

Ettie Brogan



Jessica Clews



Ettie survives the 1906 San Francisco earthquake but soon learns that worse things can happen to an innocent girl when her life becomes inextricably entwined with the wealthy O'Hara clan and their servants. As the city rises from the ashes, the O'Hara family begins to disintegrate but the cook, the kitchen maid, and the coachman form an indestructible bond. When dark secrets are revealed, Ettie must make a life-altering decision.

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JESSICA CLEWS

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Dedication

In loving memory of my Mother

CHAPTER 1

Ettie threw open the window and leaned on the sill, gulping in the crisp air. Gazing wistfully at the blue sky with sparkling green eyes, she wiped the perspiration from her forehead and sighed. Ooh, it was hot in the kitchen! Nobody should have to work on a day like this! The faint clang of a trolley bell carried on the breeze, stirring echoes of childhood; the urge to play, to do something daring, to run free in the garden, throw off the hot, sticky clothes and roll over and over in the cool grass with the breeze caressing her damp skin. And what would Cook have to say about that? The thought of Cook's reaction made Ettie giggle, a sound she quickly stifled.

"Just what do you think you're doing, my girl?"

With a guilty start Ettie turned to face Cook's indignant glare. Bridget O'Connell's face was red from the heat of the range, her normally placid features screwed up in a worried frown. Beads of perspiration clung to her forehead and upper lip, and Ettie immediately felt penitent. No-one worked harder than Cook, and she only got herself worked up when special company was expected for dinner. *She* didn't stop work for a breath of air!

"Sorry Cook! I was just getting a breath of fresh air." With another deep sigh, Ettie picked up the paring knife and hastily peeled a potato. Potatoes! How she hated peeling them, digging out the nasty little black eyes, and woe betide if she missed one. She'd hear all about it from Cook. Like this morning when she hadn't used enough blacking on the range and had to start all over again. And it wasn't even dirty to begin with. Not so as you'd notice! She stole a glance at Bridget, pounding batter as though she bore it a personal grudge.

Ettie had grown very fond of Bridget in the few months she had worked for the O'Hara family, and she knew full well that without the older woman's help she would probably be working in a cigar manufactory along with Mary Miller, who could never rid her clothes of the smell of tobacco. Even so, it was hard work trying to keep up with Bridget's high standards.

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Buxom and gray haired, yet with a rosy-cheeked freshness about her, Bridget might well be taken for a farmer's wife, except that she bore the title Miss and had reached an age whereat there was little hope, and even less desire on her part, of changing her status. Bridget was more than content with her lot.

"I hate potatoes. Just look at my hands." Ettie held them out for inspection knowing full well she would get no sympathy from Bridget O'Connell. And she was right! Cook ceased pounding at the batter long enough only to fix Ettie with a scathing look, the kind of look Ettie earned at least fifty times a day between rolling out of her warm bed at five o'clock in the morning and falling into it at nine in the evening. With that look Bridget had quelled every rebellious kitchen maid with the temerity to think herself good enough to work for the O'Hara family. Quelled them, drummed into them the awareness of their place in the scheme of things, and turned them into fine little domestics sought after by the best houses in Boston. After two years under Bridget's eagle eye, a girl could riddle ashes without leaving a smidgen of soot on any surface, polish a range until her bright little face gleamed back at her from its depths, and leave a kitchen in sparkling, pristine order after the preparation of a dinner party for sixty prominent citizens. She taught them to bake, roast, stew, broil, and sauté to such a degree of perfection that many a man coming home from a hard day's work would offer a silent prayer and a grateful belch that he had married one of Bridget's girls.

"There's enough here to feed a blooming army!" Ettie's petulant voice drew another look from Bridget, but she was too busy to retort as she deftly poured batter into gleaming copper pans. Swiftly, with an economy of movement, the pans were transferred to the oven and Bridget turned her attention to Ettie.

"I'll decide that, my girl." Bridget bustled across the kitchen to survey Ettie's work. "That'll do. Now you can put the kettle on the hob and make us a nice cup of tea."

Bridget paused from her labors to watch Ettie, the latest in a long line of housemaids. Since leaving Boston for San Francisco,

three girls such as Ettie had joined the O'Hara household; joined it and left as quickly as they came because they just could not make the grade. Mary had been a great lump of a girl whose sole purpose in life was to stuff her ample frame with food enough to feed a family at one sitting, and then she'd have the gall to clear the scraps from each plate. She was soon replaced by Jessie, a little scrap of a thing who literally had to be tipped out of bed each morning, flatly refused to keep the wood piled beside the range, and answered back when spoken to. That wouldn't have been so bad had it not been the Mistress she answered back. Well! To this day Bridget went hot and cold all over at the very thought of it. Why, the little minx had threatened to chain herself to the railings when given notice. The audacity! That Pankhurst woman had a lot to answer for and no mistake. Then there was Sarah.

Just when Bridget had given up hope of finding a decent girl in San Francisco——one who knew her place and whose head wasn't stuffed with notions of independence——along came Sarah. Oh, she was a real treasure, that one! The answer to a cook's prayers. Sarah was up with the lark, a song on her lips, and happy as the day was long. Show her how to do something once and she took to it like a duck to water! Oh yes, Sarah was a treasure. Right up to the day she broke down and sobbed out the story of the Wells Fargo driver who took her walking on the beach and had his way with her. No sooner had she coaxed the sorry tale from the girl than Bridget was off, all fire and brimstone, umbrella wielded like a sword, to search out the young rascal and make him pay for his heinous crime. She traced him to a disreputable lodging house only to find he had fled, leaving behind nothing but a pair of dirty socks and six weeks arrears in rent. The blowzy landlady, cup of gin in hand, accosted Bridget, thinking she was her ex-lodger's mother who would fork over the delinquent rent. But Bridget, outraged and insulted, set about the hapless woman with her umbrella and only beat a hasty retreat when the drunken hag threatened to call the police. But two wrongs never made a right in Bridget's book, and poor Sarah was dispatched to her father's farm to face the music.

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Of course, Bridget felt sorry for the girl but she had to send her packing before the Mistress noticed Sarah's condition, Mrs. O'Hara being sick and all. And what a rumpus there was that day with a hysterical Sarah begging not to be sent back to the farm and not even a husband on her arm to smooth things over. It's a pity she hadn't thought of that before she let that blackguard...well, it just didn't bear thinking about.

"Drink it before it gets cold," Ettie sang out gaily, as she slapped down a cup of tea, slopping it so that it ran into the saucer. Bridget bit back a hasty reprimand and substituted one of her looks.

"Sorry Cook."

"Sorry is as sorry does." Would she never learn? She did make a fair cup of tea though, and Bridget sipped the steaming beverage gratefully.

"How about we have a slice of that cinnamon cake, Cook? There's plenty left."

"If you mean can you have a slice, Ettie, just say what you mean. You know I never eat cake... it gives me 'earburn." Ettie cut herself a hefty wedge. "Ummm," she mumbled through a mouthful of crumbs, "you must be the best cook in the world."

"Don't talk with your mouth full," snapped Bridget, her tone tempered by the warmth in her eyes. Would the girl never learn, she wondered, sipping her tea, faded blue eyes pensive as she watched Ettie over the top of her cup. Oh, but she was a bright-faced lass and no mistake. Barely three months since the scrawny little waif had stood on the doorstep begging to be taken into service, and now her own mother wouldn't know her, she'd filled out that nicely. That's if she had a mother, which she didn't. In the normal course of events Bridget would never have considered her for a position, especially since she had the effrontery to ring the big brass bell on the front door, but a weeping Sarah had just departed for Sacramento and when Ettie's big green eyes filled with tears Bridget just could not face another scene. She sat the woeful child down in the kitchen with a big bowl of soup and listened to the tale of abandonment by a rascal of a father, of deathbed promises to a mother who, worn

out by years of drudgery and neglect, was finally and bloodily crushed when the San Andreas Fault wrought its terrible havoc on San Francisco. By the time Ettie had downed a third bowl of soup, Bridget herself had shed more than a few tears and just hadn't the heart to send her on her way.

Looking at Ettie now, it was hard to picture that waif on the doorstep. Her cheeks had filled out, diffused with the blush of a wild rose, and the mane of tangled red hair was tamed into a tight coil under her starched white cap, although wayward tendrils escaped and framed the dazzling green eyes. Her pert little nose was dusted with freckles, and altogether she was a pleasure to behold. And as for the rest of her! Bridget's eyes rested momentarily on the tender curves beneath the calico dress and spotless apron. She was filling out everywhere and Bridget knew she was not the only to have noticed. More than once she had caught young Jimmy, the coachman, looking at Ettie with that gleam in his eyes; neither had she missed the blush and the flutter of eyelashes with which the girl responded. It was time for a good talking to, to warn her of what could happen if she...but the very thought of such a discussion made Bridget's stomach churn.

She had never married, and the little she did know of such things came only from whispered conversations at kitchen tables when she dropped in on a married friend for a cup of tea and a bit of a chat. Mind you, there was that business in Boston...terrible goings on. And Miss Agatha of all people! Best not to think about that! It was over and done with, but if it could happen to a girl like Sarah and a lady like Miss Agatha O'Hara....

"Why are you looking at me like that, Cook?" Apprehensive, Ettie could think of a dozen minor misdemeanors that might incur Cook's wrath, like throwing out the sour milk because she couldn't stomach the smell when she went into the pantry and she knew Cook wanted to use it for scones, but she was sure she had covered her tracks. "I haven't done nothing wrong."

"I was waiting for you to fill my cup, Miss, or maybe you think I haven't been working hard enough to warrant a second cup."

Relieved, Ettie dashed across the kitchen to fetch the teapot and carefully refilled both cups. She loved these breaks, sitting at the long, scrubbed table surrounded by the gleam of tile and copper and heavenly smells from the oven. Perhaps she could persuade Cook to spin a tale about Boston. Anything just to take the weight off her aching feet and prolong the rare pleasure of doing nothing! But not the one about the potato famine! She had heard that one too often, and Bridget always waxed tearful when she spoke of the potato blight that led to the deaths of thousands in the old country; of the death of her mother who starved herself to feed her children. That bit about her mother really got to Ettie, because she knew that kind of pain——the pain that always nestled deep inside——but the rest of it was quite beyond the scope of her imagination.

“I’ve something to say to you, my girl. I’m afraid it’s something rather serious!” Bridget frowned and drew herself up, folding her arms across her ample bosom. “The truth is, my girl, it’s high time that you...”

Ettie stiffened, her heart banging like a drum inside her rib cage so she could scarcely breathe. This was it! The moment she had dreaded for three months. Oh lordy me, she was going to be let go...lose her place...be kicked out on the street. Oh, she wished she never would have thrown out the sour milk. Oh, please don’t let her say it. I’ll be good, I will, I promise I’ll never again sweep the dust under the carpet. In a split second Ettie’s world turned upside down. Her hands trembled so hard she had to put down the cup and then her legs joined in and her shoes began to beat out a tattoo on the floor and she had trouble swallowing. Oh, lordy me!

“I want you to go down to the Emporium tomorrow and get yourself two new dresses before you bust right out of your seams.” The words tumbled out with such a rush that they quite took Bridget by surprise, for that wasn’t at all what she’d intended to say. She sat back, awash with relief, and thought to herself, tomorrow, we’ll talk about the other business tomorrow.

“Oh, Cook,” was all Ettie could gasp. She wanted to get up and throw her arms around Bridget but her legs had the colly-wobbles

and anyway, Cook did not take kindly to such demonstrations. Just then, the door burst open, letting in a welcome breeze and Jimmy. He stood there, outlined against the bright sunlight, resplendent in the O'Hara livery of blue and gold, a cheeky grin on his handsome face.

Cook turned to him with a welcoming smile because that settled it; she couldn't talk about such things with a man in the room, even if he was the unwitting villain of the piece. But there was that look again, passing between him and Ettie so strong you could cut it with a knife.

Ettie felt Cook's eyes on her and couldn't help but blush because it was happening again, that little tingle down there that she got whenever Jimmy gave her that bold look.

"Hello, ladies," he greeted them cheerfully as he threw his cap with practiced skill to land on the peg behind the door, "do I, or do I not, smell something burning?"

In the confusion that followed while Bridget rescued four pans of blackened biscuits from the smoking oven, Jimmy managed to slip a note inside the top of Ettie's apron. He also managed to brush against her left nipple so that, to Ettie's shame and horror, it stood out like a little button under the white starch. Face aflame, Ettie whirled about and made for the servants' washroom, not daring to stop until she was safely inside and had turned the key. She withdrew the note from her apron, straining to read the hastily scrawled words, but she couldn't see to read and had to climb up onto the lavatory seat to catch the light from the tiny window.

MEET ME TONITE

YOU NO WHERE

LOVE JIMMY. X X X

In her excitement Ettie lost her balance and had to grab hold of the chain for support. As the water rushed into the bowl she jumped down, tore the note into tiny pieces and watched it swirl down the drain. If Cook saw it she'd skin her alive!

Wonderingly, she surveyed herself in the tiny, fly-specked mirror. The face that looked back at her was not the one she had long

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grown accustomed to; no siree, nothing like the plain Jane Henrietta Louise Brogan who had begged and fought and scrounged her way through childhood.

“Oh, Mam, I wish you could see me now,” she whispered.

Life in the Brogan household had been gray and joyless since that foggy night when Seamus Brogan went out for a jug of ale, never to return. Ettie, a five-year-old with an enormous capacity for love, had adored the red-haired giant who sang to her and carried her on his shoulder. “Touch the sky, darlin’,” he would say to her, “I colored it just for you.” For weeks she had lain awake waiting for the sound of his step, but he never came. She would roam the streets looking for him, daring to peek into doorways of the bars he had called home, but there was only the smell of beer and cigar smoke to remind her of him. The memories faded as time passed, but she never heard an Irish brogue without a small flame of hope leaping inside her. But he never came. Her brother, Danny, tried to fill the void but he was ten years older and had more manly things to do. He would toss her a penny to buy candy when she would willingly have foregone that pleasure for a hug and a kiss. But Danny wasn’t the hugging type, although love burned bright in his eyes.

Money was scarce and the family moved from one seedy place to another, often in the darkest hours, their meager possessions piled high on an old cart with rags tied round the wheels to muffle the sound of their departure.

With the disappearance of Seamus Brogan his wife, never a lively woman, seemed to shrink and grow old, drifting through the days like a shadow. If she spoke to her children at all, it was with a world-weary voice devoid of emotion. Her man had gone and she existed without hope, silently mourning him for dead, in spite of having been told by a sharp-tongued neighbor that Seamus had been seen, hale and hearty, sitting atop a Wells Fargo coach bound for Nevada, a dance-hall girl clinging to his arm.

Ettie quickly learned to tune out the jeers of children who laughed at her patched clothes and worn-out shoes; she found that drinking water, cup after cup, would make her feel full, and she

learned that a soulful look from her green eyes would often be rewarded with a stale roll from the baker, a speckled apple from a stall holder in the market. And she survived. Even on that dreadful day in school when she got up from her seat to find the back of her dress soaked in blood and thought she was dying, Ettie had the presence of mind to walk to old man Widdener's funeral parlor to ask how much it would cost her mother to bury her. Old Mrs. Widdener had given her a piece of cloth to tuck between her legs, together with a garbled version of the facts of life and instructions to go straight home and tell her mother what was happening. Sobbing with fright, Ettie poured out her fears at her mother's knee.

"Go and put your dress in a bowl of salt water," her mother said, "it will get the stain out. And Ettie, never let a boy touch you down there. You're a woman now." Ettie had just passed her twelfth birthday.

When Ettie——bruised but alive——dragged herself out of the ruins on that terrible April morning and knelt beside her mother's broken body, she wept for all the things she had wanted to say, the questions she should have asked. She promised the dying woman that she would take care of herself and be a good girl always. And she had kept her word. Hadn't she found herself a place in a lovely house on Nob Hill and didn't she eat three square meals a day and take a bath every Saturday night?

Of course, she had done some things she wished she hadn't done. In the park! After the earthquake!

In the hastily-erected tent city in Golden Gate Park, Ettie had no time to grieve. Waking each morning was an adventure and the days spun past in a kaleidoscope of new sights and sounds. Food was provided, and camaraderie grew amongst homeless citizens from all walks of life. There were errands to run for harassed women with too many wild-running children, water to be fetched and outdoor fires to be kindled for genteel ladies from Nob Hill who, until the catastrophe, had barely stepped inside their own kitchens. Rich and poor were commingled by the need to survive. Their beautiful city had crumbled and burned and the fight for existence became an

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awesome reality. Ettie flew back and forth between the tents, ever willing, and avid for new experiences as childhood slipped away.

For a few pennies she had stoically borne the touch of arthritic fingers on her tiny breasts——the nice old man with the beard said it wasn't a sin if you were hungry——but nothing more. She wasn't that hungry! Some people must have been starving 'cos they were up to all manner of tricks in the grass behind the tents, skirts hiked up and everything! She watched and listened, and in her innocence failed to understand.

But all that was behind her now. She was respectable. She was pretty. She was Jimmy's girl.

Meet me tonight... love Jimmy!

Ettie patted her face with cold water to cool her burning cheeks, and gave herself a last look in the mirror. Composing herself as best she could, she returned to the kitchen.

Jimmy was seated at the table, tucking into a plate of sandwiches, and Ettie gave him a wide berth as she returned to the sink.

"Well, don't just stand there, my girl. Get on with those potatoes." Bridget fussed with one of her famous sherry trifles, delicately adding layers of sponge cake spread with raspberry jam, sprinkling it with sherry before adding fruit and a layer of custard. She then furiously whipped up a bowl of cream until it stood up in peaks.

"But Cook, you said we had enough."

"Now I'm saying we need some more!" Bridget slapped Jimmy's hand as he dipped a finger in the cream. "I suppose the Master's back then?"

"Only to change his clothes and then we're off out again. Fair wears me out, he does."

"I'll change places with you." Ettie grinned and held out the potato knife. "Here Jimmy. You peel spuds and I'll go gallivanting all around the town."

"That's women's work!" Jimmy laughed scornfully. "It takes a man to 'andle a lively team of horses."

“Ooh, then we’ll have to find one, won’t we! Have you seen a man around here lately, Cook?” Jimmy chortled with glee as Ettie pretended to search for a man in the cupboards under the sink.

“Ettie...Jimmy, will you behave yourselves!” Bridget had finished piping swirls of cream on the trifle and carefully set it aside. She removed a roasting pan from the oven and basted a huge juicy shoulder of lamb, releasing a cloud of rosemary-fragrant steam.

Jimmy eyed the succulent roast wistfully. “Why all this fuss for a blooming politician, I ask you? It fair makes me sick!”

“Put that trifle in the pantry, Ettie, and stop your nonsense.” Bridget’s tone was sharp. “And don’t drop it!” She returned the pan to the oven, snapping the door shut. “And you button your lip, my lad. He’s a fine young gent and you mark my words, it won’t be long before...” Bridget cuffed Jimmy on the ear with the oven glove. “And get your dirty fingers out of that cream.” She was not about to engage in kitchen gossip with this young whippersnapper, and she silently chided herself for having said too much already.

“Long before what, eh?” Offering a crooked arm to an imaginary companion, Jimmy strutted round the kitchen humming the Wedding March.

Ettie turned to him, wide-eyed.

“The poliwhatsit and Miss Katie? A wedding? Ooh, p’raps we’ll get a day off.”

“He’s a politician, not a poliwhatsit, and you’ll get a day off when I say so, my girl,” snapped Bridget. “Now, get the tray ready for the missus...she’s not eaten a thing all day. And look sharp about it!”

Now why did I have to open my mouth, thought Bridget? I can trust Jimmy not to repeat it. He’s got sense enough not to, but Ettie...? Well, no use crying over spilt milk. Not when there’s work to be done.

Work is Bridget’s panacea. A newly scrubbed table, gleam of copper pans, the glow from the range reflected in the patina of the old Welsh dresser, and a kitchen fragrant with the aroma of baking

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bread. Iron gliding over snowy starched linen. Her panacea; her
craft; her pleasure.
Her world!



Ettie survives the 1906 San Francisco earthquake but soon learns that worse things can happen to an innocent girl when her life becomes inextricably entwined with the wealthy O'Hara clan and their servants. As the city rises from the ashes, the O'Hara family begins to disintegrate but the cook, the kitchen maid, and the coachman form an indestructible bond. When dark secrets are revealed, Ettie must make a life-altering decision.

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