

LOVE PAINTED IN LIES

A Maida Vale Tale

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CHAPTER ONE

MAIDA VALE, JULY

~NOW~

Cool in the summer but drafty in the winter, my parents' Victorian basement conversion flat had been their home since before I was born, and now I had moved back in with them.

"I can make us all breakfast," Mum suggested from the kitchen doorway, unaware of our breathless panic. "And we have something in a tin here, I can put it in the oven or in the toaster?"

Dad mouthed her last words to himself, whilst his old eyes searched the walls, seemingly in the hope their meaning might be written there somewhere.

"No need. Thanks Mum" I replied, snatching the tin of beans from her as I passed and placing it back on the kitchen bin-lid to stop it from springing open.

We had watched *Mamma Mia* the night before, while sharing a bottle of wine or two, which had left me feeling rather tender. "Has anyone fed the dogs yet?"

"I haven't," Dad uttered to himself.

I gave his arm a squeeze as I passed. With Dad's bad hip, he was really the only person I hadn't been asking.

"Mum, I can't find my schedule," Harriet whined.

The twins' bedroom was its usual bric-a-brac jumble of hidden secrets and lost dreams. Or just horribly messy, depending on your view.

Since having children, I had developed a range of new skills like saying, 'Show me the money,' when I wanted to scream 'Shit!'

"What is peace negotiation?" an impatient young recruiter had once asked, whilst studying my CV.

"If you had met the two Harries you would know," I had replied. He hadn't met them. They were told to wait outside. Which was a shame because when

the twins were with me, I felt less awkward.

“Well, you can’t put that on your CV,” the recruiter had concluded. He was wrong of course, because I did. ‘Finding things,’ was another one he hadn’t liked.

After a few minutes of kneeling down, my arms flailing around under her bed, I gave up and shuffled in on my front, and there, tucked in at the back, was Harriet’s class schedule.

“Pah!” I said smugly.

The noises from the flat were softened underneath, and my cheek dropped onto the cold laminate floor.

“This would have been too much for you,” I commented to my now-dead husband.

If you’d known how to cook a roast, my little Mk1, at least I’d have had a choice, he replied stiffly.

He often replied stiffly. But then not being alive would do that to you, wouldn’t it?

It was peaceful under there, and I could have stayed, only there were footsteps, shuffling, and Harriet’s head appeared next to mine, her frizzy blonde mop partly stuck over her face.

“Mummy, who are you talking to?”

“I’m playing a game, shall we lie here all day?”

Harriet regarded me curiously. “No Mummy, I have school and you have...”

“What?” I was interested.

She thought. “A lot of pets to look after.”

“Your shirt will be covered in dust now.”

“Dust and cat hair,” she replied confidently. We inched our way back out and brushed ourselves off.

“Does anyone at school have this many animals?”

Harriet fixed me with her serious look, “Mummy, we have a zoo.”

I checked my watch again. “Show me the money!” Taking her hand I led her through to the bathroom, snatching a hairbrush on the way. I began attacking her tangled tufts.

“OUCH! Mummy that hurts!” Harriet squealed as the plastic prongs fought bravely against her curls.

It was my children’s first week at a new junior school – we had joined at the end of the summer term, year five – and we had been late once already. And all the other girls there seemed to be on time, and immaculate, but I could never get Harriet’s blonde frizz to stay in one place, whether tied back, bunches or plaits. Imagine the typical mad-scientist look – that was how she woke each day. It was basically untameable. And with mine and Harry’s hair, with our mild espresso toned waves, she had taken hers directly from her father. Walking back into my bedroom, my bare foot trod in something squishy. “What’s that from?” I asked myself, inspecting the sole.

Harry answered for me. “A cat, Mum. It’s cat sick.”

“I know what it is, I mean what have they eaten that’s been bad?”

“A rat from your cupboard? Because London is full of them,” he taunted. “By the way, we forgot to tell you...”

“Oh my God! Why are you both still in pyjamas?!” I almost screamed.

“Because today,” he flicked his wedge of dark chocolate hair away from those blue eyes, enjoying my pain, “it’s take-a-bottle-to-school-go-in-your-pyjamas-day.”

“Right, and I’m a pickled walnut,” I responded.

“It’s true!” Harry shouted defensively.

Harriet joined in; “I know it sounds like he just made it up Mummy, but it really is the truth.”

“How is this even a thing?” I began making the bed.

Harry spoke slowly, as if it should be patently obvious to anyone with a brain. “If-you-donate-a-bottle-of-wine-for-the-affle, we-can-go-to-school-in-our-pyjamas.”

My mornings had often been filled with exciting surprises like this one. They usually started with the sentence, “We forgot to tell you today we need...” and at that point it could be anything at all. Seriously, like we need to take to school a frog that has a slight cough, or a box of blue ants, or a talking geranium. It was always information they should have shared with me weeks

before that day. “So, it’s pyjamas... OR...” I began hopefully, but I already knew the answer.

They replied together, “WE DO NOT LIKE ‘ORs!’”

I gave in.

No time to wash. I threw on some jogging pants, fed the dogs and cats, emptied the compost bin, checked Dad’s blood pressure, gave him his pills, and his eye drops, topped up the water bowls and we were off.

Pouring out of our basement flat in a tish-tosh tumble of half-closed bags and unkempt hair, the Harries and I raced up our stone steps to the pavement above. The sun was just making its way along the buildings on the far side, not yet hitting the pavement, but you could feel it was going to be a scorcher of a day. Elgin Food & Wine was our local corner shop. Rummaging in the alcohol aisle in my grubby sweatpants, hair in a mess, smelling rather pungent from the previous night’s wine, two children next to me in their pyjamas, I didn’t realise we were being scrutinised by other shoppers.

“Get the cheapest bottle you can find, Harry!” I urged.

“There’s wine here for a fiver, Mum?” he cried gaily.

“Too expensive,” I replied. “There must be a cheaper bottle we can have?!”

“£3.99!” Harriet screamed joyfully.

“Bingo! That’ll do us nicely,” I cheered.

The three of us joined the back of a queue of people waiting to be served. A couple of heads turned, taking in our appearance.

Harry grumbled, as we approached the front, “Mum, we’re going to be late for school again!”

“How is that my fault?” I fretted, plonking my wine on the counter in front of the shocked assistant. “When I have to buy this first.”

Behind me, a hawkish woman with a hardened face said, “Drinking at this time, and she can’t even be bothered to dress the poor lambs.”

“It’s not for me,” I explained, patting down my tangled hair. “It’s for them.” I threw her a big helpful grin, before we were outside and running up the street, while a nagging thought surfaced; my last comment probably hadn’t helped matters.

Up the road, we rounded St Dunstan's gates.

"I've always thought schools look particularly eerie when empty," I noted.

"It's not empty Mum," Harry said bitterly. "Everyone's in lessons"

A walk of shame through the playground, faces staring at us through windows.

We were given another late mark.

On the way back, I passed Shane the Caretaker (or scare-taker as Harriet liked to call him), a jovial Irishman who it seemed always had time to offer words of wisdom. "Look at the state of you. Want to borrow a comb, Minty?" he chuckled.

Back at home, my sister Tammy was waiting for me, standing outside in our basement patio, smoking and agitated. "He... he's back," she stuttered. Her tanned, slender figure was accentuated by a perfectly tailored orange summer trouser suit. She looked even more fashionably emaciated than usual. Her balayage hair fell in loose waves. She wore understated jewellery, oversized sunglasses, and lots of lipstick.

"Are you eating properly?" I asked.

She took a long drag on her cigarette, then whipped off her glasses to reveal dark, watery, fearful eyes. "Not eaten, not slept either, because he's back."

"You keep saying that, but who is, Tammy?"

Now, some words, if you see them written down or hear them, instil an instant emotional response, like 'anxiety' – horrible word, 'fear' – evil word, 'calm' – soothing, 'disgust' – yucky, 'Trump' – (as in ex-president) that word makes me cross. However, when Harry joyfully screams 'he's done a Trumpy,' it brings his giggles but also a bad smell. I'm not sure how to feel about that one. Anyway, the word I was about to hear gave an uneasy feeling.

"Quinn." She shuddered.

My heart began pounding, and my stomach dropped into a void. *Get-out-never-doubt-BOLT!*

"Your eyes have gone," Tamsin reminded me.

I brought them back and focused on her. "Sorry. I was just calming things

down.”

She tutted. “Anyway, he’s here, in London.”

“Are you positive?”

Quinn was a huge mammoth of a man with an evil temper. He got his start in Glasgow, working as a bouncer for some of their roughest clubs, later running his own group of doormen who were good at stopping trouble, but could also cause trouble if you didn’t use their firm on your club-door. It was a simple business model which developed over time into a large security company with the same marketing technique of intimidation, bullying, extortion and violence, spreading across all the major cities in the UK. That’s when we’d first met him.

“Oh yeah,” she breathed, her face drawn and haunted as she reflected. “He was in the crowd at yesterday’s ECO exhibition.”

“Really?” I tried to picture it. “I’m sure he’s too busy breaking people’s arms and legs to worry about saving the planet, Tam.”

“Why do you have to say that?”

“Because let’s be honest, that’s what he does,” I reasoned, “and he does it really well.”

“Stop it. Just...” She shook her head.

I’d upset her already. I seemed to do that a lot.

“He was there in the crowd...to watch... me.” The last word almost toppled from her mouth, unwillingly.

I scrunched up my face, imagining it all. “You think he went all the way there to hear your speech?”

“No, Minty! Not for my fucking speech! I don’t know why he was there.”

“You sure? It’s been a while, maybe it wasn’t him.”

“How many people do you think would look like they wanted to kill me with those dead angry eyes?”

“Waitrose shop assistants, Uber drivers and Gail’s Bakery baristas to name a few.”

“Gail’s Bakery...?”

“You had a hissy fit last week when you burnt your mouth on a skinny

latte.”

“Okay, but none of them are seven feet tall and 22 stone.”

“To be honest, I think Quinn was six-six and closer to 25 stone.”

She stared at me blankly, as she often did. “It was him. But what does he want with us after all these years?” she snapped. “And why do you think he looked so angry?”

I worked on an expression that would cover this situation, as I did know exactly why he would be angry.

She studied my face, her eyes narrowing. “What is it Minty? Do you know something?”

“Honestly, nothing at all...” I was a useless liar.

And at that moment, the door next to us was yanked open. My dogs ran out, wagging their tails as if I’d been gone for a week. Mum appeared, her face weathered by years of gardening and long walks, a testament to her love for the outdoors. She looked upset. “Minty! Where have you been?!”

Tammy sighed. “She’s been feeding Oprah Winfrey’s chickens, Mum.”

“Really?” my mother gasped.

“No,” Tammy said, resigned, kissing Mum’s cheek. “Check the board.”

Mum’s short-term memory was fading quickly, and information no longer seemed to stick. To spare her the need to ask Dad every few minutes, I started writing on a series of large whiteboards whenever I went out, hanging them around the flat, including on the back of our front door.

“Oh!” She moved the door so she could read it, then reappeared. “At school...oh thank goodness!” And her kind hazel eyes brightened with the excitement the day could bring. “Where are we off to now?”

Tammy tried to grab my hand, but I slipped past her. Today was not the day to talk about Quinn.

Years into my parents’ retirement, Mum was still eager to be busy. Dad on the other hand, would have been happy in his armchair, pawing through books on the latest artists ‘making a name for themselves’, or sitting outside on the steps, smoking a ‘ciggie’ and quietly listening to passers-by as they talked on their phones, unaware he was beneath them.

“Minty, while you were gone,” he said, “I heard a woman up there arguing with a man...”

“Her husband?” I enquired.

“Could be.” He smiled, always liking it when I’d help colour in a story. He went on, “Her husband’s gone, and she’s sat on our wall above on her phone, asking if she can stay at someone else’s.”

“Gosh,” I said. “Do you think it was her lover?”

“Without a doubt.” He beamed, elated by this pocket of mischievousness we may have uncovered, finally erupting into a coughing-laughing fit.

“I thought you’d given up smoking?” Mum scolded him.

“I have, Margie!” he replied crossly, continuing the charade, and beneath his silver-streaked hair, he winked at me, those eyes twinkling as ever.

“Where are we off to now then?” My mother repeated.

“The park, Mum,” I answered, and I took her hand.

~THEN~

“We are depending on you. The world is depending on you.”

The licence in my hand was different to the one Mum carried in her handbag, because mine had been stamped with the words ‘*LICENCE TO KILL*’. The small, folded card had the shaded-in outline of a girl that kept her face a secret, and on the front, a coat of arms with the words ‘Minty – Double Agent.’ “But why me?” I asked my sister.

She bent down until our eyes were level. “Because you’re the only one who can do this, and they won’t know you’re working for the other side.”

“What do you want me to do, Tammy?”

“We need to know what they’re planning.”