



The Butterfly Cabinet: A Novel

Bernie McGill

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Vivid, mysterious and unforgettable, *The Butterfly Cabinet* is Bernie McGill's engrossing portrayal of the dark history that intertwines two lives. Inspired by a true story of the death of the daughter of an aristocratic Irish family at the end of the nineteenth century, McGill powerfully tells this tale of two women whose lives will become upended by a newly told secret.

The events begin when Maddie McGlade, a former nanny now in her nineties, receives a letter from the last of her charges and realizes that the time has come to unburden herself of a secret she has kept for over seventy years: what really happened on the last day in the life of Charlotte Ormond, the four-year-old only daughter of the big house where Maddie was employed as a young woman. It is to Charlotte's would-be niece, Anna—pregnant with her first—that Maddie will tell her story as she nears the end of her life in a lonely nursing home in Northern Ireland.

The book unfolds in chapters that alternate between Maddie's story and the prison diaries of Charlotte's mother, Harriet, who had been held responsible for her daughter's death. As Maddie confesses the truth to Anna, she unravels the Ormonds' complex family history, and also details her own life, marked by poverty, fear, sacrifice and lies. In stark contrast to Maddie is the misunderstood, haughty and yet surprisingly lyrical voice of Harriet's prison diaries, which Maddie has kept hidden for decades. Motherhood came no more easily to Harriet than did her role as mistress of a far-flung Irish estate. Proud and uncompromising, she is passionate about riding horses and collecting butterflies to store in her prized cabinet. When her only daughter, Charlotte, dies, allegedly as the result of Harriet's punitive actions, the community is quick to condemn her and send her to prison for the killing. Unwilling to stoop to defend herself and too absorbed in her own world of strict rules and repressed desires, she accepts the cruel destiny that is beyond her control even as, paradoxically, it sets her free.

The result of this unusual duet is a haunting novel full of frightening silences and sorrowful absences that build toward the unexpected, chilling truth.

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