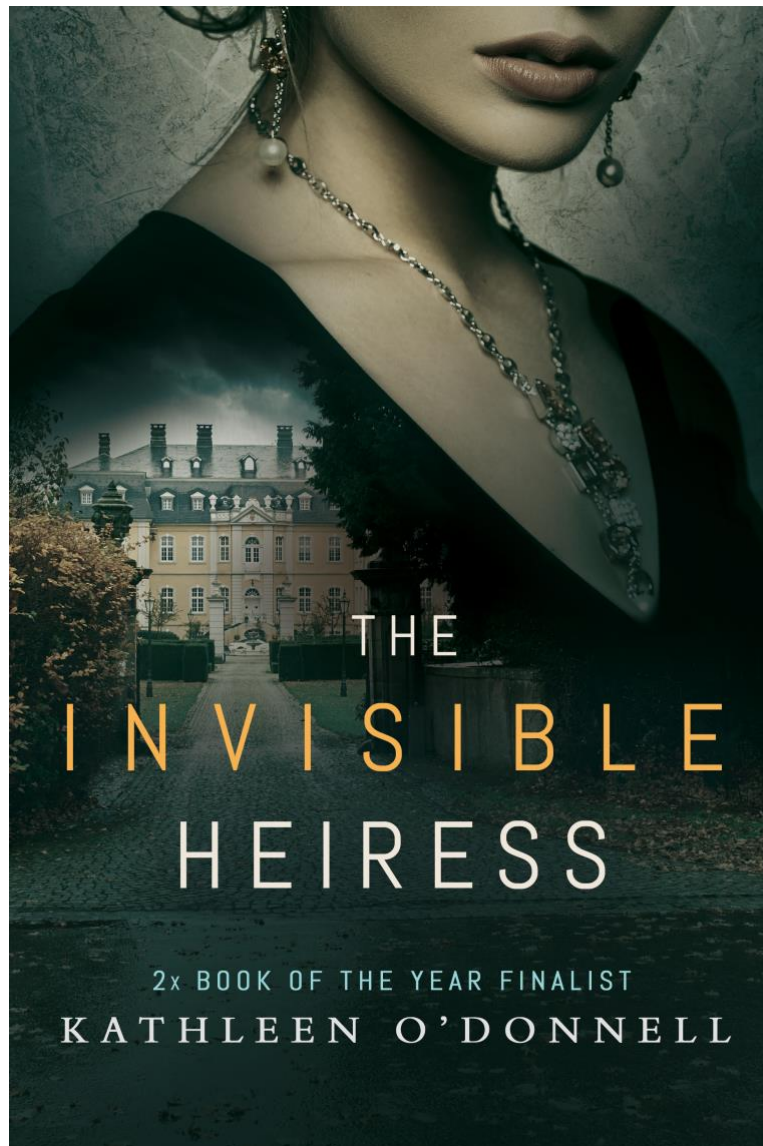


Read on for a preview from *The Invisible Heiress*.

Dark, disturbing, deliciously inappropriate.



The Invisible Heiress

Kathleen O'Donnell

Chapter One



Preston

I don't know which scene satisfied me most—my posh parents waiting in the concrete-walled visitors' room or me deposited in front of them by a uniformed guard.

They sat across from me at the Formica-topped table. My father's face was tight, eyes damp. Seeing him distressed kicked a dent in my smug demeanor, so I stopped looking at him, my eyes ping ponged toward my mother. Despite the sordid circumstances, she shone, her beauty ferocious, perhaps highlighted even more by the dour surroundings. Thick hair still a perfect shade of bombshell blonde, skin pale but flawless despite time's march, the blue of her eyes a perpetual shock.

So entranced I forgot to insult her.

Almost.

“My incarceration poses a real problem for you. Doesn't it, Mother? Harrison Blair doesn't sully herself with the downtrodden.”

She shifted backward then forward quick.

“*You're* the problem, Preston. Downtrodden? That's how you think of yourself? You—”

“Harrison, Preston,” Dad said. “Please. Let’s start right. Preston, your mother and I haven’t seen you in so long. Though God knows I’ve tried. Let’s all make a real effort.”

He paused, probably to steel himself for objections in stereo. None came.

Dad continued. “You’re not incarcerated. You’re hospitalized. Your new therapist what’s her name.” He squeezed his eyes shut like her name had been tattooed inside his lids. “Um, she, Isabel, says you’ve made some headway, participating in therapy now.”

“Might as well,” I said.

“That’s the spirit. Won’t be long until you’re back home. You’re doing so well considering how difficult, well you’re done with that part of the, uh, the rehabilitation.”

“You mean the sweating, shaking, puking, padded room part?” I said.

“You’re sober. That’s all I meant.”

My mother’s eyes popped like a kidnapper just yanked the hood off her head.

“Sober?” she said. “Doesn’t that term apply to alcoholics? Surely they have another term for homicidal, drunken pill add—”

“She’s clean, Harrison. That’s all that matters.”

Dad kept yanking on his tie. I thought he might hang himself with it right before our eyes.

“*All that matters?* Is that your idea of a joke, Todd?”

“Nice dye job, Dad. Only you’d believe those stupid commercials. So natural no one will—”

“*Darling, stop,*” he said to Mother. “Of course sobriety’s not all but it’s a start. I think, *we* think enough time has passed. We should jumpstart our family therapy.”

“*We* who?” I said.

The guard took a step forward, disapproving of my elevated tone. My father waved him back.

“Not *Mother*, I’m sure.”

“Well, Isabel thought—”

“Just because I’m in the cuckoo’s nest doesn’t mean I don’t have rights,” I said. “Isabel shouldn’t talk to you at all about me. I’m an adult. She’s *my* shrink. Confidentiality too big a word?”

“Shrinks. Therapy,” Mother said. “In my day you poured yourself a scotch and got on with it.”

“You don’t pour yourself anything. You hire that out,” I said.

“Family therapy’s part of the deal,” Dad said. “The judge insisted—”

“*You* own the judge. *We* don’t *have* to do anything. Remind him, Mother.”

“You should kiss Judge Seward’s robed ass,” she said, hissing like a stabbed tire. “You’d be someone’s bitch if not for his mercy.”

“You mean, if not for *your money*. Don’t pretend you did shit for me. You did everything for yourself, Mother, to stop the gossip. That’s what you do.”

With both fists, Dad twisted the tie he’d finally managed to take off.

“Preston, we hoped something good could come out of—”

“Todd, the only good that could possibly come out of this mess is if Preston stays *hospitalized* for the rest of her natural life.”

“Harrison, please. We agreed—”

“*You* agreed. With no one but yourself.”

“Hate to break up the party but I’m ready to go back to my room,” I said more to the guard than my parents.

“Wait, Preston,” Dad said, peering around the room, looking for his spine. “It doesn’t feel like it now, but here’s a chance for you and Mom to, I don’t know what, start again, improve your relationship, even a little. That’s what we all want, isn’t it?”

“Steady on, Dad. The devil comes dressed as everything you want.”

I let the guard take my arm, turned in time to see Mom lean her head back enough to dab at the scar under the collar of her ivory silk blouse, a scarlet line cut across her throat, not quite ear to ear, a vicious permanent necklace.

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