

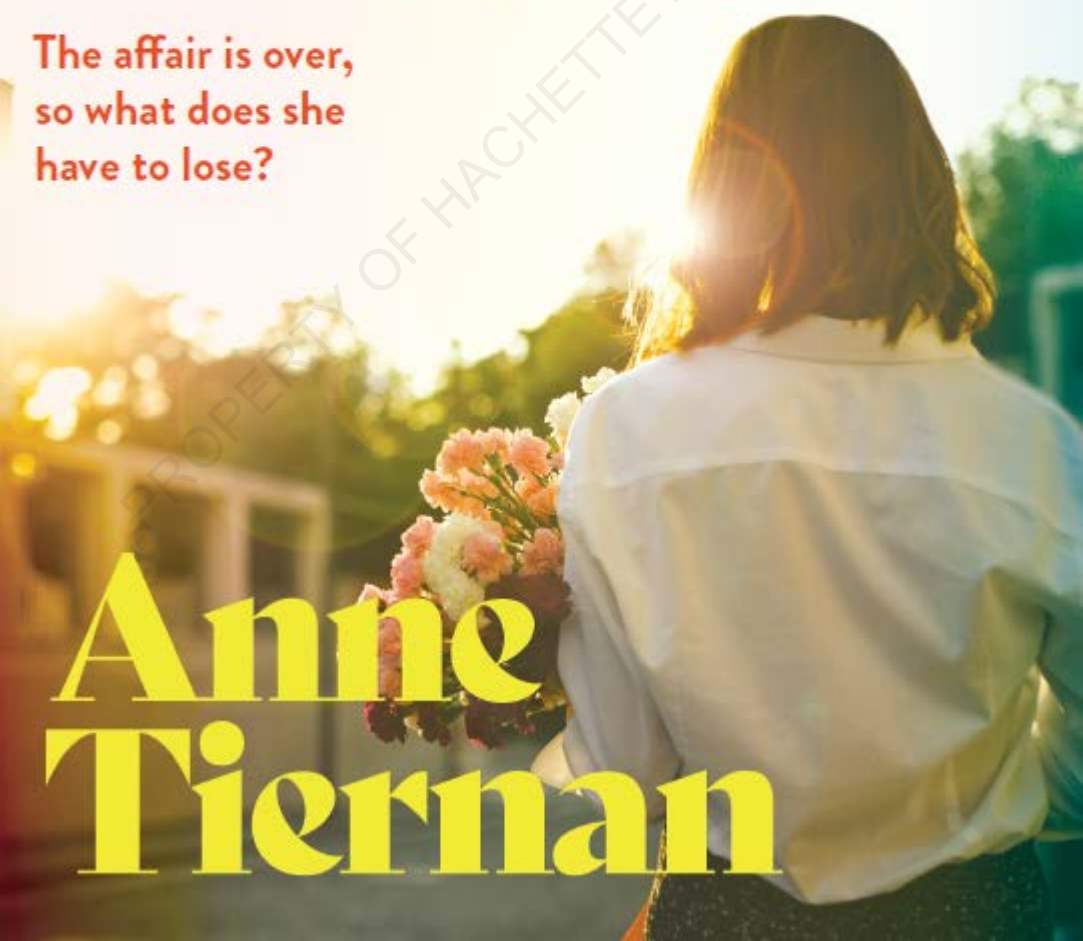
# The Good Mistress

'Draws you in and  
doesn't let go ... perfect  
for fans of Meg Mason'

Edel Coffey

The affair is over,  
so what does she  
have to lose?

Anne  
Tiernan



## PRAISE FOR *THE LAST DAYS OF JOY*

‘Moving between the past and the present with a storyteller’s natural instinct for when to reveal, and when to withhold, *The Last Days of Joy* is an honest, acutely perceptive exploration of the fractious bonds of family – the love that can hold us together, the secrets with the power to tear us apart’ **NOELLE McCARTHY**

‘*The Last Days of Joy* examines family, mental health and motherhood and is already being described as a worthy successor of Meg Mason’s *Sorrow and Bliss*’ ***Irish Independent***

‘Authentic, deeply moving and full of hope, this book broke my heart a little’ **JACQUELINE BUBLITZ**

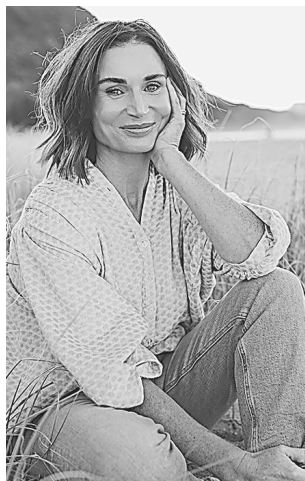
‘A page-turner, portraying the madness and messiness of family life. This novel is full of humanity, its cast of characters all at the centre of tragedy, but coupled with Tiernan’s deliciously dark humour and sharp observations on modern life – it works brilliantly. I loved it’ **ELAINE FEENEY**

‘Moving, funny, sharp and beautifully written . . . Absolutely stunning . . . I laughed and cried my way through and can’t wait to read the next Anne Tiernan’ **ANDREA MARA**

‘It’s fair to compare Tiernan’s set-up with those of Marian Keyes and Liane Moriarty, especially Keyes, who, like Tiernan, deals with bleak themes by balancing light and dark. That is not to say Tiernan does not have her own voice – she does, and it’s salty, tart and generous’ ***New Zealand Listener***

‘A bittersweet tale of family betrayal and healing that will keep you engrossed to the last word’ ***Irish Mail on Sunday***

‘This is Tiernan’s first novel, but you wouldn’t know it from the skilled storytelling and the real wisdom that lies alongside a vein of dark humour’ ***Sunday Independent***



Anne Tiernan was born in Zambia and grew up in Navan, Ireland, a small town about thirty miles from Dublin. She studied English Literature and Psychology at Trinity College and worked in banking before leaving to travel the world with her Kiwi husband. They arrived in New Zealand in 2005 and have lived there ever since, raising three children and settling in Tauranga.

Anne's debut novel, *The Last Days of Joy*, was shortlisted for the 2023 Kate O'Brien Award. *The Good Mistress* is her second novel.

# **The Good Mistress**

**Anne  
Tiernan**

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For Matt

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## JULIET

Rory's body is in the wooden box on the altar so of course that's not him texting. He's not both dead *and* alive, a kind of Schrödinger's Rory. Still, she grips the phone in her pocket and, as its vibrations pulse hope through her, remembers the report in the news a few weeks ago about a woman who knocked on the coffin at her own wake. It's the type of story that would have amused him. Juliet had assigned a special tone to his message notifications, but since their last tryst in San Francisco in March, she'd changed it back again. (She prefers the word *tryst* – it suggests the old-fashioned brass bed of the hotel, their sweaty, entwined limbs. *Affair* evokes wills, solicitors.) The texts had been less frequent since then, but she needed to cling to that hopeful lurch between hearing the sound and checking the screen. Though lately, this had often been followed by a bellyflop of disappointment.

His way was to dazzle and disappear, a celestial body dipping away below the horizon. And now he's ghosted her in the most

literal way possible. It's almost funny. Well, he'd think so anyway.

After a pause for a hymn, the woman beside her resumes sniffing. Earlier, during the eulogy, her weeping peaked, and Juliet had leaned in to ask how she knew him. 'I didn't,' she said. 'But the poor family, what a shock. God be good to them.' And she blessed herself in such a sorrowful manner that Juliet turned away in disgust. She'd forgotten how funerals are community events here, not just by invitation, like some drab wedding. *How dare you*, she thought, *snivelling like you loved him too*. At least, she hopes this was merely a thought; the sleeping pills she downed on the plane with a glass of wine failed to knock her out and have instead placed her into a sort of disassociated fugue. She also hopes this woman's tears aren't contagious because if she starts to cry now she'll never stop. Like when you go to the toilet for the first time on a night out. Breaking the seal, they used to call it.

She tries to remember the last time she was in a church, a proper one like this, with light struggling through stained glass, the heady perfume of incense and arse-numbing pews. Everywhere she looks, there are artefacts of pain: tortured sons, grieving mothers, treacherous friends. There'd be no mistaking this church for a community centre as you might do in Auckland; some Episcopalian place that teaches tolerance. (Tolerance! The nuns would be appalled.) From a distance, it's been easy to be repelled by Catholicism, but here, immersed again, the ritual pulls at her seductively. Death feels so ordinary

that she finds a strange comfort in it. Maybe this has been the point all along. To make the suffering more bearable.

The priest at the pulpit in his ornate robes is ancient and gnarled, just as he should be. You need someone who looks only a generation away from the Famine. (Almost twenty years gone, and Juliet can still only see this capitalised. There it sits in her head alongside the Church and the Troubles, a sort of holy trinity of misery.) He has a face you could imagine side-eyeing you through the fly screen of the confessional box, demanding a decade of the rosary for your impure thoughts. *Impure*: it makes them sound murky when they couldn't be more explicit. Juliet could pray on skinned knees for a thousand years and still not do enough penance for the volume of filthy thoughts she's had about Rory.

*Bless me, Father, for I have etc.*

*And adored every minute of it . . .*

There are symbolic offerings on the table beside the coffin – a guitar and a golf club maybe? Something, anyway, that doesn't align with her knowledge of him and reinforces her sense of exclusion. She is meaningless amongst this crowd. (*You're my entire universe, Jules*. He'd said that. She'd heard him.) What gift would she bring in the offertory procession? A naked selfie? She imagines it, perched on the coffin, like a sassy Mary – Magdalene obviously, not Virgin – sinful but subservient. Actually, she could just prostrate herself naked on the coffin, offer up her whole being, as she had done, over and over.

The woman beside her joins in with the priest suddenly, whispering fiercely, *Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus*.

Why only this line? It was a lonely walk into the clinic in Liverpool all those years ago, Rory both present and absent then too. The old people with their gabardine coats and their placards, kneeling outside, chanted this, like a Satanic incantation, increasing the volume as she made her way, weak-legged, to the door. The cruel piousness of them.

She leans in and whispers back, 'But are we not blessed too? The bearers of the fruit?' The woman looks alarmed and turns away.

Juliet's own almost eighteen-year-old womb fruit (citrus maybe, definitely with an edge), Ruby, is at her mother's house, sleeping off the gruelling flight, while Juliet's mother, Denise, is sleeping off the effects of another gruelling round of chemo. Juliet was surprised that Ruby wanted to come with her back 'home' – funny how she uses this word still, she supposes she'll always feel cleaved in two, like a swallow's tail. Ruby's on her gap year, but instead of cutting loose (Juliet's interpretation of it) she's using the time to work and save for university. It's unnecessary given Tāne, her father, has always been generous with his maintenance. (He can afford to be magnanimous because he's loaded, but more importantly, he's now ecstatically married to someone whose most appealing quality is that she's not Juliet.) But that's Ruby, intent on doing the honourable thing at the expense of pleasure. A sort of reversed mirror image of Juliet's own life philosophy in fact. Juliet neglected to inform her own work she's here. Simply gave a spare key to her neighbour in the building in Takapuna where she and Ruby share an apartment (at her daughter's insistence, so he

could water the plants) and here they are. She suspects she'll find missed calls and texts on her phone from Peter, the owner of the interiors shop she works in. She also suspects after three years he'll be relieved to finally have a bona fide excuse to fire her. She was hired as 'creative consultant' to help customers with decor, but it soon became apparent that while she may have the artistic aptitude, she doesn't have the appetite to advise North Shore housewives in their distressed Golden Goose trainers on how to achieve their Heritage Luxe design aspirations. So, she sits at the till now and simply takes their money. If they want to spend three hundred dollars on one noxious candle and a plastic bottle of hand soap, then fine. Juliet is resigned to the collusion.

If she leans, she can make out the back of Erica's chic blonde head in the front pew. The grieving widow. Why is it that widows get their own special title? Not bereaved children, or parents. Or lovers. And widower just a derivative, lacking the same pathos. Once upon a time, they used to say *relict*, like you were the leftovers. Juliet shudders. The woman beside her sighs and tries to nudge her back into her own space but she holds firm. It strikes her now that there is no male equivalent for a mistress. She supposes it's because women need to be put in some kind of box, categorised by their relationships to men. So, there's another thing she and Erica share.

She watches Erica intently, sees no revealing shake of her shoulders, no raising of a hand to dab away tears. Rory called Erica cold once and it thrilled Juliet. She was always trying to provoke a negative comment about her and then prove herself

to be the opposite. Though it was rare this happened, he was so reticent about his marriage. ('But am I better than her?' she'd push when they were making love. He'd never answer of course.) If there was a suggestion that Erica was uptight, Juliet would be loose; moody and she'd be sunshine itself; frigid and she'd be insatiable – not that she had to try with that. With Rory inside her, it was the only time in her life she felt full. But she would give anything now to switch places with Erica. To *be* her. To wallow in the warm centre of the grief. Not out here in the cold, the pain pushed down, mutating like some cancerous tumour invisible to the human eye.

Someone in front shifts and blocks her view so Juliet swivels and scans the crowd for familiar faces. The woman beside her mutters.

'Oh, go and keen over the coffin like they used to do,' Juliet says.

'What the hell is wrong with you?'

'Where do I start?'

She looks for her old friend Maeve but is relieved in a way when she doesn't see her. They've not spoken since Maeve's low-key wedding to Cillian. Was it a wedding? A commitment ceremony maybe – very Maeve. Instead of a religious reading, that passage from *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* on the nature of love that was all the rage back then. Fourteen years ago now. Juliet flew home from Auckland to be Maeve's . . . what? Not bridesmaid. Maid of Dishonour maybe? The night before the wedding, Colum, Cillian's brother, propositioned Juliet while they were all in the pub, despite his heavily pregnant

wife being nearby. Juliet declined, and not politely. During his speech the next day Colum congratulated Maeve for choosing a bridesmaid that wouldn't outshine her. When it came to her speech, Juliet stood and encouraged everyone present to raise a glass to Colum, the charitable best man, who despite not thinking her attractive nonetheless was willing to allow his cock in her mouth the night before. Much drama ensued. The owner of the restaurant in Dublin they were in – who turned out to be a devout Opus Dei member who considered even smear tests and yoga as evil – threatened to kick the entire wedding party out. Juliet, naturally, got all the blame. 'Why do you always have to create such a scene, Juliet?' Maeve, pregnant then with her younger son, and more sympathetic to her gestating sister-in-law than her walking nightmare of a friend, was livid.

Apart from the fact she's now a well-known writer, she has little insight into Maeve's life, which would have been unthinkable when they were young and so enmeshed in one another. Would spend the day together and still phone when they got home, Juliet lying on her belly on the thin, worn carpet of the hallway, running her fingers along the woodchipped walls, the coiled flex stretched as far as possible so that her parents in the sitting room couldn't hear. Things loosened between them once they left school, Maeve in Trinity and later working in publishing, Juliet in Dublin too but inhabiting a different world. She took a series of low-paid jobs in retail and hospitality for over ten years, a way of punishing herself after sabotaging her chance at getting a place in NCAD to study art. Not feeling



any attachment to her career made life easier. Or so she told herself. And though they kept up a pretence of friendship, there was a gulf between their lives even before Juliet left for New Zealand with Tāne when she was thirty. Being plunged into motherhood brought them closer again for a time but of course Juliet, as is her way, had to go and ruin that too.

On the back wall of the altar is the Pietà, and this lifeless body of Jesus in his mother's arms makes her think of Dan, the other member of their little gang, and his funeral here too, over thirty years ago. She, Rory and Maeve, bewildered. Seventeen and stunned that death could happen – no, that it could happen to one of them. The grief was too big, too adult-shaped, for them. Grief or guilt, though, the lines were blurred.

At the end of the mass as people line up to offer condolences to the family, the choir sings 'Be Not Afraid'. She'd forgotten these lovely songs, the soundtrack to every Irish funeral. She pinches the skin between her thumb and forefinger now to stem the tears. She won't join the queue. She won't say *Sorry for your loss* because she can't imagine one greater than her own.

But then, she's always been accused of selfishness. Rory said it too, when they fought the last time she saw him in San Francisco airport. He was leaving early after a phone call from home, the details of which he refused to share. He always enjoyed that sort of opaqueness. Juliet followed him there, begging him to stay. She can still feel their final embrace, the musky smell off him, the ripe tang of their sex. He was in such a hurry to get home he hadn't showered. She clung to him

tightly as though she might physically prevent him from leaving or, failing that, could imprint his body on her own.

She gets on her knees, puts her head in her hands, banishes that image and recalls instead the diner, Mason's, next to their hotel near Union Square where they ate breakfast. He was like a child ordering his eggs, changing his choice every day for the thrill of saying *over easy* or *sunny side up* like they did on American shows. They sat side by side in the booth, unable to keep their hands off each other.

That's it, it's all she gets. Fragments. Discarded scenes she rescues from the cutting-room floor that she replays, knows by heart. Erica has the rest. The slick Oscar-winning movie version.

The coffin is being wheeled down the aisle on a trolley. No pallbearers, detached now even in death. She's on the edge of the row and has an urge to reach out her hand and trail her fingers along the side as it goes past. He was ticklish; she would brush her hands along his torso, and he would convulse in a childlike agony. The woman beside her gasps and Juliet realises she's actually done it, she's touched the coffin. But Erica doesn't notice, or ignores it, all Death Becomes Her, walking erect and dry-eyed. The seventeen-year-old son, Charlie, looks so like Rory, something catches and flips in her heart.

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Outside, Juliet stands apart against the shaded, damp wall of the church, watching as Erica and Charlie touch the coffin before it's slid into the hearse. People crowd around hugging

them, and once age recedes from their features she recognises many of them as old neighbours or faces from businesses in the town. Like an inappropriate joke, the sun appears from behind a cloud and light bounces off the gilded details of the coffin. She pulls out her phone to see who texted earlier. Even now, with his casket only a few feet away, a tremor of hope runs through her. Like this is all a mistake.

It's from Shauna, the gallery owner who holds life-drawing classes that Juliet occasionally models for. She's been doing this modelling for a few years now. Posing naked in front of strangers feels like an authentic foil to the interiors shop, maybe a closer approximation to who she could have been if she hadn't fucked everything up. But still with that slight masochistic edge, being the muse rather than the artist. Apparently, Juliet was supposed to turn up for a class today. Three missed calls from her too. She knows Shauna is ringing out of concern rather than annoyance. Almost worse in a way. She puts the phone back in her pocket without replying.

'Grand day for it all the same,' says an old man in a flat cap, and Juliet winces. She moves away from him as though his indifference might contaminate her, and as she does she feels a familiar stickiness between her legs and the dull background cramp in her stomach makes sense now. Her period, how strange. How strange that the sun leers down and her employer thinks she should inform her of her plans and old men want to talk about the weather and her bodily functions carry on as normal.

As though He is not dead.