



The
MAID *of*
BALLYMACCOOL

A NOVEL

JENNIFER DEIBEL

The
MAID *of*
BALLYMACCOOL

A NOVEL



JENNIFER DEIBEL


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2023 by Jennifer Deibel

Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Deibel, Jennifer, 1978– author.

Title: The maid of Ballymacool / Jennifer Deibel.

Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2023]

Identifiers: LCCN 2022020830 | ISBN 9780800742713 (casebound) | ISBN

9780800741747 (paperback) | ISBN 9781493439768 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3604.E3478 M35 2023 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022020830>

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, www.booksand such.com.

Baker Publishing Group publications use paper produced from sustainable forestry practices and post-consumer waste whenever possible.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my Heavenly Father—
may these words point to Your Name and Your Renown

For my parents, Jerry and Bonnie Martin—
thank you for giving me a firm foundation of
faith, family, and identity rooted in Christ

For the soul who feels unseen—
may you find in these pages the reality that
you're more seen, more known, and more
treasured than you could have ever dreamed



COUNTY DONEGAL, IRELAND

SEPTEMBER 1935

The slap had hit its mark, leaving a burning outline Brianna was certain showed perfectly on her cheek. Despite the sting, she refused to press her hand against it. She wouldn't give Mistress Magee the satisfaction. As the woman continued to rail about Brianna's endless list of shortcomings, Brianna plotted out the route for her afternoon treasure hunt. She'd never call it thus to Mistress Magee. No, to that woman it was a *daily constitutional*—a phrase that always conjured images of outhouses and pig slop rather than the walk of a proper lady. Not that it mattered much. Maureen Magee, headmistress of Ballymacool House and Boarding School for Girls, saw to it that Brianna was reminded of the depths of her station daily. Nothing befitting a lady befitted Brianna. But that didn't bother her. Not really. All she needed were her walks in the woods, her treasures, and the good Lord. A friend wouldn't hurt though. Not that Magee would ever allow it.

“Do you hear me, girl?” The headmistress’s strident voice pierced Brianna’s thoughts.

She swallowed a sigh. “Yes, marm.”

“Then you know what you’re to do?” The severe lines on the woman’s face hardened with judgment, serving to further age her. “Well, child? Do you?” Mistress Magee straightened her posture, cupped her fingers together at her waist, and waited, impatience flashing in her steely eyes.

Child? Brianna was twenty, yet Mistress Magee perpetually treated her like she was still a snout-nosed five-year-old. “Aye, miss.” At a spark of indignation from her guardian, Brianna corrected herself. “Yes, marm.” In truth, Brianna had heard nothing of what the woman had instructed, but she didn’t need to. Mistress Magee piled on the same litany of extra chores any time Brianna deigned to show her humanity. Today’s egregious error? Not having the morning’s porridge pot scrubbed and shining prior to the students finishing breakfast. Never mind that Brianna had been kept busy clearing dishes, wiping spills, and the like. That mattered not. All that mattered were Mistress Magee’s ever-changing whims and Brianna’s inability to meet them.

“Very well.” Mistress Magee punctuated her thought with a sharp nod. “You know what’s expected. See that you carry it out. Forthwith.” She turned to leave, paused, then peered over her shoulder at Brianna, waiting.

“Yes, marm.” Brianna swiped a sponge from the table and plunged it into a basin of water, then knelt and began scrubbing the massive copper pot.

Mistress Magee nodded again, a quiet “*humph*” escaping her lips before she swept from the hot, stuffy kitchen.

Once alone, Brianna plopped back onto her heels, finally

allowing the deep sigh she'd been holding in to press out, releasing with it all the tension Mistress Magee's presence always cultivated. Tempted to let bitterness take root, she closed her eyes and imagined she was sitting at the base of her tree. She could almost feel the coolness of the damp earth seeping through her skirt, the gentle breeze tickling her skin, cooling the ache that still pulsed on her cheek from Mistress Magee's strike. Whispering a prayer for strength and endurance, she retrieved the sponge and resumed scrubbing.

As she worked the filth from the pot, her anger lightened and lifted away. A plunking sound and a gentle splash shook Brianna from her thoughts. Another leak? A quick glance at the ceiling revealed nothing. Peering into the pot, panic jolted her. She grasped at her neck and chest. *My pendant!* She plunged her hand into the murky water, ignoring the sludge collecting at the bottom, and worked until her fingers found what they sought. She curled them around the chain, then sloshed her prize a bit to clear the muck away and pulled it out of the water.

She wiped it as gently and as quickly as she could with her apron and then inspected it closely. All appeared to be intact—as intact as it had ever been, anyway. Clearly only a broken piece of a larger pendant, its edges worn by time, it was bordered with double lines accented with several fleurs de lis. Within the borders lay three stamped flowers. Brianna ran her thumb over the flowers, imagining her mother had once done the same. It was all she had that connected her to her family and long-forgotten past. She'd been left with it around her neck, even as a small infant, Mistress Magee had told her long ago. Before her hatred of Brianna had fully set in.

She clasped her hand around the shard and then opened it again to view the back of the trinket. Letters that seemed to have been hastily carved by hand stretched across the surface. Only part of a word. The *c*, *o*, and *n* were clearly visible. Another letter, or part of one, was slashed in half by the broken edge. How many hours had she spent daydreaming about what those letters might spell? What they might mean? But there was no time for that now. If she was to have any hope of a walk in the woods today, she must hasten in finishing her tasks.

She worked the chain through her fingers until they reached the ends and refastened the clasp. The battered chain often came open and fell from her neck. And it had done so even more of late. Slipping it over her head, Brianna tucked the pendant into the bodice of her dress, praying it would stay. She needed a new chain. Since she did not receive any wages for her labors at the house—she was “earning her keep,” according to Mistress Magee—the only way to procure one would be if she happened across one on one of her walks. But she knew better than to hope for such good fortune. Her years in the Ballymacool woods had taught her that treasure never reveals itself to the greedy, but rather the grateful. And so, as she plunged her hands into the now-cool water, she ran through her list of all that for which she was grateful.



The library was dark and quiet—just how Michael preferred it. The fire that had been laid down that morning was now nothing more than an orange glow. The curtains were drawn, shadowing the room in the blissful gray of an indoor

dusk. For any other household, that might seem odd at this time of day, but not for Castle Wray. Michael snorted at the name for the house situated in the heart of the Castlewray Estate. Although a grand five-bay, two-story stone house, it was not quite what he would consider a castle. And after a long morning of managing the sprawling property—one of the few ascendancy estates still in operation—a quiet afternoon with a good book was just what he needed.

Filling his lungs with the beloved musty scent of old books, stale tobacco, and a turf fire, he sauntered across the room to his favorite shelf. W. B. Yeats, George Moore, George William Russell, and others lined up like old friends ready to welcome Michael back into the folds of their confidence. Few things stirred Michael's heart and refreshed his spirit like an inspiring read, much to his mother's dismay. Other things more befitting a man of his age and station did so as well, though not to the same degree as words on the page. A bracing ride on his trusty steed, Cara, a rousing game of cards, or a well-brewed cup of tea or pint of ale all served to bolster his spirits after a trying day. But given his druthers, Michael would choose the quiet library—or a tree-canopied forest—and a familiar tome every time.

No sooner had he removed his book of choice from its spot than his parents spun into the room. His mother, equal parts the portrait of decorum and yet all a dither, fanned herself briefly before patting her hair and setting her shoulders, returning to the proper state of an ascendancy class lady of Letterkenny. Michael's father, tall and stoic as ever, clasped his hands behind his back and rocked forward and back on his toes once before settling his gaze on Michael.

“Good day, son,” he greeted him. His words wished him

well, but his tone implied something else altogether. *Wasting the day away reading again, I see?* is what Michael imagined his father truly meant to say. Michael absently wondered why his father went through the expense of having such an expansive library if it was so wasteful to use it.

Michael set the book on a nearby table. “Father. Mother.” He closed the distance between them and placed a brief kiss on his mother’s cheek, having to bend at the waist to reach her face. She pressed into the kiss, but then rubbed her fingers where his dark mustache and beard had tickled her.

His father cleared his throat and glanced at his wife, who summoned the maid. With a flick of Mrs. Wray’s wrist, the maid scurried to the tall windows and tied back the curtains. Michael flinched at the bright afternoon sun and breach of his solitude. Opening the drapes felt like inviting the whole of the estate to gawk at the family’s daily goings-on. At *his* goings-on. Michael would always choose to be out among the people, preferring the company of the down-to-earth farmers to the pompous showboats of high society. With rumblings of trouble brewing again in Germany, the men his father rubbed elbows with would be insufferable as the group passed around their self-proclaimed vast knowledge of world events and warfare. But there were times it just seemed easier to hide away from it all. And that had been his aim for today.

Gesturing to a settee in front of the fireplace, his father crossed the room and placed his hand on the thick wooden mantelpiece. “I’ve a job for you, Michael.”

Michael sank onto the seat. “Oh?” It wasn’t unusual for his father to give him tasks. It was, however, unusual for the job description to come with such a fuss and formality.

“Indeed.” His father swiped at a speck of something on the mantel that wasn’t really there, brushed his fingers together, and turned to face Michael and his mother. “It’s your cousin. Adeline.”

Michael fought to hide the wince that naturally contorted his face at the sound of his cousin’s name. A fourteen-year-old spoiled brat, who seemed to have placed Michael on a pedestal. Whether it was childish infatuation or idolization of him and his stable home life, he didn’t know. But he did know that Adeline succeeded in bringing utter chaos wherever she went. Managing to keep his composure, he responded, “What about Adeline?”

“It seems she’s having some trouble settling in over at Ballymacool.” His father paced slowly in front of the dying fire.

Michael swallowed a guffaw. “Settling in? Father, ’tis been nearly a year!”

Ignoring the comment, Father continued. “The other girls have been . . . less than welcoming.”

Next to Michael, his mother *tsked*. “You know how young girls can be,” she added, wagging her head.

I know how she can be. He blinked the thought away before it could escape his mouth.

“Adeline just needs some guidance,” his mother added. “And a strong presence to deter any further . . .” She circled her hand in the air and studied the carpet beneath them as though searching for just the right word.

“Incidents,” his father finished for her.

“Incidents?”

Mother sighed. “’Twould seem the girl has been somewhat . . . antagonistic . . . toward the other students.”

“Truth is”—Father cleared his throat—“she’s put somewhat of a target on her back and needs a watchful eye.”

Michael rose and absently twisted the whiskers of his mustache. “I see.” Though he didn’t really. What had this to do with him? “What of Uncle Thomas? Can he not intercede?”

His father snatched the copy of Russell’s *Awakening* from the table where Michael had left it a few moments ago and shoved the book on a shelf. The wrong shelf. “You know very well Thomas has his hands full with all the nonsense going on down there. Being so close to Dublin has increased the troubles on his estate a hundredfold compared to ours. It’s the whole reason Adeline was sent to Ballymacool rather than Kylemore to begin with. I must continue with the duties of running Castlewray Estate, and your mother has her society engagements to keep up. So, it falls to you.”

Michael tugged the book from its misplacement and settled it in its rightful spot. *And what am I to know of the problems of a young girl?* He dismissed the thought as soon as it materialized. He knew full well any problems dear old Adeline was having were of her own making and not of the emotional variety. She didn’t need a confidant. She needed a bodyguard. Since Adeline was Thomas’s only child, she truly had no one to fill this purpose. Heaven forbid Father step away from his haughty circle of cigar-smoking pseudogentry to fulfill a true family obligation.

Gripping the bookshelf, Michael squeezed his eyes shut and whispered a silent prayer of forgiveness for having such a callous attitude toward his father. “Very well,” he said on a sigh. He scratched at his beard and his mother winced. She hated that he refused to keep the clean-shaven face of a proper society man. The corner of his mouth turned up

slightly, taking pleasure in the small rebellion. “When do I leave?”

“Directly.”

Michael’s jaw fell slack. “So soon? Is the situation so dire?”

“Not dire, but it requires expediency.” His father’s tone left no room for argument. “And you’re to be there at least a fortnight. Perhaps longer.”

Michael coughed. “*Stay* there? Father, Ballymacool ’tis only fifteen miles west. I can easily travel back and forth each day.”

“You could, but you won’t. Adeline needs someone there ’round the clock. And you’re the man.”

“Ballymacool House has some lovely cottages on their grounds for visiting family members and the like,” Mother added. “They’ve got one already prepared for you, as they agree this is the best course of action.”

Michael tried to ignore the fact that such plans would’ve taken quite some time to make. But since he couldn’t stomach another debate, he chose to concede. “Very well.”

“Aidan has your horse ready to go and your effects as well. Godspeed, son.”

A puff of air blew from Michael’s lips before he could stop it. At least his father had had the courtesy to allow Michael to use Cara instead of the blasted motorcar. He’d never trust those contraptions. At length, he shook his head, then accepted his father’s outstretched hand and shook it. He ran his fingers through his thick hair and down the back of his neck before hugging his mother. “Good day, Mother. Father. I’ll send word if I’ve need of anything.”