RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Patsy of Paradise Place

Rosie Harris

Contents

About the Book
About the Author
Also by Rosie Harris
Title Page
Dedication
Acknowledgements

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight
Chapter Twenty-Nine
Chapter Thirty
Chapter Thirty-One
Chapter Thirty-Two
Chapter Thirty-Three
Chapter Thirty-Four

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About the Book

After years of neglect by her mother, when her father comes home from sea and sets up as a carrier at the Liverpool Docks, Patsy dreams of being a proper family again.

But when her father is killed in an accident and her mother returns to her errant ways, Patsy must keep the business going with the help of Billy Grant, the boy who worked with him. Billy is deeply in love with Patsy but she has fallen for the charismatic charms of fairground showman Bruno Alvarez, and believes that he is going to marry her.

One fateful night she brings him home to meet her mother who seduces him. Heartbroken but still in love with Bruno, Patsy discovers she is pregnant. Bruno has disappeared and even her own mother disowns her. Only loyal Billy stands by her in her troubles but when he is badly injured at work Patsy is left friendless and without a home. Will she and baby Liam ever be part of a family again?

About the Author

Rosie Harris was born in Cardiff and grew up there and in the West Country. After her marriage she resided for some years on Merseyside before moving to Buckinghamshire where she still lives. She has three grown-up children, six grandchildren and three great-grandchildren, and writes full time.

Also by Rosie Harris

Liverpool Sagas

Turn of the Tide
Looking for Love
Winnie of the Waterfront
The Cobbler's Kids
Megan of Merseyside
A Mother's Love
Waiting for Love
A Dream of Love
Love Changes Everything
Whispers of Love
The Price of Love

Welsh Sagas

Troubled Waters
One Step Forward
Pins and Needles
At Sixes and Sevens
Sunshine and Showers
The Power of Dreams
Sing for Your Supper
Love Against all Odds
A Love Like Ours
The Quality of Love
Ambitious Love
A Brighter Dawn

Patsy of Paradise Place

ROSIE HARRIS

arrow books

For my grandchildren:
Susie Harris, Kathryn Sak, Michele Harris,
Nicola Sak, Hayley Harris and Robert Harris

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Chapter One

‘DAD ... DAD? IS it really you?’ The skinny tousle-headed child, swinging from a rope tied to one of the lampposts in Paradise Place, scraped her clumpy boots along the pavement to slow herself down.

She peered through the murky gloom of a mid-December night in disbelief as a tall, muscular man carrying a heavy canvas kitbag on his shoulder came striding down the road towards her.

The next moment, Patsy’s exclamation of surprise and astonishment ended in a wild scream as the man dropped the kitbag and she found herself being swung high in the air by a pair of strong arms.

‘What do you think you are doing out here on your own at this time of night?’ he asked in a voice laced with concern.

‘Waiting to see if anyone else was coming out to play.’

‘At this time of night?’

Patsy giggled. ‘Sometimes Janie Grant or Maureen Murphy pretend to go to bed early and then they sneak out so that we can play chasers in the dark or creep up the jowlers and spy on some of the older boys and catch them smoking ciggies.’

‘Does your mam know about this?’

Patsy shrugged, but ignored his question. ‘Anyway, I don’t care if they come out now or not. You’ve come instead and that’s even better,’ she said fervently as she hugged him.

‘I’m not going to let you go away ever again!’ she vowed, locking her hands behind his neck and smothering him with kisses.

‘So if I stay at home will you promise not to sneak out in the dark to play?’ he asked, lowering her back on to the ground.

Feet placed wide apart, hands on hips, Patsy Callaghan tipped back her head and stared up at the giant of a man who towered over her, her green eyes wide with astonishment.

‘Do you really mean that?’ she asked in disbelief. ‘You really mean that you’re never going back to sea again?’

Patsy thought she must be dreaming. The last time her dad had come ashore he had been at home for three weeks and he’d taken her and her mam out for a day that she would remember as long as she lived.

He’d bought her a new green dress, some white shoes and a bow of green ribbon to tie in her hair and when she was all dressed up in her new clothes he’d taken them on the train all the way to Chester. They’d walked along the city walls and they’d sat by the river with a bag of buns and a bottle of pop and had a picnic.

John Callaghan stretched out a hand and ruffled her mop of unruly red curls. ‘It’s like I say, me darlin’ girl, I’m not going away any more. From now on I’ll be living at home with you and your mam.’

‘For ever?’ she gasped.

‘For ever and a day,’ he told her gravely.

Patsy drew in a deep breath. Father O’Brian must be right after all and your prayers did get answered if you prayed long enough and hard enough. ‘Does me mam know?’ she asked cautiously.

John Callaghan laughed, a loud jovial sound. ‘Not yet, so why don’t you run along indoors and tell her?’

Patsy hesitated, then slid her tiny hand into her father’s massive one. ‘Why don’t we do it together,’ she said and

her face split into a wide grin.

‘Whatever you say.’ John Callaghan swung his kitbag up on to his shoulder and let his young daughter lead him by the hand towards the back door of the terraced house that was their home.

Patsy paused in the scullery and looking up at her father held a finger up to her lips. ‘Hush, don’t make a sound!’ she whispered. ‘Let’s surprise her. You wait here a minute.’

John Callaghan nodded. Carefully he lowered his kitbag to the flagstone floor leaning it against one wall.

As Patsy moved towards the door that led into the living room, walking in an exaggerated fashion on the tips of the toes of her laced-up boots so as not to make a noise, John Callaghan looked round him in distaste.

He sighed. Maeve had never been house-proud, which was something he couldn’t understand because she was so finicky and meticulous about her own appearance.

Her fastidiousness seemed to end there. It never seemed to trouble her in the slightest what Patsy looked like. Even when she was a tiny baby she could be filthy dirty and dressed in grubby rags and Maeve hardly seemed to be aware of the fact. Today he’d noticed that Patsy’s frock was soiled, and the hem hanging down, her pinafore was torn and the toes of her boots were badly scuffed.

He looked around him and even in the dim light filtering through from the main living room he could see that everywhere was utterly filthy. Dirty dishes and saucepans were piled up high in the stained sink, leftover food lay around uncovered and a distinctly unpleasant smell hung in the air.

Patsy had left the door slightly ajar and he could see his wife standing in the living room, leaning over the fireguard that was draped with clothes that she’d washed out and hung there to air, peering into the mirror above the fireplace.

A pretty woman with shoulder-length strawberry-blonde hair, she was attractively slim yet enticingly curvaceous. She was wearing the very latest silk jumper blouse in leaf green over a matching pleated skirt. The lower edge of the blouse had an elaborate crochet border that emphasised her shape and the cap sleeves were trimmed in the same way.

Her face was heavily made up and she was concentrating on outlining her mouth with a bright pink lipstick as Patsy entered the room.

'Mam, there's someone to see you,' Patsy told her.

Maeve ignored the intrusion until she had finished applying her lipstick then turned briefly. 'If it's your Uncle Peter then tell him to go on to the pub and I'll see him there like we arranged. I'll be another five minutes at least.'

'No, it's not him. I bet you'll never be able to guess who it is …'

'Not now, Patsy, I'm trying to get ready to go out and I haven't time for your silly games,' Maeve told her peevishly. Then, as she looked back into the mirror and caught sight of the figure standing in the doorway she gasped in disbelief.

'John?' She swung round to face her husband. 'This is a surprise! You nearly frightened the life out of me! What are you doing here?'

'Hey, what sort of greeting is that for a man who has been at sea for almost a year?' He grabbed hold of his wife, pulling her into his arms and kissing her hungrily.

Breathlessly, Maeve wriggled free. 'Hold on, John, do be careful, you're ruining my make-up!' she complained, raising her carefully pencilled brows as she peered over his shoulder into the mirror.

'You've got me mam's lipstick all over your face,' Patsy giggled as he released his hold on her mother and stepped back.

John Callaghan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then stared down at the vivid pink stain.

‘Why do you put that bloody muck on your face,’ he muttered.

Maeve gave him a withering look. ‘It’s what women do to make themselves look more attractive when they’re going out,’ she said sarcastically.

His gaze darkened as his eyes swept over her, taking in the low neck of her dress, the shining beads, dangling earrings, the pale silk stockings and the high-heeled shoes laced with coloured cords in the same shade of green as her dress.

‘Going somewhere special, were you?’

‘I certainly was,’ she told him as she turned back to the mirror and began repairing the damage he had done to her make-up.

‘And what about young Patsy, then? he asked in a steely voice.

Maeve gave him a puzzled look. ‘Patsy. What about her?’

‘If you were going out then what was Patsy going to do? Judging by the state of her and the way she is dressed you weren’t exactly planning to take her along with you.’

Maeve’s mouth twisted as she looked across at Patsy in her grubby cotton dress, torn pinafore and cumbersome boots. ‘You know bloody well that I wasn’t taking her with me!’ She laughed. ‘Patsy is a big girl now, in case you hadn’t noticed, aren’t you, luv? You don’t mind staying on your own if I go out for an hour or so, do you, pet?’

‘An hour or so? You mean for the entire evening and half the night, don’t you?’ John commented.

Maeve shrugged. ‘An hour or two or the entire evening, what difference does it make?’ she said lightly. ‘Once Patsy’s tucked up in bed and I’ve kissed her good-night she’s soon fast asleep so she doesn’t know whether I’m here or not.’

‘If she is asleep. More likely she’ll be lying there fretting and worrying, too scared to go to sleep,’ he argued. ‘A nine-year-old shouldn’t be left in the house on her own.’

‘Well, she won’t be on her own tonight, will she?’ Maeve smiled smugly. ‘She’ll have her dad here to keep her company.’

‘And for every night in the future.’

Maeve paused with her lipstick in the air, her mouth agape. ‘Yer wha’?’

‘I’ve decided that I’m not going back to sea any more.’

Maeve remained silent as she completed the task of outlining her mouth in brilliant pink but her brain was working overtime. What was he saying? Not going back to sea again? She couldn’t even begin to think of what that was going to mean. If John was to be at home all the time from now on then it would turn her life completely topsy-turvy. She felt annoyed. She hadn’t expected him home for another few weeks and this meant the end of her freedom for the near future.

As things stood, apart from the few weeks two or three times a year when he came home on shore leave she was free to do as she pleased. While John was away she didn’t bother to do any cooking and cleaning unless she felt like it, or if she was entertaining one of her many men friends.

If the place was a tip most of the time it didn’t matter, because there was only Patsy there to notice it. Maeve’s lips tightened: she’d soon cured Patsy of complaining about the state the place was in by making her help with the cleaning and clearing up.

If John was at home all the time though, that was another kettle of fish completely. He was a stickler for order and he’d expect the place to be clean and tidy all the time. He’d expect her to wash his clothes, iron his shirts and put food on the table at regular times. What was even more to the point, he wouldn’t approve of her gadding off

out on her own three or four nights a week. In fact, he'd probably try and put a stop to it.

Now was probably not the time to let him know how much she resented his decision, she decided. As she turned from the mirror there was a feigned look of delight on her pretty face.

'John, this is wonderful news,' she cooed as she twined her arms around his neck and her glistening pink lips curved into a tantalising smile. 'You're really going to be home for good from now on? I can't believe what I'm hearing!'

Patsy had been holding her breath as she waited for her mother's reaction to the news. Now she let it out in a cautious sigh of relief.

From now on things would be so different, she thought happily. They'd be a proper family. She wouldn't have to fend for herself when she came home from school, or spend long evenings sitting at the window staring out into the dark street, wondering when her mother would be coming home.

She was so afraid of being in the house on her own that she could never sleep. As soon as her mother had kissed her good-night and she heard her go downstairs and the front door slam and she knew she was on her own there were all sorts of strange noises and shadows that she never noticed when her mother was there. The rustling, scuttling noises as mice and cockroaches scurried about, and even the house seemed to creak and groan as if it was alive.

She'd once tried to tell her mother about her fears. Maeve had simply given her a hug and told her not to be so fanciful and then packed her off to bed early, telling her to get to sleep before she went out.

She had lain there with her eyes tight shut trying desperately to fall asleep, but it hadn't worked. She was still awake when her mam came up to kiss her good-night and the moment she heard the front door slam she'd been

out of bed and huddled by the window as usual, watching and waiting until she saw her mother coming home again.

When she saw her approaching, if she was on her own, then Patsy would scuttle back into bed and pretend to be asleep in case she came upstairs to check up on her.

With her dad at home all the time that would stop, she told herself gleefully. There would be no more lonely nights.

She couldn't have had a more wonderful father, Patsy thought as she studied him. With his lean tanned face, shock of dark brown hair and gentle blue eyes he was the most handsome man she'd ever known. Her heart felt as if it was bursting with love and pride and she looked forward to boasting about the fact that he was home for good when she went to school next day.

She'd make him promise to come and meet her after school ended and that would stop all the teasing she had to put up with because he was so often away from home.

He was so tall and broad shouldered that he made her mother look slim and dainty as they stood there embracing. She had her arms locked round his muscular neck and she was gazing up at him with her wide-set green eyes as if she adored him.

Patsy sighed again. She knew only too well that those limpid green eyes could become emerald hard and the soft curving lips tighten into an unforgiving line. And the dainty fingers that were at this moment stroking the blue stubble on John Callaghan's cheeks could inflict a stinging slap, or curl into a fist that left bruises on her arms and chest when things didn't go the way Maeve wanted them to do.

There were times, Patsy reflected, when she wished her mother was fat and blowsy like some of the other women in Paradise Place. They seemed to be content with their lot and stayed home at nights, and were always around for their kids when they came home from school. They were there waiting to give them a hug if they were unhappy

because they'd been bullied, or console them if they'd been told off at school.

Nevertheless, she took a pride in the fact that her mother looked so lovely. She wished her own red hair shone like gold and that she was as neat and dainty as her mother instead of being so clumsy. She always boasted that her mother was as beautiful as a princess. If, sometimes, their house was so filthy that she was ashamed for anyone to see it, she always managed to dream up some excuse or the other as to why she couldn't bring her friends indoors.

Now things would be different. Her dad liked things spotlessly clean and everything neat and tidy. 'Ship-shape and Bristol fashion' he called it, and he was always telling her that was how things had to be on board ship because there was so little space that everyone had to be tidy.

'A place for everything and everything in its place,' he would scold whenever he found their living room or scullery in a shambles.

Her mam couldn't be tidy if she tried and she would laugh when he started ranting on about it. Then she would light up a cigarette, perch on the arm of a chair or the edge of the table, and watch as he picked things up and put them away.

With her dad at home they'd have to stop piling up the dirty dishes in the sink and simply rinsing off a cup or plate when they needed it. They'd have to wash up after each meal and dry the dishes they'd used and put them away on the dresser or in the cupboard.

There'd be no more running off to the chippy for a fish supper or foraging around to see what scraps she could find in the larder when she was hungry and her mam was out at the pub. Instead, they'd sit down at the table to eat their meal every night and on Sunday there'd be a roast dinner and she'd be so full up afterwards that she would hardly be able to move.

Yes, she thought happily, life was going to be very different. If her dad was at home all the time her mam wouldn't need to go out at nights because she was fed up and lonely. And she wouldn't be bringing any of her strange friends home either.

Patsy shuddered as she thought about some of the uncles who came to the house. Most of them had unpleasant beery breath and she hated it when they tried to kiss her. She hated it even more when they tried to cuddle her because they usually had hot sweaty hands that seemed to roam all over her body. Or else they made her sit on their lap and then they held her so tightly that she could hardly breathe.

Most of the time though they didn't seem to want her around. Some of them gave her a few coppers and told her to take herself off and get lost for an hour or two. If she came back too early she found the front door and the back door locked and no matter how hard she knocked, her mam took no notice. Once one of the uncles had given her a shiny silver tanner and she'd been able to buy a bag of toffees and a big bottle of pop to share with Janie and Maureen. And there'd still been enough left over for her to buy them all an ice-cream.

All that sort of thing would be in the past, she thought pragmatically. At long last they'd be all together like a proper loving family.

When the summer came they would be able to have days out together. There would be trips to the park to feed the ducks, or in the summer they might even go across on the ferryboat to New Brighton. She loved it there because there was so much to see and do, so many exciting things going on.

Her dad liked to walk along the shore for miles and miles and watch the huge liners and massive cargo boats coming down the Mersey and being guided into dock in Liverpool by fussy little tugboats. He seemed to know

where each one had come from and how long they had been at sea. She liked visiting the fairground where there was music, and brightly coloured swings and slides and roundabouts to ride on.

Sometimes there was a circus in the grounds of New Brighton Tower, with ferocious wild animals in huge iron cages and her dad would tell her about the foreign places they all came from, where they roamed wild.

She liked the elephants best even though they were so huge and cumbersome that she was afraid they might crush her with one of their enormous feet if she stood too close to them. Some of them did tricks, like picking things up with their long grey trunks, and sometimes they let people have rides sitting up on their backs in special basket chairs.

Patsy sighed happily as she snuggled down in bed that night. There were going to be so many wonderful times ahead now that her dad had promised not to go back to sea ever again. It really was as if all her dreams, as well as her prayers, were coming true at once.

Chapter Two

JOHN CALLAGHAN HAD suspected that adapting from being a seafarer to becoming a landlubber was bound to present problems. Even in his most uncertain moments, though, he hadn't envisaged anything like those he experienced during the first two months of his change of lifestyle.

His return home in mid-December was so near to Christmas that he decided to leave looking for work until the New Year. He deserved a holiday, he told himself, and he needed time to adjust to being a family man.

Patsy was overjoyed.

'Can I stay home from school so that we can go out together every day?' she asked. Her sharp green eyes shone with enthusiasm. 'We can go looking at all the lovely shop windows in Lord Street and Church Street. They've been specially decorated up for Christmas! And can we make paper chains to hang up in the house and make our own Christmas pudding?' she asked him excitedly.

'You can't stay home from school just for that,' he told her gravely. 'I'll still be here when you break up from school for your Christmas holidays so we can do all those things then if you want to.'

'Of course I want to! I want to do them with you, though, Dad. Me mam isn't interested, except in going round the shops and then she only wants to buy things for herself.'

'Patsy!' John Callaghan frowned disapprovingly.

She pulled a face. 'Well, it's true. You ask her yourself if you don't believe me.'

John Callaghan didn’t say anything more on the subject. He suspected that what Patsy had said was probably right even if he didn’t approve of her saying such things.

Unlike Patsy, right from the start Maeve seemed to resent his continuous presence in the house. She acted like a caged bird, beating her wings because she had to adjust to his needs and ways, sulking when she didn’t want to fall in with his plans.

It wasn’t easy for either of them. When he tried to establish some sort of order and routine Maeve accused him of being a fusspot. Sometimes, or so it seemed to him, she deliberately opposed his efforts by leaving her clothes strewn all over the place in the bedroom and dirty dishes piled up in the sink.

As a result of years of strict routine on board ship, John Callaghan was used to rising early each morning. Maeve refused to comply.

On his first morning at home he was up before seven and down in the kitchen making a pot of tea. When he took a cup up to Maeve who was still in bed she struggled up on one elbow, rubbing the sleep from her eyes like a small child. Pushing back her tangle of strawberry-blonde hair from her forehead she stared at him, bewildered. ‘What the hell do you think you’re playing at waking me up in the middle of the night?’

‘It’s not the middle of the night,’ he told her. ‘I know we sat up late last night talking, but it’s time we were up or Patsy won’t have time to eat her breakfast before she has to go off to school.’

‘Breakfast? Have you woken me up at this ungodly hour to talk about Patsy and her breakfast?’ Maeve asked sulkily. ‘If Patsy wants something to eat she knows where the bread’s kept and she’s quite capable of putting some margarine on it. Half the time she doesn’t bother to eat any breakfast, anyway.’

She pushed the cup of tea away and wriggled back down in bed, pulling the covers over her head.

‘Stay where you are then if you’re all that tired,’ John told her. ‘I’ll see to Patsy this morning.’

Maeve didn’t answer so he went back downstairs. He’d already stirred the dying embers in the firegrate back to life so that he could boil the kettle so now he might as well cook a pan of porridge and cut some bread ready to make Patsy some toast, he decided.

Patsy looked astonished when she came downstairs and found that the dirty dishes from the night before had been cleared from the table and that it was now laid for breakfast for the two of them.

‘Is this a special treat because it’s your first day home or are we going to have breakfast like this every morning?’ she asked in surprise.

‘From now on you’ll be having breakfast like this every morning,’ he told her crisply.

She grinned gleefully as she sat down at the table and tucked into the food he set in front of her.

‘Now go and get ready and I’ll walk as far as the school with you,’ he said when she had scraped her bowl clean and eaten a slice of dripping toast.

‘I am ready,’ she told him.

He studied her for a moment in silence. ‘You’re going to school dressed like that?’ he frowned.

‘Yeah! What’s wrong with me?’ She ran the back of her hand across her mouth. ‘I’ve had a wash!’ She looked at him sideways to see if he believed her. ‘Well, I wiped me face over with a wet flannel before I had my breakfast.’

He shook his head disapprovingly, then decided not to make an issue of it. ‘Your dress looks grubby. Hadn’t you better go and change it?’

She rubbed ineffectually at the greasy stain down the bodice of the drab blue serge dress. ‘I haven’t got another one,’ she said slowly.

He felt irritated by her prevarication. ‘Don’t talk silly! You must have more than one dress.’

‘Not winter ones. Me mam said she would get me a new one for Christmas.’

‘Christmas is weeks away. Are you going to wear that same dress every day until then?’

‘I wears one of my summer ones with a jumper over it on Saturdays and then I wash this one and it’s clean for me to wear to Mass on Sunday and to school all the next week,’ she explained.

John Callaghan opened his mouth to speak then shut it again, his lips tight together holding back the exasperation. He wasn’t sure if Patsy was telling the truth or whether she was being cheeky. Maeve had the cupboard in their bedroom packed full of clothes so surely Patsy must have more than just one warm dress.

He looked at Patsy again and shook his head sadly as he noticed the grubby socks with a great cobbled darn in the leg of one of them.

‘Well it’s Friday so as it’s only for today I suppose it won’t matter too much. Go and get your coat on or we’ll be late.’

‘No we won’t, because I’m ready now.’ Patsy grinned. She reached down a thick red-and-black striped scarf that was hanging behind the kitchen door and began winding it round her neck.

‘Your coat,’ he repeated patiently.

‘I haven’t got one so I wear this,’ she told him.

‘And what about when it rains?’ he queried.

‘I pulls it up over my head and I run as fast as I can to try and dodge the raindrops,’ she grinned.

‘Come on, Dad,’ she grabbed at his hand. ‘I don’t want to be late. I want all me mates to see you. Some of them don’t believe I have a dad. And some of the others say you run away from home because …’ Her voice faded away and

she bit down on her lower lip and gave him a nervous sideways look.

John Callaghan felt his insides churn. He was pretty sure he knew what she was going to say and he was glad that she hadn't.

'Come on then, let's be going.' He ruffled her untidy red curls with his free hand. 'Do you want to nip upstairs to say goodbye to your mam?'

'No fear!' Patsy's eyes widened dramatically as she pulled a face. 'She'd skelp me if I woke her this early in the morning,' she giggled.

Maeve was still in bed when John returned from taking Patsy to school.

'You know I'm not a morning person,' she yawned when he went upstairs to waken her. She gave him a provocative smile. 'Why don't you come back to bed and we can have a cuddle and another sleep.'

'No, I'm wide awake and want to get on with things,' he told her. 'I'll go downstairs and start cleaning up. Give me a shout when you decide to get up and I'll cook some breakfast for you.'

She pulled the bedclothes back up over her ears. 'Oh, don't bother,' she snapped. 'I never eat breakfast anyway,' she added with a noisy yawn.

It seemed to set the pattern for the days that followed. No matter what he said or did, Maeve was rarely out of bed before ten o'clock in the morning. Then she would spend ages putting on her make-up and combing her hair. After that she would potter round the house for the next hour or so in her flimsy blue silk dressing gown and pale blue mules with white swansdown trimming looking like a stand-in for Clara Bow. This irritated him even more than the fact that she was a late riser.

If anyone came to the door he would rush to answer it, afraid of what they might think or say if they saw Maeve in that state. Not that she didn't look lovely, seductive even,

but that was not the point. He couldn't think of another woman in Paradise Place who was ever seen in a dressing gown. Probably none of them had one, and certainly not a silk one. If there was a middle-of-the-night emergency then they either pulled a skirt or dress on over their nightgown, wrapped a blanket round their shoulders, or put on their outdoor coat.

He wondered what the other women thought about the fact that Maeve was always dressed up to the nines and yet young Patsy's clothes were little better than rags.

The first weekend he was at home he took Patsy out on a shopping spree. He bought her two winter skirts, one navy and one brown, two thick wool jumpers, one blue and one green, and a heavy navy-blue gabardine coat that would also keep the rain out. He also bought her sensible leather shoes to replace the boots she'd been wearing and several pairs of knee-high woollen socks.

Patsy was like a dog with two tails as she displayed all her new clothes for her mother to see, but Maeve was not impressed.

'Complete waste of money,' she said dismissively. 'Have you any idea what she is like with her clothes? When she's swung from a few lampposts and climbed a few walls, or been in a fight with some of the other kids, those things will be in tatters, you'll see.'

'She's only a tomboy because you let her run wild,' John protested. 'From now on she's going to behave like a little lady, aren't you, kiddo?' he murmured, ruffling Patsy's curls.

'Until she gets herself into a scrap with some of the other kids round about and they start fighting and tearing the clothes from her back.'

'Why does she get into those sort of scrapes?' John asked, his eyes narrowing speculatively, as Patsy walked out of the room.

Maeve shrugged. ‘How the hell should I know? When she comes home with a black eye or a bloody nose she never tells me how it happened.’

‘Have you ever taken the trouble to find out why she won’t tell you?’

‘Got better things to do with me time,’ Maeve grinned. ‘If she wants to be secretive about things then that’s up to her, luv, now isn’t it?’

‘She gets into fights because she’s defending you,’ John told her quietly.

‘Defending *me*? Worra she got to defend me about, I’d like to know?’ she demanded hotly.

‘I think you do know,’ John said firmly. ‘She doesn’t like it when the kids start teasing her, calling her names and saying she doesn’t know who her father is.’

‘Bloody load of rot!’ Maeve snapped. ‘Course she knows who her father is.’

‘Not when I’m away at sea and you’re bringing home a different man every night of the week,’ he said bitterly.

‘Who youse been gossiping with then?’ Maeve asked defiantly. ‘Been down the boozer listening to all the local scandal from those beery bastards, have you?’

He nodded. ‘It didn’t take long before some of your so-called friends were putting me wise to the way you carry on when I’m not here.’

Maeve shrugged, but her cheeks were now bright red and her eyes shooting sparks of venom. ‘You shouldn’t have buggered off to sea and left me on my own for months at a stretch then, should you,’ she spat.

John sighed. ‘No, I shouldn’t have done, but I did it so that I could earn the money to give you and Patsy a good life,’ he said flatly.

‘Money’s not everything,’ Maeve told him, her luscious pink mouth curling sardonically. ‘I need a man about the place for company and if you preferred to bugger off on

your own for months at a time then I had to find someone else to fill your shoes … and your bed!'

He flinched as if she had struck him. How could a woman who looked so angelic talk and act like that? he asked himself, struggling to hold his anger in check.

'You didn't have to neglect Patsy,' he said lamely.

'What lies has she been telling now?' Maeve asked, taking a cigarette from the packet lying on the table and lighting it. She puffed out a cloud of blue smoke. 'You don't want to let her wind you up, you know. She's a contrary little madam, likes to go her own way so I let her. She'll tame down in time.'

'If she doesn't land in trouble first! Dressed like an urchin and playing out in the streets at all hours of the night and day she could very easily end up in bad company.'

'She's on the ball, that one,' Maeve told him scathingly. 'She's well able to take care of herself.' She stubbed out her cigarette angrily. 'What's brought all this on anyway? You got a guilty conscience about leaving us for months at a time or something?'

John's steady blue gaze levelled with her face. 'Maybe I have,' he said thoughtfully. 'I never dreamed that Patsy was leading the sort of life she is. Or that she was being taunted and teased.'

'Kids' stuff, that,' Maeve told him. 'The little buggers are always picking on each other. One minute they're fighting and the next they've got their arms round each other's necks and you can't tear them apart.'

'I always thought mothers looked out for their daughters and that they cherished them and taught them how to behave and dressed them in pretty clothes. I made you a generous allowance all the time I was at sea so I knew you were all right for money, and I thought you'd be enjoying each other's company.'

'Doing what? She's a kid, she wants to play with other kids of her own age not sit around with me watching me

paint my nails!'

'I imagined you'd be taking her to the pictures, or on trips to the shops or even over to New Brighton and places like that. If I'd known for one minute that she was being left on her own at nights while you went gadding off out with other blokes I'd have been home like a shot.'

'And are you telling me that you never went out on a drinking binge with the other fellas on the ship when you put into port?' Maeve jibed.

'Out drinking, no! I looked round the different places we docked in and took in the sights, but I didn't squander my money boozing. You must know that from the amount I was sending home to you.'

Maeve's mood suddenly seemed to change. Her face softened and her sneering was replaced by soft wheedling tones. Her eyes became limpid green pools as she looked up into her husband's face 'What are we quarrelling about, luv? You're home now so why don't we make the most of it?' She reached up, slipped her arms around his neck and gave him a seductive smile. 'I know of far better things we could be doing,' she breathed coquettishly, the tip of her tongue teasing the lobe of his ear.

Chapter Three

FOR PATSY CALLAGHAN, Christmas 1922 was a mixture of sheer delight that her dad would be at home for Christmas for the first time since she could remember, wonderment that one of her most cherished dreams had come true, and fear that something would go wrong and spoil everything.

She would have given almost anything not to have had to go to school in the week leading up to the Christmas holidays. She wanted to spend every magical moment she could with her dad.

In the past, huddled in the dark waiting for her mam to come home from the pub, or wherever else she had gone in the evenings, Patsy had tried desperately to remember what sort of man her dad was. She wanted him to be strong yet gentle, kind yet authoritative. She hoped he didn't have a temper or shout, but above all she wanted him to be understanding, yet firm.

It was so long, more than ten months, since he had been at home that her memory of him was rather confused. She hardly expected the real man to live up to her anticipations, but it was consoling to daydream.

To her astonishment he seemed to match up to her expectations in every way. Except for the shouting. He hadn't shouted at her yet, but then she had been trying so hard not to do anything that might upset him or make him cross with her.

He had shouted at her mother a number of times and Patsy hated it when he did that, despite the fact that she could understand why it happened. Her mam could be so