

OPRAH'S Book Club.

MIAEVE BINCHY

LANE GARDNER

THE HEARTWARMING
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLER

Tara Road

Maeve Binchy

*

Chapter ONE

Ria's mother had always been very fond of film stars. It was a matter of sadness to her that Clark Gable had died on the day Ria was born. Tyrone Power had died on the day Hilary had been born just two years earlier. But somehow that wasn't as bad. Hilary hadn't seen off the great king of cinema as Ria had. Ria could never see *Gone with the Wind* without feeling somehow guilty.

She told this to Ken Murray, the first boy who kissed her. She told him in the cinema. Just as he was kissing her, in fact.

'You're very boring,' he said, trying to open her blouse.

'I'm not boring,' Ria cried with some spirit. 'Clark Gable is there on the screen and I've told you something interesting. A coincidence. It's not boring.'

Ken Murray was embarrassed as so much attention had been called to them. People were shushing them and others were laughing. Ken moved away and huddled down in his seat as if he didn't want to be seen with her.

Ria could have kicked herself. She was almost sixteen. Everyone at school liked kissing, or said they did. Now she was starting to do it and she had made such a mess of it. She reached out her hand for him.

'I thought you wanted to look at the film,' he muttered.

'I thought you wanted to put your arm around me,' Ria said hopefully.

He took out a bag of toffees and ate one. Without even passing her the bag. The romantic bit was over.

Sometimes you could talk to Hilary, Ria had noticed. This wasn't one of those nights.

'Should you not talk when people kiss you?' she asked her sister.

'Jesus, Mary and Holy St Joseph,' said Hilary, who was getting dressed to go out.

I just asked,' Ria said. 'You'd know, with all your experience with fellows.'

Hilary looked around nervously in case anyone had heard. 'Will you shut up about my experience with fellows,' she hissed. 'Mam will hear you and that will put paid to either of us going anywhere ever again.'

Their mother had warned them many times that she was not going to stand for any cheap behaviour in the family. A widow woman left with two daughters had enough to worry her without thinking that her girls were tramps and would never get a husband. She would die happy if Hilary and Ria had nice respectable men and homes of their own. Nice homes, in a classier part of Dublin, places with a garden even. Nora Johnson had great hopes that they would all be able to move a little upwards. Somewhere nicer than the big sprawling housing estate where they lived now. And the way to find a good man was not by flaunting yourself at every man that came along.

'Sorry, Hilary,' Ria looked contrite. 'But anyway she didn't hear, she's looking at telly.'

Their mother did little else of an evening. She was tired, she said, when she got back from the dry cleaners where she worked at the counter. All day on your feet, it was nice to sit down and get transported to another world. Mam wouldn't have heard anything untoward about experience with fellows from upstairs.

Hilary forgave her. Coafter all, she needed Ria to help her tonight. Mam had a system that as soon as Hilary got in she was to leave her handbag on the landing floor. That way when Mam got up to go to the bathroom in the night she'd know Hilary was home and would go to sleep happily. Sometimes it was Ria's job to leave the handbag out there at midnight,

allowing Hilary to creep in at any hour, having taken only her keys and lipstick in her pocket.

'Who'll do it for me when the time comes?' Ria wondered.

'You won't need it if you're going to be blabbing and yattering on to fellows when they try to kiss you,' Hilary said. 'You'll not want to stay out late because you'll have nowhere to go.'

'I bet I will,' Ria said, but she didn't feel as confident as she sounded. There was a stinging behind her eyes.

She was sure she didn't look too bad. Her friends at school said she was very lucky to have all that dark curly hair and blue eyes. She wasn't fat or anything and her spots weren't out of control. But people didn't pick her out; she didn't have any kind of sparkle like other girls in the class did.

Hilary saw her despondent face. 'Listen, you're fine, you've got naturally curly hair, that's a plus for a start. And you're small, fellows like that. It will get better. Sixteen is the worst age, no matter what they tell you.' Sometimes Hilary could be very nice indeed. Usually on the nights she wanted her handbag left on the landing.

And of course Hilary was right. It did get better. Ria left school and like her elder sister did a secretarial course. There were plenty of fellows, it turned out. Nobody particularly special, but she wasn't in any rush. She would travel the world possibly before she settled down to marry.

'Not too much travelling,' her mother warned.

Nora Johnson thought that men might regard travel as fast. Men preferred to marry safer, calmer women. Women who didn't go gallivanting too much. It was only sensible to have advance information about men, Nora Johnson told her daughters. This way you could go armed into the struggle. There was a hint that she may not have been adequately informed herself. The late Mr Johnson, though he had a bright smile and wore his hat at a rakish angle, was not a good provider. He had not been a believer in nor a

subscriber to life insurance policies. Nora Johnson did not want the same thing for her daughters when the time came.

'When do you think the time will come?' Ria asked Hilary.

'For what?' Hilary was frowning a lot at her reflection in the mirror. The thing about applying blusher was that you had to get it just right. Too much and you looked consumptive, too little and you looked dirty and as if you hadn't washed your face.

'I mean, when do you think either of us will get married? You know the way Mam's always talking about when the time comes.'

'Well, I hope it comes to me first, I'm the eldest. You're not even to consider doing it ahead of me.'

'No, I have nobody in mind. It's just I'd love to be able to look into the future and see where we'll be in two years' time. Wouldn't it be great if we could have a peep?'

'Well, go to a fortune-teller then if you're that anxious.'

'They don't know anything.' Ria was scornful.

'It depends. If you get the right one they do. A lot of the girls at work found this great one. It would make you shiver the way she knows things.'

'You've never been to her?' Ria was astounded.

'Yes I have actually, just for fun. The others were all going, I didn't want to be the only one disapproving.'

'And?'

'And what?'

'What did she tell you? Don't be mean, go on.' Ria's eyes were dancing.

'She said I would marry within two yearsGCa'

'Great, can I be the bridesmaid?'

'And that I'd live in a place surrounded by trees and that his name began with an M, and that we'd both have good health all our lives.'

'Michael, Matthew, Maurice, Marcello?' Ria rolled them all around to try them out. 'How many children?'

'She said no children,' Hilary said.

'You don't believe her, do you?'

'Of course I do, what's the point giving up a week's wages if I don't believe her?'

'You never paid that!'

'She's good. You know, she has the gift.'

'Come on.'

'No, she does have a gift. All kinds of high-up people consult her. They wouldn't if she didn't have the power.'

'And where did she see all this good health and the fellow called M and no children? In tea-leaves?'

'No, on my hand. Look at the little lines under your little finger around the side of your hand. You've got two, I've got none.'

'Hilary, don't be ridiculous. Mam has three linesGCa'

'And remember there was another baby who died, so that makes three, right.'

'You are serious! You do believe it.'

'You asked so I'm telling you.'

'And everyone who is going to have children has those little lines and those who aren't haven't?'

'You have to know how to look.' Hilary was defensive.

'You have to know how to charge, it seems.' Ria was distressed to see the normally level-headed Hilary so easily taken in.

'It's not that dear when you considerGCa' Hilary began.

'Ah, Hilary, please. A week's wages to hear that kind of rubbish! Where does she live, in a penthouse?'

'No, a caravan as it happens, on a halting site.'

'You're joking me?'

'True, she doesn't care about money. It's not a racket or a job, it's a gift.'

'Yeah.'

'So it looks like I can do what I like without getting pregnant.' Hilary sounded very confident.

'It might be dangerous to throw out the pill,' said Ria. 'I wouldn't rely totally on Madame Fifi or whatever she's called.'

'Mrs Connor.'

'Mrs Connor,' Ria repeated. 'Isn't that amazing. Mam used to consult Saint Ann or someone when she was young. We thought that was mad enough, now it's Mrs Connor in the halting site.'

'Wait until you need to know something, you'll be along to her like a flash.'

It was very hard to know what a job was going to be like until you were in it and then it was too late.

Hilary had office jobs in a bakery, a laundry and then settled in a school. There wasn't much chance of meeting a husband there, she said, but the pay was a bit better and she got her lunch free, which meant she could save a bit more. She was determined to have something to put towards a house when the time came.

Ria was saving too, but to travel the world. She worked first in the office of a hardware shop, then in a company which made hairdressing supplies. And then settled in a big, busy estate agency. Ria was on the reception desk and answered the phone. It was a world she knew nothing of when she went in, but it was obviously a business with a huge buzz. Prosperity had come to Ireland in the early eighties and the property market was the first to reflect this.

There was huge competition between the various estate agents and Ria found they worked closely as a team.

On the first day she met Rosemary. Slim, blonde, and gorgeous, but as friendly as any of the girls she had ever met at school or secretarial college. Rosemary also lived at home with her mother and sister, so there was an immediate bond. Rosemary was so confident and well up in everything that was happening. Ria assumed that she must be a graduate or someone with huge knowledge of the property market. But no, Rosemary had only worked there for six months; it was her second job.

'There's no point in working anywhere unless we know what it's all about,' Rosemary said. 'It makes it twice as interesting if you know all that's going on.'

It also made Rosemary twice as interesting to all the fellows who worked there. They found it very difficult to get to first base with her: in fact, Ria had heard that there was a sweepstake being run secretly on who would be the first to score. Rosemary had heard this too. She and Ria laughed over it.

'It's only a game,' Rosemary said. 'They don't really want me at all.' Ria was not sure that she was right; almost any man in the office would have been proud to escort Rosemary Ryan. But she was adamant, a career first, fellows later. Ria listened with interest. It was such a different message from the one she got at home, where her mother and Hilary seemed to put a much greater emphasis on the marriage side of things.

Ria's mother said that 1982 was a terrible year for film stars dying. Ingrid Bergman died, and Romy Schneider and Henry Fonda, then there was the