another wife. I want you.’

‘Why? You just said I’m not the best in bed.’

‘You’re not that bad. We’ve been together nineteen years and it’s stupid to throw it all away on a whim. You’re a good wife for a man like me. You can talk to anyone. People like you.’ He gave her a sour glance. ‘But you could have lost the weight. It’s not much to ask.’

‘I tried. Several times.’

‘Well, you didn’t keep it off for long.’

‘No. It’s not much fun living on lettuce leaves. Or eating them alone when your husband’s away, which is at least half the time with you. What’s more –’ she stared at herself in the

mirror – ‘I quite like being this size. I enjoy the voluptuous feel of my body. Read the latest research, Des. Most normal men like curvy women and some people are meant by nature to be larger than size 8 or 10. Marilyn Monroe was my size, you know.’

‘Well, *I* don’t like all that blubber.’

‘My body’s firm, well-toned, and—’ She bit back further protests. She’d never been able to convince him, didn’t need to now, because she’d made her decision. Relief whispered through her, mingling with the sadness, and she knew leaving him was the right thing to do.

He leaned forward, his body menacing, one hand bunched into a fist. ‘You’ll have to fight me for custody of Mitch.’

‘I won’t, actually. I’ve already seen a lawyer about that. Our son is considered old enough to choose for himself, so the courts will let him do just that.’

‘My lawyers will find a way round it.’

‘I’m sure they’ll try. I know you’ll use any dirty trick you can think up.’ Suddenly Des sickened her. She stood up so quickly his outstretched hand missed her. ‘But Mitch is *my* son, too, and *I* want him because I love him. You just want a son and heir to carry on your name – you’ve never been interested in your daughters, either from your first marriage or by your mistress – and you only want custody of Mitch to score off me. He’ll be as lonely as I’ve been if he continues to live here with you.’

Her feet made no noise on the thick grey carpet and when she opened the door, the eavesdropper fell through it and landed at her feet.

She stared down at her son. ‘Well, Mitch, I see there’s no need to tell you what’s happening. You’ll be able to make a well-informed choice about your future.’ She watched coolly as he stood up, seventeen years old, red haired, as his father had been once, six foot tall but thin and poorly co-ordinated, not yet used to his new height – which came from her side of the family, not Des’s.

Mitch looked down at her from his two inches of extra height, something they often joked about. 'I'll go and stay with Gran till you two have sorted things out. I don't want to play piggy in the middle.'

From behind them Des, the smile back in place, said calmly, 'I'll drive you over there, son.'

Mitch backed away, shaking his head. 'No, thanks. I'll phone Gran and she'll come and get me.' He turned and raced up the imposing curve of the staircase as if he couldn't bear to stay with them a minute longer, banging into one of the paintings on the way and leaving it rocking to and fro on its gilt chain.

Des turned to his wife, fury twisting his face again. 'You'll be sorry, you stupid bitch! I'll make very sure of that. You're really going to miss the luxury of all this.' He gestured widely with one hand at the echoing hall that reached up three storeys in the centre of the house, all polished marble floor tiles and gleaming white columns.

Judith followed his gaze and smiled. He was proud of this house, but it was an architect's kitsch fantasy designed to suit the whim of a rich man who had no taste. Des had simply indulged himself in whatever displayed his wealth most ostentatiously and mocked his wife's pleas to tone things down. 'I've never really liked this house. You're welcome to it.'

'You'll not set foot across the threshold again if you leave, mind.'

'Why would I want to? Most of my things are packed and gone already.' She realized suddenly she wouldn't have done that if she'd felt they really had a chance of healing things between them. But it had been harder than she'd expected to tell him. 'I'm not sorry I married you because we had some good years and you gave me Mitch. But I've stayed with you far too long.' Hoping, always hoping . . . that things would improve . . . that one day Des would stop lusting after money and decide he'd made enough of it . . . that they could start enjoying life *together*. He'd promised that often enough.

‘You didn’t mind me supporting you while you fiddled around with your painting, though, did you? You didn’t mind me buying you the best of equipment or paying for those expensive private art lessons.’

‘I *earned* them by acting as your hostess at those damned boring functions you’re always putting on to impress rich investors. And anyway, I needed something to occupy my time while you were out with your tarts.’

She paused halfway across the hall to say, ‘Oh, and by the way, I’ve drawn all the money out of our joint account.’

‘Peanuts!’ he scoffed.

‘More than enough for my needs for quite some time. If you remember, I have my aunt’s house in Lancashire. I’ll go and live there for a while.’ Her aunt May had died the previous year, dropping dead suddenly of an aneurism, the way she’d have wanted to go. Des hadn’t even bothered to attend the funeral, but Judith had wanted to farewell her only aunt.

‘You’re welcome to that hovel.’

It wasn’t a hovel. It was quite a large house, by normal standards if not by Des’s inflated ideas of what a des res should be like. Judith had made many happy visits to the village of Blackfold and when she went round the house after the funeral she’d felt an indefinable sense of welcome. So she’d decided to keep it and rent it out.

She began to climb the stairs slowly and wearily, not even looking back at him as she added, ‘And even before the lawyers start dividing things up, don’t forget that one of your smaller companies is completely in my name. I think I’ll be quite comfortable with the income from that, don’t you? I may even decide to get involved in managing it.’

‘You’ll sign that over to me before you leave,’ he roared. ‘You’ve no right to it now.’

She'd known that would upset him. Very possessive about his holdings, Des was. He'd only assigned it to her for tax avoidance purposes, and she wasn't really sure whether it was hers. 'I mean to have a share of your worldly wealth, Des, because I've earned it.'

Footsteps came pounding up the stairs behind her and she turned in shock. When he shook her hard, she fought back, kicking him in the shins. Yelling in pain at that, he thumped her and she felt herself start to fall, slowly, so slowly she thought she had time to grab the burnished brass handrail. But she missed it and cried out in fear as empty space whirled round her. She seemed to tumble and bounce for a very long time before darkness engulfed her.

When she came to, Mitch was crouched over her protectively and Des was sitting part-way up the stairs with his head in his hands.

Her son clutched her hand. 'Don't try to move, Mum. The ambulance is on its way. I think you've hurt your knee. It's badly swollen.'

She moved her head to look and couldn't hold back a whimper of pain at even this small movement.

Des raised his head. 'Hell, I'm sorry, Judith, truly sorry. I didn't mean to—'

She closed her eyes. Didn't speak. Didn't want to see him or speak to him ever again. Just held her son's hand and waited to be carried out of her husband's life on a stretcher.

Cheshire. A stark January day. An icy wind savages the broomstick trees. Flurries of chill drops make a vain assault on the double glazing.

Oblivious to the weather, Maeve Corrigan sat bolt upright in her favourite armchair and made her announcement to Andy Blauman in measured tones.

Which jerked him out of his relaxed sprawl into instant, shocked attention. 'Ah, Maeve, no!'

‘I don’t want your pity, just your help, Andy. And in return, I’ll—’

‘You know you’ve no need to bribe me to help you – whatever the circumstances.’ His gaze was reproachful.

While the wind whistled in shrill encouragement outside, she speared him with one of her famous looks, keeping him and his pity at bay. ‘I have *always* paid my way and I intend to continue doing so until the day they carry me out of here feet first.’ Which was, unfortunately, going to be sooner than she’d expected.

But when he rushed across to fold her in his arms, for a moment – just one moment of weakness – she couldn’t bear to push him away, and sagged against the warmth of his young body, stroking his curly hair.

Like a teddy bear he was, this large American of Irish-Jewish descent who had come to Ireland as a young man to find his mother’s family, had followed the trail of his distant relatives to Maeve in Lancashire and had stayed there for over ten years. He had a softness to him that he tried in vain to hide and when he’d first come to work for her, she’d had to teach him how to be firm with the workers. If he hadn’t learned, she wouldn’t have kept him on, but he picked things up quickly, did Andy. Now, well, she didn’t know what she would do without him, needed him for the next two years to implement the provisions of her will and manage her legacy to her family. And as she couldn’t be here, she intended to bind him to herself and her heirs legally.

As she felt tears welling in her eyes she shoved him away, concentrating on the anger that had been simmering within her ever since her last trip to the oncologist. ‘Get away with you!’ She blinked furiously, refusing to weep in front of him or anyone. ‘Sit down again, will you, and listen to what I want you to do.’

Five minutes later he was scowling. ‘Maeve Corrigan, that’s outrageous!’

She beamed at him, restored to good humour by her own cunning. ‘Yes. It is, rather. So you’ll do it for me, then, Andy?’

He was sulky now. ‘What choice do I have? As if I’d desert you at a time like this!’

She smiled at that admission. She didn’t intend to give him or anyone else a choice and would conduct this business of dying in her own way, as she had done everything else in her life since she had turned twenty-one. Right from her childhood she had found it deeply satisfying to make people dance to her tune. Well, why not? She always knew exactly what she wanted and the best way to get it, while other folk rarely did.

Except that she hadn’t been able to bear children. That had been her one failure in life, the main thing she regretted now. But nature had denied her this privilege.

Her two brothers had children, though, five of them. And they would be her heirs. But the main Corrigan Legacy, her money, would go to only one, whoever seemed the most capable of holding it together.

