

*Author of **Something Old, Something New***

**LORNA
BARRETT**

**When Life
Gives You
Lemons**

**When you think you have
everything figured out,
Life has other ideas**



**When Life
Gives You Lemons**

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BARRETT**

POOLBEG

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About the Author

Lorna lives in West Cork with her family and two dogs. She loves living by the sea and finds inspiration for her books all around her. She works in banking and writes books and poetry in her spare time. Her first book *Something Old, Something New* was published in June 2021.

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For Ann.
And for Best Friends everywhere.

Prologue



The restaurant was filled with diners after the theatre. Will looked at the wine menu. He went to the bottom of the list to the most expensive vintages first. He did it out of habit. He should be nowhere near the bottom of the wine list the way things were. He should be asking the nice young waitress what the house wine was and if it was remotely drinkable, and then he should be ordering that.

But he had a reputation to uphold. The reputation that he had built up over decades as the canniest financier in the banking world. It was all gone to hell in a handcart. He was aware that that shit was going to hit the fan any day now, but he found it hard, impossible even, to let the old banker inside him go. He couldn't bear to lose face, even among Diane's old friends who meant little to him.

He and Diane had cultivated many friendships, lucrative ones, as they both shot their way to the top of their professions. Still Diane insisted on spending time with this bunch of misfits. He had tried to get out of tonight, but she made him come. They didn't do things together anymore, but she didn't want to be the only one without a partner at the table. It was an unwritten rule. When either required a plus one, the other stepped up.

It wasn't that it was a chore to spend time with Diane. She was one of the smartest people he knew. But Will didn't do theatre. Or anything that didn't involve financing some risky project or other. He had an aversion to leisure pursuits of any kind. He fantasised about dropping dead at his desk in the Irish Financial Services Centre rather than having to retire. That wasn't an option now. He could face jail time for what he did and end his days in a prison cell instead.

He was going to have to tell her, but not tonight. He ordered two bottles of the 1984 Chateau Margaux instead. He was well aware that he was wasting good wine on the philistines around

the table, but he did it anyway. Showing off was ingrained in him. He'd put the wine on Diane's credit card. She was still representing drug lords and gang leaders down at the Four Courts and making very decent money for it.

He wondered if Kevin and Laurie were even born in 1984. Probably not, he thought. Kevin was dressed like he was sitting in a McDonald's. An unforgivable sin as far as Will was concerned. Men should always look their best. An expertly cut, well-fitting suit and a tailored shirt. And expensive shoes, of course. Italian leather preferably. What was so difficult about that?

In fairness, Joe, Sarah's husband, always looked his best. He was into fashion and Will had often heard Diane having conversations about various design houses with him. Will imagined it was because he spent most of his time in Rome. Joe was a snappy dresser and was a founder of a successful software company. More proof to Will that sartorial elegance and success went hand in hand.

But Peter. Christ, Peter. Will could have made him a millionaire in the boom. He'd actually given him the heads-up on some land that was coming onto the market. There was planning permission for fifty-seven houses and each house sold for well in excess of four-hundred-and-fifty thousand euro. OK, they were badly constructed, and you could hear your neighbour plugging in his kettle in the kitchen next door and shagging his other half upstairs, but the thing was every one of them sold. He told Peter he'd organise all the finance and that he would make himself a fortune. Peter had turned him down. He also insisted on calling Will "Willy". It was like nails on a blackboard. Another reason to dislike him. His lack of ambition disgusted Will and he only tolerated him and his frumpy wife for Diane's sake.

Peter felt ill at ease. He hated these things. It's not that he didn't like Suze's friends – he did. But he didn't have a clue what the play they had just seen was about. He thought the whole thing was a bit poncey, to be honest. They were there because of Laurie, Suze's friend. Her boyfriend Kevin was the star of the

play, so they all had to go along and do the “love, darling” thing. Suze didn’t want to go either, he was sure. She hardly went anywhere these days. Not with him, anyway. He would prefer if he was among his own mates, talking about the footie. That he could relate to. One-man plays he could not.

Will was doing his usual, showing off, ordering the most expensive wine on the menu. Once a banker, always a bleedin’ banker, Peter thought. Well, Will could get lost if he thought he and Suze were going to pay for it. They didn’t even drink wine. Peter preferred his pints and Suze liked her dry cider. She drank it because it was low in calories, but it didn’t seem to be making any difference to her figure. Suze had put on weight after having the kids and that was twenty years ago. She hadn’t shrunk in any significant way since. Not that Peter was complaining. He wasn’t. Not at all. OK, he admired good-looking women. Like Diane. She was a ride and always had been. She looked amazing. Even though she was in her forties, the same age as his Suze, she seemed untouched by middle age. She probably had a whole load of work done. What that work was, Peter hadn’t a breeze, but he knew if you had enough dosh, anything was possible. Peter had fancied Diane back in the day, but soon realised he didn’t have a chance with her. True to form she married Will who was older, a sophisticate and rich. They lived in a mansion in Malahide. Suze said they were featured in magazines like some kind of golden couple. Peter wouldn’t know. He’d never been invited to the inner sanctum. He didn’t read magazines either. Unless it was on sports and came with the Sunday paper.

Joe loved nothing more than a bit of theatrics, but his life was stranger than anything on stage right now. He was living a double life and he hated himself for it. He looked at his beautiful wife chatting to Diane, Suze and Laurie and felt like a total prick.

He had wanted to talk to Sarah this weekend, but the play and the dinner were sprung on him at the last minute. He came home from Rome every Friday night and went back on Sunday afternoon so the time they had together was limited.

And there was May too, their sixteen-year-old daughter. He and May spent every Saturday together while Sarah ran her busy bakery. Another weekend was gone and the opportunity to talk to her had vanished with it. He was barely listening to the conversations going on around him.

He felt his phone vibrate in his pocket, but he couldn't look at it. He needed to be here with Sarah, in body and in mind. She deserved that. Poor Sarah who he loved with all his heart and had done since they were kids. Kind Sarah who wouldn't hurt a fly, who saw the good in everyone. Well, there was no good side to what he was about to hit her with. He was glad she had such good friends. She was going to need them.

Kevin was feeling triumphant. He had been in rehearsals for months and now his hard work had been rewarded. He had been given four encores. Four! He could still feel the love radiating off the audience. He wanted to run back and do it all again.

This dinner was Laurie's idea. He barely knew her friends, but the old guy was buying good wine and insisting, very loudly, that the night was on him. Good thing too, thought Kevin. He and Laurie didn't have a bean. Because he had been in rehearsals for so long, he hadn't been earning. Laurie's freelance work paid her well enough, but it wasn't steady. She'd been offered the job of writing the Advice Column for Gorge.ie. Gorge.ie was one of the biggest online publications in Ireland and the UK. It had gone completely online and produced tonnes of content for its millions of readers. It was a huge deal for Laurie to be offered the job. She wasn't convinced that she was the right fit to be an Agony Aunt. She had done psychology for a couple of years in college but certainly couldn't be considered an expert. But needs must. They were broke and they needed the steady income.

Laurie was one in a million. He didn't know many other women who would allow their boyfriends to indulge their passion and basically live off them. But it wasn't going to be for long. He intended to make it big, and he could feel that it going to happen this time. He was flying to LA in a couple of days. Laurie was paying for that too. He would succeed and repay her

a million times over. He would prove to her that her unwavering faith in him hadn't been misplaced.

He also owed a debt of gratitude to the women who had befriended Laurie when she moved to live with him in Malahide. She didn't know a soul and it was only when she joined the tennis club that she met the women who they were having dinner with. Kevin didn't underestimate how much they had contributed to Laurie staying on the less than salubrious north side with him. If she hadn't met them, she might have hightailed it back to Dalkey by now.

Chapter 1



It was one of those clear blue mornings that would fool you into thinking that winter had finally passed. It was still bloody freezing though, thought Diane as she got her racket bag out of the boot of her car. She checked the car park to see if the others had arrived. She spied Suze's car taking up two spaces. And it was only a bloody Micra. Suze couldn't park a car to save her life. Sarah's Mini was neatly parked beside Suze's. Laurie walked when it wasn't raining.

She saw Suze, Sarah and Laurie already warming up on the court.

Diane, Sarah and Suze had been friends since school. At different times in their lives their paths had diverged but they always managed to make their way back to one another. Diane wasn't given to sentimentality, but she loved the women like sisters. Laurie was a late addition to their little gang but a very welcome one. She was a great tennis player and lots of fun to be around. The three had been kicking around the idea of playing doubles on a Sunday morning but couldn't agree on a fourth player who would be worthy of joining their group. Then one Sunday morning a vision of beauty came in the gate. She was tall, dark and had long hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was toned and beautiful and looked like a supermodel.

The three women couldn't take their eyes off her. Her face, her hair, her perfect breasts with nipples that pointed upwards. Diane's did too but that was only because she had paid a surgeon a large chunk of change to make them. At past forty, Suze and Sarah could only fondly remember a time when their breasts looked skywards.

The women ambushed Laurie and invited her to play with them. Laurie wasn't aware that it was both an interview and an audition. No matter, she passed both and was now a firm friend.

“Morning!” Diane said as she opened the gate to the court.

There was a flurry of good mornings and chat about the previous night’s dinner.

“Please thank Will. There was no need for him to pick up the tab. Kevin and I thought we’d go Dutch,” said Laurie.

“You know Will. He loves nothing more than splashing the cash around,” said Diane. Fucking prick, she thought. He’d used her bloody credit card.

“He shouldn’t have done it. We can afford to pay for our own dinner, you know,” said Suze. Peter had given out all the way home. About Will paying for dinner. About Will buying the most expensive wine. About Will breathing, in fact.

“It was very kind of him. And it was a great night, wasn’t it?” Sarah said brightly.

Sarah gave Suze a look, indicating she should zip it. Suze and Diane could go at it like nobody’s business. She had refereed hundreds of spats over the years.

“Yes, it was,” conceded Suze. “Thank him again for us.”

They started to play but nobody’s mind was fully on the game. It was probably down to the late night the night before.

“Whose serve is it?” asked Diane.

“Yours. For fuck’s sake. Concentrate, will you?” Suze said.

“Sorry. OK, ready?”

Diane served cross court to Sarah, Suze’s playing partner.

“Long,” Suze said.

Crap. “OK. Second service,” said Diane. She served again. “Fifteen, thirty.” Yes, back in the game.

“Thirty all. Great serve, Diane,” Laurie said encouragingly.

Even though the women were the best of friends, they were also fiercely competitive. Diane and Laurie were slightly ahead, having won twenty-eight matches to the others’ twenty-six. The game ended in another win for the pair. It wasn’t the best game they ever had and they all seemed relieved that it was over.

They showered in the changing rooms and met in the bar for a coffee as they did after every match. Diane went to the bar and ordered three cappuccinos for the others and a glass of wine for herself.

“It’s a bit early for that, isn’t it?” said Suze, looking at the glass in Diane’s hand.

“What? Are you my mother now?” she retorted.

“I’m just saying. Ah, forget it,” muttered Suze under her breath.

Diane took a long swig as if to tell Suze to go and shite. They had all noticed it. Diane had been knocking back the vino quite a bit lately. Last night she’d been pretty drunk by the time they were leaving the restaurant. Will had taken her hand to steer her towards a waiting taxi and she told him to get his fucking hands off her. They’d put that down to all of them being a bit pissed.

“I can’t get over how good Kevin was last night,” said Sarah. “Honestly, I thought it would be some boring old shite, but it was brilliant.”

“Seán O’Casey will be delighted you didn’t think it was *boring old shite*, I’m sure,” said Suze.

“He’s dead,” Diane said.

“Yeah, I know he is, thank you.”

“Suze, what is your problem? Apart from the obvious ...”

“Give it up, you two!” warned Sarah. She turned to Laurie. She didn’t want to witness another flare-up between Diane and Suze. “When is Kevin off to LA, Laurie?”

“He’s going tomorrow. I’m going to miss him like mad.”

“I’d miss him too if I were you,” said Sarah.

Diane and Suze nodded in agreement, spat forgotten. Kevin was a ride. But it wasn’t just that. He had a certain *je ne sais quoi*, the X-factor.

“I presume he’ll change his name,” said Diane.

“Er, no, I don’t think so. Why would he?”

“I don’t think he’ll get far with a name like Kevin, do you? Kevin Flynn. It doesn’t sound very ‘Hollywood’.”

“Well, there’s Kevin Spacey. Kevin Bacon. Kevin Costner. Kevin Kline. And I’m sure there’s more than I can’t think of right now!” said Laurie.

“You mean Calvin?” said Diane.

“What?” said Laurie.

“It’s Calvin Klein, not Kevin Klein.”

“No, I mean Kevin Kline. The actor.”

“You’re wrong. But anyway. I suppose if he’s good enough, his name won’t hold him back.”

Laurie knew there was no point arguing with a woman who argued for a living. She ignored Diane and continued to talk about how nervous she was for Kevin and how this would be the last time he would go to Hollywood for pilot season. It was expensive and the chances of getting picked up for a show were next to zero.

“He has some auditions lined up and a few meetings with different agents. I’m not getting my hopes up though. I made that mistake the last time.”

“You never know,” said Sarah. “I’ve got a good feeling about this. He was mesmerizing last night. And those looks! I think he’s going to be a big star.”

“I hope so because there is no Plan B. If he can’t make a living from being an actor, I don’t know what he’s going to do. I’ve tried to talk to him about it, but he won’t even consider failing.”

“At least you have your freelance work to support you until he does make it,” said Suze, hoping that he would indeed hit the big time. Laurie had been more than patient. It had been heart-breaking to watch Kevin get close to stardom and then get beaten to a big part at the last minute. He had auditioned for an RTÉ drama and had received several call-backs. It was a main part and the rights had already been sold to loads of international television companies. It would have meant a level of security that Kevin and Laurie never had before. In the end RTÉ went with an established actor and Kevin was left with another rejection to add to his collection.

“I did get a job offer from Gorge.ie,” said Laurie. “They want me to write their agony column.”

“That’s brilliant,” said Suze. “God, I’d bite somebody’s hand off for a job offer.”

“It’s a million miles away from my usual journo stuff but the money is good. And it’s a steady income. I can’t tell you how nervous I get coming up to the end of the month when the rent is due. It’ll be great to know that I won’t have to worry about that anymore.”

The women turned around as the noise in the club bar went up by a few decibels. Some of the male members had arrived after their own games. The men were jostling for pole position at the bar counter and fighting over whose round it was.

“They’re so fucking loud,” complained Suze.

“Sarah kissed Doctor Tom!” Diane blurted out.

“*Diane!* I told you that in confidence. And *he* kissed *me*. Not the other way round.”

“*Shhh!* Keep your voices down,” warned Sarah.

The women all stole looks at the group of men. Tom was quietly sipping his pint.

“You kissed him?” said Suze. Nobody could mistake the large dose of disapproval in her tone.

“I told you. *He* kissed *me*. I didn’t instigate it. Anyway, why are you getting all Holy Mary about it?”

“I’m not. It’s just that ... it’s ... you’re married.”

“I know I’m married, Suze. And it was a kiss. It didn’t mean anything.”

“No, of course. It’s just that I couldn’t imagine kissing anyone except Peter.”

“You mean you can’t imagine anyone else wanting to kiss you?” said Diane.

“*Diane!*” Laurie was shocked.

“Sorry, Suze. But what do you want? Violins?”

Diane remembered when Suze told her that she was going to get married. Peter was a couple of years older than Suze, but they were both still very young. She had long been convinced that Suze settled down far too quickly fearing that if she didn’t

take Peter up on his offer she would be single for the rest of her life.

“No, you’re right,” said Suze. “I’m sorry, Sarah. I was being judge-y. And I’m fucking dead jealous. He’s gorgeous. Tell us all about it.”

“It was nothing really. We were both a little drunk. It was the night we won the mixed doubles. We had the presentation, and we all drank way too much Prosecco.”

“I remember,” said Suze. “Peter picked me up early because he was golfing the next morning in Wicklow or something. He wanted to get an early night.”

“Anyway, Tom asked me if I wanted to share a taxi with him.”

“And he wanted to share more than the taxi, I bet!” said Suze.

“He was just being nice. We were talking all sorts of nonsense on the way home. I can’t remember most of it, thanks to the bubbly. Then he just leaned over and took my face in his hands. He ...”

“What? He what?” said Suze.

“Well, it was just that ... it felt nice.”

“That’s not what you told me, you little minx!” said Diane.

“*Diane!* Honestly, I am never going to tell you anything ever again!”

“She said she felt her fanny getting all hot. Fire in the hole!”

“You’re a fucking blabbermouth!”

The three shrieked while Sarah turned a few different shades of purple.

“That was the end of it,” she said. “I said goodnight and got out of the taxi. And I went inside and got into bed beside my husband!” She didn’t tell them that when she got into bed Joe was snoring his head off and she couldn’t think about anything else except the kiss. She spent the night fantasising about Tom making love to her.

They all glanced over at the bar once again. Sarah hoped to God he didn’t notice.

“He apologised the next time I saw him. I told him to forget it, that it was just a stupid kiss. He knows I’m happily married.

What I can't understand is why a good-looking guy like him isn't."

The others wondered the same thing. He was a catch in the truest sense. He was a doctor, he was fit and athletic and was extremely handsome.

"He could be a serial killer," said Laurie. "Maybe you had a lucky escape. He might be removing his patient's organs and eating them with a fine Chianti."

Sarah knew that in another life she would jump at the chance to be with Tom. She couldn't explain it, but she had been hungry for the kiss. Waiting for it, even.

Chapter 2



Laurie got home and saw Kevin's suitcase in the hall. She hated the thought of them being apart for six weeks.

He was having a beer in the kitchen, looking like he hadn't a care in the world. He offered her one. He went to the fridge and got her a cold bottle.

"Hey, you look more nervous than I am," he said to her.

"That wouldn't be hard. How are you not up to ninety?"

"No point, babe. What will be will be."

She had to admire him. She knew that he didn't sweat the small stuff, but this was big stuff. This mattered.

"I'm worried that you won't get a part and I'm worried that you will," she said. "What happens if you become a big star and you have beautiful women throwing themselves at you and you forget all about me?"

Laurie had seen some of the propositions that his followers made on social media. While he laughed it off, Laurie knew that there were women out there who would be more than happy to enact their online proposals in person.

"Beautiful women are always flinging themselves at me," he joked. "I mean, who could blame them?"

"Be serious, Kev."

"Lots of guys work away from home, Laur. Some guys do dangerous shit for a living. We ought to be grateful that I just have to read lines that somebody else wrote, pretend to be somebody else and call that work."

"Most guys' work doesn't involve pretending to be somebody else with a beautiful woman in close proximity."

“*Aw*, come on! The sex scenes are the worst. They’re so fucking cringy and the most unsexy thing I have ever done in my life. Honest to God, if that’s what’s worrying you, you can forget it.”

“I’m worried that you’re going to change if you become a big star.”

“Babes, I’m going to make it. I have no doubt in my mind about it. So, get used to the idea. Now, please cheer up and start thinking about all the things we’re going to do with all that moolah.”

Laurie wished she could share his optimism. But how could he be so certain? She lived in the real world and she wasn’t so sure that things worked out just because you wished them to.

She was about to air another doubt when Kevin took the beer from her hand and put it on the counter. He started to kiss her and unbutton her shirt. The conversation was over as far as he was concerned.

But Laurie couldn’t let it go.

“But, seriously, what if you fall in love with someone else?” she said between kisses.

He didn’t respond.

She hated how ridiculously insecure she sounded. She knew that he didn’t understand her worries about him meeting someone else. He had never given her any reason to doubt his love for her. From the very first night she met him.

She’d been standing outside the nightclub that night, waiting for the taxi she ordered, when a guy appeared by her side. He asked her for a light. She told him she didn’t smoke. He told her it didn’t matter because he didn’t smoke either. He was drunk and messy, and she tried to ignore him. She did however notice that he was very good-looking despite his drunkenness. She found herself smiling at his corny pick-up lines. He took this as encouragement and was banging on about Heaven missing an angel when her taxi arrived.

He begged her not to leave. He whipped out his phone and asked for her number. Laurie was in the process of refusing when he started to curse loudly. His battery was dead. He looked like he was about to cry. She felt bad for him and slowly reeled off the ten digits of her phone number to him. Safe in the knowledge that his phone was dead and that she'd never hear from him again.

He phoned her the following morning. She couldn't believe it. He told her he had recited her number in his head hundreds of times on his way back to his mate's flat where he was crashing for the night. He turned the flat upside down in his search for a pen when he got there. He eventually found a piece of chalk. Luckily his mate's flat was a shithole, and he wrote the number on the bare floorboards beside the couch he was sleeping on.

He asked her out for dinner. She felt she couldn't refuse. She wasn't looking for love. She was enjoying freedom after ending a three-year relationship that wasn't going anywhere. She wasn't prepared for the man who was sitting at their *table-a-deux* waiting for her. She almost stopped in her tracks. He was even better-looking than she remembered and, thanks to his sober state, a lot more attractive too.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come. I must have seemed like a complete idiot last night."

"What can I say? A guy who can remember a ten-digit number in an advanced inebriated state deserves a chance in my book."

"I wouldn't have done it for anyone else."

"Is that another one of your chat-up lines? Like when you asked me to feel your shirt because it was made from boyfriend material?"

"Oh God! I'm such a spanner."

Laurie didn't think so. She thought he was gorgeous. He was different from her previous long-term boyfriend, Ciarán. Ciarán was an accountant and was well on his way up the corporate ladder. Had he asked her to, she probably would have married him. They would have bought a nice house in a nice area and had cute children who went to the best schools. She thought that was what she wanted.

Sitting opposite Kevin in the restaurant that night, he offered her nothing. He had no money. He didn't have a proper job. In

fact, at that very minute, he didn't have any job at all. He had been working for minimum wage in a call centre but had jacked it in the day before. He said it was killing his soul. His creativity.

Laurie looked at him and she believed him. She believed in him. He had something. She had no idea what that something was. He might be full of shit, she thought. But she would find out. Maybe to her peril. But from the first date she had the unwavering certainty that Kevin Flynn was the man for her.

Chapter 3



“Deuce!”

Oh God, this is lasting forever, thought Sarah. She shouldn't have agreed to play. She could hardly concentrate on the game at all. She returned the ball into the net and it was advantage and match point to Laurie and Diane. Suze looked like she couldn't care less about the game either and was just going through the motions.

She couldn't wait to be in the clubhouse, sitting at the table spilling her guts to her best friends, though she could barely articulate what had happened.

“Game, set and match!” called Diane smugly.

She high-fived Laurie and came to the net and shook hands with the Suze and Sarah. They gathered their belongings and headed for the clubhouse. They all ordered cappuccinos except for Diane and they sat down. They started the usual post-mortem on the game and eventually noticed that Sarah wasn't joining in the conversation.

“Sarah? Are you OK?” asked Laurie.

“You and Suze were playing like a pair of old ladies out there. It's not surprising you lost,” said Diane.

“I don't give a damn about losing. It's nothing to do with the game.”

“Well, what's wrong then?”

“Joe is leaving me. He met someone else.”

They sat around with their mouths wide open for a time, looking at Sarah's sad and lovely face. Nobody knew what to say. Sarah and Joe were together forever. It had to be some kind of sick joke.

“A man. He says he’s gay.”

“*What?* Joe? How? I mean ... he can’t be ... Are you sure ...?”
Suze was unable to process this revelation.

As far as Joe was concerned, Diane had always thought he was a bit gay. Well, maybe not gay, but certainly on more than nodding terms with his feminine side. He used to accessorise their clothes years ago, and that was before accessorising was a thing. He was like one of the girls. She didn’t think that now was the time to bring that up.

“I don’t understand it, Sarah,” Suze continued. “How can he be gay? It’s probably just some kind of mid-life crisis he’s having.”

“It’s not a mid-life crisis, for fuck’s sake!” cried Sarah. “He’s gay. He told me he met somebody. He’s in a relationship!”

They remained speechless.

“Look on the bright side, Sarah. You always have Doctor Tom,” said Diane.

“Jesus, Diane. You’re bringing that up now? You’re so fucking insensitive. Remind me never to turn to you for support.”

Diane looked hurt. Sarah knew she was only trying to make things OK, like she did when they were kids. But there was no making this situation OK.

“What am I going to tell May?”

“You need to let her know that you both still love her,” said Suze. “That you’re still her mum and dad and that will never change.”

Suze was normally so bitter about everything lately that Sarah had forgotten she had the capability to be kind.

“He wants us to tell her when I get home today. I’m scared of what this will do to her. All this time she thought she had a normal family. But in actual fact, her whole childhood is based on a big fat lie. Oh God, how am I going to make this alright?”

Nobody envied Sarah the task ahead. May was the light of Sarah’s and Joe’s lives. There was no way that the news wasn’t going to devastate her.

“Where did he meet this guy?” asked Laurie

“In his Rome office. He’s Italian. Joe said it just happened, that he wasn’t looking for ... well, he says he wasn’t looking for a man. Seemingly he just knew when he met him that he had to be with him.”

Sarah started to cry, and her friends tried their best to comfort her.

“At least he’s in Rome and not here in Dublin if that’s any comfort,” said Laurie.

“It is and it’s not. He’ll be living it up in Rome with his new boyfriend and I’ll be here in Dublin dealing with a freaked-out teenager. It’s so unfair!”

Chapter 4



Sarah had come home from work at The Bakery, on what she thought was just another Saturday evening. She was looking forward to dinner but there was no smell of anything cooking.

Joe made Saturday night's meal every week and it was always a feast. He was a great cook and Sarah was glad to have dinner handed up to her. It was a real treat after serving hundreds of customers all week.

It was a special time shared by the three of them and almost the only meal that they got to eat together around the table in the week. Joe and May always ate out on Sundays before Joe went to the airport to fly back to Rome, leaving Sarah to catch up with her paperwork for The Bakery.

Sarah put her keys down on the hall table and shouted "*Hello!*" to the seemingly empty house. She walked through the kitchen and saw Joe sitting outside on the patio.

He was smoking! Joe didn't smoke. He hadn't even smoked when they were kids and were all trying it out to be cool. It was a beautiful April evening, warm and sunny. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, not his usual pants and shirt combo. He always wore trousers and a shirt. He looked so unlike himself that Sarah was discombobulated.

"Hi, you're smoking," was all she said.

"Hi. *Eh*, yeah," he said, looking at the cigarette as if he was seeing it for the first time.

She felt like she didn't know him. She sensed that her foundations had shifted somehow. Had he found out about the kiss with Tom? He couldn't have. Nobody except she, Tom and the girls knew about that. And they wouldn't tell him for the world. She sat down opposite him while he stubbed out his cigarette in an ashtray that she didn't even know they owned.

“I, *eh*, I need to talk to you.” He toyed around with the cigarette butt for a few seconds longer. “Look, Sarah, I don’t know how to tell you this. It’s very hard for me to say it but ...”

He seemed to be forcing the words out of his mouth. She waited fearfully for him to continue.

“I’ve met someone else.”

He looked up at her when he heard her involuntary gasp.

“I met ... *eh*, I met someone a few months ago. A man. I’m gay, Sarah. I suppose I always have been.”

Joe had always known that he wasn’t the same as the other lads in his school. He had no real sexual curiosity about girls. Unlike his classmates, he didn’t obsess about getting his hands inside a girl’s blouse or up her skirt.

At the time he didn’t know what he was, but he knew he was different. He didn’t know any gay people back then. Of course, they were in society somewhere, but they were obviously trying as hard as Joe was to *fit in*, to *be normal*.

He managed to do it. He fitted in. He was *normal*. He was married to Sarah. They had a beautiful daughter. They lived in a four-bedroomed house on a great street. But when he met Paolo, he could no longer ignore who he was. What he was.

Getting married to Sarah at the time seemed like the right thing to do. He loved her and he cared deeply about her. He thought that was enough. She seemed to have settled for him on some level too. But surely she wasn’t happy with the way things were between them? Surely she wanted passion and real love and all that it entailed?

Joe vividly remembered being introduced to Paolo at his desk for the first time. He was a programmer in the office in Rome. He was strikingly good-looking, with beautiful brown eyes behind stylish glasses. Joe immediately felt his heart racing and his palms getting sweaty. He acted like a total idiot. He knocked over Paolo’s bottle of water. It landed in Paolo’s lap and made a huge wet patch on his crotch. Paolo looked from his crotch to Joe and

back at his crotch. Joe spluttered out some sort of apology in Italian and had even involuntarily moved his hand towards Paolo's crotch to wipe it. Luckily he stopped himself before his hand made any contact.

Paolo excused himself and went to the bathroom. Joe tried to recover his composure and moved into the boardroom where he and some of the other executives were having a sales meeting. He could see Paolo returning to his desk out of the corner of his eye and he kept stealing glances at him through the glass wall of the boardroom.

What was that he felt when he looked at him? Joe couldn't concentrate on any of the sales figures being bandied about the boardroom. He could only think of the brown eyes in the dark face of the man with the wet crotch sitting at his desk twenty feet away from him.

Joe was having a drink in the hotel's bar later that evening. He had stayed in the same room in the same hotel for over ten years since he'd taken the "Italian Job" as he and Sarah used to call it. The company had offered to pay for an apartment but Joe preferred the idea of staying in a hotel. His home was in Dublin with Sarah and May.

He was checking his emails on his phone when he felt a pair of eyes on him. He looked up and saw Paolo standing there. Joe's Italian was still far from perfect, so he opted for English

"Hi. Paolo, isn't it?"

"*Si. Mi dispiace.* I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here. I ..."

"No. Please. Sit."

Joe watched as Paolo settled himself into the chair opposite. He started to get the sweaty feeling again and he was sure that Paolo could hear his heartbeat, it was so loud in his ears. He tried to gather his thoughts. What this a chance encounter? Or had Paolo sought him out?

"Will you have a drink?" he asked.

Paolo accepted his offer and Joe ordered two bottles of beer. He put away his phone.

"Emails. Never-ending. Always queries."

"*Si.* It is because you are the boss. Sometimes I want that for me but I think I like to have fun in life also. Maybe someday."

Joe waited for him to explain what he was doing there but no explanation appeared to be forthcoming. Joe was looking at Paolo's mouth when he moved it to speak and imagined what it would be like to kiss the strong bow of his lips and taste him.

Luckily the waiter arrived with the drinks and stopped Joe from making a complete show of himself. He had at least ten years on Paolo. And more probably. But he felt as if he was very much the younger man. Paolo seemed assured and not at all nervous.

"I see you changed your jeans," Joe said, staring at his crotch for the second time that day.

"*Si*."

"I'm very clumsy. My wife tells me so all the time."

"You are married? I thought that ... I ... *scusi*, I did not know that."

Joe watched Paolo jump out of his chair like a scalded cat. His actions confirmed to Joe his reason for being there.

"I must go now. I have a ... I ... *Buona notte*."

Joe watched as Paolo moved through the lobby and out the front door. He wanted to run after him. He wanted to pull him into his arms and kiss him. He wanted to feel Paolo's arms around him. He knew in that moment that his life had changed forever. For the first time in his life he was ready to surrender. He knew he was gay. He had known forever. He had made a strategic decision not to be. He didn't want to be different. He didn't want to live life on the fringes.

He had an encounter with a man during the first few years of his marriage to Sarah and he hated himself for it. Being gay wasn't an easy gig in Dublin in those days. It was furtive and dangerous even. Joe had nowhere to turn. He couldn't speak to anyone about it. Peter and Will, Sarah's friends' husbands were both alpha. His friends too, as far as he could tell.

It was safer to stay firmly in the closet with the door locked. He realised how frazzled he had been for years and years. His life with Sarah and May wasn't bad. It was great in parts. It just wasn't the life he should be living.

Now he wanted Paolo like he never wanted anybody. Not Sarah, not anyone.

In bed, he relived the encounter over and over in his head. Paolo never said why he was there. Joe could only surmise it was because Paolo had seen through the ruse. He had seen him for who he truly was. The fact that Paolo left immediately upon hearing that he was married only further reinforced his belief that Paolo felt something pass between them.

Joe tossed and turned. He slept only in fits and starts. He was wrecked when his phone alarm went off at seven the following morning. Normally he would have wanted to stay in bed and sleep but not today. He couldn't wait to get to the office. He longed to see Paolo's handsome face.

At work, Joe tried to play it cool, but he failed miserably. He found it impossible to concentrate on sales and targets, knowing Paolo was in the same building as him. When he couldn't help it anymore, he made it his business to spend time with the programmers on their floor. He had a word with a few of the guys as he made his way to Paolo's desk.

"Buongiorno."

"Ciao," Paolo said simply.

Joe took the smile that crept across Paolo's face as encouragement. He broke out his Italian for beginners

"I was wondering if you would like to maybe have dinner tonight? With me, I mean."

Joe was glad to hear Paolo accept his invitation in perfect English. Paolo suggested a small restaurant off Piazza del Popolo, and they arranged to meet at nine.

Joe left work early, something unheard of in the past, unless he was catching a flight back to Dublin. He took extra care getting ready. He had checked the personnel records and found out that Paolo was twenty-nine. Jesus. He was almost fifteen years younger than him. He wondered if Paolo had had many lovers. Looking like he did, he was sure to have had. But had they been men or women? Or both?

He wanted to call Sarah and ask her what he should wear. Sarah was his go-to person for every decision he made, big and small. He felt a pang of anxiety when he thought about her. He loved her. He loved her like he loved nobody else. He trusted her with his life. He tried to look at himself in the mirror, but he couldn't hold his own gaze. If the evening went how he hoped it would, he was about to betray the woman he loved so much.

He arrived a little early at the restaurant and ordered a Borolo, hoping that Paolo liked red wine. Then he called the waiter over and ordered a bottle of white from the Veneto region as well just in case. He couldn't concentrate on the menu and the beautiful Italian words swam in front of his eyes.

Every time the door opened, he got butterflies in his stomach. He made himself stop looking up every time someone came in as he knew he must look like a nervous nelly. While he was resisting his urge to look up, Paolo took a seat opposite him at their table for two.

He was dressed in a superbly fitted charcoal suit with a sharp white shirt underneath. Although Joe was in his best clobber, he felt like a slob as he greeted his unbelievably handsome date. But there was something a little different about him.

"Contact lenses," Paolo said as Joe searched his face trying to figure it out.

"Of course. You look good. Not that glasses don't suit you. You look good with them too. I'm just saying that ... sorry, you'll have to forgive me, I'm nervous. It's been quite a long time since I ..."

"It's OK," Paolo said, putting his hand on Joe's.

There was no pretending that this was anything but a first date. They were grown men and both of them knew why they were there.

"*Va bene*," said Paolo. "We do not have to do anything. We will have dinner and we will see what happens after that. Maybe nothing. Maybe something."

Joe didn't feel any less nervous even with the absence of pressure. He wanted to move things forward, but he wanted to take his time and savour the man sitting opposite him as well. He let Paolo order dinner for them both. He tried to assume some kind of control by pouring the wine, only spilling a bit of it onto the white linen tablecloth.

Joe tried to pay the bill but Paolo insisted they split it. Joe didn't want the night to end. He suggested they go for a drink in a wine bar near his hotel. He wanted to ask Paolo back to his hotel, but he wasn't sure if he was ready for the consequences of such a suggestion.

The wine bar was packed, and Paolo ordered a Valpolicella. Joe pretended to be impressed by his choice of wine, but he couldn't have cared less what he was drinking. He had drunk quite a bit of wine before and during dinner and was feeling a little intoxicated. Emboldened by the alcohol, he leaned over and kissed Paolo on the mouth.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I don't know what came over me."

"No. I like it."

Paolo kissed him back. Joe felt a fire start in the pit of his stomach. He must be completely pissed, he thought. Here he was in the middle of a wine bar, in the centre of Rome, kissing by far the handsomest man in the place.

"You should come back to my hotel," he said in what he hoped was his sexy voice.

"You drink too much *vino*, *no*? You should go back to your hotel but alone, I think."

"But I want you to come back with me."

"I want that too but you are drunk. And you are married. Goodnight, Joe. I will see you tomorrow."

Joe watched Paolo walk away. He wanted him. He didn't care about being either drunk or married. He was frustrated. His head was completely fucked up. He wanted to run after Paolo but instead he walked into the hotel and up to his room.

The following day, Joe asked Paolo to come to his office. Paolo was dressed in his jeans and a T-shirt and Joe could see his strong arms. He had noticed them the night before when at one stage Paolo had removed his jacket in the crowded wine bar. He had rolled up his sleeves to reveal tanned forearms. He had imagined what it would be like to have those arms around him. It took all his willpower not to throw himself at the younger man.

Paolo sat looked at him quizzically.

“Paolo. Last night was, well ... last night, *em*. Well, I just need to know what it was. I’m sorry, but I can’t do this if this is not, well, you know, exclusive.” He pointed his finger from Paolo to himself, feeling like an idiot.

“Well, yes,” Paolo said.

“Yes?” Joe felt hugely relieved. “It’s just that I haven’t been able to think about anything else or anybody else except you since I spilled your water the other day. I want to tell my wife that I have met you. I want to tell my daughter. I want to tell everyone. But I have to be sure that this is real enough to risk everything for.”

“For me it is real,” Paolo said.

Joe looked into Paolo’s eyes and knew that he felt the same. He couldn’t think about the consequences. The devastation that this action would cause to the two people he loved most in the world.

Chapter 5



Suze left the tennis club and drove towards home. She gripped the steering wheel, her knuckles white with the effort. Thoughts ran through her head at a million miles an hour. She felt jealous of Sarah. She knew it was ridiculous to be jealous of a woman who had just found out that her husband was gay. A woman who had been presented with unassailable evidence that the last twenty years of her life and marriage had been a sham. Still, she wished she had been faced with some such dilemma.

She wished that when she got home, Peter would tell her something fantastical. Sarah's story had a certain glamour to it. Sarah and Joe lived what Suze considered an already exciting life. With their successful businesses, pots of money and their fabulous home, it was far from humdrum anyway. Now throw in the Italian capital city and a hot man and it only upped the pizzazz to a point somewhere off the Richter scale. Things like that would never happen in the lives of boring old Suze and Peter.

Suze's lacklustre life consisted of a husband who seemed just as fed up as she did, and two kids who had no real use for her anymore. She had given up her job to be there for them growing up. She had cooked nice meals for them, did their laundry, cleaned their rooms and a hundred other little things to ensure their lives ran smoothly. The kinds of things that went unnoticed and largely unappreciated.

Maybe it was her own fault. Suze didn't do fun stuff with her kids. She was the practical one. Peter was the one who they had a good time with. He took them to the park and played tennis and football with them. He was the one who went to all their matches and the cinema. Suze did the inoculations and the Parent Teacher meetings.

She remembered the holiday in Disneyland. She booked the flights and the hotel, taking great care to ensure that every amenity was on their doorstep. She took out a loan with the credit union to make sure that they would want for nothing on their holiday of a lifetime. In the theme parks, she held their bags and watched as they went on all the rides and had a whale of a time. Paul, Emma and Peter recounted the rollercoaster rides over dinner, never thinking that Suze would have liked to have had a go too. She never told them otherwise. Over time she relegated herself to last place in the family pecking order. She had only herself to blame.

As Paul and Emma got older, Suze was happy to let them play their computer games and retreat to their rooms. She figured they were happier doing that than spending time with their uninspiring mother. She sometimes wondered if her kids might have had more respect for her if she hadn't been at their beck and call every hour of every day and had a career instead. She had given up on her dreams too easily. She hadn't turned into the person she thought she would someday be.

Suze wished she had made more of an effort with her daughter, but it was no secret that her dad was Emma's preferred parent. She knew mothers and daughters who did lots of fun stuff together. She had pitched the idea of going into town on a shopping trip lately, but Emma looked at her like she was out of her mind for even suggesting such a thing.

Emma was either out with her friends or holed up in her room studying for her Leaving Certificate. She only left her room for the bathroom or for meals. Paul had already left home and she was sure he wouldn't be coming back if he could help it. He got a job and worked his way through college to pay for the pleasure of not having to live at home. They adored Peter. It was Suze they wanted to get away from.

Peter had said it was normal for a young lad like Paul not to want to live at home. He'd want to bring girls back to his flat, he had said. He had tried to convince Suze that girls were the reason their son paid hundreds of euro every month to stay away from them.

Emma couldn't wait to get away from them either. She had said as much when she was picking colleges. Suze felt like a failure in every department. She had always blamed Peter or other people

for her unhappiness, but lately she realised that the misery was deep inside her and always had been. Peter had just been unfortunate to fall in love with her and share that misery with her for the past twenty years.

Peter was watching a match on TV when she got home. He shouted hello to her as she put her racket and bag in the cupboard under the stairs.

“Is Emma here?” she asked him.

“Everton and Villa,” he replied.

For fuck’s sake, she thought. He didn’t even listen to her anymore.

“I asked where Emma is, not who’s playing.”

“Ah, sorry, love. She’s gone to Jessica’s. She said she’d be late back. How was the tennis? How are the girls?” He didn’t take his eyes off the action on the TV screen.

“Fine. It was grand. The girls are good. Joe is gay. He’s leaving Sarah, moving to Rome.” She said this as casually as if she was saying he had a corn on his toe. At least it caused Peter to turn down the sound on the television.

“Wha’? Joe? Gay? That’s gas. I always thought he was a bit of a poofter, mind you. Nothin’ wrong with that of course. He’d always be sittin’ in the middle of the women instead o’ the lads.”

“Yeah, I don’t think you can say ‘poofters’ these days. We are living in a politically correct age, you know. Poor Sarah, she’s really upset about it. She’s worried about how May will take the news.”

“Yeah, Jaysus. That’s a hard one alright. We’re lucky we don’t have anything like that goin’ on.”

“*Lucky?* You think we’re lucky? For fuck’s sake, Peter, open your eyes! Do I look like I think I’m lucky?”

“No, I’m just sayin’ that if we had something to tell the kids, that they’d be older and more able to handle it, that’s all.”

She could see that he was trying desperately not to say the wrong thing. She had been biting his head off every time he opened his mouth lately. The poor fella. He didn’t deserve it really. Anyway, he wouldn’t have to put up with it much longer.

“You mean like if we told them we were going to split up? Is that the kind of thing you had in mind?”

“*Ab* here, Suze. Give it a rest. I was just sayin’ that our kids are older. That’s all. Nothing else. End of bleedin’ story.”

“Peter?”

“Wha’?” he said, again paying rapt attention to the football game even with the sound down.

“I’m leaving. I’m going to get some stuff and I’m going to move out.”

He got such a shock he turned off the television.

“What are you talkin’ about, love? Move out? What do you mean ‘leaving’?”

“I mean leaving *you!*”

“Wait. Where are you goin’? Calm down a bit and ...”

“Don’t fucking tell me to calm down. I’m going. I don’t love you and you certainly don’t love me. I’m going to pack. Tell Emma whatever you have to. She won’t miss me or care if I’m gone. I’ll stay in a hotel until, well, until I figure something out. Here, don’t miss your football. Put the telly back on. I don’t want any drama.”

Suze left him staring after her with his mouth open. A few seconds later, she heard him follow her upstairs.

He stood watching her pull things out of drawers and stuff them into an overnight bag.

“Look, love, there’s no need for this. Come back downstairs and we can talk about things.”

“I can’t talk, Peter. I can’t even think. I’ve slowly been losing my mind and none of you have even noticed. I’m nobody to you. Mrs. Invisible!”

“No, love. Don’t say tha’. You’re scarin’ me now. I don’t want you to go.”

Suze looked at him and his distress almost made her lose her resolve and stay.

“I ... I can’t. It’s too painful.”

“Here, look. You stay here. I’ll go if that’s what you want. I can go and stay in me ma’s.” He tried to wrestle the overnight bag

from her hands. It was the same one he used for his overnight golf outings with the lads.

She forcefully pulled it back, surprised at her own strength.

“No. You stay. The kids would prefer to have you here than me. I’m sorry, Peter. I’m just ... I’m just ... sorry.”

Peter continued to plead with her over the bannister as she made her way downstairs with her bag. She picked up her car keys and walked back out the door

Chapter 6



Diane had met Will while she was living with three guys who weren't housetrained in a flat-share in the city centre. She spotted the ad for the room in the *Evening Herald*. She rang the number on the paper and tried for three days straight to get through. The phone was eventually answered on day four by a lad with a thick country accent. She barely understood what he said but she took it from the conversation that she had to present herself at the property in person.

They had obviously made a huge effort to attract a tenant because the house wasn't massively untidy when she met them. They seemed like nice enough guys and her room was bright, spacious and at the top of the house. She agreed to move in that weekend.

Her housemates were at college too. She envisaged intense debates into the wee hours of night but the most intellectual it got was an argument on the merits of Blur vs Oasis. Each one of the lads tried to get off with her. She reckoned that when she turned the first one down the other two saw it as a challenge. She would rather stick pins in her eyes than kiss Conor from Kerry, Barry from Drogheda or Pavel from the Czech Republic.

When it was obvious that Diane wasn't going to mould herself into a girlfriend role, they gave her the role of mammy. They actually expected her to pick up after them. She soon disabused them of the notion that she would do any such thing. She kept her room neat and tidy and developed an immunity of sorts when it came to the state of every other room in the house.

The bathroom was like a war zone. She only entered when she absolutely had to, armed with a spray bottle of bleach and paper toilet-seat covers. She showered and washed her long hair in record time and generally did an amazing job of spending hardly any time in the smallest room in the house.

She waited tables in l'Escargot, the fanciest French restaurant in the city. The fine dining establishment attracted the wealthiest clientele in Dublin. Mostly male, they spent an inordinate amount of time eating overpriced foie gras and drinking exorbitantly expensive wines from Bordeaux. They tipped well and for that reason Diane put up with their wandering hands and lewd remarks.

Will was a regular. He was the youngest chief executive of any bank in Ireland and had a reputation for being a tough guy. He was always nice to Diane and she never once had to slap away a hand or laugh at colourful remarks. She was shocked when he asked her out. He was an adult with a proper grown-up job and she was still at college. She politely declined, hoping it wouldn't affect the way he tipped.

Will didn't give up easily. He asked her out every time he came to the restaurant. It was embarrassing to keep turning him down and she was almost running out of excuses.

Then he caught her unawares by dropping by when they were getting the room set up for dinner. He was tie-less and his shirt was unbuttoned, giving him a more casual air.

"I know you're probably washing your hair. Or your friend's hair. Or your dog's. But I wonder if you would do me the honour of having dinner with me tomorrow evening?"

Diane struggled to find an excuse.

"And you can't say you're working. I already checked with the manager. You're off for the next two nights."

Fucking Fred, thought Diane. She would have a word with him later about that.

"*Em. Eh.* OK. But only if you agree to stop asking me out. We'll go out for dinner tomorrow night and that's it. You go back to your life and I'll go back to mine."

Diane never went back to her life after that. Will arrived at her door to pick her up at eight o'clock sharp. She answered the door and could barely see him over the enormous bouquet he was holding. She thanked him, took the flowers and closed the door in his face. She found a bucket that wasn't full of cans or beer bottles and put the flowers in it. She looked at herself in the smudged hall mirror and opened the door again.

“Oh. I wasn’t sure whether you were coming back,” he said.

“Sorry about that. I couldn’t ask you inside. The house is practically radioactive, it’s so manky. You’d probably catch something. I’ve built up some sort of immunity at this stage.”

Later in the evening, Will told her that she shouldn’t be living in such terrible conditions. He brought her back to his apartment in Donnybrook and she was struck by the contrast. Will’s place was all polished tiles and clean lines. There was no pyramid made out of empty beer cans. No week’s worth of dirty bowls in the sink. No indefinable smells. She almost sighed with joy when she used the bathroom. And it was the spare one.

“You should move in here.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I mean it. You’d be nearer to college. You’d have the place to yourself all day when I’m at work, so you’d get more studying done. Those guys you live with sound like a bunch of juvenile delinquents.”

“But I hardly know you.”

“We’ve known each other for a year now.”

“Have we?”

“I asked you out in November 1993. It’s now November 1994.”

“Oh.” It was a ludicrous suggestion, but she was tempted. “I can’t.”

“I’m offering you my spare room.”

“Oh yeah. Yes. I know that.”

She didn’t know. She wasn’t sure what he was proposing. He was persistent, she had to give him that. And what he was saying made sense on some level. She would be closer to UCD and she would get lots done in the perfect silence of the apartment. No music blaring. No Nintendo. No *Home and Away*.

She and Will made love that night and she never moved back in with Conor, Barry and Pavel.



Diane started seeing other men about a decade into their marriage. She wasn't looking for anything meaningful or long term from any of them. She was just looking to be entertained. Will was a workaholic and didn't have time for much else outside the financial world.

She suspected that Will had affairs too. There were the perfume smells that lingered on his clothes, the sudden weekends away. It had to be with women who worked at the bank as it was the only other place he spent his time. The thought of Will being with another woman didn't bother Diane. Rather it assuaged her own guilt, knowing that he was being unfaithful too.

They never confronted the infidelities in their marriage. There was no need. Diane never considered divorcing him. They had built a life together that from the outside looked perfect. In reality it wasn't at all what people thought but, whatever it was, it suited them.

Chapter 7



Home from the club, Diane turned the key in the front door. The marble tiles gleamed thanks to Michaela, the cleaner who came in six days a week to keep the huge house spotless. She shouted hello and got no response. Will was acting very strangely lately. She hoped he wasn't ill – mainly because she didn't want to end up saddled with an invalid to look after. She wasn't the caring type and wouldn't think twice about despatching him to a nursing home if there was anything serious wrong with him.

They had everything money could buy so whatever ailed Will was not anything material. She put her keys down on the kitchen island and jumped a few feet in the air when she saw her husband sitting on the armchair, staring out at the perfectly manicured garden.

“For fuck's sake, Will! You frightened the life out of me. Why didn't you answer when I shouted hello?”

He continued to sit in silence.

“Have you been sitting here the whole time I've been gone?”

She hoped he wasn't going to bring up the night before. They hadn't done it in ages. She had to go back to the previous summer to pinpoint the last time they had fucked. They had watched a movie together. Will had his own TV in his room and rarely joined Diane in the living room. The movie was kind of rubbishy but Diane had liked the fact that he sat down beside her.

They ended up drinking a few glasses of wine and Diane realised that she didn't want the night to end when the movie did. The film had a few intense sex scenes and that had put her in the mood. She started to open the buttons on his shirt and played with his chest hair. She kissed him and straddled him on the couch.

Will was taking things slowly. For fuck's sake, thought Diane. This wasn't the time for considered lovemaking. She wanted it *now. Wham. Bam. Thank you, ma'am.* Diane tried to help him along, to speed things up. She tried everything but nothing worked. He couldn't do it. He couldn't rise to the occasion. It was mortifying. For him. For her. She went red all over again when she thought about it. She opened the fridge door to get some cool air on her face.

"I'll make us some lunch," she said with mock cheerfulness as if salmon and some salad was going to fix whatever was ailing him.

They had a separate dining room with an enormous formal dining table, but it felt ridiculous to use it for just the two of them. Sitting at the island unit in the kitchen was cosier and Diane needed to get him out of his funk. She hoped that physical closeness would help him to open up to her.

"I'm sorry, Diane. I can't eat this," he said, pushing away his plate and getting up. He turned to walk away.

"Hold on, Will. Don't go. Talk to me. I can help you. Whatever's going on, I'm here for you." She was going to tell him about Sarah and Joe. Show him that their situation wasn't as bad as what other people were going through.

He turned back to her. She hoped she was getting through to him.

"You don't understand," he replied. "I've lost everything."

Diane was vain enough to think he was still going on about not being able to get it up the night before. She got up and stood beside him. She tried to take his hand but he pulled it away.

"You haven't lost me. There's always the pharmaceutical solution. Lots of people take Viagra."

"Jesus, Diane, this isn't about me not getting a hard-on. We have nothing left. Financially, we're fucked. We're even going to lose this house."

Diane stared at him. He seemed unfamiliar to her. He was grey in the face and his hair was completely white. Being older was what had attracted her to him in the first place but now he looked old enough to be somebody's grandfather. She hadn't

noticed him ageing before but now she was suddenly struck by it.

“Of course we won’t, there’s no mortgage on this house. We paid it off ages ago.”

“There is. There is a mortgage.”

“What are you on about?”

“A few of us, the directors, tried to shore up the bank’s share price ten years ago and we all bought thousands of shares each.”

Diane was stunned into silence. She couldn’t bring herself to speak.

“We took options to buy the shares and pay for them at a date in the future. We assumed that when we sold the shares it would be for a higher price. Well, guess what? The ten years are up but the share price isn’t.”

“But what has the house got to do with it? I don’t understand.”

“I had to use the house as collateral. It wasn’t just me. Denis and Rocks are in the same boat.”

“Oh, well, if Denis and Rocks are fucked too, that’s alright then, isn’t it?”

“No. What I’m saying is that we all thought the share price would go up. The last thing we expected was the financial crash to hit. We thought we’d make a killing. Retirement funds.”

“So you’ve known this might happen for the last ten years? The share price collapsed in 2008. Why did you wait until now to do something about it?”

“We didn’t have the cash to do anything. Not the amount required anyway. We just hoped that by some miracle the price would recover.”

The shock made Diane’s knees buckle and she had to hold on to the island to support herself.

“My name is on the deeds of this house. You couldn’t have used it as collateral without my permission. I would have needed to sign something. Legal documents.”

Diane looked at Will. He couldn’t meet her gaze and stared at the floor.

“You didn’t. Tell me you didn’t.”

“I’m sorry, Diane. I forged your signature. You were in New York with the girls, and I didn’t want to bother you with it.”

“You didn’t wait because you knew that there was no way in hell that I would have signed my life away on a fucking bet!” she yelled.

“I know.”

He raised his face to her and she almost felt sorry for him. There was no life in him anymore.

“You could go to jail for this.”

“I know.”

“You know, you know,” she mimicked. “How much money is involved?”

“Five,” he said.

“Five what?” she said, seething.

“Five million,” he said flatly.

“Five million euro. We’ll never get that if we put it on the market. We’d be lucky to get two million. What will happen with the shortfall? Will the bank come after us?”

“Yeah, probably. But you don’t have to worry, Diane. I’ll repay it. You don’t have to –”

“My name is on the fucking mortgage, Will. I am equally as liable as you are.”

“Look, I’ll come clean. I’ll tell the gardaí that I forged your signature. I’ll tell them everything.”

“If you go to the police, you’ll go to jail. I want you to suffer for what you did but you going to prison is not going to solve anything. And what about me? I can’t have any murky financial issues if I want to keep practising. Fucking hell, Will. I could be disbarred for what you did.”

Will looked like he was being punched repeatedly.

“We’ll put the house up for sale and see what the shortfall is,” she said. “In the meantime, I want you to get your things together and get the fuck out of my life.”



The following day at work, Diane couldn't think straight. When Andrew, her assistant, buzzed her to say her mother was at reception and wanted to see her, she wondered how much worse things could get. Diane and her mother Marie had a relationship that could only be described as strained. As soon as Diane could, she had left home and since then only returned for the occasional visit.

Marie was opinionated and stubborn. They had that in common. Everyone said they were too alike to ever get on. There were things that Diane admired about her mum. Marie raised her all by herself. She worked as a solicitor in a busy practice and Diane wanted for nothing. It was always in the back of Diane's mind that she and Marie would become friends in Marie's old age and maybe even go on holidays together. That time hadn't arrived yet.

"You look like you're going somewhere nice," Diane said when Andrew showed Marie into her office.

Marie was dressed in a bright purple dress with a colourful silk scarf.

"I've already been."

Diane looked at her watch. It was eleven thirty.

"Where have you been at this hour?"

"Somewhere I've been looking forward to going to for a long time. I've been to a funeral."

Diane wondered if her mother was going gaga. Marie looked like she was going to a garden party or a luncheon with her posh pals. She was only in her sixties but Diane had heard of early onset dementia in some people, especially women.

"Oh. OK. Anyone I know? Knew?"

"Edmond Charlton."

"From the law firm? Charlton Bristow? Oh yes, I did hear that he died. Why were you looking forward to going to his funeral?"

"Come and have coffee with me."

"Mum, you can see I'm up to my eyes." Diane surveyed her desk. There were files everywhere. She was in the middle of a murder case and she needed her mother's visit like she needed a

hole in the head. Between Will and now her mum, her mind was nowhere near where it should be.

“It’s important.”

Diane saw the seriousness in her mother’s eyes. For fuck’s sake, she thought as she pulled her jacket off the seat behind her.

“Right. Come on. But you better make it snappy whatever it is.”

When she was younger Diane used to fantasise about meeting her dad. He would turn up, full of apology and take her out on his yacht. He was successful and handsome of course. She always forgave him for not being there for her when she was growing up.

Her mum didn’t talk about him. Ever. Diane knew from an early age that the subject of her dad was off limits. It caused an untold number of arguments between mother and daughter. Marie was open about any other subject, including ones that other parents ran a mile from. Diane was the first one in her class to know the facts of life but she would never know about who her dad was if Marie could help it.

That was why Diane was completely stunned when over a two-shot Americano, Marie revealed to her who her father was.

“So what’s going on? You’re not ill, are you? Not that you look it.”

“No. It’s nothing like that. It’s the funeral I was at earlier.”

“Right. I didn’t know you knew the guy. What about it?”

“The funeral. It was your father’s.”

Marie had just turned twenty. She was interning at a firm of solicitors in Dublin city centre. Edmond Charlton was one of the senior partners. The firm was working on a takeover

involving an American bank and a small stockbroking company. There was a deadline for the deal to be finalised and he was working all hours. He asked for extra resources and Marie was assigned to his department.

She loved the cut and thrust of the deal and soaked up the experience like a sponge. She didn't mind doing the menial tasks and was more than willing to make tea or go out and buy sandwiches for the busy lawyers. She arrived early and left whenever the work was done or when nobody could concentrate anymore, whichever one came first.

He didn't pay particular attention to her nor she to him. He was the big boss and there were layers of lawyers between Marie and Edmond Charlton. One evening she was grabbing a cup of coffee from the new-fangled machine on the fourth floor of the modern office building. She turned around and saw him. She immediately offered to get him a cup. It was 1973 and it was expected that she would. Especially if the man was the senior partner and had been working his ass off as much as the rest of them.

"I tell you what," he said. "Why don't we go and grab a real drink? I think we deserve it, don't you?"

Marie wasn't sure she did, but she found herself nodding agreement. He was the boss. She went back to her desk and grabbed her coat and bag. One of the other interns, her friend Steph, looked at her quizzically as Mr. Charlton stood in the doorway waiting for her. She looked at Steph and shrugged. She didn't know why she was going either.

Dublin in the seventies wasn't known for its trendy hotspots but Edmond brought her to one of them for a drink that first evening. Marie didn't know such places existed. Who knew that basements of the beautiful Georgian buildings on Leeson Street housed intimate spaces where serious business was conducted?

Marie was young and quite inexperienced where men were concerned. She had slept with boys in college but they were just that. Boys. Boys who bought cigarettes in tens because they were so broke. Never had she as much as been taken for dinner by any of them.

Her head was completely turned by Edmond's sophistication and his suave manner. She agreed to have a drink with him again

the following night and the one after that. Her mother tut-tutted when she came in late at night, smelling of drink and cigarettes, but Marie didn't care. Her life was like something out of a film and she felt grown-up and sophisticated.

The first time Edmond kissed her it felt strange and exciting. He tasted of cigars and whiskey. The boys she kissed up until then smelled of body odour and cheap aftershave. She knew he was married. But it seemed like his marriage and the boys with BO were in another universe, a million miles away from them.

He invited her to have dinner in the Shelbourne with him. It wasn't in the main restaurant but in a private dining room. They ate prawn cocktails to start and had steak for the main course. They drank an expensive bottle of wine. Marie refused dessert as she was full. She felt mature. When Edmond dangled a room key in front of her after coffee, all of a sudden she felt less so. They had kissed and on one occasion in a dark club he had fondled her breast. He had tried to put his hand up her skirt but she stopped him before he got to his desired destination. She wasn't sure she was ready. She had made a conscious decision to wear matching underwear that night though. It wasn't a set but the bra and panties were both baby-pink. Maybe subconsciously she had been expecting the invitation to his room all along.

He said that they couldn't be seen going upstairs together. He left and asked her to follow him five minutes later. She understood. He was married and getting into a lift in a hotel with a woman who was half his age and who wasn't his wife would surely raise alarm bells. She had to sneak past the concierge and all the reception staff. She felt a thrill run through her. None of her friends had been wined and dined by a powerful man like Edmond. She felt worldly and special and revelled in the attention he lavished on her.

She was more than a tad taken aback when he opened the door dressed in a towelling bath robe. She was aware that she wasn't invited there to play Tiddlywinks, but she wasn't expecting him to be naked except for a dressing gown either.

The room was big and sumptuous and like nothing she had ever seen in person. Looming largest in the room was the bed. It was enormous. She was half expecting rose petals to be scattered on the bedspread.

There was a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table. He offered her one and she took a huge gulp to calm her nerves. He took the glass from her hand and put it on the table. He started to kiss her. But not like he did before. She had spent hours daydreaming about his kisses since she met him. Now his mouth was greedy and his tongue hungrily probed the inside of her mouth. She wanted him to take it easy, to kiss her gently like he used to.

She tried to push him away in an effort to slow him down.

“What is it? I thought you wanted this?”

“I do. It’s just that I thought we would ... I thought ...”

His mouth was on hers again. He put his hand on her breast. She could hardly breathe. His big mouth was using up all of her air. She felt his erection against her and she realised that he had opened his robe. She hadn’t noticed before that he was flabby. He was able to hide it with his clothing. He was roughly opening the buttons of her new blouse. She heard the material tear but she was afraid to look at him. She didn’t want to see him.

“I don’t think I’m ready,” she managed to say.

“Don’t be a cock-tease,” he said, putting his hand up her skirt, shoving it roughly between her thighs and putting his fingers inside her.

She hated what he said and the harsh tone in his voice. She knew for certain that she didn’t want to have sex with him. Not when he was acting like this. Like a savage. She didn’t want him anywhere near her. She put her hands on his chest and gave him a shove. Her shoving had no impact on him. She felt his fingers inside her again. She wanted him to stop. She tried to push him away again. He was in his own world.

“You love it,” he gasped. “You love my fingers in your pussy – you want me to fuck you!”

She didn’t like it. Any of it. He was hurting her. She could see his pores. She normally had her eyes closed when they kissed. He wasn’t wearing his glasses like he usually did and he seemed like a total stranger.

“Stop. I don’t want this. I want to leave.”

“You want to play hard to get, is that it? You want me to give it to you. You want me to put my cock inside you, you little tease!”

“No. Get away. I want to –”

He put his hand over her mouth. Panic and terror rose inside her. He picked her up with his free arm and lay her on the bed. Her skirt was around her waist before she knew it. In her rising panic, she felt him pull her baby-pink panties off and discard them on the floor.

He roughly pushed her legs open. She kicked and flailed to try to make him stop. It was futile. He was bigger and stronger and he was going to take what he wanted. She didn't want to look at him. She closed her eyes shut. She stopped moving and let the inevitable happen. She retreated to somewhere in her brain and turned her head away while Edmond put his penis inside her and pumped and pumped until he reached climax.

She didn't react. She stayed still. She stayed on the bed while he went into the bathroom. She heard him move around in there. She heard the toilet flush and water run from the taps. She heard him come back out. Sensed him in the room. She wanted to scream at him and scratch his fucking eyes out. But she couldn't move. It was like she was paralysed.

“I'm going,” he said.

He threw the key onto the bed beside her. He almost hit her with it. There was no explanation, no apology. She was certain that he'd be sorry. That he would beg her to forgive him. That he would say he got carried away when he saw her. That there was no excuse for his brutish behaviour. He said none of those things. She heard the door bang closed behind him.

She finally got up. Her panties were torn. She was sore all over. The force with which he held her left her bruised on her arms. The insides of her thighs felt tender and she imagined she might have some bruising. She went into the bathroom and saw the dressing gown slung over the side of the bath. The sight of it made pull up the toilet seat and vomit. She looked in the mirror. She hadn't realised that she had been crying. Her eyes were puffy and red.

An invisible weight made her feel like he was still on top of her. It would take many years for the emotional weight of what happened that night to leave her.

“He raped you?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Jesus, Mum.” Diane looked at her mother. She was stoic despite the devastating story she was telling. Despite the horror she had been through over forty years before. “You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I’m sorry that this is part of your story.”

“Never mind that. This isn’t about me. This is a fucking crime. Did you go to the guards?”

“And say what? I was with a man in a hotel room and he forced himself on me.”

“*Eh*. Yes.”

“I would have been shamed by the police. I willingly went to the room. Even if I didn’t, I was alone in a hotel room with a man. I must have been asking for it. Right? I mean, it was 1973. The guards would have said I deserved what happened to me. My parents would have said the same thing. The whole of society would have agreed that I was some sort of slut who had it coming to her.”

“Did he know about me?”

“Good lord, no. I didn’t tell him. I called up Bristow Charlton the day after it happened and said I wouldn’t be back. I told the college I wanted a new placement. Of course, they asked why. I gave them some bullshit about working with a company more aligned to my values and beliefs. I ended up getting a placement in a free legal aid centre. Mostly working on cases with single mothers coincidentally.”

“So you never saw him again?”

“No. I saw his photograph in the papers the odd time but that was about it. Even though Dublin is a small place, I managed to avoid him for my whole career.”

“How did you cope, Mum? I mean with being raped?”

“I wiped it from my mind. I wouldn’t let myself think about it. When I realised that I was pregnant, I concentrated only on that.”

On you. But I realise now that it was always there. Looming large in the back of my mind. For a long time, if I did think about it, it was only to blame myself. For being stupid. For letting it happen to me. For letting him get away with it. For being afraid to confront him. It was only in the last ten years or so that I did something about it. I went to therapy. I still go. It helped me enormously.”

“Lucky for the fucker that he’s dead because I would have him fucking killed if he wasn’t. I know people who would do that for me.” Diane thought of the men she had defended over the last few years. Drug traffickers, murderers. Even if it meant that she was indebted to them forever, she would have hired them to make sure Edmond Charlton had a slow painful end.

“Forget him, darling. He’s gone now.”

“I hope he rots in hell.”

Diane didn’t go back to her office. She was devastated about what her mum had gone through. She remembered all the fights they had. Diane stormed out of the house more times than she cared to remember when her mum told her that her dad had died when she was pregnant with her. Diane knew she was lying. She could just tell. The two women knew each other inside out. For the life of her, Diane couldn’t understand why her mother wouldn’t just tell her the truth.

Though she wondered if she could have handled it when she was sixteen. Or eighteen. Probably not. She could barely handle it now and she was in her forties. Everything was shifting. Will was gone. She was technically bankrupt. Her conception came about because of a criminal act. *Fucking hell.*

In recent years, Will had urged her to take a career break. To sit back and do nothing. Or to travel or take up a hobby. The idea horrified Diane. The last thing she wanted to be was a lady who lunched. She had worked hard all her life and had established herself as one of the most sought-after barristers in the country. Now, though, it seemed inconceivable that she would remain in her old life. She needed to get away. From Malahide, from Dublin. From everything.

Back home, she looked around her. They were going to lose their home. When they bought it, Copper Beech was a trophy house for them, reflecting their status in life. Will must have invited the whole of Dublin to the house at one stage or another to show it off. Well, they were both fucked now. The bank was going to repossess it and come after them for millions besides.

Expensive paintings hung on every wall and objets d'art took pride of place in every room in the house. Their art collection alone was insured for hundreds of thousands of euro. She had bought most of the works herself and knew the value of each one. If she left them on the walls and in the house, the bank would seize them.

Her mother had a penthouse apartment in Marbella which she bought from the plans and barely ever visited. Diane had only been there a couple of times as she was too busy to take weekend breaks or extended holidays. It was in a small, gated complex with lots of other rich Irish people for neighbours. Diane had a sudden urge to go there.

She started to formulate a plan. Marbella. Her collection of art. Wealthy clientele. The sun. The sea. Warm breezes. Balmy nights. A new life was calling to her and Diane was more than willing to answer that call.

Chapter 8



Suze had a dream since he was young. She was going to study art in college and maybe discover the next big thing in the art world. When she was at school she believed it was possible. Her teachers encouraged her to work hard and her Career Guidance teacher even arranged for her to spend a morning with a curator in the National Gallery. It was only when she got home from school that the dream seemed to turn to dust.

Suze was excited to tell her parents all about the meeting with the art curator. The woman was so sophisticated and showed a real interest in Suze. She even offered to give her a preview of the collection of Impressionist work on loan from the National Gallery in London.

Suze didn't expect her parents to be as excited about the preview as she was, but she didn't expect them to be angry about it either. She saw a look pass between her mam and dad and, when her dad left the room, she knew that her mam had been left to be the bearer of bad news.

There would be no college for Suze. Her parents didn't have the money. Her dad had been out of work for six months and had only started a new job in the Cadbury's factory a few weeks before. They were behind on mortgage payments, *blab blab*. Books, *blab blab*. Fees, *blab blab*. After the first few words, Suze barely heard what her mam said.

Suze didn't plead or argue. She knew it wouldn't do any good. She ran to her bedroom and threw herself on her bed. She wasn't even given the luxury of crying for hours because her dad told her to get up and go pick up her younger brother from soccer practice.

What she knew all along was confirmed for her that night. Dreams were for other people. She had dared to dream, and she

got slapped down. Diane and Sarah could dream. They weren't ordinary like Suze was. Diane with her blonde hair and long legs. Suze's eyes nearly popped out of her head when she saw Diane in a bikini the summer they were sixteen. Diane's body had transformed from girl to woman overnight. Suze cursed her own stupid genes, her big thighs and her small boobs. Diane had boys and men falling all over her. She only had one parent and she was going to college. For fuck's sake. Life just wasn't fair.

Suze took the first job she was offered when she finished school. Her mother told her she could save up and go to college at night. This made Suze determined not to go. She wanted her parents to suffer for what they did. She wanted them to watch her underachieve and know deep down that it was their fault.

She hated working in the bank and complained about it constantly to her parents. They knew she wanted a fight and never took the bait. Her dad just said that she was lucky to have a permanent, pensionable job and her mam told her not to worry. That she could give it up when she got married.

Suze met Peter on a work night out. They got talking and she found out that he only lived down the road from her and he knew a lot of her friends. He was an electrician and had just finished his apprenticeship. He was nice and funny and suddenly Suze didn't feel like complaining anymore. If she had been in college, she wouldn't have met Peter. She wondered if maybe there was a bigger plan at work after all.

When he popped the question, she didn't hesitate for a second. Firstly, she loved Peter and, secondly, she couldn't wait to move out of her mam and dad's house. She was only twenty-three. She should have been in Paris working in the Louvre or the Musée d'Orsay. Instead she was in grey drizzly Dublin, happily picking out wedding dresses, yet she was perfectly content.

They started out happy. They rented a flat while they were saving for a deposit for a house. Suze remembered the two of them painting the walls mad colours and the landlord having a fit. They burned dinners and drank lots of wine. They laughed so much together. They had loads of great sex. They phoned each other twenty times a day. They said "*I love you*" constantly. She couldn't remember when they stopped. She didn't remember why.

As the years went by, Suze felt like she became inconsequential. She retreated further into herself until she felt that there was barely anything left. She started to lower her voice and did another hundred little things to make herself even less noticeable.

Suze had gone over the drive in her head a few times. She had done it for real on thousands of occasions. The route to the airport was utterly familiar yet it felt otherworldly and strange. She supposed it was because she didn't intend to make the journey back home. She pulled into the International Airport Hotel and took her overnight bag out of the car.

The hotel was busy with a mix of businesspeople and tourists. She felt detached from all of them. She was neither on a mission of business or pleasure. She didn't have a reservation but, as she had guessed, there were rooms available.

She paid for a double room and took the lift to the third floor. Inside the room, she sat on the bed and put her head in her hands. There were no tears. There was nothing. A whole lot of nothing. She looked around the standard double room with its hangers dangling on the empty rail. The room looked unfinished. She took her bag and went back downstairs to the reception desk.

"Do you have a suite?" she asked the young man at the desk.

"Yes, madam, we have one of the junior suites available. Actually, the penthouse suite is free tonight. It's only available for one night, I'm afraid."

"One night is all I want. I'll take it," she said and handed over her credit card again. It cost a small fortune but what the hell. Poor Peter would end up paying for it.

She made her way up to the penthouse suite on the twelfth floor. She was happy she had switched rooms. Her life was so fucking ordinary that she wasn't going to leave her pathetic ordinary life in a ninety-nine-euro standard double. This was more like it. The penthouse boasted floor-to-ceiling glass with views over the airport and the city beyond.

She could probably see her house from here if she looked hard enough, but she didn't want to think about home tonight. Or Peter or Emma or Paul. She had to focus on herself now. She leaned over to open her overnight bag on the bed and caught her reflection in the full-length mirror beside the bathroom door.

Christ, was that her? She could see the rolls of fat wrapped in the red jersey of her top and she wanted to get sick. How had she got so out of shape? How did she get into bed with Peter looking like a fat old cow? She was so invisible that he didn't even see her, she imagined.

She stared at the mirror and started to take off her clothes, one item at a time. She coldly took in her naked image and would have laughed if the sight wasn't so tragic. Again, no tears came. It was too late for tears anyhow. Too late for sorry, too late for regret, too late for losing weight, too late for going to the gym, just too fucking late.

She couldn't bear to look at the ugly lumps of skin and fat that passed for her body so she went to the bathroom and put on a robe. She went to her toilet bag and took out the little bottles containing all the different pills she had been accumulating. She shook the bottles and heard the reassuring rattle of their contents.

She opened a water but changed her mind when she saw the bottles of wine that were left in the suite compliments of the hotel management. *Shit*. Not screw-caps. She didn't want to have to ring downstairs for a waiter to come up and open it. She didn't want to see another soul. Ever. Funny that the little Polish lad on the reception desk would be the last person she would see. She thought about her friends, Diane especially. She dialled her number but hit the call-end button after a few rings. She didn't want to talk. She couldn't get knocked off course. Talking was done. It was time for action.

She looked around and found a corkscrew in one of the drawers. She opened the bottle of French red and took a slug directly from the bottle. She opened the containers and spilled their contents on the bed. She looked at them for a while. She was scared. She argued back and forth with herself for a few moments. *This is what you want. Take the bloody pills. You want out. Nobody will miss you. Nobody will give a fuck.*

She started to take the tablets two at a time followed by glugs of wine. She soon felt the need to lie down and she plumped up

the pillows and leaned against them as she sat up and continued to down the pills.

Fuck it, now there's tears, she thought. She felt the tears running down her face, but she wasn't able to feel the corresponding emotion. There were still lots more pills to take. Concentrate. *Take all of them*, she ordered herself. The wine was empty, so she had to get up and open the accompanying bottle of white. Her legs weren't able to carry out the orders being sent from her brain and she collapsed as she tried to get off the bed. She fell in a crumpled heap on the floor. She started to vomit and then passed out as the red wine and half-ingested blue pills pooled on the carpet beside her mouth.

Chapter 9



Sarah was the popular girl at school. She knew she wasn't the cleverest girl in the class but that didn't bother her. She was fun and easy-going and was enormously popular. She was kind and always championed the underdog. She was more interested in her friends than declining verbs in French class.

She loved Home Economics and always got an 'A' in the subject. When her teacher told her about a culinary arts course she could take, she was thrilled. She wanted to go to college as much for the social aspect as the academic. Mostly she wanted to party.

She remained friends with Diane and Suze and made sure that the three made time to meet up even though their lives were on different trajectories. She saw Joe all the time. He became her best friend in the absence of Diane and Suze.

Sarah thought Joe would meet other friends and drift away, but it didn't happen. Joe was a constant presence in her life. When Sarah went to the pub, Joe would appear beside her. When she went to a nightclub, he was right there. It was no wonder other guys didn't ask her out. Sarah knew she was attractive, but she might as well have been Quasimodo for all the male attention she got. They were a boy and girl out together. To the outside world they were a couple.

Joe kissed her on their way home from the pub one night. Sarah was floored. She was shocked that he did it in the first place and surprised that it felt as good as it did. It felt warm and familiar and lovely. Joe waited for her to say something. She couldn't speak. She went into her house and left him standing at the gate. He called her the next day but she told her mam to tell him she was out.

Sick of being fobbed off over the phone, he turned up at her door in person. Her mother liked him and didn't have the heart to lie to his face. She let him in and told him to wait in the kitchen. She then went and told Sarah that Joe was downstairs waiting for her.

Sarah was angry when she saw him sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea her mother had made for him. Her mother sensed an atmosphere and left the two of them alone.

"Why did you do it? You've ruined everything."

"You know I'd never do anything to upset you. I just ... I ... it just felt like the right thing to do."

"Well, it wasn't. We can't be friends after that. Things will never be the same between us now."

"Good. I don't want them to be the same, Sarah. I want to be with you and not as your sidekick. I want you to be my girlfriend."

Sarah burst into tears and told him to get out. She ran back upstairs and banged her bedroom door shut. She waited for her dad to give her a bollicking about banging doors but her mum must have told him to go easy on her. She lay on her bed for hours, forgoing dinner and *Top of the Pops* on TV. She was conflicted. She loved Joe. She did. He was her best friend, her sounding-board, and she had so much fun when she was with him. She couldn't imagine not having him in her life.

She shouted to her folks that she was going out and walked the few hundred yards to Joe's house. Mrs. O'Hara answered the door. She was way older than everyone else's mother. She must've been ancient like forty or something when she had Joe.

"*Joseph, Sarah is here for you!*" she shouted up the stairs.

Joe appeared instantly. It was as if he'd been waiting for her to show up. He looked like he'd been crying and Sarah's heart almost melted. Mrs. O'Hara went back into the living room and left the pair in the hall. Sarah and Joe headed straight to his bedroom like they always did. But both of them knew that things had changed utterly.

"I want you to kiss me again," Sarah ordered him.

Joe did as he was bid. Sarah kissed him back.

"OK. I wanted to make sure."

“What?”

“That the feeling was real. The feeling I got when you kissed me the first time.”

“And?”

“Just shut up and kiss me again.”

They started going out. They were the same two people but being a couple made it feel completely different. She liked it when they made love. She felt loved and cherished and she knew that she could trust him with her life.

May was in her room, snapchatting with her friends. She was meant to be studying but there were so many distractions these days. Her parents didn't understand. They thought that it was simply a case of putting her phone away and sticking her head in a book. Her life and the lives of her friends happened on their phones. She could miss something crucial if she didn't check in every few minutes.

She heard her mum come home from tennis. Her dad was moving around, gathering his stuff for another week in Rome. She sighed when she heard her mum call her to come downstairs.

She went out to the landing. “*What? I'm trying to study!*” she called down.

“Yeah, right!” said Sarah. “Your dad wants to talk to you. It's important.”

“If this is about me helping out more around the house, I already told you – I don't have time. Not if you want me to do well in school. You can't have it both ways. Anyway, why don't you just hire a cleaner?”

She went downstairs and went into the sitting room. She saw her dad come into the room and sit down quietly. She was immediately alarmed. Joe didn't walk quietly into any space. Especially if May was in it. He was always fooling around, throwing his arms around her, tickling her and generally being a complete idiot.

“May ...” her dad began.

He then put his face in his hands, unable to continue whatever it was he was going to say.

She felt a knot in her stomach. Something awful was coming. Out of sheer habit, she picked up her phone and was about to send a message about the scenario in which she found herself into the group chat. She put the phone away and looked at her mum. Sarah looked like she was about to cry too. May felt the knot grow and tighten.

“What? What is it? You’re freaking me out.”

Joe tried to speak but, again, the words caught in his throat. His utterances were incoherent.

Sarah spoke instead.

“Your dad has met somebody else.”

May received the news with a mixture of relief and disgust. She was convinced that he was going to tell her that he was ill. Or worse, dying. But to have met someone else. To leave her mum for another woman. She loved her dad, but she wanted to punch him in the face.

“Oh my God, Dad! What are you talking about? For fuck’s sake!”

Both Joe and Sarah gave out to her for cursing. What were they at? Did they think a little “fuck” meant anything in the face of the revelation that her dad had been unfaithful? May knew that by “met someone else” her mum meant her dad was cheating on her. But May felt like he had cheated on her too. The hurt was quickly replaced by anger.

“Who is she? Is it some Italian slut?”

Then she saw her dad was crying and her heart was torn.

“It’s not a woman, love. Your dad is leaving us for a man.”

“*You – have – got – to – be – kidding – me.* Tell me you are, Mum!”

May could see from Sarah’s expression that it was no joke.

Joe gave Sarah a look to say she could’ve taken a more softly, softly approach. He couldn’t blame her, he supposed. She had been blindsided too.

He hoped and prayed that May would be able to handle the news that her father wasn't at all the man she thought he was. He couldn't bear to lose the adoration of his daughter, but he feared that he might just have done that.

Sarah and May had been his life. He loved both of them more than anything in the world and he could never have imagined risking losing them both for anything.

His life was divided into two portions now. The BP, before Paolo, and AP, after Paolo. His life BP had not been unbearable by any means, but life AP was divine. He felt alive when he was with Paolo. Even if Paolo left him in the morning, he could never go back to his old self. He was brand new. He was reborn. He was truly in love for the first time in his life.

“Gay? Oh my God, Dad! Have you done this on purpose just to shame me? What are my friends going to say? *I – can – never – leave – this – house – again. Ever.* I am so embarrassed.”

Joe let his daughter rant. He held fast to the image of Paolo in his head. Paolo was the truth and as the old saying went: *the truth will out.*

“Sweetheart, I would never do anything on purpose to make you feel like this. It just happened. Please believe me, I didn't go out looking for anyone. I have never before been unfaithful –”

“*Oh God! Make him stop, Mum!*” May put her hands over her ears.

“I think you'd better go,” Sarah said to Joe.

May threw herself into her mum's arms. Sarah's heart was broken for her little girl who wasn't so little anymore. May and Joe had a close bond which seemed to become even stronger the longer they spent apart. Joe called Sarah every evening after work. Sometimes the calls wouldn't last for more than a couple of minutes. This wasn't the case with May and Joe. They facetedimed each other all the time and never seemed to run out of things to say.

“I can't leave you both like this,” he said. “May?”

Sarah felt May cling closer to her.

“I'll take care of her. She's stronger than she thinks.”

“I'll call you from Rome,” he said and awkwardly moved in to kiss her on the cheek.

Sarah turned her face away from him. A kiss was entirely inappropriate under the circumstances. The door was still open into the hall and she watched as he slowly picked up his bag and let himself out the front door. God, why did she feel bad for him? That bastard had blown their world apart and *she* was feeling sorry for *him*.

As soon as he was gone, May ran up the stairs and banged her bedroom door closed. Sarah's ears rang with the reverberation. She followed her daughter upstairs and tried to open the door but it was locked.

"You know, things won't be too different for us really," she said through the door. "Dad's away most of the time. We never saw him during the week anyway. We'll still do all the same things. The main thing is he loves you so much. That hasn't changed. It never will."

She stopped talking when the volume of noise coming from the room threatened to burst her eardrums. May had obviously decided to dispense with her headphones and blare her music through her Bluetooth speaker. Sarah went back downstairs and looked around. Everything looked the same. Even though their lives were forever altered, the house was as it had ever been. May was right about one thing. They definitely needed a cleaner. Sarah slumped down onto the big sofa in the living room and tried to make sense of things.

Joe had said that he still loved them, that being with Paolo wouldn't change that. Maybe May would eventually believe it. But the love between a father and his daughter was different than that between a man and his wife. Then the realisation dawned on Sarah that Joe didn't love her like a husband loves his wife. For all those years he loved her like a best friend. And she loved him in the same way. She wasn't jealous of Paolo. She wasn't devastated at the thought of them together.

Joe had stated what should have been said a long time ago. They were not *in* love. They never had been *in* love. They never turned each other on like other married couples. Their sex life was hit and miss. They weren't the couple who had sex after the *Late Late Show* on a Friday night or the kind who made love every Sunday morning. There was nothing regular about their lovemaking. In fact, it was irregular and infrequent but that was never something that bothered her. Until now. She knew it wasn't

normal not to have an intimate relationship with her husband. She did know, but they seemed to have so much else going for them that she thought it was enough.

May arrived downstairs when she got hungry as Sarah had predicted she would. Sarah had made lasagne and the aroma of the garlic, onions and fresh basil was enough to tempt her out of her lair.

Sarah put a plate of delicious layers of meat and pasta in front of her daughter.

“Well, sweetheart? Have you been able to process any of that?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

May took a bite of her food. Sarah sat opposite her and tucked into her own dinner. They sat and ate in silence.

“Jenny said that lots of dads are probably gay. That back in the day people were afraid to say they were. Frannie said it was illegal when Dad was young, but she’s probably exaggerating.”

“You told Jenny? And Frannie? Do all your friends know?”

Sarah wasn’t sure she was ready for the whole neighbourhood to know their business. If the news was on the bush telegraph, she would have to prepare herself.

“*Duh!* I had to talk to someone.”

“You could have talked to me.”

May looked at her like she had grown another head.

“Well, I wish you hadn’t told them just yet. I mean, it’s a private matter. I –”

May threw down her fork and ran back upstairs.

Well done, Sarah. Brilliant bit of parenting there. Poor May. She couldn’t imagine how she would have taken the same news as a teenager herself. Funny thing is that she would’ve turned to her best friend too. Joe would’ve helped her make sense of it all.

Chapter 10



You let the penthouse suite last night?” the head of housekeeping asked her young colleague on reception. “The Irish soccer team have booked it at lunchtime today for a photo shoot. We put a few bottles of wine and a fruit basket in there yesterday. I hope your guests haven’t helped themselves to it.”

The housekeeper was reminded of the old saying of getting monkeys if you’re paying peanuts. It was certainly true of the hotel group she worked for. They weren’t prepared to pay for experienced staff. It wasn’t the poor lad’s fault but there was no way she was going to take the flak for this mess.

“You better hope she checks out soon,” she said to the young man who looked very worried indeed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realise it had to be back for lunchtime. I thought it was down for occupancy tonight. The woman paid for a ninety-nine-euro room and then came back down and asked if we had any suites free. I thought I was doing the right thing, upselling and all that.”

“Let’s just hope she’s an early riser,” said the irate housekeeper and stormed off.

When the check-out time of twelve o’clock came and went with no sign of their guest, the housekeeper knocked on the door. There was a *Do Not Disturb* sign on the handle and no answer from inside.

She knocked again and told the presumably sleeping guest that she would be letting herself in with the master key. When there was still no response, she opened the door. The curtains were open, and the room was full of light. She walked through the lounge and into the adjoining bedroom. There was no sign the bed had been slept in. She hoped that they didn’t have a walk-out on their hands.

She walked around to check the bathroom and stopped dead in her tracks when she saw a woman lying motionless on the floor, having obviously thrown up during the night. It was only then that she noticed all the blue tablets on the bed and the semi-ingested ones on the floor.

She phoned down to the desk and told the clerk to call an ambulance straight away and to get the manager up there. She felt the woman's pulse and she couldn't be sure but thought there was a faint trace there. She was also still warm so there was hope. She didn't want to touch the poor woman too much or anything belonging to her.

The housekeeper knew it was an attempted suicide. She had heard of people who checked into hotels to commit suicide but she never thought she would be faced with it in real life. What could be so wrong in someone's life that the only answer was to end it?

She stayed with the guest until the ambulance and the police arrived. The ambulance crew started to work on her straight away and she was asked to leave the room. She imagined it was good that they were working on her. They wouldn't bother if she were already dead.

Diane found herself unexpectedly free for a couple of hours. The hearing for her client was cancelled at the last minute. Witness intimidation, allegedly. That was not going to play well with the judge. The case might have to go for a retrial which might not happen for months.

She was in a slow-moving line in a coffee shop when her phone rang.

“Hello.”

“Is this Diane?”

A woman whose voice she didn't recognise was on the other end.

“This is Diane Foster speaking,” she answered.

“I’m Detective Tess Ryan. I need to talk to you. I don’t want to alarm you, but ...”

“Is this about my husband?”

“*Em*, your husband? No. This is about a woman called Susan Jackson. Do you know her?”

Suze? What the hell were the police ringing her about Suze for?

“Yes, I know her. She’s my friend. What’s wrong, what’s going on?”

“I’d rather tell you in person. Can you come to the police station in Santry?”

“What did she do? Does she need representation? I’m a barrister but I could get a solicitor there if she needs one.”

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Has she been in an accident?”

“No. I’ll speak to you when you get here.” The detective hung up.

Diane left her place in the queue and ordered a taxi on her App. She stood outside and waited. Luckily for her nerves, the taxi pulled up almost straight away.

She got to the Garda station, her heart racing, within twenty minutes. She couldn’t remember the detective’s name but, when she mentioned Susan Jackson, the garda at the desk directed her an office on the first floor.

“What’s wrong with Suze? Is she dead?” she demanded as she sat down with the detective.

“No. She’s alive, but she is very unwell. What is your relationship with her? Do you know who is her next of kin?”

“Yes, Peter, her husband. Look, you have to tell me what’s going on. I’m going out of my mind here.”

“Can you give me her husband’s number, please? Once I contact him, I’ll be able to talk to you.”

Diane scrolled through her phone. Her hands were shaking. She had spent more than her fair share of time in Garda stations and was never intimidated. This was different though. This was too close to home for her liking

She gave the number to the detective, who excused herself and said that she'd be right back. Another garda she knew to see asked her if she wanted a coffee. She did. Badly. But not badly enough to drink the station variety.

Within a few minutes Tess Ryan was back. By then, Diane's heart was almost beating out of her chest.

"So are you going to tell me what happened?"

"Alright. I spoke to Mrs. Jackson's husband. He okayed it for me to inform you about what happened last night. He's on his way here now. We are of the opinion that Mrs. Jackson tried to commit suicide."

The detective allowed time for her statement to sink in. Diane stared at her with her mouth open.

"Mrs. Jackson checked into the International Hotel at the airport, we believe with the intention of ending her life. The last call she made on her mobile phone was to you."

Diane had seen the incoming call. She didn't get home from work until late and had taken some case papers to bed with her. She didn't pick up. She didn't want to distract herself from putting the finishing touches to her opening arguments. *Fuck.*

"Yes, Suze called me but I was preparing for a case today and I didn't pick up. But suicide? Are you sure? You must be mistaken. Suze wouldn't try to kill herself. She has a husband and kids and ..."

"I'm afraid there's no mistake. She took an overdose of pills – a lot of pills – with alcohol. I'm sorry. This must be very hard for you."

"Where is she? Is she OK?"

"Yes. For now. She's still unconscious. She's in intensive care in the Mater. She is under constant surveillance."

None of this made any sense to Diane. Suze wasn't what she would have considered suicidal. The last time she saw her she was her usual cranky self, but she didn't seem like a woman who was going to end her life. Suze had tried to call her. Why did she want to talk to her? Did she hope that Diane would talk her down off whatever ledge she was on? Did she just need some kind words? Would knowing that Diane was there for her have made any difference?

Diane tried to imagine Suze in that hotel room. Desperate and alone. How could this happen without her suspecting that something was this wrong with her best friend's life? Suze used to be fun, the most fun of all of them. She loved dressing up and going out. She was always on about travelling the world and broadening her horizons. She wanted to go to college and study art history. When did she give up on her hopes and aspirations? When did she stop having fun? When did she stop being fun? Diane remembered when she settled down with Peter. It was like she put her dreams in a suitcase under the bed and never opened it again.

Peter arrived at the police station and Diane held his hand while the detective passed on the same information to him. He looked devastated and kept saying that he couldn't make her happy. Poor Peter. Diane stayed with him while he took in the horror of what had taken place the night before.

He told the detective that Suze had said she was moving out, and that she was getting a flat, but that she would spend the night in a hotel. The poor guy said he had offered to go but she insisted he stay in their house.

They drove to the hospital and went to the ward the detective had told them Suze was in. Diane waited while Peter went into the room. After a few moments he came to the door and asked Diane to come in.

Suze was attached to a lot of tubes and was still unconscious. Peter was helpless-looking, and Diane wondered how he would cope. Suze did everything at home. She made sure things ran like clockwork. All that was required of Peter was to go to work, make money to support his family and come home again. Suze shopped, cooked, cleaned, ironed, dropped, picked up and did a hundred other thankless jobs to make their home life seem effortless.

They sat staring helplessly at Suze for a good hour. When a doctor came into the room, Diane excused herself and left the doctor and Peter to it.

On the way home, Diane was racked with guilt. She had to call Sarah and Laurie. Suze needed them all now. They hadn't been good enough friends to her. Good friends would notice when someone was in that degree of pain. Good friends would make it inconceivable to think of leaving them permanently.

Chapter 11



Laurie was on her treadmill when the phone rang. She smiled when she saw his face light up her screen.

“Babe. I got a part. The pilot for *Doomsday* got picked up by HBO.”

“*No way! That’s wonderful!*” she screamed into the phone.

“It’s the pilot I did the last time I was here. Do you remember I told you that the network wanted it, but they had someone else in mind for the lead? Well, it turns out they wanted that Richard Pattinson, but he’s got projects lined up for the next two years. Thank fuck. You’re talking to Chief Inspector Dan Calhoun.”

“Oh my God, Kevin! What does it mean? When will you ...? Where are you going to ...?” She couldn’t get all the questions out.

“The pilot is done, and it will air as it is. All the crew are staying on. Filming will start in a few weeks. It’s friggin’ crazy. The network bought ten episodes to air on Monday nights at ten o’clock. Prime time.”

“I can’t believe it. I know you said it was going to happen but, now that it is, it seems surreal somehow. Hey, congratulations, Mister Big-time Actor. I wish I could show you how proud I am of you.”

“I’ll be expecting quite a welcome when I get home. I gotta go. We have some press stuff now. I love you, babe.”

“I love you too.”

Laurie put the phone down and stared at it. She was happy for him. More than happy. She was excited and bursting with pride. But she was also scared. Scared that he would change. Scared that fame would devour him.

Then the phone rang again. It was Diane. She snatched it up, grinning, dying to tell her the good news.

Chapter 12



Diane, Sarah and Laurie sat around Suze's bed. Suze had been moved to St. Anne's psychiatric hospital on Dublin's north side. It was the first time they had been able to visit Suze apart from Diane's visit the day after it happened. At first, visits were confined to family and Peter, Paul and Emma kept a vigil at her bedside for over a week.

"She doesn't look like herself," Sarah said, trying to hold back her tears. "How did we not know? We're all so fucking caught up in our own lives that we can't even see what's in front of our eyes."

They all nodded. Each harboured a terrible degree of guilt.

"Christ, I wish she would just wake up and tell us what was hurting her so much," said Laurie, verbalising the frustration they were all feeling.

"The doctors told Peter that she could be like this indefinitely," said Diane. "Some patients never come back from the brink. It's like she has suffered a huge trauma and her brain can't process the cause or the actions she took."

"Diane, she's right here. She's two feet away. We should assume she can hear us. So let's keep it positive, OK?" said Sarah.

"You're right. Of course. I know you can hear us, Suze. We just haven't said anything interesting enough to make you want to join in. Isn't that right?" Diane took her friend's hand.

The women decided to act normal and talk about everyday things, hoping that something they said might jolt Suze back to the present.

"So, how is May coping since Joe left?" Laurie asked.

"Oh, you know. She barely talks to me. She only comes downstairs to eat and if she does speak it's to blame me for

everything that's wrong in her life."

"But she can't blame you for Joe being gay, surely."

"You'd think so, yeah."

"So what are you going to do?" Laurie asked.

"Oh, I don't know. For the first time in my life I've been called upon to parent in a crisis and I'm messing it up. I'm acting as childish as she is. I'm ignoring her now too so what kind of example is that?"

"OK, you know I try not to stick my nose in when it comes to other people's kids," said Diane, "but I know May. She's level-headed and she's also very smart. If I were you, I'd send her to Joe for a weekend and let her meet with Whatshisface – Mario. He caused this mess. Let him clean it up."

"Are you mad? There's no way I'm sending her to Rome without vetting the place first. God knows what kind of lifestyle those two are leading! No way. And it's Paolo, not Mario or Fabio or whatever else 'io' that you keep calling him!"

"Oh whatever! But do you really think that Joe, your Joe, the geekiest guy in Malahide is romping around in a leather thong and studs in a den of iniquity that you couldn't subject your daughter to? Do you really think that, Sarah?"

"I don't know. I don't know any gay people really." Sarah laughed at the irony of the statement. She didn't know any gay people really – she was just married to one for twenty years! She was sick of Joe hijacking every thought she had these days and decided it would be best to change the subject. "What about you, Laurie? Please don't say you're going to leave us now that Kevin is on the brink of superstardom?"

"Not right now. I've just started the new job. And anyway, he's going to be so busy filming that I'd just be in the way. He's going to be working flat out for three months to make the first ten episodes and God knows what else will come up after that."

"How is your column going? Did you get any juicy letters to answer?" asked Sarah.

"None. I don't know what I'm expected to do. People are supposed to send their problems in to agony@gorge.ie but, as of yet, I haven't got one single email."

"Maybe the subscribers don't know about it?" said Sarah.

“They ran an article on it last week. Maybe it won’t take off at all. Maybe nobody has any problems anymore.”

“You think? Look around you. There’s Suze still in a coma after attempting to take her own life. And Sarah. She was married to a gay man for over twenty years and didn’t know it. You’re living on a different continent to the man you love. I think you can rest assured that there are plenty of people with all sorts of problems out there.”

Chapter 13



Kevin let himself into the apartment and Laurie flung herself at him.

“What are you doing here? I thought you were filming for the next three months.”

“You think I could live without you for three whole months? I wanted to surprise you.”

If it were possible, he looked even more gorgeous than he had before he’d gone to Los Angeles. She actually thought he looked a little bit Hollywood and she liked it. She had decided to put aside her doubts about not being enough for him and concentrate on enjoying this wonderful time in their lives. When she looked at poor Suze lying motionless in the bed in St. Anne’s, it put things very much into perspective for her. For all of them, she imagined.

“God, I missed you. I wish you had been there with me. It was unreal to get that call. When my agent rang to say I got the part, it was the best feeling in the world. Well, maybe the second best!” He nudged her towards their spacious bedroom.

“Hold on, you’re just in the door. Do you want to have a coffee or something? Did you have breakfast?” Laurie asked, trying to halt his progress.

“I’m just about to,” he muttered into her hair. “I’ve been thinking about this moment since I got on the plane.”

After making love, Kevin fell fast asleep and Laurie took the opportunity to try again to cobble something together for her column. She didn’t imagine she’d get much time to work when

Kevin was around. She needed to file some sort of copy and her deadline was looming. She reckoned if she didn't get any emails soon she would have to make stuff up.

She sat at her computer and tried to nail down a few themes which she could use. She spent a couple of hours writing to herself and coming up with all sorts of responses. It was a big responsibility. What if people were mentally unstable? What if her fictitious letters and responses caused someone to do something dangerous?

She was in the depths of despair by the time Kevin arrived out of the bedroom, wearing only his combat shorts. He was bare-chested and his hair was standing up at all angles. Looking a little bit less Hollywood than earlier.

She could see him out of the corner of her eye pulling up cushions and looking in pockets for something he had obviously lost. He wouldn't disturb her as they both had a rule to treat the other like they were at their workplace when they were using the home office.

After another few minutes of his searching which was accompanied by many "shits" and "fuck-its", she asked him what was going on.

"Sorry, I didn't want to disturb you. You didn't see my phone, did you?"

"No, I don't think I saw it since you came in. Did you try to ring it?"

"*Duh*," he said.

"I was just trying to help."

"Sorry, yeah, I rang it from your phone. It's going straight to voicemail. I think it was on silent anyway. I tried to find my iPhone app as well before you ask. It's switched off. All my numbers for the agents and stuff are on that phone. If it's lost, I'm knackered."

"It's normally glued to you. I'd be very surprised if you lost it. When was the last time you used it?"

"I texted you on the way from the airport. *Fuck*. I hope I didn't leave it in the taxi. I didn't even look to see what company it was."

Laurie could hear the panic in his voice. “The airport use only one company. I’ll look it up and you can give them a call. I’m sure they’ll find it,” she said soothingly.

“They’d better,” he said with a very worried expression on his face.

She ended up accompanying Kevin to the airport in an attempt to find the elusive phone. She thought he was completely overreacting when he demanded to see the CCTV footage of the rank outside the Arrivals Hall. The taxi was eventually located, and the driver was contacted. He said he hadn’t seen any phone and that he had picked up several fares after Kevin. It was pretty hopeless, and Laurie didn’t hold out any hope of getting it back.

He was disproportionately annoyed with himself for losing the phone, Laurie thought. OK, all his numbers were on it but he could send a few emails and get all the numbers he lost. When she said this to him, he flew off the handle. He stormed off and shouted back that he was going to cancel his SIM and get another phone.

When Kevin arrived home later on with a new phone, he was a bit less frazzled but still fuming with himself for losing the other.

“Hey, I have a surprise for you, babe,” he said later on that evening.

His mood had improved, and Laurie hoped that the phone drama was behind them.

“I was thinking while I was over in LA that we need a nice house. The homes in LA are amazing and I don’t see any reason why we can’t have an amazing place here too. I called an estate agent from over there and I arranged a viewing for tomorrow at twelve. How does that suit you with work?”

“*Em.* Fine. But this apartment is plenty big for just the two of us. We don’t need to rush into anything just now – maybe we should –”

“Laurie, we’ve hit the jackpot! I’m getting paid stupid amounts of money for each episode and I’ve got other stuff going on in

the background. Money is not an issue, nor will it ever be an issue in our lives. We can afford to go crazy. Let's go look anyhow. If you don't like it, you can always say no."

"OK. Sure. Of course. It's just a lot to take in. I'm here working on trying to get a column written to pay the rent on this apartment which we had to scrape together last month and you're talking about money like we won the EuroMillions." She put her face in her hands.

"Things will never be the same for us again. You'd better get used to it."

Laurie had contacted Diane and Sarah to tell her she wouldn't be at the hospital for a couple of days because Kevin was home. She'd got winky emojis back. She felt bad about not going to see Suze, but Diane and Sarah said that there was no change in her condition and that the doctors had no idea when things would improve for her.

The estate agent rang the buzzer to say he was downstairs. They were getting the royal treatment so it must be some house, thought Laurie.

They got into his Land Rover and negotiated the rugged terrain from one side of Malahide to the other.

The agent talked mainly to Kevin, so Laurie looked out at the sea and contemplated how her life had brought her to this point. They passed Sarah's little bakery and there were people sitting outside in the sunshine. She saw May clearing the tables and her heart went out to the poor girl.

Soon they pulled up outside a gated enclave. The agent was buzzed in by the security guy and they were suddenly in a different world. There were seven houses inside, but none visible from the road or from each other. Each had a winding drive to the house and mature trees grew all along each one. It was amazing. Laurie hadn't known that such places existed, but she could certainly get used to it.

They drove at a snail's pace up to Number 5, which of course wasn't called Number 5 in the brochure. A house like this required a proper name not a number and this was called Copper Beech House. The agent pulled up outside a magnificent mock Edwardian house so enormous that it could easily be mistaken for a boutique hotel.

The agent said they were to stay in the car as the owner was still at home but that she would be leaving any minute. When Laurie saw the beautiful, elegant woman coming out and getting into her Mercedes, she wondered if she would ever be able to pull off the lady-of-the-manor-role as successfully as her. Then she did a double take. Diane? No, it couldn't be. There were probably lots of tall, blonde, beautiful women who lived in houses like this.

The Mercedes drove by her and the back of the car was packed with parcels, confirming to Laurie that she wasn't mistaken. Diane's car was chock-a-block with boxes these days. She was glad the windows of the Land Rover were blacked out.

This was Diane's house? *Wowza*. She knew from the others that Diane and Will had an incredible home but she had no idea it would be this incredible. Why would they sell this fabulous home? Diane never mentioned anything about moving. She didn't know how she felt about looking around the house, knowing it belonged to her friend.

She followed the agent and Will into the reception hall and through all ten thousand square feet of opulent living space in spite of her reservations. The house was amazing. The marble hall ran into the marble kitchen and once again Laurie wondered how or why anybody would sell this place. The agent answered Laurie's unasked question. When he had finished bigging up the property that really didn't need bigging up at all, he told them that it was a fire sale. The bank had instructed the sale and were anxious to sell as quickly as possible. He said the bank would consider any reasonable offer. It was worth eight million at the height of the boom, but market value now was one point five million euro. He said that one point three million would probably seal the deal.

The house was certainly staged for a sale. The colours were neutral, and the house was clear of any clutter. As far as Laurie could see there was nothing personal left lying around. There were no photographs or art on the walls. How could they have

lived there for over a decade and not have left their mark anywhere?

Laurie could tell that Kevin loved it. He kept grabbing Laurie's hand and squeezing it and mouthing "*Wow!*" and "*Awesome!*" to her when the agent wasn't looking. They went into one of the master suites and Laurie discovered that Diane and Will had one each. There was a man's dressing gown folded at the end of a huge bed with plush bed linens in a masculine pattern. In the cabinets in the bathroom there was evidence of only men's toiletries. There were lines of suits and men's shoes in the walk-in closet.

In another master suite on the floor below, Laurie really felt like an intruder. She saw familiar things that she had seen Diane wear. Her bag, boots and leather jacket that she had worn to the hospital just a few days ago were put away neatly in her closet along with surprisingly few other items of clothing.

In fact, most of the closets and wardrobe space was empty in all of the rooms. Diane must have either stored them elsewhere or moved stuff out already. How would she bring this up with Diane? How would she tell her that she had been on a tour of her house and that her superstar boyfriend was thinking of buying it? Especially since Diane had given no indication that she was even selling in the first place?

Chapter 14



Diane's criminal court case was still stalled while the judge investigated the threats made against one of the jurors. She was glad to have the time to visit Suze and sit with her even though it seemed hopeless at times. Suze was like a statue in the bed, not moving as much as her little finger. Diane despaired but she tried not to let the hopelessness get the better of her. Suze had to recover. It was non-negotiable.

The house was on the market. The bank had pushed to sell, and Diane and Will couldn't argue. She had insisted that she was given sufficient notice and was never present when a viewing was taking place. She saw the estate agent's flashy jeep parked outside and drove past without acknowledging his presence. She would have loved nothing better than to give him the finger as she passed but she knew that it wasn't the agent's fault. No. The fault lay squarely at Will's door.

She fussed with Suze's pillows and pulled her bedclothes around her as if she was a child. She talked to her gently as she held her lifeless hand.

The door opened and Sarah walked in.

"Hey," said Diane.

"Hey. Laurie's having some Kevin time, lucky duck. So she won't be here today."

"I'm sure Suze won't notice," said Diane sadly.

Sarah's phone beeped and she sent off a text while Diane concentrated on Suze.

Not for the first time Diane wondered if she would ever come back to them. Despite her misgivings, she spoke to Suze as if she were sitting up in bed partaking in the conversation.

"Do you remember the time Joe cut your fringe?" Diane said.

Sarah gasped. “Oh my God! You looked like a mad person. We called it the Lunatic Fringe. Sorry, Suze! You couldn’t go out without a hat on for a month. Poor Joe nearly died.”

“Sister Catherine, the old wagon, wouldn’t let you wear your hat in class. You hated that nun after that.”

Sarah was texting again. “Sorry, it’s work,” she said.

“And the night you got really drunk after downing nearly a whole bottle of Southern Comfort. Your mum came out of the house and heard someone throwing up. We blamed Joe and your mum gave him a sweeping brush and a bucket of water and made him clean it up. You thought it was hilarious. You said it was payback for him hacking your hair off.”

Sarah turned to Diane and whispered, “When did Suze stop being fun? She used to be the maddest of all of us. What the hell happened?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been wondering the same thing. I think it was after the Leaving Cert. I think when her parents wouldn’t let her go to college. She started to settle for things then. Things that were never in her plans.”

“I think so too. Jesus, Diane. How did we not see this coming?”

Sarah’s phone beeped again.

“For fuck’s sake, Sarah. Are they texting you every time a customer comes into the shop? We are visiting our sick friend here.”

“Yes. I mean no. No, it’s not them ... it’s not work ... it’s something else,” Sarah said cagily.

“Give me that!” said Diane, grabbing the phone from Sarah’s hand.

“Diane! Give me back my phone! Don’t you dare read that!”

“*Tom!* Sarah O’Hara, you dirty little slut! There you are going on about Joe breaking your heart and all the while you’re sexting Tom Harrison!” said Diane incredulously.

“I’m not sexting. I am simply replying to his text, that’s all. Not that it’s any of your bloody business.” Sarah snapped her phone back.

“So go on. Tell me. What’s he texting you about?”

“He’s just being nice, that’s all. He heard that Joe and I split up and he’s concerned.”

“I bet he is,” said Diane.

Tom hadn’t made any secret of how he felt about Sarah, even when she was still with Joe.

“OK, look. He asked me to have dinner with him on Friday night. I said I’d go and now I’m regretting it. I mean, he’s a stranger. What are we going to talk about? I’m not used to going out with people I don’t know.”

“It’s called dating.”

“It’s not a date.”

“It’s a date. Anyway, he had his tongue in your mouth so he’s not that much of a stranger.”

“Oh God. What have I done? There’s no way I would have agreed to a date.”

“Why not? It’ll be good for you to get yourself back out there. Unless you planned on being single for the rest of your life.”

Sarah hadn’t really thought about it. Part of her still thought that Joe was going through a phase of some sort. Like teenagers go through phases of not talking to their parents or smoking pot. But if it wasn’t a phase? If it was real. That he was gone for good. Was she ready to date again? Did she think that she would find love again?

Chapter 15



Kevin was still going on the occasional rant about his phone even though his new one was up and running. It was typical of him, Laurie thought. Kevin hated anything to get the better of him. He saw life as a competition mostly. If anyone ever managed to get one up on him, he made it his mission to get even. It was all part of his determined personality and, she had to admit, it was working out pretty well for him so far.

“Forget about it. It was just a phone. It’s gone. You’ve got a new one. Move on,” said Laurie. She wasn’t about to listen to him moaning about his phone for the next few hours.

“There was stuff on it. You know, important things.”

“Look, you didn’t lose the nuclear codes, Kevin. And face it, unless the person who found it is extraordinarily honest, you’re not getting it back.”

“Yeah. You’re right. Whoever found it will probably wipe it and sell it on. Sorry for wanking on about it.” He poured her a glass of wine. “I think we should put in an offer for the house first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t know, Kev. What about Diane?”

“What if you hadn’t seen Diane leaving the house? You’d be none the wiser about who owned the gaff,” reasoned Kevin.

“But I did see her. And the fact that she hasn’t said anything to any of us about moving is kind of strange. I mean it’s not like she’s selling her three-bed semi. It’s a flipping mansion.”

“Look, I don’t know what kind of situation they’re in or why their bank is forcing them to sell. And, to be honest, I couldn’t care less. It’s up for sale. If we don’t buy it, someone else will. Maybe they need to sell it. In that case we’ll be doing them a

favour. Why don't you look at it that way? It's a win-win for everyone."

She knew he loved the house and she knew the reason he wanted to own such a prestigious property. He wanted to stick it back in the faces of all the people who said he would amount to nothing. The folk who said he was a dreamer, a nobody, a talentless knob who was too lazy to get a real job. He wanted to buy a mansion near to all the lads he went to school with. They would drive past every day on their way to and from their boring 9 to 5 jobs and know that Kevin Flynn was living in the lap of luxury.

Whether Laurie liked it or not, he was going to put in an offer. Like everything in life, he wanted it and he was going to get it. "I suppose. It's just, well, I'm going to have to say it to Diane. I don't know how I'm going to just drop it into conversation, but I'll think of something."

She decided she would ask Diane out straight. Diane was a forthright person. She wouldn't pussyfoot around a subject if she wanted an answer. She would simply ask Diane if she had any problem with her and Kevin putting in an offer.

Kevin was leaving in a few days' time and he wanted to have the offer in before he went. He said he would look after all of the details, so she didn't have to worry about any of it. He said the house would be in both their names but that she wouldn't have to make any financial contribution. Just as well because she had spent most of her savings supporting them both when Kevin wasn't making a penny.

Laurie wanted to let Kevin to know how proud she was of him and how excited she was about their future. She went to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and took out the things that she had been saving for celebrating his big break.

Kevin turned around when she came back into the room. She could see him forget about the house and the phone and everything else when he saw her standing there naked, holding a cake in one hand and the bottle of champagne in the other.

"Wow, baby!"

"You like what you see?"

"Yeah! It's the triple chocolate fudge from OTT Cakes, isn't it?" he said, laughing as he took the cake and bottle from

Laurie's hands.

“Fucker!” She laughed too.

He opened the champagne bottle, twisting the bottle like an expert, causing the champagne to open with a sigh as opposed to a pop. He poured some into Laurie's mouth, licking the bubbles which escaped. He drank from the bottle himself, then poured more of the sparkling liquid over her breasts and down her naval. He proceeded to lick it up and Laurie did the same to him. He lifted her onto the kitchen table and fed her chocolate cake. She moaned in pleasure as the sugar and chocolate along with her desire for him sent pleasure neurons ricocheting through her entire body.

She leaned back on the table and opened herself to him. He pushed himself into her and she heard the plant that had been at the edge of the table crash to the floor, echoing her own climax. She clung to Kevin as he lay on top of her, his breathing ragged.

“Fuck, Laurie. That was amazing.”

“Yeah, and it wasn't even the Triple Choc. It was only Double.”

Chapter 16



Paolo was happy. He was in a committed relationship for the first time in his life and he loved it. He loved Joe. He even rediscovered the city he lived in all his life. Having Joe by his side made him feel like he was experiencing Rome for the first time. But there was something in Joe that worried him. A sadness. It seemed to float just beneath the surface. He knew that Joe had given up a lot to be with him and he wanted to do whatever he could to make him happy again. At first, they were so engrossed in each other that Paolo hadn't noticed that anything was amiss but as the months went on, he picked up the courage to address it.

"I miss them. But I made my choice to be with you. I can't have both. I knew that when I met you. Enough about that. What will we do for dinner tonight?"

"Let's go out and get drunk," said Paolo, pulling him off the couch.

Paolo hoped he might open up after a few glasses of wine.

They both dressed up and went to the little trattoria in Trastevere where they had been a few times, and which served the best antipasto in Rome. Paolo could feel Joe relax and become totally his over dinner.

Joe had insisted that Paolo speak Italian to him as he badly wanted to become fluent in the language of his adopted country. He had always loved the passionate way the Italians spoke to one another and, as his own command of the language was improving, he felt more of a connection to Paolo and his surroundings.

The waiters didn't bat an eyelid when he ordered the wine or asked them about a particular dish. Paolo loved to see him grow more confident and embrace *la dolce vita*. Joe had started to dress differently and never left home without his sunglasses and his

highly polished loafers. Not that Paolo had thought there was anything wrong with the way he dressed beforehand but now he was definitely more stylish and more conscious of how he looked.

He also walked everywhere and had lost the belly that he had carried around before. Paolo didn't care if he was overweight or wore rags – he loved the gentle, kind man who had walked into his life and turned it upside-down.

If only Sarah would allow May to visit them, he thought. If only Joe's sadness would dissipate, then they could be truly happy. He understood Sarah's anger with them both. Joe had shattered her world. He had betrayed her. Maybe if he talked to her, he might be able to make her understand that the love they felt for each other had left them with no choice.

He decided it might be time to take a trip to Dublin and meet Sarah face to face. Sarah and Joe had been best friends for all those years and she must miss him as much as Joe missed her.

He booked a flight to Dublin for the following day. He told Joe that he was taking a couple of days off as his mother had insisted he be a good nephew and visit his sick aunt in Turin.

Joe didn't suspect a thing and went off to work the next morning at the usual time. Paolo got the train to Aeroporto di Fiumicino where he boarded a flight to Dublin. He arrived in Dublin airport at eleven o'clock and got a taxi straight to Malahide. Joe had told him all about his life in Dublin and Paolo knew that Sarah's café was on the Main Street. He hoped she would be working.

It was a bright morning as the taxi made the short trip to the coastal village. He found the only coffee shop on the street and assumed it was the right one. There were a few customers around drinking coffee and chatting. The lunch rush hadn't started yet.

Joe had shown him lots of photographs of Sarah and May on his phone so he knew exactly who he was looking for. There were two younger girls working behind the counter. He ordered an espresso and sat and waited. He looked out the window at the

quaint street and tried to imagine the type of life Joe had given up to be with him.

He saw her then. Her dark hair was tied in a messy bun on top of her head. He could see green eyes with long eyelashes, and high cheekbones. Paolo's stomach did a bit of a flip. He hoped his nerve wasn't going to desert him.

Sarah was giving instructions to the younger women behind the counter, but they couldn't concentrate on what she was telling them.

"What's going on?" she demanded.

"Oh my God, he's gorgeous!" said Melanie.

"A ride," agreed Claire.

"*Shhh!* Who?" asked Sarah.

Melanie pointed at a guy sitting with his back to her at the window.

"There's a load of dirty dishes that aren't going to throw themselves into the dishwasher," Sarah said. "Get on with it."

Just then the 'ride' got up and walked towards the counter.

"Hi. You're causing a bit of a stir with my girls here," Sarah said, nodding towards the two girls who giggled in response.

"*Scusi?*" Paolo said, confused.

"*Em.* No, nothing. I ... *eh* ..." Something about the man made her uneasy.

"Sarah?" he said simply.

"Paolo?" She knew instinctively it was him.

"Yes. I'm sorry to come to the place where you work but I need to talk to you."

"What the hell do you have to say to me that I could possibly want to hear?" she said sharply.

The girls were staring in surprise, so she beckoned to Paolo and led him out to the garden at the back.

Paolo could see the rage radiating out of Sarah's every pore and he feared he had made a huge mistake.

"Jesus Christ. Is Joe here too?" she asked outside.

"No. He does not know that I am here. He thinks I am in Turin visiting my aunt."

"You have some cheek turning up here out of the blue! What the hell do you want with me? I have nothing more to give you that you haven't already taken. Unless of course you want to take my daughter away from me too!"

"He misses you. He misses May ..."

"Don't you dare say her name. *Don't. Don't. Just don't ...*" She felt tears burn her eyes.

"Please, Sarah, he needs you both. He needs ..."

"Well, he should have thought about that before he ran off with you then, shouldn't he?"

Paolo knew he had made a mistake. What had he been thinking? He shouldn't have come. He had ruined her life. He had ruined her daughter's life. It had only been a few months. She obviously needed more time. She might never get over it.

"Sarah, I am very sorry that you are angry, but Joe and I are in love. We did not look for this to happen. It just did. Believe me when I tell you I am not being cruel, but Joe is with me now. He wants you and May to be in his life but if you will not allow that then you will lose him."

"*Ha!* You come here and start giving me ultimatums. You only know him for five minutes for crying out loud. You and Joe in love! And what was twenty years of marriage all about? Tell me that. Don't make me laugh! Now, please leave. And don't ever come back here. You *or* him."

She followed him out through The Bakery where the girls had obviously been earwiggling on their conversation. They sprang back like they had been shot when Sarah walked back in.

"I'm staying in the Grand Hotel if you change your mind," he said from the doorway.

Sarah didn't answer him. She hoped her silence would indicate to him that he wouldn't be seeing her later. Or ever.

“Can you two manage on your own? I have to ... I have to, *eh*, go,” she said.

She had given Claire and Melanie plenty to gossip about for the afternoon.

She got into her car and banged on the steering wheel in frustration. She most certainly looked like a lunatic, but she couldn't help herself. She started to cry. She cried like a child with the unfairness of it all. She needed Joe. He was the person in her life who made everything alright.

When she regained her composure, she drove home and threw herself onto the couch. There were a million thoughts going around in her head and she couldn't make any sense of the chaos in her brain. She thought of Suze lying there with not a thought in the world going through her head and she wished she could just check out of this situation for a while. Just until something, anything began to make some sense.

May called into The Bakery on her way home from school as she did most days.

“Your mum went home early,” Claire said when she came in.

“Oh? Is she alright?” asked May.

“Some guy came to see her, and she left after she spoke to him. He was foreign. Gorgeous too.”

“I think his name was Pablo or something,” said Melanie.

“Did my mum leave with him?” asked May.

It must have been her dad's Paolo. It had to be. What other foreign guy would visit her mum?

“No. She told him to leave. He said he was staying in the Grand,” said Melanie.

“Oh, OK. I guess I'll go home too. Are you two alright? Do you need me to help you with anything?”

“No, we're fine,” said Claire. “Tell Sarah we had a really busy lunch, and she needs to order more tuna. See you tomorrow, hon.”

“See you.”

Instead of going home, May went straight to the Grand Hotel. She had no idea what she would do when she got there, but she couldn't miss the opportunity to see the man her father had fallen in love with.

She wished she wasn't wearing her school uniform. It emphasised the fact that she was a child. But she didn't want to go home and change. She would have to lie to her mum about where she was going, and things were bad enough between them as it was. She could see the hotel up ahead and started to feel nervous.

She hadn't answered any of the texts her dad had sent. She unfollowed him on Facebook and Twitter. She couldn't bear to see photographic evidence of his new life. She was torn between Sarah and Joe. She loved them both, but her mum had declared war on her dad, and she didn't want to pick sides.

She wanted to be Switzerland, but it was proving really hard to be neutral. She was only sixteen, but she understood what a shock it was to her mum to hear that her dad was gay. It was a shock to May too, but at least she hadn't been married to him.

Her dad was the nicest guy on the planet and they both missed him madly. He would do anything for them. He went out late at night to buy chocolate for them. He bought them thoughtful gifts when it wasn't even their birthdays or Christmas. It would take a long time for her mum to get over the pain and the hurt he had caused them.

She was at the front door of the hotel and she grappled with whether to go in or not. She was here now, she reasoned so she stepped into the compartment of the revolving door. The lobby was busy with people having afternoon tea and business meetings. May went up to the reception desk and waited for the woman behind the desk to finish her phone call.

“How can I help you?” she asked sweetly when she put down the phone.

“*Em.* I'm looking for a man called Sorry, I just know his first name. It's Paolo. He's Italian. I don't know what room he's in or anything,” she said apologetically.

“Let me see,” the woman said and she checked the computer. “Yes, we have a Mr. Paolo Chiellini staying. Would you like me to

put you through to his room?”

“Yes, please,” May said quickly, afraid she would change her mind.

The receptionist picked up the phone and dialled his room number. She let it ring a few times and then declared that he must be out. She asked if May would like to leave a message for their guest.

“*Umm*. No, it’s fine. He doesn’t know me or anything. I just thought that ...”

To her complete mortification, May started to cry. The receptionist came out from behind the desk. She took May to a seat in the hotel lobby and brought her a glass of water. May stopped crying and drank some water. She felt foolish in front of the nice receptionist.

“I have to go back to work now. Will you be alright?” the woman asked kindly.

“I’ll be fine. Sorry. Sorry about that,” May said.

“I’m sorry but I have to ask ... It’s just that you’re obviously still at school and you’re ... well, Mr. Chiellini is ... well ...”

“Oh no! No. It’s not that. It’s not like I ... He ... he’s a ... *em*, he’s a family friend. He’s a friend of my dad’s.”

“Can I at least contact your dad? Or your mum? Maybe they can come here and pick you up?”

May suddenly wanted to leave. The nice receptionist thought she was there to have some sort of hook-up. *Em*. She was mortified. She should have gone straight home and to hell with her dad’s new boyfriend. She got up, picked up her schoolbag off the floor, said “Goodbye and thanks” and headed for the door. She was looking down at her phone when she bumped into somebody.

“Sorry!” She looked up and knew it was him. Claire and Melanie said he was gorgeous, and they weren’t lying. He was like the stuff that teenage girls’ dreams were made of. Except he was the stuff her dad’s dream was made of.

“*Scusi*, I am very sorry,” he said as he looked at her. “May?” He knew her from the pictures Joe had shown him.

“Paolo?”

“Are you alright? I didn’t harm you, did I?”

“No, and it was my stupid fault, I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“Your papa showed me photographs of you. You are very like him, you know. And like your mama. I think you are a perfect mix of the two,” he said, looking at her closely.

May felt uncomfortable under his full gaze and stood back from him.

“Did your mama tell you that I was here?” he asked doubtfully.

“No. The girls in The Bakery heard you two talking. I haven’t seen my mum yet. Did you two fight?”

“May, please believe me, I did not come here to cause any trouble for you or your mama. I came here because your papa is sad without you. He misses you both and no matter how much I try to make him happy, I cannot do it. I know that he has hurt you and his heart hurts for the pain he made for you.”

“I’m sorry, I have to go. My mum would kill me for coming here. I shouldn’t have come. But I don’t know what to do,” and she started to cry all over again.

“Please. Come. Sit.” He led her back to the seat she had just vacated a minute before and sat down opposite her. “Would you like some tea?” Joe drank tea all the time and Paolo reckoned his daughter might do the same.

“No, thanks.” May could not control her tears. She missed her dad so much it hurt. He gave the best hugs in the world and she wanted him back to bearhug her to death.

Her dad was gone and her mum was gone too in her own way. Her mum thought she was doing everything to maintain a normal home life, but it wasn’t working. She was breaking down in tears at the slightest thing and her moods were erratic to say the least. She wanted her dear, sweet mum back too. As long as this stand-off with her dad and Paolo was going on, she had no chance of getting either back.

Her mum was acting like a child so maybe it was up to her to act like the adult here.

They sat in silence for a time while May tried to form the questions she had into some semblance of order.

“Was my dad always gay?” was her first question.

“Well, yes, of course, but he didn’t accept it. He has told me about what he was like as a young boy and a teenager. It seems he knew but was too afraid to be gay. It was a different time then.”

“Is he happy with you?”

“Yes. I think he is happy. But there is always a sadness for you and your mama. He misses you in his life. He has made decisions and he cannot go back. But he wants his daughter and he wants your mama, his best friend.”

“I can’t talk for my mum, but I want my dad to be part of my life too. Did he send you here?”

“No. He thinks I am in Turin visiting my sick aunt. But you must understand, I had to come to try to talk to your mother.”

“Will you tell him you saw me?”

“I do not know. I think he would be angry that I came. Please understand that I only want the best for your papa.”

“What do you do?” she asked. She suddenly wanted to know things about him.

Paolo told her how he was a geeky teenager always tinkering with computers, taking them apart and putting them back together again. Writing code, making games and spending days forgetting to eat because he was so engrossed in his hobby. When a job as a programmer came up in CompuTerra he had no idea he would meet and fall in love with anybody.

May could tell that he was afraid of saying too much and didn’t want to tell her anything that Joe would be angry about.

“What about you? What do you want to do?” he asked.

“I want to work with food. That’s for sure. I’ll probably study commerce in college. I hope to take over my mum’s business someday. I love the smells there. She brought me to work with her since I was a baby so it’s like my second home.”

“If you like food, you will love Roma. We have the best restaurants in all of Italia. The Neapolitans think they make the best pizza, but I know a restaurant where they have the most wonderful pizza in the world. Everything is fresh. The mozzarella, the basil, the ripe tomatoes,” he said and kissed his

thumb and forefinger. “*Magnifico!* I would like for your papa and me to take you there someday.”

“I do love pizza,” she said wistfully. “But I can’t see my mum letting me go to Rome any time soon.” That pizza really did sound delicious. She had been trying to convince Sarah to get a pizza oven for The Bakery for years but no joy. Wait until *she* was in charge!

“May, I am sad to be a cause of your pain. I am sorry also for your mama’s hurt. Please tell her that I am sorry from the bottom of my heart.”

“I will. She won’t take it well, but I will tell her. I’m glad I met you. Tell my dad I love him. Tell him that I will call him as soon as Mum and I are ready to move on.” She stood and held out her hand to shake.

He stood up. “May I?” he asked, indicating that he would like to give her the Italian goodbye.

“Sure.”

He lightly kissed her on each cheek. She felt it was very sophisticated and decided that the Italians were so much more stylish than the Irish.

“Goodbye then,” she said, finding the whole leaving him standing there a little bit awkward.com.

“*Ciao,*” she heard him say as she walked back out into the late afternoon.

Chapter 17



Sarah was still lying on the couch when May got home. She was startled when she heard her daughter's key in the door and annoyed with herself for losing track of time.

"Hi, love," she said with attempted cheeriness.

"Hi," muttered May as she went upstairs to her room where she spent most of her time lately.

It was past five so Sarah assumed May had gone to The Bakery after school. She hoped that Claire and Melanie didn't say anything about their Italian visitor. May was a good girl and she deserved better than a mother who took a half day from work in order to lie on her couch feeling sorry for herself.

Sarah was shocked to meet Paolo. It wasn't because he was incredibly handsome and sexy but because he was real. When Joe had told her he had met somebody, a man, it had somehow seemed too farfetched to be true. But seeing Paolo in the flesh had made it all hit home.

Joe was gone for good. She and May and Joe would never be the same family unit again. The happy times they all had together would be just memories now. She could either dismiss what they had as a lie or cherish it for what it was, a great two decades of being loved by the kind, gentle man who had always been there for her.

She came to the conclusion that their marriage deserved more than the trashing she had been giving it. They made May. They had created the beautiful creature who had brought them nothing but joy since she came kicking and screaming into their world.

She went up and knocked on her daughter's door.

“I’ll make you something nice for dinner – what would you like?” she asked, hoping to tempt her from her lair.

“I’m in the mood for pizza for some reason,” said May from the other side of the door.

Great, Sarah thought. She usually had to strain to hear May mutter that she wasn’t hungry, but today was progress.

Sarah went to the kitchen and got out the flour and yeast. She added some salt, olive oil and water. She began to knead the wet dough on her marble worktop. She kneaded and kneaded until her arms hurt. She felt her frustration of her earlier meeting with Paolo diminish as the dough became a smooth ball.

She put the dough in a bowl to let it rise. She looked around the kitchen at all the things she had been neglecting. The place *was* a mess. She did need to hire a cleaner. Between work, visiting Suze and the hours she spent feeling sorry for herself, she had let the place resemble Paddy’s Market. As the dough rested, she started to clean like a woman possessed.

When May came downstairs, she threw a cloth at her and told her to get cleaning too. May didn’t complain or groan. She got to it. They worked mostly in silence. They emptied presses and scrubbed the tiles and counters until the whole place shone like a new pin.

“God, I feel better after that,” Sarah said at last, exhausted.

“What’s it all for? Is Granny coming around?”

May worried about her mum’s sudden burst of energy.

“Darling, we have to get on with our lives. Your dad has moved on and we need to move on as well.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” said May.

She was an eyewitness to the devastation that Joe had wreaked on Sarah. She wasn’t convinced that bleach and soapy water could make everything alright.

The dough had doubled in size and Sarah started to roll it out.

“I’ll do it, Mum,” May said, pushing Sarah aside. “You make the salad. I’ll do the pizza. Do we have any fresh basil?”

“Sure, we do,” said Sarah, stripping leaves off a basil plant on the kitchen windowsill.

Sarah didn't know what had come over her daughter, but she certainly liked it. She watched as May busied herself rolling out the dough, pulping tomatoes and seasoning them with salt, pepper and sugar. She was impressed that she was tasting everything as she went along. Soon Sarah was salivating at the thought of the delicious home-made pizza.

She watched as May spread the tomato and basil sauce over the base. She then tore up a ball of buffalo mozzarella. She cut up chorizo and spread slices of Parma ham on the pizza. She finished by breaking an egg over the top.

The aroma in the kitchen while it cooked was divine.

Sarah set two places at the island and the pair sat and feasted on the delicious pizza. The egg was just set and the meats were slightly charred and delicious. For the first time in months, the conversation flowed easily. They had both been hurt deeply by Joe's actions, but they still had each other. And Joe was waiting in the wings if and when they were ready to take him back into the fold.

"I saw Paolo today," May said simply.

Sarah almost spat out the mouthful of wine she had just taken. How the hell did May see Paolo? Did Paolo go to the school looking for her? Did he go back to The Bakery in the afternoon? If he did, she would go to the Grand Hotel and have a few words with him. None of them nice.

May saw Sarah's mouth hanging open and the stunned look on her face so she answered her mum's unasked questions for her.

"I went to The Bakery and the girls told me about some gorgeous foreign guy who'd been in to see you and that you'd told him to leave. Claire said that you went home straight after talking to him. I guessed it was him. They told me he said he was staying at the Grand, so I went there."

Sarah looked at May, but she was still having difficulty getting any sound out.

"I almost didn't meet him. The receptionist tried his room, but he wasn't there. I was just about to leave when I bumped into him. Literally. I was looking at my phone and I just walked right into him."

"What did ... what did he ... how ...?"

Sarah wasn't capable of full sentences yet. She took another mouthful of her wine and let May keep talking.

"He was nice, Mum. He said that Dad misses us like crazy. He said he's, like, sad all the time."

Sarah could tell that May was struggling to cope with her feelings. She listened as she continued.

"I'm just so confused about everything. Don't get me wrong, I'm not confused about the gay thing. That I get. I just don't know if I am meant to forgive him for what he did or if he even did anything that was wrong in the first place. He only fell in love. He didn't kill anyone. I'm sorry, Mum, but I miss him too. I cry when I think about how much I want to see him. I know he hurt us, but I want to tell him that I still love him just the same. I want to tell him that I'm glad he's happy. But I don't want you to hate me if I do."

Sarah was thoroughly ashamed of herself. She had spewed out her hateful thoughts about Joe without any thought of her precious little girl. Of course she wanted May and Joe to be in each other's lives.

"Sweetheart, I could never hate you. I love you with all my heart and so does your dad. Of course you want him to be happy. And seeing you will make him happy. How would you like to go to Rome and visit him?"

"Oh, Mum! Are you serious? I'd love it."

May got up and squeezed Sarah so hard she almost cracked a rib.

"OK, OK. I'll call your dad tomorrow. You can start looking up flights."

Sarah's phone beeped and she saw a message from Tom. She quickly put her phone in her pocket. She didn't want to tell May about Tom yet. It was too soon, and the poor kid had enough to deal with for now. Uncharacteristically, May insisted she would clean up after dinner. Sarah went upstairs, excited, to open the text.

Hey. How are you doing? I'm looking forward to seeing you on Friday. You're still up for it? Tx

Was she still up for it? If only the poor man knew how up for it she was. She felt a thrill run through her. Was this really

happening? She fancied Tom. When he kissed her in the car park after the tennis-awards ceremony, she was a married woman. She just wasn't a sexually active married woman. It was only a kiss, but she felt Tom's hunger and she was certain now that he had felt hers too. Why else would he pursue her and ask her out on a date? He put an 'x' after his name. Well, after his initial. Should she put one too? Fuck, this dating thing was a minefield.

Hey, yourself. Yes, I'm still up for Friday. Looking forward to it as well. See you then. Sarah

She looked at the phone. Fuck it, she thought and added an 'x' before pressing send. In for a penny, in for a pound.

She opened her wardrobe in the hope of finding something suitable to wear on a date. Not surprisingly she didn't have a thing. She would have to find a spare hour or two to go shopping. She padded over the carpet to her underwear drawer and searched through that too. She wouldn't be seen dead in any of it. The underwear that she considered her sexy stuff was as old as the hills and smelled of mothballs! Enough said. She would take Friday off and go to town after she had visited Suze in the hospital. She thought about poor Suze all broken and lost and she started to feel really grateful for her life. OK, Joe was gone. He ran off with a man. So what? She would survive. She still had May. She might even be on the verge of having a fling with a very sexy Tom Harrison. Life wasn't too bad at all. No, sir, things were looking up.

Chapter 18



The three women sat around Suze's bed and tried their best to ignore the fact that it was getting more unlikely that Suze would regain consciousness. Peter had told them that the doctors were going to try some new treatments. They all hated the fact that the days had stretched into weeks and still Suze remained locked inside herself. They included her in all their chat and sought her opinion as if she was a part of the conversation.

"So, Laurie," said Sarah, "how is that gorgeous man of yours?"

"Oh, you know, taking it all in his stride. Like it's a regular job. Except his work colleagues are some of the most famous actors in Hollywood. He's says a name and I'm like 'Oh my God, is that Matt Damon you're on about?'"

"And is it?"

"Yeah! And everyone's being very nice to him. They're inviting him out for dinner, introducing him to lots of people. He's totally unfazed. He started an indoor soccer league and the list of players looks like the nominations on Oscars night."

"*Wow!* Imagine he's doing so great even with a name like Kevin!" Sarah said pointedly to Diane.

"Alright, alright. It wasn't personal. I just thought he'd have a better chance if *he* was called Brad or Matt or something like that. Anyway, what the hell do I know? I'm glad for him though. I'm glad for both of you, Laurie."

Laurie wondered if she would be happy when she broke the news to Diane about the house. She didn't want to think about that yet, so she turned her attention to Sarah.

"Are you all ready for your date? What are you going to wear?"

"I don't know yet. I'm going into town when I leave here. I've organised a personal shopper to help me out. I follow her on

Instagram. She's always pulling great looks together."

"You should have asked me. I'd have gone with you."

"I didn't want to bother you. I know you've got your deadline for your column."

"What about me?" said Diane. "I know a thing or two about fashion."

"You're busy too, Diane. And, honestly, I need professional help at this stage. I've been dressing the same way since my twenties."

"*Hey, did you see that?*" Laurie said suddenly.

"What?" Diane and Sarah said in unison.

"Suze. Her eyelid twitched."

The women surrounded Suze, all willing themselves to see the twitch. The tiniest movement. But there was nothing. Diane rang for the nurse nonetheless. The nurse came in and checked monitors and Suze's vitals. They must have been mistaken. Suze was the same. Unresponsive and immobile in the hospital bed.

"I can't fucking stand this, Suze," said Diane. "You need to come back to us. Whatever the fuck is going on inside that head of yours, you need to come back to us."

"Diane!" said Laurie.

"What?"

"She's in a coma. You can't start giving out to her. It's not like it's her fault."

"How do you know? Are you an expert in neuroscience now?"

"Stop it, you two," said Sarah. "We're all upset. Let's say our goodbyes and come back again tomorrow."

They all gave Suze a little peck on the cheek and told her how much they loved her and wanted her back.

They made their way out to the car park.

"We'll call over later to give you the once-over before you go on your big date," said Diane.

"OK, see you guys then. Wish me luck."

They watched Sarah drive off towards the city centre.

"You want to get some lunch?" Laurie asked Diane.

“Yeah, sure. There’s that pub just before you turn in for the hospital. The food is supposed to be good.”

“Great, see you there,” said Laurie, getting into her car.

Laurie arrived within two minutes of Diane and they got a lovely table at the window. They ordered goat’s cheese salads and two glasses of white wine.

“Diane. There’s a reason I asked you to lunch. I have something to tell you.”

“Oh. That sounds serious,” said Diane, spreading her napkin on her knees. “Go on.”

“I don’t know how to say this, so I’ll just well, say it. Kevin put an offer in on your house. We looked at it last week and his offer was accepted just before he went back to LA.”

“Oh. OK. Well. *Em.* That’s *eh* ... I was going to tell you all but ...”

“No. You don’t need to explain anything. It’s just that I saw you. Leaving the house the day we went to view it. I saw you going by in your car. I didn’t know how to say it to you. I’m sorry. This is awkward ...” Laurie was glad that she had ordered the wine now.

“I *was* going to tell you guys. But it’s complicated. I’ll explain when I’m ready. I’m still getting my head around it and the actions I’m taking might be construed to be not quite legal.”

Laurie was alarmed. Diane was a barrister and she was admitting to illegal activities. Laurie felt like she was a part of it now, implicated.

“Diane. What’s going on? Can I help?”

“No. it’s not ... It’s nothing. I’m being overly dramatic. I’m glad you’re buying the house. It’s a beautiful home and you’ll be very happy there, I’m sure. If you and Kevin don’t buy it, then someone else is going to. You have my blessing, if that’s what you need.”

“Thank you. I know it must be hard for you to leave such a wonderful house. You know, if you want to talk, I’m here for you.”

“What did the estate agent tell you?”

“He said it’s a repossession case.”

“Oh.”

“Is it true?”

“Will made a bad investment decision. He remortgaged our home without telling me.”

Laurie could see the anger simmering in Diane’s face. She herself would be furious. How could Will have been so careless with their home? With his wife?

“Will you be alright? Are you ... you know ...”

“I will be. Don’t worry about me, Laurie. And don’t pity me either. Worry I may tolerate, pity I absolutely won’t.”

Laurie got home to her apartment, sat down at her desk and prayed for inspiration. She had exactly an hour and a half to get her column to Penny Witherspoon, her editor, who would be pissed off if it was late. Penny was tough and Laurie didn’t fancy getting off on the wrong foot with her new boss.

She sat and stared at the blank screen for at least a half an hour. She typed a few words then deleted them and continued to do this until she had to get up and make herself a cup of tea. Get it together, Laurie, she ordered herself and made another attempt.

Dear Reader,

My name is Laurie Henderson and I am your new Agony Aunt at Gorge.ie. I was really happy to get what I consider to be the best job in the magazine. I get to hear what is going on in your lives and best of all I get to help you if I can.

I know that people go through terrible things every day and I know that people lose their breasts due to cancer, their jobs due to the recession and their minds due to the stresses that the twenty-first century puts on us.

I have a friend who is in hospital right now. She's getting the care she needs and she's one of the lucky ones. She has family and friends who love her fiercely and are fighting for her to come back to us.

Another friend is going on a first date tonight. She is beautiful and funny but extremely vulnerable right now. I think she's brave and wonderful and I admire her so much.

I want to let you know that you're never the only one, you're never alone. I will do my best to answer your letters and to give you the best advice I can. So I urge you to come to me if you want to share your problem and we can all help each other. Know that there's always someone here.

Love,
Laurie

Send!

Please like it, she silently begged.

Chapter 19



Suze was aware of the noises around her and she understood that they were familiar. She just couldn't identify the voices. She was doing her utmost to stay in the dark recesses of her mind but she was being pushed to the surface by a force that she couldn't control.

She had been lying there happily in the inky blackness for what seemed like an eternity but now she was getting glimpses of light and sound and she couldn't keep them out. The light and sounds were forcing their way in. She wanted to scream but she didn't have a voice. The light was beginning to really bug her now. She wanted the comforting black.

The doctor switched off his torch and put it back in his pocket.

"There seemed to be some movement in her pupils then," he said to Peter. "It's the first positive sign we've had. I want to do more tests. I'm sorry but I'll have to ask you and your daughter to wait outside."

Peter and Emma sat in the waiting room, hoping against hope that today would be the day that Suze came back to them. They had been living a nightmare since they got the news of her attempted suicide. When Suze had left that day, Peter had no idea what she was about to do. He blamed himself for not making her happy. He had assumed that the way they were was just what happened to married couples after a certain time.

Emma had been amazing. For a girl who practically ignored her mother for most of her teenage years, she was paying full attention to her now. She sat with Suze every day and told her all about what had happened in school and what was going on with her friends. Peter was certain that Emma had never shared any confidences with

Suze up until now, but she was desperate to get her mam to respond to her.

Peter wasn't angry. He was mostly sad. Maybe if she had succeeded in killing herself then the anger would have kicked in but all he could feel now was relief. He wanted to make up to Suze for all his shortcomings. He wanted to never take her for granted again. He would spend the rest of his life trying to make it up to her. The doctor's news today had been the first good sign that they'd had in weeks and he held on to Emma's hand while they waited for the doctor to finish his examination.

The door opened.

"Peter, Emma, you can come back in now," the doctor said.

They followed him back to the room and Suze was propped up more than she had been before. She still had her eyes closed but she seemed to be more present.

The doctor was looking the most optimistic he had been since they had met him.

"I think the signs are good," he said. "She hasn't spoken but that might be explained by the trauma she has been through. Her throat is raw from the tubes and she is probably still experiencing pain there. Her reactions are good. Keep talking to her. Keep doing what you have been doing. It's working."

"Thank you, doctor," said Peter.

"Not me. Thank yourselves and your wife's friends. You're the ones who are responsible for her recovery. It's going to be slow, but it's most certainly going to happen."

Emma went to her mam and held her, kissing her on the cheek.

"Mam, did you hear that? The doctor said that you're going to get better. He said it's definitely going to happen."

"Now, Emma, you heard what he said. It could take some time for your mam to start talking to us."

Suze could feel Emma's embrace, but she couldn't give the command to her own arms to make any movements. She was shackled by the invisible weight that was intent on keeping her deep inside herself – but she could feel the force getting weaker and the chains on her limbs and around her throat being loosened. She was surprised that it didn't seem so scary anymore.

Chapter 20



Sarah wanted to look amazing for her date with Tom, but she wanted it to look magically effortless too. She had decided in her deliberations with herself to go for a jeans and fancy top combo. She thought a dress would be too formal. And too old. She was going for the hip forty-something look, but she had no idea where the hell to shop for that. She stood outside the assigned meeting spot, outside the old fur shop on Grafton Street and waited for her Personal Shopper.

She hoped she had made the right decision in going with an Instagram Influencer. Would she try to shoehorn her into some kind of unsuitable get-up? Sarah wasn't good at confrontation and certainly wasn't good at being unkind. Whatever the woman suggested, Sarah knew she would end up buying. She should have asked Diane and Laurie to come with her. They always looked fabulous and she would be happy to emulate their style. And why the hell had she left shopping until the eleventh hour?

She paid attention to the people passing her by. She admired some outfits and dismissed others out of hand. A woman who almost took the sight out of her eye sidled up beside her. Amber, her personal shopper and best friend for the day, was tall and thin and very pale. She had red hair and red lips and wore a simple dark-green wrap dress with neon-pink court shoes. The pink shoes were mad, and Sarah was worried that she might end up with a bit of a mad outfit too. That definitely wasn't what she was after.

“Hello. Are you Sarah?”

The woman sounded almost combative. Sarah wasn't sure whether she should answer in the affirmative.

“Eh, yes. Hi. Sarah O'Hara.” She wasn't sure why she added her second name. She was pretty sure the woman didn't care less.

“I’m Amber. Come with me.”

Sarah followed Amber and was relieved that they were starting in Brown Thomas. Amber refused the store’s offer of a glass of champagne. This was work. She started out among the racks of designer clothes and bid Sarah to follow her. Sarah tried to tell Amber what she was after but the woman was on a mission and one that Sarah wasn’t sure she was a part of. Amber began to show her items. When Sarah wasn’t sure of something and shrugged, Amber just tut-tutted and made Sarah feel like she hadn’t a clue about fashion. And in all honesty, lately, she hadn’t.

Sarah felt it was going to be a battle and she just hoped that she would emerge victorious. Amber brought Sarah to an enormous room with wall-to-wall mirrors and ordered her to strip down to her underwear. Sarah almost giggled with nerves at the strangeness of the situation where a domineering woman was telling her to take her clothes off.

She did as she was told and stood there at her full five-feet-five inches height and looked at Amber. Amber was regarding her directly and also looking at her reflection in the dressing-room mirrors. Sarah felt vulnerable and naked in the physical and emotional sense. She had to look down at herself to make sure she still had her knickers and bra on.

“Righty-o,” said Amber. “You need to start from the inside out. You start with proper underwear,” she said, intimating that the underwear Sarah was wearing was not proper.

“I just put these on because they’re comfortable,” Sarah said, making excuses for the horrible flesh-coloured briefs and bra she had on. She felt like she had been caught in dirty underwear, the way Amber showed her obvious distaste.

“What size are you? Bra?” Amber was all business.

“*Em*, I think I’m about a 34C or something,” said Sarah.

“My God! Every woman should know exactly what size she is!” said bossy Amber, taking out her measuring tape and putting it around Sarah’s bust.

“32D,” she said with a cross between a smile and a grimace.

A D cup? Sarah felt nonsensically pleased with herself, even though she had done nothing to deserve it. Amber seemed

pleased with her too. It reminded her of being at school and wanting her teacher to like her.

Teacher left the room, telling Sarah she could relax and read some magazines while she waited.

There was a Nespresso machine and Sarah almost expected a scantily clad Italian waiter to appear and rustle up an Americano for her. Sarah looked around the beautifully appointed room and caught her reflection in the mirror. Oh God. These surroundings made her look dull and flat. Her hair was unkempt and in need of a new style. No wonder Amber looked at her pityingly. She would get an appointment for her hair on her way home later.

Amber came back to the dressing room and Sarah got up and almost stood to attention. Amber had been foraging for bras and knickers and had brought back the most wonderful lingerie that Sarah had ever seen. Amber helped her into the bras and Sarah felt the difference they made straight away. She felt sexy and young and ready for some fun!

She tried on five different types and colours, and told Amber that she would take them all. They felt wonderful on her skin and certainly put her boobs right up there and out there which was exactly where she wanted them. Amber showed her how the different bras went with different outfits and Sarah really felt like she was at school.

Professor Amber was teaching cool stuff though. She taught her all the tricks of the trade when it came to dressing and hiding what you didn't want to show and showing off what you wanted to. Wow, who knew there was a science to this whole thing? She ended up with two new pairs of jeans which hugged her hips and showed off her small waist. She got boots in tan leather and black, a beautifully tailored designer blazer, an array of tops, make-up and a bottle of perfume, the one in the ad with Cate Blanchett. Mission accomplished. And exceeded.

Diane and Laurie had obviously gone to that school and passed their exams with flying colours. Sarah would graduate too today. She almost kissed Amber when it was time to go but it was Amber who wanted to kiss Sarah when she charged over seventeen-hundred euro to her credit card.

It was the best money Sarah had ever spent, she felt. She made her way to Dublin's newest hair salon to get her hair done. On

the rare occasions when Sarah went to a hairdresser, she took whoever was free and let the stylist have free rein with her tresses. Today she asked for their best stylist and made do with their second in command.

She explained to the guy that she was fed up with the same long boring hair she had worn the same way since she was a teenager and asked him to give her some movement and a glossy colour. She picked out a chocolate-brown colour and asked for some caramel tones. She sat back to read *Hello!* magazines while the stylist went to work on her. After an hour and a half she walked out of the hair salon, looking and feeling like a new woman. Georges with an 's' had given her a slight fringe and had chopped her hair into layers and the colour gave it a young vibrant look. She was delighted and couldn't wait to get home to try on all her clothes with her new hairstyle.

Sarah was only in the door when the doorbell rang. She answered the door to Diane and Laurie.

"Sorry, we were looking for our friend Sarah," said a stunned Diane.

"Come in, you eejit," Sarah said, pleased with the effect her new look had on them.

"Oh my God, Sarah," Laurie said. "You look amazing. Your hair. You look ten years younger. Not that you looked old, you look ... Oh, you know what I'm saying."

"I'd say Joe might reconsider if he got a load of you now," said Diane.

"I wouldn't want him to. Something happened to me today. I'm not afraid to look forward. In fact, I'm quite excited about what the future holds."

"Good for you. Now let's see what you got in town," said Laurie.

The three women went upstairs to get Sarah ready for her big night out. Diane and Laurie sat on the bed while Sarah showed them all of the day's purchases. They were impressed with her cache and made her try on every single thing.

"OK, the darker jeans, the silk shirt and the blazer. With the black boots," said Diane.

"I couldn't agree more," said Laurie.

“Are you sure?”

“*Yes!*” they both shouted, leaving Sarah in no doubt about what to wear.

Then they made her parade up and down the bedroom in her new underwear until she felt as confident and sexy as she looked.

“You look fabulous,” said Laurie. “I’m excited and I’m not the one going out.”

“It’s not as if he’s going to see me in my underwear but at least I’ll feel good.”

“Don’t be so sure,” said Diane.

“What? On a first date?”

“Why not? You’re both adults. And free and single. Don’t tell me you haven’t considered it?”

“I have actually. I haven’t been able to think about anything else for the past few days. Honestly, I’m so horny I’d skip dinner and go straight to bed with him if he asked me.”

“You’re a dirty little slut, Sarah O’Hara,” said Diane.

Laurie laughed at the two of them. Their shared history allowed them to slag each other without any fear of the other taking offence.

“I’ve arranged for May to have a sleepover with Meg,” said Sarah. “You know. Just in case. Fucking hell, I am a slut!”

“Make sure you let him pay for dinner. Men like to feel they’re in charge,” warned Diane.

“Oh Christ. I never even thought about who’s going to pay. It’s a minefield. I haven’t been dating since the last century. I think I should pay half, though? No? I’m an independent woman. Do you think Tom would think he was owed something just because he paid?” Sarah looked at Laurie to tell her how dates were conducted in the 21st century.

“Yeah, pay for your own. I would anyway. But he might insist on paying cos he probably hasn’t been dating since 1845 either!” said Laurie cheekily.

“You can cut that out but is there anything else you think I need to know before I head out into the dating jungle?”

“Tom’s the same age as you are, so I imagine he will date like you guys would have done in the old days.” Laurie laughed, unable to help herself now.

“You know what? You can keep your dating information all to yourself.”

“No, there’s nothing else. Just be yourself and don’t order anything messy to eat.”

“OK. No burgers or spaghetti. Roger that.”

“Don’t drink too much either,” Diane said. “You’re funny when you’re drunk but I’m not sure Tom will want to hear you singing Beyonce out of tune.”

“Shit, no. I definitely won’t get into such a state that I want to start singing.”

Sarah took a deep breath when she heard the car drive up. She took one more look at herself in the hall mirror and she had to admit she looked pretty good. Laurie had done her make-up and had given her smoky eyes. It would be murder to take off later on, but she wasn’t going to worry about that now. She walked to the hall door.

For a split second, Tom almost turned around, thinking he had the wrong house.

“*Wow!* You look amazing!” he said, taking her all in and bending to kiss her cheek.

He gave her flowers that didn’t look like they had been bought at a petrol station. She thanked him and invited him in. She put the flowers in water. He looked really good, and she started to get nervous all over again. He was wearing a dark-grey suit with a black shirt underneath. His hair was short and greying at the temples. She almost had to pinch herself. Was this handsome man really here to take her out to dinner? Was it going to be only dinner, or would there be more to the night?

Their first kiss felt like it had happened years ago instead of just a couple of months. She was a different person now. She was free. She was ready. She was about to grab life with both hands.

They got to the restaurant and the waiter showed them to a candlelit booth at the back. Tom had asked her about herself all the way there in the car, so she thought it was her turn to ask him some things about his past.

“So how come you’re single? Is it because of your work? I mean, I know you work long hours.”

“My wife died three years ago. She was killed in a car accident. She was a doctor too. She’d been working a twelve-hour shift and was driving home. I know it’s a downer. We should talk about something else.”

“Oh no! I’m sorry. I had no idea.”

“I haven’t told many people. I can’t deal with their pity. It’s why I moved here. To get away from the constant stream of sympathy.”

“I’d like to know about her. If you don’t mind, that is. What was her name?”

“Lennon. Her name was Lennon. Her parents were crazy Beatles fans. She became Lennon Harrison when she married me. We used to say that we were destined to be together.”

He laughed as he remembered his wife. Sarah was happy to let him talk.

“We had this wonderful life mapped out. We were going to work hard and establish our careers for ten years. We’d start a family when we became consultants. It sounded like a great plan and we were cocky enough to think that everything would go according to that plan. We wanted kids so badly and we wanted to be able to give them everything. Of course, I now realise that children just want to be loved and cared for. We didn’t need to earn a fortune to be able to give them that. I sometimes feel like I’ve lost the children we might have had as well as losing my wife.”

“That’s so sad,” she said, feeling so sorry for this lovely man.

“It probably sounds stupid. Feeling the loss of something that you never had in the first place.”

“No. It’s not stupid. You’re grieving for the life you would have had. I completely understand.” Sarah had tears in her eyes.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I haven’t been out with anybody since the accident. I wrestled with whether I should tell you or not. I like you, Sarah, and I wanted to be honest with you.”

“I’m glad you told me. It’s too big a thing to have left unsaid. We are who we are because of the experiences we’ve gone through.”

“OK. How about we keep it light from now on? How about we have some fun?”

“That’s alright by me.”

“How about some wine?”

Sarah was relieved that Tom seemed to be back to himself again. She knew a man his age would have some sort of baggage, but she wasn’t prepared for the dead wife variety. Would he compare her to Lennon? It was natural that he would, she supposed. She watched as he talked wine with the waiter. She watched his mouth move and imagined it on hers.

“Sorry?” She hadn’t realised the waiter was gone and he was talking to her.

“Are you OK? You seem lost in thought?”

“Just wondering about what to order,” she said.

They talked easily over dinner and didn’t run out of things to say. Sarah was delighted with herself for not spilling any wine or food on the tablecloth or on herself. Tom didn’t mention Lennon again. He was attentive and thoughtful and wanted to know all about May and The Bakery.

“Talking of The Bakery, I have a fabulous cake at home.” Sarah was surprised by her boldness. “We could have a slice and I could brew some coffee,” she suggested. “If you fancy it, that is.”

“I do fancy it. And I fancy you. But I guess you know that.”

Sarah felt herself get hot. Tom was signalling for the waiter. He seemed in as much of a hurry as she was to leave the restaurant.

“I’ll pay,” Sarah said, waving her card at him.

“No. I insist. You’re providing dessert after all.”

“So this is the cake,” he said as Sarah handed him a plate of rich chocolate cake with a dollop of cream. He took a spoonful and declared it the best he had ever had.

Sarah took another sip of her wine. They both agreed it was a bit late for coffee and she had opened a nice bottle of red. She was nervous about what was about to happen. The more wine she drank, the sexier Tom became. He had morphed into George Clooney before she reached the end of the glass.

She suggested they go to the living room. The living room with the enormous couch. The enormous couch that might as well have a flashing sign saying ‘*kiss me*’ above it. She started to clear off the plates from the island unit and bring them over to the sink.

She felt him come up behind her and felt his arms around her. He was kissing her neck and she felt the heat of his mouth on her skin. She turned to him and he kissed her on the mouth. The last kiss they had was only been a precursor to this moment. She opened her mouth to him. She felt a fire start down inside her. She felt him come to life against her too. She was high on the fact that she could still turn a man on.

Joe, no, there was no point thinking about Joe and those old times. There was only the now. And a man’s penis was getting hard because of *her*. She took his hand and led him upstairs to her bedroom. She had moved everything belonging to Joe into the spare room and the space was all hers.

He took her in his arms again and kissed her deeply. Her head was light and there was a burning in her groin. He opened the button at the back of her top and pulled it over her head. He made an approving noise when he saw her underwear and she silently thanked Amber for her excellent taste.

He kissed her nipples through her bra and then she started to unbutton his shirt. His chest was toned and hairy and she ran her fingers over his nipples which felt hard under her touch. She could hardly believe that she was with a man. *This* man. He was like a dream standing there half dressed in her bedroom. He

deftly unhooked her bra and kissed her nipples again. Her insides were going crazy with desire. He laid her down on the bed and started to kiss her from her mouth to the top of her jeans. He started to undo her buttons and zip and she helped him take them off. She was lying there in just her knickers and watched while he took off his trousers. He took off his socks as sexily as any man can and lay down on the bed beside her.

“I haven’t done this for a long time,” he said, slightly embarrassed.

“Neither have I. We’ll be gentle with each other,” she said, giggling into his neck.

He was kissing her breasts again and making his way down her body. She was honestly going to burst if he wasn’t inside her soon. He was taking off her knickers and studying her with intent and longing. Oh my God. She hoped she looked OK down there. She hadn’t really thought that he would be looking at her up close.

The light in the room was very dim so she hoped that it was being kind to her. He didn’t have an ounce of fat and she reckoned he must work out. He looked good in his tennis shorts but by God, he looked better in his boxers. Somehow while she was lost in her thoughts, he was naked too. He was making his way back up her body.

She opened her legs wide and she felt him, hard and ready. She was wet and he easily slid into her. She arched herself up to him to take in all of him and they both climaxed together. She held on to him tightly while her breathing came back to normal and her body stopped shuddering. He kissed her tenderly as they both lay together.

“I’m sorry, that was all a bit rushed,” he said.

“Was it? I thought it was wonderful,” she said dreamily, kissing him again.

“It *was* wonderful,” he agreed, “but I’d like to show you that I can do it better than that.” He grinned as he started to kiss her again and Sarah felt her anger with Joe and Paolo floating away on a cloud.

Chapter 21



Suze was sitting up, propped up by pillows. Her eyes were closed but Diane, Sarah and Laurie could tell that a change had taken place. She seemed to have reoccupied her skin and her face had a hint of colour in it. Up until now you couldn't tell if her circulation was working or not, she was so pale.

"Hi, babe," Laurie said.

They were completely taken unawares by their sudden tears. They knew she had been very close to death but it seemed that only now, when she was so near to coming back to life, did they realise how far she had been gone from them. They hugged her and let their tears fall on her face so that, at first, they didn't notice her tears falling and mingling with theirs.

"She's crying!" said Laurie, startled.

"Suze! Oh Suze!" Sarah said.

Suze opened her eyes slightly. The light came in through the slits. She could hear her three best friends. Theirs were the voices she had been hearing in her head all this time. They had been there, willing her to talk or at least let them know that she was still alive. She felt like she had been dragged kicking and screaming back to life, despite her resisting with all her might.

Suze listened to them talk. They were falling over themselves trying to tell her things, but she knew she wasn't hearing things for the first time. She had been able to hear them all along, she just hadn't been processing the information. But her brain had kicked back in and it was like a rebooted computer. The processing chip in her mind was sorting and chronologically putting everything in order in her mind.

Despite Diane's order not to cry anymore, she couldn't stop. She had no control over what was happening. She had almost given all of this up. She had almost checked out for good and

left behind these amazing friends who had sat at her side every day since.

“Get the nurse,” she heard Diane order somebody.

Diane had to take charge of course.

She felt the nurse beside her within seconds and felt a reassuring hand on hers. She sensed increased activity as more medics arrived at her bedside. She heard her friends being asked to leave.

Diane leaned in to hug her gently and Suze got the strength from somewhere to pull her to her.

“Don’t make me go back there,” she said hoarsely, barely audibly even to her.

“Go back where?” Diane asked, leaning her ear to Suze’s mouth to try to hear her.

“Home,” she managed to exhale.

“Don’t worry about anything now, Suze. Just concentrate on getting yourself better, OK? I promise I’ll take care of you.”

Chapter 22



Laurie's phone rang. It was a private number, but she answered anyway in case it was Kevin.

"Sda Lorry?" said a male voice with an unmistakable Dublin accent.

"This is Laurie. Who is this?"

"I found a pho-in," said the man on the other end.

Right, he must have found Kevin's phone. "Oh, good, thanks. It must be belonging to my boyfriend. He left it in a taxi."

"I though' he's your bleedin' pimp," said the voice. "Jaysus, my mot wouldn't let me do da to her. He's a lucky man, your fella."

What the hell was he talking about?

"Sorry? I think you must be getting me mixed up with somebody else. You've obviously got the wrong person," said Laurie, about to hang up.

"No, love. I don't tink so. Your fella took a video of the two of yis. It gave me a bleedin' horn, it did. You're a ride, so y'are."

A video? It was impossible, yet Laurie felt her blood run cold.

"I really think you have the wrong person. I –"

"Nah, love. I have ya alrigh'. I tell ya wha', I'll give ya the pho-in back."

"Look, I don't know why you've chosen to call me, but you're mistaken if you think I'm in some video on a phone you have."

"Ah, it's yourself alrigh'. Unless your boy Kev was playin' away from home."

Kev? How did he know the name? Laurie heard his disgusting laugh. She wanted to hang up but she was afraid of her life that the guy wasn't making idle threats.

“I don’t wanta be a prick so I’ll sell it back to ya for a tousand europes. ’Sda OK?”

“Are you aware that you’re attempting to blackmail me? I think the police will be very interested to hear that,” she said, hoping the threat of the law would scare him off.

“Listen, love, I’ll tell ya wha’. I’ll put the video on YouTu-ib and ya can tell the fuckin’ cops anything ya fuckin’ like, yeah? Do ya see where I’m comin’ from?”

Laurie knew he meant business.

“Look,” she said, hoping to reason with this low life, “I’ll meet you and we can talk about this. If it is what you say it is, then I will consider, *em*, buying the phone back from you for one thousand euro.”

“Sorry, love. Did I say a tousand? I menta say two tousand. It’ll be goin’ up every hour. There’s a yard on the right before de entrance to de docks. Meet me there at tree bells. Ya better bring a few extra bob in case the price goes up again an’ all.”

“What? Where? Do you have an Eircode?”

“Would ya fuck off!”

The line went dead.

She rang Kevin. It was the middle of the night in LA but she didn’t care. He eventually picked up.

“Hi, honey,” he said sleepily.

“Don’t you fucking ‘hi honey’ me,” she snarled.

Laurie never spoke to him like that, so he sat up in bed and tried to get his brain into gear. He had been in a deep sleep and wondered if he had heard her right.

“Hon? What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? OK! Where do I start? Well. A strange man called me up and says he has a video of you and me having sex. He’s trying to blackmail me. He wants two thousand euro to get it back or he’s going to put it up on YouTube. And the price is

going to go up if I don't get the money to him in an hour. *Is that good enough for you?*"

Kevin went quiet at the other end, confirming Laurie's worst fears. That the man she loved had filmed them having sex without her consent.

"OK, Laurie. If he has my phone, then there is a video on it. The night before I left for LA for the auditions ... the night we had dinner with your friends ... I ... Jesus. Fuck. I ... You were asleep. I set up my phone to record. I started ... I woke you and we ..."

"You took a video of us making love? What the hell is wrong with you? What were you thinking? Jesus Christ, Kevin. This is my life up in fucking flames. What if he does what he's threatening to do and puts it on YouTube? Or sends it to other contacts on your phone? My parents! My colleagues! Oh Christ!"

"I'm sorry, baby. I never thought it would fall into the wrong hands. I just didn't think. I guess I wanted to have you with me, even when we weren't together," he said, trying to explain the inexplicable.

"I'll handle it. But, Kevin, I never want to see you again after this. You have humiliated me and probably put me in danger too. Don't contact me again. *Do you hear? We're finished!*"

She hung up the phone.

She was shaking with anger and fear. What would this guy do to her when they met up? Would he have a gun? Would he think that she was fair game and try to rape her? Jesus Christ, she couldn't handle this on her own. She didn't want to call the police. The thought of explaining to some garda, most likely a male garda, that she had been filmed in a sexual act made her feel like she was going to throw up. But she had to do something. She had to tell somebody.

She rang Diane and explained what had just happened. Diane assured her that everything was going to be OK. They would get the phone and that would be the end of it. She was convincing and Laurie even believed for a few moments that it would be fine.

Diane rang Sarah and both women arrived at Laurie's apartment within half an hour.

“So, you woke up to Kevin’s face in your nether regions and he was actually getting it all on camera? Jesus Christ, you definitely have a more interesting sex life than I have,” said Diane, staggered as to how this had all come about.

“I don’t need judgement or a lecture, Diane. I just want you guys to be my lookout while I meet with this guy. I’m afraid he’s going to try to harm me.”

“Not judging, just jealous,” said Diane, trying to make the situation seem a little lighter.

“Can we stop talking about it? I need to get that phone and I have to make sure that it’s not on YouTube. I’ll have to kill myself if it gets out. God, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t kill myself.”

“It’s OK. We need to get going and meet this creep, whoever he is.”

“Diane, can you draw up a legal document that he would sign, saying he has no rights to the video and can’t put it on the internet?” suggested Sarah.

“Sure, that’s a great idea. I’m sure he’d be glad to do that. Jesus, Sarah. He’s a scumbag. The law means nothing to people like him. He probably needs the cash to buy drugs. In fact, our best hope is that he’s an addict and doesn’t have the brainpower to copy the video, just wants the money quickly. Let’s get to him before the price goes up again.”

The three women got into Laurie’s Mini and headed to the docks. They were all wearing skinny jeans, boots and leather biker jackets. They hadn’t done it purposely but they obviously all thought that it was suitable attire for fighting crime. They drove towards the city. It was Sunday and town was quiet.

None of them had been to the docks before and didn’t know exactly where they were going. They saw a sign for the ferry and followed in that general direction. They came to the turn-off for the ferry. Sarah was the first to notice the empty yard. A security hut was unoccupied, the barrier was up and they drove through. The scumbag had got through unchecked too, they assumed.

There was no sign of anybody in the enormous yard. There were some discarded shipping containers at the far end and Laurie drove towards them. She stopped about thirty metres from them. She pulled up the handbrake and got out of the car. She told Diane and

Sarah to stay put but to keep an eye on her. She walked towards a wall of containers.

Diane and Sarah watched. They saw her stop as a figure came out of the shadows of the huge metal boxes. The women got out of the car, satisfied that the man had his back to them. They tiptoed around the containers and made their way quietly to where Laurie and the guy were talking. Hidden behind a container, they could hear the conversation getting animated.

“Give me the phone first,” Laurie was saying.

“Not so fast, love. I just wanta have one more look a’ it. You’re bleedin’ gorgeous, ya are. I was pullin’ mesel’ off to it earlier.”

The bastard, thought Diane. He was hellbent on humiliating Sarah further. They could see Laurie looking hopelessly at him, trying to appeal to a better nature that he didn’t have.

“We’ll have to go help her,” said Diane to Sarah.

“How?” said Sarah.

“We’ll go round the back of this container. He should be only a few feet away from us then. We’ll come up from behind him and knock him down to the ground. You can use my scarf to tie him up. OK?”

Sarah had never heard anything so ridiculous in her life. Jump the guy, tie him up with Diane’s Hermes scarf. What the hell were they thinking? Nevertheless, she found herself going along with Diane’s plan.

“OK,” she said and they tiptoed around the back of the container.

Sure enough, he was just ahead of them. Diane led the charge on him and let out a roar. He was so startled that he was rooted to the spot. Diane jumped him from behind and landed full stretch on his back on the ground. She put her knee into his spine and held his hands while Sarah tied them together. She stayed on top of him, trying to keep him down. He was skinny as hell but strong. Sarah worried that she couldn’t hold him for long.

“*Did you get the phone?*” she shouted at Laurie.

“No, it’s in his pocket, I think.”

He was wriggling around on the ground like a giant eel and Diane had to put her hands into his pockets. She found four phones and took all of them. She, Laurie and Sarah pulled him to the back of one of the containers. Sarah was all in at this stage and used her own belt to tie him to the lock of one of the containers.

“Are there more copies of the video?” Diane screamed into his face.

“Go way, ya fuckin’ mad bitch!” he spat at her.

“This isn’t mad, pal. You don’t want to see me when I’m mad,” she said and started to squeeze his balls. He screamed out in pain.

“No. That’s it. Just on da pho-in. I was goin’ ta sell it with the extra feature!”

“Think carefully about that, pal. Are you really sure that’s it?” she said, giving his balls one last good squeeze.

His face turned puce and the women thought he was going to pass out.

“I swear ta God. I just have it on the pho-in. I don’t even have the gear to make proper copies!”

“OK, but if I see this video, me and my friends are coming after you. I have the kind of friends that you don’t ever want to meet. Have you heard of Jake the Butcher?”

“Everybody fuckin’ knows tha’ mad bastard,” he panted.

“Well, guess what? He’s a good friend of mine. And he owes me a few favours. He’s just dying to pay me back. Do you get me?” she said to the wincing, writhing figure on the ground.

“Get – the – fuck – off – me!” he said, struggling to get the words out through the pain

“Do you fucking well understand?” she roared at him.

“Yeah, yeah, I understand!”

They were out of breath when they got back to Laurie’s car. She drove so fast her car tyres screeched on the way out. The security

man was still absent. They hadn't seen any CCTV cameras, though there surely must have been one at the entrance at least – hopefully, if there was one, it wouldn't have captured what just happened down by the containers.

They waited until they caught their breath before talking. Then they all started to laugh with nerves.

“*Oh my God, Diane, you were brilliant!*” screamed Sarah on a high.

“Luckily for us I've been watching reruns of *Cagney & Lacey*,” said Diane breathlessly. She hadn't enjoyed anything as much in years. She just hoped that the little scum bag hadn't made any more copies. They just had to take his word, such as it was, and hope for the best.

“Which phone is it?” asked Sarah, helping Laurie to look through the haul.

“The iPhone. The black one,” said Laurie. She pulled over and took the phone. Kevin's password had been changed. Luckily, she was able to open it using 1234 before it locked her out. She went straight into the photo gallery. The offensive video was there alongside photographs of Malahide and LA and other perfectly innocent, normal shots. She pressed delete. She felt like she had not only erased the video but Kevin too from her life.

She checked the other phones but none had copies of the video on them. She got Diane and Sarah to check them just to make sure.

“I think we should go to the police,” Diane said.

“I dunno. I'd have to tell them why we tied that guy up,” said Laurie.

“OK. Let's just leave it,” said Sarah.

“But what if he's just left there and he dies?” asked Laurie.”

“He's definitely not going to die, Laurie. I'm crap at tying knots. He's probably out of there already.”

“Right. I'll report it anonymously a bit later.”



Back home, Laurie made an emergency call from one of the phones they found in the guy's pocket. She told them that there was a man tied to a container in the port. She hung up the phone. She felt a mixture of relief and grief. She couldn't stop shaking. She didn't want to think about her life now that Kevin wasn't going to be in it. The pain almost made her heart stop. For the first time, she fully understood how Suze must have felt. That death was the preferred option.

Kevin had been frantically trying to reach her. She hadn't answered his FaceTime requests, his calls or his text messages. What kind of person would do that? Who would take a sex video and not tell the main participant?

She thought back to that night and wondered if he had planned it in his head for days ahead. Or was it a spur of the moment thing? Either way it was a gross invasion of her privacy and it was just plain wrong.

She sat on the couch, trying to make sense of her life. In one phone call from a random stranger, Kevin had gone from hero to zero. Her life had been shattered. The fear of the video going online made her almost vomit every time she thought about it. Would she ever feel secure again?

She couldn't face anyone today. She couldn't phone her mum or talk to anybody else. She switched off her phone and crawled into bed. Her editor Penny Whatsherface had emailed her – giving out about the article she had submitted, no doubt. She hadn't had the nerve to look at the email. She lay there wondering if she could cope with this job at all. What if one of the readers had been through the same experience as she had? What advice would she give her? Would she tell her to do what she just did? Would she tell her to erase the person she loved from her life?

Chapter 23



Diane sat with Suze and held her hand. She had a lot on her plate and a lot of things to sort out in a short space of time, but Suze had shot herself to the top of her priority list for now. In every way, Suze was only a shadow of the woman she had been. She was thin and her hair was growing out of its always neat, short style. She didn't look like her old self at all.

"I'm not saying you have to, you know I'm not, but why don't you want to go back home, Suze? Peter and the kids are dying to have you home with them," she said gently.

"Dying? *I will die if I go back there. Don't you see, Diane? Home is the problem. I'm not a good wife or mother. I'm failing at everything. I'm not saying I'll never go back but I can't go now. Don't make me. Please.*"

Diane just patted her hand and said that there was no pressure and that she would look after her. The doctors were willing to discharge her in the next few days and she would visit her GP and go to counselling sessions every week.

Suze was weak and Diane helped her to get out of bed and held on to her while she attempted to walk the length of the hospital corridor. Diane reckoned her physical recovery would happen a lot more quickly than her emotional one.

She was alarmed by how light Suze seemed to be. She felt fragile, but Diane insisted that they do an extra length just to make her push herself. It was probably the reason Suze had asked her to help her – she wouldn't let her off lightly with anything. She had no time for slacking and never saw the point in doing something half-arsed.

She told Suze all about kicking ass down at the docks the day before and Suze actually laughed. It was good to hear it.

Diane arranged to pick up Suze and her things. Suze had asked her to talk to Peter and tell him her plans. Diane was dreading having that conversation. She would have to tell him that the woman he had been married to all those years wasn't ready to go back to the home they had built together.

"She wants me to take her home," Diane said to Peter. "You see —"

"Oh, OK. Well, we'll all be there waitin' for her. We'll try not to make any big fuss or anythin'. Just make it like she was comin' home from a holiday or somethin'."

"No, Peter. She wants to come home with me. She's not ready to go back home to you yet. I'm sorry but I feel that we all should obey her wishes."

"But the kids! What about Emma and Paul? What am I goin' to say to them?"

"I don't know, Peter. It's hard but you're going to have to figure it out. She has asked me to take her home with me and that's what I'm going to do. There'll be doctors' appointments and stuff and I'll let you know about all of that. But for now she'll be with me."

Diane felt terrible for being so direct with him but Suze's welfare was at stake. If she had to hurt Peter and the kids, then so be it. In friendship, sometimes you had to just do it. You had to be strong when your friend couldn't be.

She went in and got Suze and her little case. It was the case she had taken to the airport hotel that night. Diane would have to make sure that she threw it out with the rubbish. She didn't want any reminders hanging around the place. She never wanted Suze going back there ever again.

When they got back to Diane's house she got Suze settled into one of the rooms. Suze had been in Diane's house years before and had

almost forgotten how out of this world it was. She thought again how ridiculous it was to have a house this size for two people. Of course, she wouldn't say that now – after all, she was a guest in their beautiful home.

The house looked very bare, though, and Suze couldn't quite put her finger on it. She was sure there used to be a grand piano in the foyer even though Diane had only done lessons as a child and never played now. As far as she knew Will didn't play either. Maybe they saw sense and got rid of it.

She was sure there used to be a lot of art on display too. The walls were looking pretty bare, come to think about it. Anyway, she had enough to think about, so she forgot about the bare walls and the absent grand piano.

Later she went down to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. The doctor had recommended green tea and she was sure that Diane would have some.

Diane was doing some paperwork at the island. The TV was on in the background.

“What's on?” Suze asked.

“*The Sopranos*,” Diane said, glad to see her friend up and about.

“Getting some more tips?” asked Suze.

“Ha! Yeah, I'm thinking of raiding a few drug dens later on.” Diane smiled, going over and giving Suze a gentle hug.

To her surprise Suze hugged her back and the hug felt real and strong.

“Do you have green tea?” asked Suze.

“The press right above you. In the packet on the right.”

“Would you like some?”

“Sure.”

Diane flicked off the TV and they sat and drank their tea.

“The doctor said I should try to stay off caffeine,” Suze said, holding up her cup to Diane.

“Good idea. For everyone really. Green tea is great for your metabolism too.”

Suze needed Diane to be real. She didn't want her friend pussyfooting around her right now. She needed Boot Camp Di

to knock her back into shape.

“Diane. I need you to be yourself. I need you to be real.”

“OK, good. This green tea is awful shite. I don’t know how anyone can drink it.”

She got up and poured it down the sink. She made herself a real cup of tea and sat down again.

“Do you want to talk?” she asked.

“*Em.* I don’t know.”

“It’s OK. We don’t have to. I just want you to know that you can say anything to me. I’m shockproof. But you know that.”

“I want to. I just don’t know where to start.”

“Well, start at the beginning. What made you go to the airport hotel that night? Did something big happen to trigger it? Did somebody say something?”

“I’d just had enough. It wasn’t anything that was said or done that day. To me every day was just more of the same. The only relationships I had with worth talking about was with you guys. Emma and Paul don’t need me. I know, I know they do need their mother. But I’ve been a shit mother lately, Diane. Don’t bother trying to argue with me. I have nothing to say to them that I haven’t already said to them for years. I have nothing to give them. I am so fucking far down in the shit that I have a hard time putting any value on myself. I suppose it just came to a point where the value was zero, so I just wanted it to end. And by ‘it’, I mean the pain of feeling like I’m totally useless and invisible. I suppose part of it is trying to prove that you’re not invisible – only it’s too late, you’re dead.”

Oh God. Diane felt like she was way out of her depth on this one. How was she meant to take care of a woman who felt so worthless that she might try to check out again? She had done a sweep of the house and had thrown out all medication down to the aspirin in the kitchen press. She had put all the sharp knives and the scissors away too, just in case.

“I’m not going to lie, Suze. I’m scared. What if I can’t do enough to help you? What if I say something stupid or bitchy and you take it the wrong way and you try to – well, you know?”

“Diane, I need you to be yourself. So don’t think that you’re going to set me off again. You’re not. I’m lucky to be here. I

know that. The doctor said, if I had been washing the pills down with water like I planned, then I would be dead. It was the wine that made me puke it all up. You know what I'm like with the vino, always getting sick. I have no intention of trying to kill myself again so please don't worry about that. I'll go to all the shrinks they send me to and I'll do whatever I need to do. I know I need to do something to make myself better. I can't spend the next forty years living like the last forty, feeling useless and invisible. I need to find something I'm good at. I need to start loving myself." She was embarrassed by how clichéd it sounded.

"Loving yourself is good. We all love you, so you'll have to start listening to the reasons why we do and believe us. You take all the time you need."

But Diane knew that they didn't have all that much time left. They had to vacate the house in two weeks' time.

Chapter 24



Laurie woke up the next morning and wanted to go straight back to sleep. Her first thought was of Kevin. He had also been her last thought before she went to sleep the night before. She wanted to stay in bed for the rest of her life, but her stubbornness wouldn't let him do that to her.

She got up and put on some coffee to brew. She poured herself a cup and sat down at her desk. She flicked on her computer and saw the email from Penny. Her first instinct was to delete it without reading it, but she reckoned if she was out the job before she even started, then she needed to know.

She would have to give up this apartment and she would definitely not be moving into Diane's mansion as planned. She'd be hightailing it back to her old bedroom in her parents' house.

The tone of the first line of the email was friendly, so she read the full thing – only to discover that Penny was full of praise for her piece. She had also attached emails sent in by readers for the “Dear Laurie” column. Laurie put her cursor on the file and clicked it open. There were over twenty letters. *Wow*. Who knew? Laurie was immediately buoyed with confidence.

There were other emails from Kevin. These she did delete. She checked her phone and there were thirteen missed calls from him too. Thirteen, unlucky for some. Unlucky for Kevin because she wouldn't be calling him back. She needed to change her number, so she got dressed and went to get herself a new phone.

As she walked along she turned around a few times, thinking she heard Kevin's voice behind her. His voice was programmed into her head and she imagined every male voice she heard was his. This would drive her crazy, she thought. The man in the phone shop sounded like him though he wasn't even from Dublin.

She needed to listen to a Stephen Fry tape or something to drown out the voice that was implanted in her brain. Kevin's voice would only be the beginning. His touch, the feel of him. His breath, his smell. These things were all woven into her being too. She would pack up all of his things and have them sent to LA or to Diane's house for when he moved in.

The physical things were going to be easy to shift but the emotional things would be more difficult to get rid of. Diane and Sarah seemed to agree that Kevin was a total shitbag to do that to her. She respected their opinions and, although they didn't actually tell her to get rid of him, she knew that they would. She couldn't ever trust him again. Without trust they had nothing.

Laurie got back home and started to put Kevin's belongings into plastic bags. She picked up his T-shirts and held them up to her face. She could smell him off each one, even the freshly laundered ones. He had T-shirts going back years and years and he still wore them all.

She had bought him proper shirts, but they always stayed hanging in his closet, mostly with the tags still on, until Laurie would put them in a charity bag. She remembered the day of her friend Grace's wedding. Kevin was meeting her at the venue because he was filming that day. She had warned him not to turn up in jeans and a T-shirt as it would be disrespectful to the bride and groom.

She wasn't convinced that he would heed her and was dreading his arrival. When he showed up, she barely recognised him. He had borrowed a suit and the whole shebang from the wardrobe department in RTÉ and he was transformed. He looked amazing. She had never seen him dressed up before that minute. He was wearing a fitted expensive-looking suit with a white shirt and grey tie.

The dancing started, and he put out his hand to ask her to dance. She stood up and danced with the most handsome man in the room by a mile.

She muttered "Thank you for dressing up" into his neck as they danced.

"I wouldn't let you down, you know that," he said.

Grace had joked that they upstaged the bride and groom that day, but Laurie wasn't sure that she was actually joking. She knew

they made a striking couple and people literally did stop in mid-dance to look at the impossibly handsome guy lead his beautiful girl around the dance floor.

From that night on, she believed that he would never let her down. Well, spectacular fail, Kev, she thought. She still couldn't believe that he had been so stupid. The warnings she had heard that once on a computer nothing could ever be truly deleted played on a loop in her brain. She prayed to a god she didn't believe in that her mother and father would never have to see her in such a compromising situation.

She was angry again now and started to shove clothes into bags and tie them tightly. She made a few trips to the basement storage area where all of Kevin's stuff was now lying in cheap, black plastic bags. When she was satisfied that she had got rid of every piece of him from the apartment she turned on her computer, ready to immerse herself in somebody else's problems for a change.

Maybe we are all idiots, she thought as she read through the letters. There was no way she was going to be able to publish every letter, so she had to pick out the most important ones. They were mostly about love gone bad, a subject she knew plenty about.

Most were from women of course. Surely all of these men didn't set out to break hearts, so how come so many broken hearts had written in looking for advice? One woman who signed herself as "Grim in Manchester" wrote that her boyfriend had slept with her best friend but only because her friend hadn't had sex with anyone for over a year. It was pity sex, he said in his own defence. Should she believe that he had acted out of kindness to her best bud? She put that into a folder she titled "WTF?"

She found one or two others that belonged in that folder too. People had to be kidding her. There was a woman who asked: if she was regularly getting off with her neighbour was it really an affair as they were both women and should she tell her husband?

Nobody had written in to say that their boyfriend had taken a video of them having sex thankfully as she still hadn't come up with a proper and reasonable response to that particular problem.

Chapter 25



Malahide looked lovely this morning, Sarah thought. In fact, everything looked better since her night with Doctor Tom. Overnight, she had almost forgotten how devastated she had been over Joe. What was coming over her? Love? She couldn't imagine something like that happening so quickly but who could tell? Whatever the feeling was, she liked it.

She hummed a song under her breath while she worked. Claire and Melanie gave her funny looks. She had always been a good boss but since the "Joe Bomb" had gone off, she knew she had been moody and short-tempered with them. She could see the girls were glad to have the old Sarah back and they enjoyed the easy banter that they used to have before.

She still missed Joe a lot. May did too. She gave the girls some jobs to do and went into her office. She asked herself if this was it. Had she fully forgiven Joe and was she ready to talk to him? Part of her still wanted him to suffer but she realised that she was the one suffering without him in her life. She dialled his number, as familiar to her as her own.

"Sarah," said the old familiar voice.

"Hey. How are you?"

"Good. I'm eh ... yeah, good. I'm all the better for hearing you."

"Me too. You, I mean. I miss you. Everything I do, I want to tell you about it but you're not there. I was in BTs the other day and got loads of new clothes."

"Really? What did you buy?"

"Jeans. Really nice ones that hold in your tummy and ... Jesus, what are we like? What are we doing talking about clothes?" she said with a laugh.

“I know, it’s gas. Old habits, I suppose. How is May? Jesus, I miss her so much.”

Sarah could hear his voice crack. She felt like the worst kind of lowlife for keeping them apart for so long.

“She’s fine. I’m very proud of her, Joe. She has taught me a thing or two about compassion and tolerance, I can tell you. We may have screwed up each other’s lives but May ... well, we did everything right with her.”

“You never screwed up my life. You only added to it. I loved you. I still love you. I hope you believe that.”

“I do, I do,” said Sarah, laughing a little. God, it was good to hear his voice, good to talk to him. “But you did kind of screw up my life. I was ... I mean, I’m still shocked by the whole thing. I don’t know, maybe I am a bit dim, but I just didn’t see it coming.”

“I’m being honest when I say that I didn’t either. I never thought I’d meet a man in that way. I always thought that we’d end up growing old together. I obviously repressed my true feelings because I was happy the way things were with us.”

“I think we’re both guilty of repressing our feelings. We slept in the same bed for years and rarely touched each other. The odd kiss goodnight was about as raunchy as it got. A good marriage counsellor would have figured it out in five minutes’ flat if we’d bothered going to one.”

“I wish we could get over the blame and the recriminations and get back to being a family. But there’s an extra person in the family now. I love Paolo and I could never live without him. He completes me like I never ... sorry ...” Joe let his sentence trail off.

“It’s OK. I met him, you know.”

“*You met Paolo? How?*”

“He came to The Bakery. I wasn’t very nice to him, to be honest. He said you thought he was in Turin with his sick aunt or something.”

“Yes, I remember that. What did he ...? Why did ...?”

“He wanted to try to make things alright, that’s all. He told me how much you missed us, and he wanted us all to kiss and make up. I’m sorry but I pretty much told him to piss off back to Italy.

He met May. She liked him by the way. They discovered they have a love of food in common.”

“He met May? This is mad. I had no idea he was going to go see you two. I don’t know how to feel about it. I mean, I could kill him or kiss him, I can’t make up my mind.”

“Steady on. I don’t want that image in my head, thanks,” said Sarah.

“Sorry. Did May really like him? It would mean a lot to me if she accepted him. Us.”

“Yes, it should. She is very discerning, is our daughter. The girls in The Bakery nearly fainted when Paolo walked in and ordered an espresso. He’s a very beautiful young man.”

“He is. He is beautiful in every way. Like you are, Sarah. I’ve been very blessed with the people I love. And he’s not that young, really. He’s almost thirty. I mean, I’m not a Sugar Daddy.”

“Yeah, right,” said Sarah, laughing again. “I was thinking it’s about time May paid you a visit.”

“Are you serious? You’d let her come?”

“She’s been wanting to – I should never had made her feel like she couldn’t. It’s just that it was hard for me to get past the anger.”

“The situation is so strange. I mean, we went from being Mr. and Mrs. Middle Ireland, living in suburbia to me ... well, you know the rest.”

“I sure do.”

“Thank you, Sarah. This means the world to me.”

Sarah hung up the phone. It was strange talking to Joe when everything had changed but nothing had changed either. He sounded like his old self, but he had changed too. He sounded, what was it? Happier? Yes, he definitely sounded happier than ever before.

Chapter 26



Diane got a call from the estate agent. He phoned to tell her that she wouldn't need to vacate immediately. He said something had come up with the buyer. It sure had, Diane thought, and once again felt bad for Laurie. Laurie was still scared shitless that the video would appear online somewhere. How could Kevin have been so bloody stupid? He wasn't a kid, he was thirty-six years of age. Mature. Or he should be. He had no excuse for what he did. Diane was certain that he was suffering in his own way for his colossal mistake.

Kevin's lapse in reason had given Diane a bit more time to plan for her future. She had a few other things to take care of before she left. Suze seemed to be a bit brighter in herself, but Diane didn't know when she would be well enough not to need her constant presence.

Right on cue, Suze came into the kitchen.

"Who was that on the phone?" she asked.

"Oh, it was just work," Diane lied.

"Please, go if you need to. I'll be fine by myself."

Diane had no intention of leaving Suze alone. It was still early days and she would never forgive herself if anything happened. "No, I'll just pop upstairs and do a bit of work if that's OK."

"Of course. I think I'll sit out in the garden and read. It's a beautiful day."

Diane hadn't noticed the weather. She had other things on her mind. She had lots to do before she could finally move to Spain and start her new life. She had toyed with the idea of opening an art gallery but quickly realised that she didn't know enough about art to be successful at it. She needed to be able to make a living. It had come to her by accident. She met a friend who was

a buyer for a large department store. They got chatting and her friend had divulged how much profit was to be made from selling designer brands. Diane couldn't get the conversation out of her mind. Marbella had its share of designer boutiques but Diane's vision and her competitive streak made her determined to go into the rag trade.

"OK, Suze. Give me a shout if you need me."

"You're too good to me, Diane, you know that?" Suze said, sounding very sane and more herself, much to Diane's relief.

Diane's passport now bore the name Diane Ní Fheoister, her maiden name in Irish. She had never been a fan of the Irish language and was the worst in her class at the subject. She hated being forced to learn the strange words and indecipherable poetry. But when she needed to hide her identity, her Irish name became invaluable to her.

Over the past few weeks she had auctioned her paintings, handbags, shoes, jewellery and other valuable items through a variety of auction houses. She had opened a Spanish bank account and the money from the sale of her art now sat in the account, waiting for her to find a use for it.

For all intents and purposes she was self-employed. She had notified all of her clients that she would no longer be practising law and had recommended colleagues they could contact if they wished. She would miss the law. It had been her life for more than twenty years. But Diane wasn't one for regrets. Things had happened. She reacted in the best way she knew how.

Will moved to Budapest to take over at the helm of Hungary's largest bank. She didn't miss him. She supposed they had separated years before. They had become more individuals than a couple, the longer their marriage endured. He called her but she never picked up the phone. She sent him a text to tell him that she wanted a divorce. Her friend Sharon was handling it for her. She didn't want to speak to him ever again.

Her mum was happy for Diane to take the apartment. She asked a few questions but didn't pry too much. She knew that Diane knew her own mind and would tell her what was going on when she was good and ready.

She would miss her friends. It was the one thing she wouldn't let herself think about too much. They were her family. She had

known Sarah and Suze all her life and couldn't imagine what it would be like not to be able to see them, and Laurie the latecomer, whenever she wanted to. She imagined that FaceTime would become a huge part of her life. She also hoped that they would visit her in Spain. They had all become so busy with their lives that they hadn't stopped to notice what was really happening. Events lately had shown them that they needed to be more present for each other.

Chapter 27



Suze knew she was causing Peter and the children great pain by staying with Diane and not going 'home' to them. But she couldn't go back. She wasn't sure about a lot of things, but she was one-hundred-per-cent certain that going back to her old life would be the end of her. She loved Peter, Paul and Emma but they would all need to get used to living a new reality.

Suze felt safe with Diane. Diane was like a big sister who wouldn't let anyone mess with her. She and Diane always had a strong friendship, but Suze never imagined she would test the friendship to the degree she was doing now.

She thought about Emma's sad face and her heart broke for her little girl. But she was no good to her the way she was. She needed to fix herself before she ever tried to be a mother to Emma again. She wanted to be a role model for her beautiful daughter yet up until now she was failing miserably. It wouldn't be easy, but she would make Emma proud of her somehow.

Suze had been living with Diane for a whole month. She attended her therapy sessions three times a week. She went to her GP every second day. She wasn't allowed to drive yet so Diane drove her to and from the hospital and the doctor's surgery for her appointments. She cooked for her and did everything just short of dressing her in the morning. Diane was a star. A really good friend. Suze hoped to be able to repay her someday for everything she was doing for her.

Suze was working very hard with her doctors to try to get to the root of the pain. She had purged herself of the shame of having done what she had done. She was trying to start her life over with the extra baggage of having tried to kill herself! The deep probing wasn't easy for her to do.

She had never liked herself and she never took the time to figure out exactly why. The doctors were trying to make her feel worthy and valuable, but she had struggled at the beginning with the whole concept. It was only with deep introspection that she saw that there was actually nothing to dislike about herself.

She had never done anything bad to anyone, she had never been a particularly mean person either. She just never thought she was that special. She had never felt that she was worth bothering with. She projected that onto Peter too and thought that he wasn't too special either if he chose her to be his life partner.

But she was making progress. Her mind was opening up to the thought that she was in fact a worthy person. She had made choices in her life but what she was now did not have to define her. She had plenty of time to do all the things she wanted to do with her life. She had been there for her husband and their children when they needed her. It was now her time. It was time for Suze to put herself first and find her own joy. Where the hell she was going to find it she didn't know. That was the million-dollar question.



On one of the days when Diane picked her up from one of her appointments, she suggested to Suze that she invite Paul and Emma for dinner.

“They miss you. Why don't you ask them over? You know I've no problem with you having them come over.”

“I don't know what I'll say to them. What if they don't want to come?”

“Of course they'll want to come. You're their mother.”



Suze opened the door and saw her two kids standing there. Paul looked handsome and grown up and Emma looked so sad and so

lovely. She hugged them like she hadn't done for a long time. She could see the tears in their eyes and she could hardly stand the pain of it. Paul tried very hard to hold himself together but was unsuccessful. Suze was glad he let himself cry. Keeping your emotions bottled up led to all sorts of bother. And Suze knew that more than most.

"C'mon now. Stop the crying. You both look great. My God, I can't believe that you're my little babies," said Suze.

She ushered them through to the kitchen and sat them down at the island unit. This was weird. How many times had they had dinner together? Hundreds of times? Thousands? And now Suze was acting like a dotty old aunt with her own children. Maybe this had been a big mistake, maybe Diane had got it wrong.

"Mum, you look nice," said Emma kindly.

"Yeah, your hair is longer. It's nice," said Paul.

Suze was surprised that they had noticed any changes in her.

"You should let it grow some more. You look younger," continued Emma.

"Oh my God, all these compliments – stop it, I'm blushing."

She went over and squeezed her daughter's shoulder. She was sure that Emma hadn't looked at her, really critically looked at her, for a long time but now she was noticing changes.

Paul and Emma marvelled at Diane's house. Suze took them on a grand tour and Emma couldn't believe that Diane owned a house like it. The 'suicide attempt' was the elephant in the room. They tiptoed around it every which way until Suze could no longer not talk about it. When they got back to the kitchen after the grand tour, she spoke up.

"Look, loves, I'm sorry for putting you through what I put you through. I don't know how much you want to know but I'll answer any questions you have. If I can. I don't have all the answers but I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out what made me do it."

She looked at her children who were in fact now adults for all intents and purposes and she felt ashamed to have hurt them so much. But for the first time she followed the shame with an understanding and a forgiveness for herself that hadn't been there before.

“It’s my fault – I hardly spoke to you,” said Emma. “I stayed in my room and was on my phone so much I –”

“Oh, darling, no! It isn’t your fault. Do you hear me?” Suze said, taking her daughter’s face in her hands. “This is not your fault so get that out of your head right now. This is down to me. *Me*. Nobody else. I was sick. I have been depressed for a long time. I coped day to day, but I should have confided in someone sooner.” *Fuck*. This was what Suze feared most. That her kids or anybody she loved would try to take the blame for what she did. Emma was a blank canvas and Suze had spent her life up until now trying to keep that canvas spotless and neat and white. The last thing she wanted was the big black stain of shame over what she had done to colour Emma’s life. No way was that going to happen. “I lost myself somewhere along the way. I couldn’t feel my own worth. But I was so wrong. I was ill but I’m getting better, much better.”

“When are you coming home?” asked Emma timidly.

“Emma, to be honest, I don’t know. I don’t even know if I will ever go home. I love you. And that will never change. I love you and Paul, and I love your dad. But I can’t go back to our old life like nothing has happened. You’ll be off to college in September and I can’t see me and Dad sitting at home in that empty house. It would be a very bad move for me. I need to go forward, not back. We just have to figure out a way for us all to be happy. Just not under the one roof like we were.”

Suze would have loved to tell Emma that she had made a big fuck-off mistake and that she was going to move back home. That they could bring all their dirty washing home at weekends and they could all have Sunday lunch together. But the thought filled her with horror. And horror was something that Suze had to avoid in the aftermath of her suicide attempt.

“What about you, Paul?”

“I just want you to be happy, Mam.”

The simplicity of the words almost shattered Suze. Happiness was all she wanted for her children too. It was all she wanted for all the people she loved. But to think that her son wanted it for her too was just too much. The number of tears that she had shed and that those around her had shed amazed Suze. But she

was sick of tears now. She craved laughter and happiness and, most of all, she craved something good to eat.

She took chicken out of the fridge and some vegetables to make her kids their favourite Thai chicken curry. Suze opened drawers and checked the countertops but there were no sharp knives anywhere. Diane.

“Sorry, kids. It looks like it’s take-away. The crazy lady is not allowed to use the knives.”

“How is your mam?” asked Peter when Emma and Paul came home.

“She’s OK. She looks good,” said Emma, immediately ashamed of herself.

She wanted to be able to tell her dad that her mother was a mess and that she wanted to come back home but none of that was true. Emma thought that Suze looked better than she had ever looked. She used to be so unhappy with her weight but now she looked slimmer and her longer hair made her look younger. She would spare her dad all of that detail.

“It’s great that you had time together,” said Peter. “What did she cook for yis? I miss her cookin’.”

“She didn’t cook anything, she couldn’t,” Paul told him. “Diane hid all the sharp knives.”

“Oh.” What else could he say to that? Of course Diane had to hide the knives. And any medicines. And any other object that Suze could use to harm herself. Would he have known to do that if Suze was here? He didn’t think so. Suze probably knew that and that was why she felt safer in Diane’s care.

Peter felt like hell for his two kids. He had played his part in Suze’s decision to kill herself. He had been slowly killing her for years, he thought. He had stopped complimenting her. He had stopped telling her things about his life and his work. He had stopped wanting her. He did a lot of stopping and no starting anything in their place.

He hadn't done anything to try to make things better between them. Worst of all, he didn't actually know that anything was wrong in the first place. He imagined that couples grew apart. End of story. He imagined that people eventually had said everything that needed to be said and that in the end they ran out of things to say. He had seen old couples in the pub sitting side by side for a few hours and not saying one iota to each other. He had thought it was funny. He had thought it was normal.

But he had learned the hard way that it was very much not normal or in the least bit funny. Suze was right, she was only forty-three. Or was she forty-two? He should bloody well know what age his wife is. Anyway, they were young. Well, they weren't old. Peter hadn't given any thought really to what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

He imagined and hoped that he and Suze would someday become grandparents and that was fine with him. Suze had said that she was freaked out about the prospect of being a grandmother. How did he not see that Suze wanted so much more out of life for herself than he wanted? How was he so blind to her needs?

He deserved a kick in the arse for being so stupid but who was going to give it to him now? He regretted all the times he had said no. He remembered the Friday she rang him up at work and told him she had booked a room in a city-centre hotel and that she would meet him in the bar. He told her that he was playing a darts match in the local that night and that he couldn't let the lads down.

He hadn't let the lads down, but he had let his wife down badly. He told her to call one of her friends and she had replied that she didn't want her friends, she wanted him. Imagine! She was in bed when he got home that night. She didn't make a big deal out of it. She didn't rant and rave. But she slept with her back to him for weeks afterwards.

He didn't deserve to make love to her for that stunt, so he took his punishment without complaint. He had turned down lots more propositions besides, much to his shame. If he could take her up on even one of those offers right now, he would jump at the chance, but he knew it was unlikely. Suze had signalled loud and clear that she wasn't counting on him as part

of her recovery and, although it saddened him, he couldn't blame her for blocking him out.

"How are you kids?" he asked.

"Grand," said Paul.

Peter had hoped that his son would say something more than just "grand". He knew the kids were hurting and that they were confused about what was happening. He wanted them to understand that no matter where he and Suze lived or no matter what happened in the future, they were loved as much as ever by both of them.

"I don't mind as long as she's OK. I'm worried about you too, Dad," said Emma.

"Ah no, don't worry about me, love. I'll be grand. I've made mistakes and I'll do my best to make it up to your mam but don't worry about me. I'm a big boy now and I can look after meself. Just make sure that you don't forget about me and come home to visit the odd time."

"Every weekend," said Paul and Emma in unison.

"I better learn to cook so, wha?"

Emma went to her room. She would be out of here soon, she thought. She looked at the babyish white furniture that had been in her room for the last ten years. All her childhood things were scattered around the place too. She needed to put them away. She was nearly eighteen now. An adult.

She had been such a selfish little bitch though. She had taken her mother for granted for most of her life. She had always been her daddy's little girl. Her mother had Paul. She seemed to like him best anyhow. Or was that in her head?

What made her think that she preferred Paul? Nothing would come to mind that would prove her long-held belief. Her mam used to take her to town when she was younger. She would be thrilled with all the beautiful things her mam bought for her, showing them off to her friends and anyone who would look.

As she got older their shopping trips became fractious. To say that she and her mam had different ideas about fashion was a huge understatement. Suze was always trying to get her to pick out

“nice” outfits when all Emma wanted to wear was tracksuit leggings and hoodies. Like normal kids.

The outings became too argumentative and eventually they stopped altogether with Emma preferring to go to town with her friends and pick out some decent clothes. She eventually stopped showing her mother what she had bought, not able to stand the rolling eyes and the sighs that followed.

The relationship they enjoyed when she was a little girl was so far removed from what it was now that it made Emma wince. How that they both let it get so out of hand?

Emma loved her mam. Suze did everything for them. When they came in from school, there was always something nice to eat. She remembered regularly telling her mam she wasn't hungry and not eating what had been lovingly prepared for her. She felt herself going red from the shame of it. She would make it up to her. She didn't care if she came back home or where she chose to live. She was still her mother and Emma very much still her mother's daughter.

Paul closed the door in his old room. Tonight had been heavy duty. He didn't know if he felt worse for his mam or his dad. His father seemed like a spare part rattling around the house without his mam. But Paul had to admit that his mam seemed to be getting better which was the most important thing right now.

He had worried when they got the invitation to dinner that Emma would freak out and go all girly and crying but, in fairness to her, she had held it together well enough.

He had known all along how miserable his mam had been. It was one of the reasons he moved out. He didn't know how to fix her. Deep down he knew it wasn't his job to do so but he felt weighed down by the responsibility either way.

So he left and got a flat in town, pretending that he wanted to be nearer to college to study. He didn't feel to blame for what his mam had done. He loved her and he was always kind to her. He tried to be helpful when he was at home, but he couldn't bear

her sadness. He loved her too much to be able to bear the feelings of despair that radiated from her every pore.

He decided he would keep in touch with her more. He would text her and send her funny videos. She loved animals and she used to love to laugh. He didn't have any medical expertise to offer but he did know where to get loads of funny cat videos.

Chapter 28



Diane pulled up at the Village Tennis club with Suze in the passenger seat. Sarah and Laurie's cars were already in the car park.

"I'm going to get a new car," said Suze, stepping out onto the path.

"You'll have to wait till you're off your medication," said Diane matter-of-factly.

"Yeah, of course," said Suze.

Sarah and Laurie were warming up. When they saw Suze with Diane, they ran to her and almost hugged her to death.

"Cut it out," said Diane. "We still want her to be able to play and she won't be able to if you break her."

They ignored Diane and held onto their dear friend for a while longer. They all had tears in their eyes. Again.

"Oh, for fuck's sake! Enough with the crying. Let's bloody well play tennis," ordered Diane.

They agreed to implement the no-tears policy and started to warm up together.

"I have to warn you guys," said Suze. "I did a lot of playing tennis in my head before I came to. I think it was a kind of therapy for me."

"OK, time to put your money where your mouth is. You can serve," said Diane, hitting the balls to her.

Suze hit a great first service that Laurie couldn't return. Suze had been very nervous when Diane suggested they all play their usual Sunday game. Word would have spread around the club by now about what she had done. Also, she was worried that her game might have been affected by her illness. But she needn't

have worried. It was like she had never stopped. The old competitive spirit was there too, and she was glad that Diane and Laurie were really trying to beat them. But it was Suze and Sarah's match. They annihilated Diane and Laurie who clearly had other things on their minds.

They went to the bar as usual and ordered their drinks. They all looked at Diane when she sat down with a cappuccino.

"What? Jesus, you think I'm an alcoholic if I have a few glasses of wine. You're still not happy when I'm having a cup of coffee. You're a hard crowd to please."

The subject turned to Suze and Doctor. Tom.

"Yes, we've been seeing a good bit of each other," said Sarah innocently.

"I'd say you have, alright. Is there any bit of each other you haven't seen at this stage?" said Diane.

"Very funny. But no, there isn't," said Sarah with a huge grin. "I'm planning a surprise for him. While May is in Rome, I've booked a little hotel on the Amalfi Coast. He thinks we're staying in Rome but I've organised a rental car and everything. I hope he'll be happy."

"Who wouldn't be happy to go to the Amalfi coast?" said Laurie. "It's one of the most wonderful, romantic places on earth. Oh you are so lucky, Sarah! Lucky to have found Tom after all the stuff with Joe."

"I know. I feel so blessed that my life has taken a turn for the better. I was so friggin' miserable there for a while that I thought I'd go mad. Sorry, Suze."

"Please don't apologise any time the words suicide, mad or lunatic are mentioned. OK? Now, please let's just get back to normal."

"So. Any word from Kevin, the actor turned filmmaker?" asked Diane.

"I unfollowed him on Social Media. I changed my phone number, and I closed my old email account. He's now writing to me. A few letters every week. The letter box will be full soon, but I can't bring myself to throw them out. It's funny I have no trouble deleting an email, but I feel that the effort he took to put actual pen to paper makes them deserving of preservation."

“*Mmm*. It’s hard to think of anything belonging to Kevin being deserving of anything except a good kick in the arse,” said Diane.

“I know you all think he is the worst creep in the world, and I do too. But he is also the person I thought I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Speaking of Kevin, Diane, any word on him moving into the house?”

If looks could kill, then Laurie would be stone dead. The minute the words left her mouth, she knew she had messed up. Diane hadn’t told the others that she was selling up. Hell, she hadn’t even told Laurie really. She had found out by mistake.

“What house?” Suze and Sarah said almost in unison.

They were looking from Diane to Laurie and they knew that something was up. Diane looked mad and Laurie looked very afraid.

“I’m sorry, Diane. I forgot that the others don’t know. I ... I’m sorry.”

Diane heaved a huge sigh. “Well, I hadn’t planned to tell you like this, but Will and I are selling Copper Beech House. It’s all a bit forced really. Will mortgaged the house behind my back when the bank was in trouble. And, well, we’re left with an enormous debt on a house that’s not even worth a fraction of the amount we owe.”

The others still had their mouths open. Laurie hadn’t heard the full reason they were selling, and she was staggered by Diane’s revelation. Maybe all men were pricks. Some made secret sex tapes and some hid the fact that they were gay. Some were dishonest and some ignored your presence until you felt you were invisible. What Will had done to Diane wasn’t the same as what Kevin had done to her, Laurie thought, but they were both betrayals.

“And then I landed on your doorstep, Diane,” said Suze. “You should have told me. I would have –”

“Don’t even think that. I’m happy you’re with me. Anyway, how could I tell you? You asked for my help and there was no way I was going to refuse that. You’re my pet project, and you’re keeping my mind off wanting to bloody strangle him.”

“Jesus, I can’t believe you kept this all to yourself,” said Sarah.

“Look, there was a lot going on. I’m fine, I’ve got a plan of action that I’m working on. Believe me, if I needed anything, I would have asked.”

“What’s the plan?” Laurie asked.

“I’m moving to Spain. Marbella to be precise. I’m going to move into mum’s apartment. I’m looking for a premises to open a boutique. It’ll be a whole fresh start.”

“What about Will? What about you? How will you manage?” asked Sarah, the questions tumbling out.

“He’s working in Budapest. We’re in the process of getting a divorce. Our marriage was over years ago when I think about it. He’s been married to his work more than he’s been married to me. The age difference really kicked in in the last few years. I loved that he was older when I was young. I think I found him attractive because I missed having a father figure. And I didn’t even need a shrink to figure that one out! If he has any sense, he’ll stay in Budapest. There’s nothing for him here anymore. I’ve been selling everything valuable we have. He didn’t even notice that all the art is gone off the walls. When we used to have his colleagues over in the old times, they would all comment on the pieces, but Will looked at them like he had never seen them before in his life. Lucky for me. I bought most of it myself from my own income so technically they’re mine.”

“You’re going to be living in Spain? You can’t just up and leave us,” said Sarah.

The others chimed in with agreement. Diane was the linchpin of the group. Would they even be a group without her?

“I’m not just up-ing and leaving. I’ve been planning this for a while. I’ve passed on all my cases at work. The sale of the house will go through quickly enough. I’m pretty much ready to go. You’ll have to come visit me. It can be your bolthole.”

“But how will we all fit in a tiny apartment?” asked Sarah.

“Who said anything about tiny? It’s bloody enormous. It’s a penthouse with a roof terrace and a pool. I should fucking hope that I don’t look like a woman who would live in a tiny flat.”

“Hey, but what has this got to do with Kevin?” asked Sarah.

“He’s the one who bought my house.”

Diane and Laurie watched the news register with Suze and Sarah.

“He bought it for us,” said Laurie sadly.

“I’m sorry,” said Sarah. “He’s such a bloody fool. I can actually see both of you in that house. God, I want to strangle him.”

Suze was quiet on the drive home to Malahide.

“I know this must have come as a shock to you,” said Diane.

“Yeah. It’s just that I thought I had all the time in the world to get my act together. It seems like I’ll have to hurry up and get a plan of action together for myself.”

“Don’t worry I won’t be going anywhere until you’re better. That’s a promise.”

Chapter 29



May had packed and unpacked her bag a dozen times. She didn't know what she would need for her trip to Rome. She was excited about seeing her dad and she could hardly sleep. She knew it took a lot for her mum to forgive him and she loved her more than ever for agreeing to let her go.

Her mum had told her that she was going to fly to Rome with her, stay around Rome for a couple of days and fly back with her. May had overheard Sarah's phone conversations and knew very well that Sarah wasn't going to be alone.

Tom obviously wasn't going to be on the same flight unless they had an elaborate plan where he would wear a disguise! She had met Tom and he seemed nice. He wasn't trying to be all cool and stuff. May liked that about him. She was happy for Sarah. Her mum deserved to have some fun too.

May had looked up so much online about Rome that her head spun with the information overload. She had heard so much about the Sistine Chapel that it was on top of her list of things she wanted to do. Pizza, pasta and all kinds of gelato was a close second. No matter what they would do she would do it with her dad and that was enough to make her feel deliriously happy.

She pulled the bag down the stairs behind her and joined Sarah in the kitchen. They were booked on an early flight to Aeroporto Leonardo da Vinci. Sarah was brewing some coffee to get the day started. May knew there was no point in talking to her mum until she had some caffeine inside her so she took out her bowl and poured milk on her cereal. The only other sound in the kitchen was the low hum of music on the radio.

May ate her breakfast in silence and Sarah sipped her coffee. She was quiet but she was bursting with excitement inside. Her first trip to Rome. They went to great places on holidays every

year but never to Rome. Too much of a busman's holiday for her dad.

She felt like a huge adventure was awaiting her. She would Instagram all the great sights and the food. Her friends in St. Joseph's would be green with envy. When they finished breakfast, Sarah issued more directives on what to do and see and what not to do and see in the Eternal City.

"Look, Mum, my brain is full. I can't take any more information so save your breath."

"I just want to make sure that you see all there is to see, honey, that's all."

"I'm sure Dad will make sure I see everything. Anyway, what are you going to do? All by yourself and all?" she asked cheekily.

"*Em*, don't worry about me at all. I can take care of myself. Don't even give me a second thought once you meet your dad. OK?"

"I just don't know why you can't admit that you're meeting Tom," said May squarely.

"What? No, I'm not. Why would you think ...?" Sarah looked at May. Her daughter was no longer a child. She was a young woman. And a smart one at that. "OK, I am meeting Tom. I'm meeting him in Rome. He's getting the Ryanair flight. It gets in an hour after ours. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. This trip is about you and your dad. I didn't want to make it about me," she sighed.

"Whatever! I think he's OK. I'm glad you met someone and I just wish you'd stop treating me like a child."

"I'm sorry. I know you're not a child. I should've told you. I just didn't want to confuse you. Things are already barmy enough in this family."

"It's OK. I know old people need to have a life too."

"Cheeky brat! Sarah said and kissed May on the cheek. "Come on. The taxi will be here in two minutes."



Once they got to the airport, they sat in the departures lounge and waited patiently for the call to board. Sarah hated airports and wished this part of the process could be bypassed somehow. She was thinking about her body being broken down to tiny molecules and by some force of physics being teleported to Rome, beamed up by Scotty.

May wondered if Tom would become a big part of her life some day and how would she feel if that happened? She already thought of Paolo as part of her new family so it was safe to assume that her mum would expect Tom to get the same treatment if it came to it. May always dreamed of having a bigger family, but imagined her parents adding children to the mix and not adults.

Anyway, who was to say what was a normal family anymore? Granny O'Hara, her dad's own mother, had initially gone batshit crazy when she heard that Joe was gay. She had said that he needed to be struck with a cattle prod until he saw sense. May patiently tried to explain to her politically incorrect grandmother that it wasn't simply a lifestyle choice.

Her granny's stance was softening a little since especially since May had shown her a photograph of Paolo. Sarah had said that her granny was getting forgetful and hoped that she wasn't in the early stages of dementia. She was forgetful but May reckoned that her memory was just full, like a computer hard drive, and that she needed to delete some unnecessary data. Granny asked for a copy of the photograph of Paolo which was now displayed in the frame of the mirror in the hall.

Their flight was called, and May and Sarah made their way onto the plane. They sat in their allocated seats. Sarah insisted on taking the aisle seat so May was stuck between Sarah and a twelve-year-old boy old munching on a bag of Tayto cheese and onion crisps. She tried to ignore the young boy and the noise of the games he played on his phone and read magazines until they touched down in Rome.

May's heart was racing. She couldn't wait to see her dad. She was impatient with how long the bus was taking to bring them to the terminal. People were still getting on when it was quite clearly already full. May and Sarah stood holding onto a pole with their bags at their feet. When you couldn't fit even a fly on the bus, it finally took off. The queue for passport control was long and May let out a sigh. It was their turn eventually and May took off through the airport with Sarah trying to keep up with her.

Joe was standing there. Her dad. The person she loved most in the world after Sarah. She ran to him and almost knocked him to the floor in her enthusiasm to hug him.

Sarah appreciated that Joe had come to the airport on his own to meet May. This wasn't about Paolo today. This was about a father and his daughter. He looked good, she thought as she approached him from the doors.

She stopped beside him and May and then it was her turn. She fell into the familiar embrace and smelled his familiar smell. He was still wearing the same aftershave. She wanted to take him back to Dublin with her and May and put Paolo and everything else behind them. She also wanted him to never stop holding her. She was safe in his arms where she experienced so much love all those years. It was May's turn again and he held his daughter for dear life, making Sarah feel like an interloper. The three of them were crying tears of joy at seeing each other – and of sadness because they could never get back what they had. The hugging stopped when some irate travellers asked them rather rudely to move out of the way.

They walked to a coffee shop and sat down.

“Sarah! What's different about you? Your hair. You got a fringe. I thought you were afraid of fringes after I botched up Suze's haircut years ago,” he said, taking her all in. “And you, May, are a sight for sore eyes. I know it's only been a few months, but you look so grown up. You don't look like a little girl anymore.”

The tears threatened to start flowing again but Sarah called a halt to it. “Stop it, you guys. There's a wonderful city out there and it's waiting for you to run amok all over it. Go do it. I'll see you back here on Monday.” She kissed them both on the cheeks.

It was a weird feeling to be kissing Joe goodbye and then waiting for her boyfriend to arrive on the next flight.

“What are you going to do, Sarah? Are you sure you won’t come with us? We’d love to have you, wouldn’t we, May?”

“No, this weekend is for the two of you. Don’t worry about me, I’ll amuse myself,” Sarah said and she could see May arching her eyebrows.

She really hoped that May wouldn’t tell Joe about Tom. She wanted to tell him herself. She watched as they left the terminal building. Once they were gone, she went to the car-rental desk to pick up the Mercedes convertible she had ordered.

More queueing ensued. The Italians never seemed to be in a hurry to do anything. Except eat, she mused as she waited. She felt the butterflies in her stomach. She couldn’t believe that she was going to have two whole days and nights with Tom. They had got to know each other pretty well over the few months they’d been seeing each other but there was still a lot about each other they still had to uncover. Sarah’s thoughts about Tom naked were interrupted by a woman’s voice asking her to come forward.

“*Ciao*. I have a reservation,” Sarah said, handing her a printout.

She waited patiently as the woman scanned the page and then the computer screen.

“No, *signora*, we do not have your booking,” replied the woman.

“You must have it. Look, that’s the receipt.”

“This is not a booking, *signora*. There is no number. Every booking has a number, this is just for information,” said the stony-faced woman.

Sarah had been sure that she had completed the transaction online but obviously hadn’t.

“Oh. Well, OK, maybe I did mess up the booking.” Sarah hated to admit that she was in the wrong. “Can I book the car now? Here in person?”

“We do not have this car. We have only Fiat. It is a very good car. Four-hundred and twenty euro for two days.” said Stony Face.

Four hundred and twenty euro for a bloody Fiat! She wanted to rent it, not buy it. Jesus wept. Time was running out and Tom's flight was due in any minute.

"Fine. I'll take it. *Grazie.*"

Sarah understood on some level that she was being completely ripped off. But like everything else she did, she couldn't help but be polite about it. She handed over her licence and credit card and what seemed like hours later she got the keys to some class of Fiat.

She waited for Tom to come through the automatic doors. She saw him and started to wave like a bit of lunatic. The Italians were all very noisy and she had to wave and shout to be heard over the racket. He spotted her and she couldn't believe how excited she was to see him.

He was wearing jeans and a shirt and looked devilishly handsome. He picked her up and swung her around. He seemed giddy about spending a whole weekend with her. Two whole nights together. And on the Amalfi Coast no less. She would keep the surprise until they were well out of Rome.

She had driven in Italy many times before. When she visited Joe, she did the driving. Joe was afraid to drive in Rome. He hardly drove at home either come to think of it, but he reckoned that Italian drivers all had death wishes and he wasn't about to get himself killed. Even when Sarah drove, he was nervous as hell. He sat with his hands on his knees and his head bowed as if in prayer.

She didn't think Tom would be like that. Maybe he would even insist on driving once they got out of the city. She led him to the car rental hub in the car park and followed the directions Stony Face. She stopped at 114B and looked at the tin can in front of her.

You have got to be kidding, she thought. Tom would barely fit in this car. She would have trouble herself getting her own long legs in. The thought of going back to the battle axe and filling out

all the paperwork again filled her with dread, so she just looked at Tom and shrugged.

“Your carriage awaits,” she said.

“That? My carriage? Oh, alright. It’s ... *em* ... it’s small,” he said.

“I booked a convertible Mercedes, but those fools messed up the reservation. And now we have this,” she said, not about to blame herself for the can of beans in front of them.

“Well, in that case, it’s perfect. Let’s get this baby out on the open road.”

They both got into the car. Or rather they both tried to get into the car. It was ridiculously small and they had to put the seats back the whole way. It would have been easier to take the seats out and drive from the back seat, thought Sarah.

They had a three-hour drive ahead of them. She hoped that the car wouldn’t do any lasting damage to their limbs as she pressed buttons and turned knobs. The wipers worked. It wasn’t raining but at least if it did, she knew where they were now. She eventually found the indicators and off they went.

“Where are we heading for, captain?” he asked, laughing at their seemingly giant bodies in the tiny car.

“It’s a surprise. Hold onto your hat,” she warned as she put the car in top gear to do ninety kilometres per hour.

Tom was impressed by Sarah’s fearlessness on the roads. Rome airport was busy, and he only almost evacuated his bowels twice as Sarah negotiated her way through the traffic.

He knew that she had to drive as aggressively as the rest of the road users if they were ever to get where they were going so he braced himself for the journey. The roof of the car was so low that he couldn’t actually see any of the road signs and Sarah wasn’t letting on where they were going. The sea was on their right, so they were heading south. He just hoped they weren’t going to go too far south.



After driving for almost three hours, it had started to get dark. Tom decided to just surrender to the Italian night and to the brave woman beside him. But when they turned off the motorway, he recognised the hairpin bends immediately. He knew where they were, there was no mistaking even in the dark.

The Amalfi Coast. He had driven these roads with Lennon. Her hair had blown around her face as they screamed down the coast from Sorrento to Priano and Positano. Anywhere but here. He had looked forward to being in Italy with Sarah, he really had, but not here. Not where he had such cherished memories of his beautiful wife.

Sarah was talking about the hotel she booked and having breakfast on the terrace. Poor Sarah, she had great intentions. She wanted this to be perfect and he wanted that too. He turned to the beautiful woman beside him and leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

“Careful, it’s hard enough to negotiate these bends without that distraction,” she said with a smile.

“Sorry. It’s just that you’ve done such a nice thing. You’ve gone to a lot of trouble.”

“Have you guessed where we are? Will I tell you? We’re on the Amalfi coast,” she said excitedly. “I’ve always wanted to come here but I never did. Joe never wanted to go on holidays in Italy – you know, working here and all.”

“Well, you’re here now.”

He didn’t want to hurt her feelings by telling her he knew every inch of the coast and had hired a boat and sailed to the Isle of Capri while Lennon sunbathed on the deck and jumped off into the clear Mediterranean Sea. He could see her little yellow bikini as clear as if she was standing in front of him. She was beautiful and all the woman he ever wanted. Now she was gone and he was back here with somebody else.

He started to feel jittery, but he could barely move his legs in this tin box. He thought he would self-combust if he didn’t get out of the car soon. He would have to tell Sarah to pull over at the next town. He had to get some oxygen. He opened the window and let the sea air into the car. The force of the air in the car almost made the car blow over. Holy crap! He closed the

window again and tapped his feet as best he could off the tin floor.

“You OK?” Sarah asked.

“Fine.” He couldn’t risk a long sentence. He needed to be economical with the air in the car. He was finding it hard to breathe when he heard her announce that they’d arrived. Thank God, he couldn’t have taken another minute in the car. He got out and stretched his whole body. Sarah was doing the same and she seemed to be oblivious to his threatened suffocation.

“Isn’t it beautiful? That’s Positano there, all those twinkly lights on the hill. It’s magical, isn’t it?”

“Lovely,” he said.

Sarah looked him. “Are you OK?” she asked again.

She knew that the journey had been uncomfortable, so she was prepared to just put it down to that. She had hoped for some praise. Maybe he would say she was a wonderful girlfriend to bring him to such a beautiful place and maybe he would take her in his arms and kiss her with the twinkly lights of Positano behind them.

It looked like that wasn’t going to happen so Sarah opened the boot and took out their bags. She wondered if he expected her to carry his bag into the hotel for him. What the hell was eating him, she thought. She dropped his bag at his feet and made for the hotel lobby. He hurried after her and took her bag too.

She went to the reception desk and checked them in.

There seemed to be an atmosphere between them all of a sudden. She didn’t know him well enough to know what was going on with him. Was he a moody man? Was he unpleasant? In her experience of him so far, he seemed very pleasant indeed. She didn’t have to force him to come away with her either. He jumped at the idea. When she suggested going to Italy, he had suggested that maybe they should go to Venice but surely he wasn’t throwing a strop because he didn’t get what he wanted? No, she would give him a chance to freshen up and hopefully cheer up too.

There was no major show of gratitude when they got to their room either. Sarah had let her mind run away with her with thoughts of Tom making mad passionate love to her before they got dressed for dinner. He said he didn’t even feel like dinner

and it looked like he would be making mad passionate sleep to her instead.

He had muttered something that sounded like an apology, but Sarah didn't understand. She wanted this weekend to be perfect. She should have known when she got the little shit-box of a Fiat that it didn't bode well for the rest of the weekend. Tom was already in bed, but Sarah didn't want to crawl in beside him.

She let herself out of the room and went downstairs to the bar. She ordered a glass of wine but changed her mind and asked for a bottle. She ordered an antipasti platter and picked over the delicious meats and vinegary artichoke hearts. She could taste Italy in every mouthful, but it didn't cheer her up one bit.

She couldn't help but think about how her night was going so far. Was Tom really upstairs in their room while she was sitting at the bar drinking a bottle of wine on her own? Yes. That was exactly what was going on. Maybe he wasn't feeling well, she thought. She really needed to make excuses for him because none of this made any sense to her overworked, overtired brain tonight.

The first glass of wine had a taste of more off it and she was soon at the end of the bottle. She had finished most of the platter too, so she made her way upstairs to bed.

Tom was a large shape in the bed, but he made no indication he knew she had come back to the room. She changed in the bathroom and got into bed beside him. It was hard to avoid him as the bed was quite small, but she did her best to not let even a tiny bit of her skin touch of his. She punched her pillow a few times and huffed and puffed before finally settling down to sleep.

When she woke up in the morning, Tom was not in the room. It took her a while for the full recollection of the day before to come back to her. She looked at her watch. It was ten o'clock. She almost started to cry. She had missed breakfast too. One of the highlights of the weekend was going to be eating breakfast on the terrace looking over the sea and the Isle of Capri beyond. But she was in

bed. Alone. And hungry. Why had everything gone to complete shit?

When she came out of the bathroom, he was back from wherever he had wandered off to. Whatever was coming was going to be bad, she knew. He looked wretched and she thought he must be ill. She watched as he sat down on the bed. He motioned for her to sit beside him. She continued to stand.

“Sarah, I’m really sorry about last night. I’m sorry about everything.”

“I can’t figure out what I did. I just wanted this to be a fun, romantic weekend. You’re acting all weird and I’ve no idea why.”

“Lennon and I spent our honeymoon here. Everywhere I look, I see her. I never would have come here if I’d known but what were the chances that you would pick Priano of all places?”

He put his head in his hands and Sarah stood there dumbfounded. She’d had no idea. He clearly wasn’t over losing her yet.

“Oh.” She was lost for words.

“I ... I didn’t think ... I ...”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t. When you said we were going to Rome, I thought we were actually staying in Rome. I would have told you if you had mentioned the Amalfi Coast.”

“So this is my fault?” Sarah was angry now. She hadn’t done anything except be thoughtful and romantic. She felt that Tom was accusing her of trying to trick him.

“No. I’m not saying that at all. It’s just that it’s ... it’s painful. The memories ...”

Sarah wanted to run out of the room screaming. She had been looking forward to the weekend with Tom for weeks. She wanted it to be perfect. It turned out it was a fucking disaster.

“Look, you’d better go home. I’ll head back to Rome and meet up with May and Joe. I don’t know what to say. I’m sorry this trip made you feel so sad, but you know it was completely accidental. You’re obviously not ready to move on with your life just yet. Just pack up your things and I’ll drive us back to Rome.”

He groaned and Sarah didn't know if it was the thought of going in the tiny car again or because of the disastrous situation they found themselves in.

Chapter 30



Diane got a phone call from the agent in Marbella to tell her that she had found the perfect shop for her. Diane tried to explain that it was a bad time and that she wouldn't be able to drop everything and fly over straight away.

“Diane, this is it. This is exactly what you've been looking for so I don't know what is so important, but it can't be more important than securing this lease. It's up on my website so go have a look and come back and tell me what time I can pick you up from the airport.”

Carol was pushy but that's what Diane liked about her. She was from Galway and had started an agency with her sister in Marbella years ago. Anybody who bought anything had used the sisters and they had become very wealthy thanks to the Irish buying up half of the Costa del Sol.

Diane looked at the website and she knew that she was right. It was perfect. There was a Gucci shop and a Prada shop on the same street. Diane's heart started to race, and she knew she had to have it.

But what was she going to do about Suze? She couldn't leave her, and Suze wouldn't go home to Peter. She also still needed to be driven to her doctors' appointments every day. She wondered if she could do the paperwork here and send it over to Spain to the agent. She rang the estate agent back.

“I told you, didn't I? It's perfect. What time are you landing?” said Carol smugly.

“It is. It's totally perfect and I want it. But I can't leave right now. Can we do the transaction with me here and you there?”

“Diane, this is going to go quickly. It only came on the market this morning and I rang you straight away. The lease is being sold by an old wealthy Spanish woman who wants to meet prospective

tenants in person. She insists that she wants to vet the tenant going in. Besides that, all of the paperwork needs to be stamped by the notary and money transfers have to be made. No, Diane, if you want this shop, you need to get yourself over here. And pronto.”

Balls! Suze came into the kitchen just then and Diane dropped the phone as if it was on fire.

“Who was that?” asked Suze.

“Nothing that was just, *emm* That was the bin men to say they wouldn’t be coming this week.”

“The bin men ring you? For fuck’s sake, how the other half live!” said Suze, putting on the kettle.

Diane was glad to see that Suze was looking a lot brighter. The light was beginning to return to her eyes, and she was getting back to being more like herself. She had a thought then about Laurie. She had a big apartment and maybe Suze could stay with her for a while. She didn’t want to make Suze sound like she needed a baby-sitter, but she supposed that’s exactly what was required. She went to her room and called Laurie.

“Hi. It’s me. I have a favour to ask you.”

“Sure, shoot. I’ll do anything to take my mind off Kevin, the pig.”

Great. It was perfect. Suze could be Laurie’s big distraction. She certainly wouldn’t have too much time to think about sex videos and missing her pervy boyfriend while she was in charge of a woman who was recently released from a psychiatric hospital.

Diane told Laurie what was going on and Laurie immediately agreed to Suze moving in with her.

“It’s fine, I’m working from home anyway. I’ll enjoy the company. I’m just worried that I’m not qualified to look after someone who’s just been through what Suze’s been through.”

“You just have to keep an eye on her. Make sure there’s no pills around, no sharp knives, you know the kind of stuff.”

“What about my razor?” asked Laurie, beginning to sound a bit freaked out and worried she had taken on more than she could handle.

“Razors, anything sharp needs to be hidden. She tried to kill herself, Laurie. I’m ninety-nine-per-cent sure she won’t try it again, but we shouldn’t take any chances.”

“Oh God, I don’t know if this is a good idea.”

“You’ll be fine. She just drinks lots of tea every day and has to be brought to her appointments. She is just like the old Suze really except for the hard edges are gone. She’s like a ball of mush that has to be minded for now. She’s making great progress according to her doctors. I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t think you could handle it. And we shouldn’t make out like it’s a chore. We’ll have to make it sound like Suze will be doing you a favour. Like you’re miserable and lonely without Kevin and you would love the company. OK?”

“I am miserable and lonely without him.”

Diane came back to the kitchen and told Suze about the phone call from Marbella.

“That’s great, Diane. You’re really going then? You’re going for good? God, how am I going to survive without you? You’ve been the best friend in the world to me.” She hugged Diane.

“I could go to Spain, secure the lease and come back. But, you know, I feel that it’s time to just go. Leaving you guys is going to be awful but I’ve made the decision and made all the plans. There’s no reason to prolong the agony. You know, Laurie is miserable without that lowlife Kevin. How would you feel about staying with her for a while? She really could do with the company.”

“Oh,” said Suze. “I suppose if she wants the company, I could stay with her for a while.”

Suze didn’t blame Diane for grabbing the chance she was being given and she would be forever grateful to her. She was pragmatic enough to know that she had made these women responsible for her well-being, but she was also keeping up her side of the bargain. She was getting better.

She didn't envision staying at Laurie's for long. When her mother died, she left Suze some money. Suze had wanted to put on an extension on the house, but Peter insisted that she kept the money for herself. He was a good man, Suze thought, not for the first time. She had enough to buy a small place of her own and would just need to get a job to keep herself. That was going to be the toughest part, she thought.

She had no idea how she would get back into the workforce, competing with bright young things her kids' age. But there was something out there for her, she was sure of it. She might even ask Sarah if she had any jobs going at The Bakery. She just needed to get a foot in the door.

Two days later, Laurie called to pick up Suze and the three women stood in the hall of Copper Beech House for the last time. Diane looked around her.

"This has been my home for the last ten years, but I don't feel anything leaving it behind," she sighed.

"That's because you have a whole new big adventure ahead of you," said Suze.

"You do. And in beautiful sunshine. I'm jealous," said Laurie.

"I don't know how much I'll see of the sunshine. It's going to be hard work getting established and all of that," said Diane.

"And we'll be over to visit soon," said Suze. "I'll call you every day too."

The taxi arrived to take Diane to the airport, and they said their goodbyes. The sound of car engines drowned out the women's sniffing. Things were coming to an end for them. How was it all happening so fast?

Laurie was driving off and Suze was waving out the window.

"Hold on!" Diane called, running after the car, glad of the flat ballerina pumps she wore for travelling.

Laurie braked and stopped.

“Here, Suze. Take the Merc. The vehicle registration form is in the glove box. Send it off and it’s all yours,” she said, handing Suze the keys.

“What? No way,” said a stunned Suze.

“I’ll have it if you don’t want it,” said Laurie, not quite joking.

“Take it, Suze. That fucking shit-box you drive is not going to last much longer. Anyway, I want to give you something nice. You deserve it.”

Suze started to cry.

“Diane. You’re too good. How can I ever repay you?”

“You already are. You’re getting better.”

Chapter 31



The sun was shining, and it was a perfect day on the coast. The drive back through Sorrento and Naples was beautiful. And long. They hardly spoke on the way back. Tom had tried to apologise a few times, but Sarah had told him to stop. There were no apologies necessary. They had jumped into a full-blown relationship way too soon. Well, she had. She would tread more carefully the next time. If she ever bothered with men again.

She said goodbye to Tom at the airport. He tried to kiss her goodbye but she shrugged him off. She watched him go inside the terminal building and drove to the Avis building. She returned her hire car and made her way to the station to wait for the next train to Rome.

Sarah knew lots of hotels in the city and went to her favourite one near the Spanish Steps. She paid by credit card for her overpriced room and sat on the balcony overlooking the steps. They were thronged but the noise from the gushing fountain and from the people seemed like it was happening in another dimension. One that she wasn't a part of.

Her phone rang and Diane's beautiful face lit up the screen.

"*Ciao*, missus. I'm sorry to interrupt your weekend of passion."

"*Eh* ... you're *eh* ... not ..."

"You can save all the juicy details for another time. I have something to tell you."

"Oh, OK. Go ahead."

Sarah was relieved that she wasn't going to have to tell Diane about the fiasco in Priano. She wasn't sure she could even articulate it to herself.

"I'm leaving for Spain. I'm at the airport."

"Oh. When will you be back?"

"I won't. I'm going for good."

Sarah couldn't bear it. It was the last thing she wanted to hear. Joe was gone, Tom was gone and now Diane. The loss of Diane was almost as bad as the loss of Joe. Diane had been a constant in her life since their school days. She trusted her with her life. Diane knew her as well as she knew herself.

"We can't just say goodbye over the phone."

"Ah here, it's only Malaga. I'm not going to Timbuktu, Sarah. You can visit any time you want."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll be in Malaga by the time you get home."

"Yes, in Malaga. I'll see you there. Send me your address. I'll fly home with May and fly back out to Spain."

"What? Are you sure? We could just facetime if you want."

"See you tomorrow and that's final." Sarah hung up the phone. At least she wouldn't have time to think about Tom. She had a few things to organise while she absented herself for another few days. She made some phone calls and sorted out The Bakery.

May would have to stay with Granny O'Hara for a few days. It was only a few streets away from their own house so May would come and go from school as normal.

She dialled Joe's number. She didn't want to encroach on his time with May but she would go crazy if she had to spend the evening on her own. She didn't want to think about Diane leaving and Tom still being in love with his dead wife. She didn't want to sit alone again at dinner. She wanted to feel normal. She needed to feel wanted.



Joe had given her directions to the restaurant on the Via Pompei. It was a beautiful evening and she decided to walk. She walked along the Via del Corso towards the Piazza del Popolo and was again struck by how beautiful the Italians were and how they knew it. The silky dark hair, the sunglasses, the leather jackets, the smell of perfume. And that was only the men. The women were equally as stunning.

The people looked fantastic and carefree, and Sarah was envious of Diane moving to a country with a warm climate. The girls in The Bakery had told her it was raining at home. What else was new? She fantasised about living in Italy as she walked along the cobbled streets. She felt she could get over Tom and get over Joe and be happy if she lived somewhere the sun was shining. But she had too many ties to Ireland and to Malahide in particular to think about going anywhere.

She had her home, her friends, her business and Granny O'Hara. Somehow Joe's mother had become her responsibility. Sarah didn't look on her like a responsibility though. She was a great old lady with a sharp wit and a wicked laugh. She had been great to them through the years and was a stable force in May's life too.

She was gone a bit wacky lately, but Sarah supposed that all old people reached a stage in their lives where they no longer bothered to use their filters. Granny O'Hara loved Sarah. She didn't have a daughter, so she treated Sarah like her own. May was the one who told her grandmother that Joe was gay. May made Sarah laugh when she compared it to having the awkward conversation she herself had with May about the facts of life.

Sarah reached the door of the restaurant and checked herself in the glass in the door. She had spent a small fortune on this outfit to wear going out with Tom. She fixed her hair one last time, applied another coat of lip-gloss and went in.

They were at a table right inside the door. May was rolling her eyes at her but there was nothing unusual in that. May whispered to her that they had been watching her preening herself in the mirrored glass outside the door. Oh well!

Joe and Paolo stood up to greet her and they both kissed her on both cheeks. Very Mediterranean, she thought. No more kissing on the lips for her and her ex. They made a bit of small talk and it took a little while before Sarah could look Paolo in the

eye. She had really been very rude to him the last time. Paolo and May were scanning a shared menu. They had their heads together and Paolo was translating the menu to her. He had her full attention and she hung on his every word. They must look like they were on a double date with their kids, Sarah thought. Her and Joe, the parents and Paolo and May, the kids. It was strange but oddly not weird, thought Sarah.

“So, where’s the famous Tom?” asked Joe.

“Oh, May told you?” said Sarah, giving May daggers.

But May and Paolo were still totally engrossed in the menu and each other.

“Don’t be mad at her. We were talking and I just mentioned that I was concerned about you, that’s all. She said that you had met someone. I’m happy for you.”

“Well, I’m here on my own in Rome when I should be in Priano. You can safely assume that the weekend didn’t go exactly to plan.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked gently.

“Not here, not now. But, God, it’s good to have you back in my life. I missed talking to you about things. About everything, really.” She smiled at him with genuine affection.

“I know exactly how you feel. I hate myself for what I did –”

“Stop. No more ‘sorry’. No more regrets. It’s all about now and the future. So let’s make sure we’re here for one another from now on.”

The meal was wonderful and led Sarah to declare that Italian food was her favourite food in the world.

“Mum, you say that about every food. When we go to the Arji Bhaji you say Indian is your favourite. When we go to Rio Bravo, you say that Mexican is the best. You’re hilarious.”

“I love good food, what can I say?” said Sarah, feeling full and content because of the food and the company and warm and fuzzy thanks to the vino.

Paolo was charming and fun, and Sarah really liked him despite not wanting herself to. May was mad about him, that was obvious, and it looked like he had all the O’Hara women under his spell.

It was time to go but Sarah didn't want to go back to her hotel yet. Paolo suggested he take May back to the apartment and Joe and Sarah could go grab a drink and spend some time together. How perfect was he, Sarah thought. She kissed May and Paolo on both cheeks and headed out into the Rome night. There were people buzzing around everywhere. There were hundreds of scooters driving through the streets and Sarah could see Joe wincing as it seemed like there would be an accident any second.

"So you still have your aversion to driving?" said Sarah.

"It's got worse if anything," said Joe. "Paolo has a scooter, but I refuse to get on the back of it. It's a catastrophic accident waiting to happen. Hey, stop laughing. I'm nervous, that's all." He gave Sarah a little dig in the ribs with his elbow.

"You wouldn't have enjoyed my driving down the coast then," she said.

"It's probably why your boyfriend's not here," said Joe, laughing. But he saw that Sarah wasn't sharing the joke. "Sorry, Sarah. What happened?"

"*Am*, I don't want to ruin a lovely night talking about my troubles," she said.

"Tell me all about your troubles. I order you."

"It turns out that the Amalfi Coast has a special place in his heart. He went there on honeymoon."

"He's married?"

"Worse. He's widowed. His wife died in a car accident three years ago and he is obviously not over her. It would've been grand if I picked any other place but of course I had to pick there. Jesus Christ, what luck?"

"And what? Did he freak out or something?"

"No, he took to the bed! And not in the way I had imagined. It was this morning before he told me what was going on. I was mad with him, but I feel bad for him too. I took a bit of perverse pleasure in how uncomfortable he was on the drive back to the airport though."

"It sounds like he's a very sensitive person. That's a good thing, Sarah. It must have been a shock for him. You know? To be there with you and still have all those memories of her."

Sarah looked at Joe. Fucking men, she thought. They always stuck together.

“No, seriously, Sarah. Put yourself in his shoes.”

“It’s just that I really thought he’s the one. I know it was very soon after, well, after everything that happened, but I really thought ... He is thoughtful and caring and he makes me feel like ... Sorry, this is weird talking like this to you.”

“What? He makes you feel alive? He sets you on fire when he touches you? That’s wonderful. That’s what we couldn’t do for each other. We had everything else but not that. Don’t give up on him. Another way to look at it is that he was afraid of making new memories on the Amalfi Coast with you. He thought he somehow would be betraying his dead wife. Does that make any sense?”

“You’re full of it, Joe O’Hara. Now let’s have some more wine.”

Chapter 32



“You’re going to Marbella? Jesus, Mum, we’re just back from Rome and you’re off gallivanting again?” said May, once again sounding like the parent.

“Seriously? Gallivanting? May, you’re sixteen years of age. You shouldn’t use that word. You sound like Granny O’Hara. Anyway, the reason I’m going is that Diane wants my opinion on a shop she’s thinking of leasing.”

It wasn’t a lie but it wasn’t exactly the truth either. She couldn’t tell May the truth, that she couldn’t face going back to reality just yet. Every time Tom popped into her head, she popped him right back out again.

“Yeah, right.”

“May, just stay with Granny and be a good girl. Keep an eye on The Bakery and call me if there’s anything I need to know. Now go, I need to go through security again. The flight’s in less than an hour.” She kissed her little girl again. They were back to just a peck on the cheek, all Irish like. She watched May who was nearly a woman walk away.

May turned around.

“Mum!”

“What, love?”

“Thanks. Rome was great. Thanks for being so cool about everything.”

Sarah was surprised. Shocked, in fact. May had never ever used cool in a sentence regarding her before.

“Eh, sure. *Nessun problema.*”

May’s rolled eyes indicated she should stick to her regular lingo.

“We’re all going to be fine, Mum. We just got a new person in our family, that’s all.”

May was right. They just got a new person. Paolo would be a great addition to their lives, she could feel it. It was obvious that he was crazy about Joe. And he about Paolo. Lucky ducks, thought Sarah. Why couldn’t that be her and Tom? Maybe romantic happiness was not on the cards for her. The thought depressed her enormously. She had been sure that she and Tom had something real. Something special.

Fuck it, she thought and groaned when she caught sight of the queue ahead of her. But the line moved along swiftly and Sarah was once again on the other side within fifteen minutes. She bought a stack of magazines and newspapers. She didn’t want to have any time at all to think about the disastrous weekend. She didn’t want to think about never seeing Tom again. She couldn’t bear the thought that he would never call to her door looking like George Clooney and worst of all he would never kiss her again.

Sarah got a taxi to the address Diane had given her as the sunlight faded. She got out outside the swanky apartment block. Sarah buzzed her apartment and Diane ran down to greet her. Diane had only been there for twenty-four hours but already she looked like a native. Her long blonde hair was flying behind her and she looked relaxed and happy. It was only then that Sarah realised how stressed-looking she had been for months.

They both carried Sarah’s luggage up the stairs.

“Where are you going with all the bags? You were only going away for a weekend.”

“Says the pot to the kettle,” replied Sarah. Diane was known for the ludicrous amounts of shoes and clothing she brought on holidays.

“Fair point.”

There were only three floors in the apartment block and the bougainvillea bloomed pink against the white-washed walls.

Diane was barefoot and wore linen trousers and a string top.

“You look amazing, Di. You look like you belong here,” said Sarah as she dropped her bag down.

“I feel like I belong here too. It’s so good to wake up with the sun shining and feel the heat. I will definitely get used to this. Come on in, I’ve got a bottle chilling.”

The words were music to Sarah’s ears and soon the two women were sitting on Diane’s rooftop terrace festooned in twinkling lights under the darkening sky.

“So how was Amalfi? Did Doctor Tom think you were amazing and reward you in kind for bringing him to such a place?” asked Diane.

“Not exactly. He only lasted one night.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It turns out that the Amalfi Coast has a special place in Tom’s heart. He was there on his honeymoon. With Lennon. It was horrendous. It was like he had some kind of meltdown. He couldn’t wait to get out of the place. I had to drive him back to Rome. He flew home on his own. I got a hotel in Rome and flew back with May.”

“Jesus! Are you OK?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. I understand that being there must have stirred up a lot of memories. But you should have seen him, Di. He was in bits. I thought he was going to burst out crying at one stage. I mean we’d talked about his wife before. Quite a bit actually. It’s a pity he didn’t mention the fact that he needed to give the Amalfi Coast a wide berth for the rest of his life. That would’ve been useful information to have.”

“You couldn’t have known. I don’t know what to say, Sarah. I really thought that you two were great together. He’ll probably get home and realise what a plonker he’s been. I’m sure he’ll apologise and beg you to forgive him.”

“I don’t think so, Di. He seemed pretty cut up. He couldn’t even look at me at the airport. I don’t know if he will ever get over her. I’m just mad at myself for falling for him. I thought if Joe met someone then I deserved the same. I really thought he was the man for me.”

Sarah felt a lump in her throat. She didn't want to cry. Diane was starting out on her new life and she didn't want to be a downer.

"Let's not talk about it anymore. Tell me about the shop. Did you see it?"

"I did. It's exactly what I want. The location is perfect."

"So did you sign the lease? Is it yours?"

"This is the weird part. The old lady who owns the shop has to approve of me before she grants me the lease. I have to meet her tomorrow at twelve. In the shop. She doesn't have any English, so Carol is going to translate for me. I'm worried about it, to be honest. Old people don't like me. Will's mother thought I was a trollop right up until she died. She was convinced I was only after his money even though I earned as much as he did. Thank God she died before seeing the situation her precious son got us into."

"Granny O'Hara likes you."

"Oh, come on, Sarah. She fucking hates me. I told you I overheard her telling Joe that I was a bad influence on you."

"Well, you did bring pot up to his room."

"Yes. When we were fifteen. And because we were all going to smoke it! I was the one who had risk life and limb and meet the guy in town. I could have got beaten up or arrested. Anyway I heard her saying it last year at Joe's birthday barbecue."

Sarah had to admit that Granny didn't have a good word to say about Diane. Diane was too fearless, too free-spirited. Diane slated the Catholic church and all the authoritarian figures that Granny looked up to.

"Right. Maybe you should just stand there and look pretty. Let Carol do all the talking."

Diane waited nervously in the shop with Carol. She had underestimated how much she wanted it. She had made the big decision to move to Spain. Her marriage was over. Her career was over. She might resurrect her career one day but not her

marriage. Her mother's revelation about the circumstances of her conception had been the final straw. This was all she had now. She had to make it work.

"Explain to me again why we have to meet this woman."

"The shop goes way back in their family history. It was used to hide Republicans during the Spanish Civil War in the nineteen-thirties. Señora Messine's father was hidden here. He married the daughter of the family who hid him from General Franco's army. She wants to make sure the shop is in good hands. She's not just going to let it to anybody."

"But how can she tell by meeting me one time? I mean it's bloody ridiculous. I could be refused because she doesn't like the shoes I'm wearing."

"Your shoes are fabulous and she's going to love you. Relax."

Diane couldn't. She was playing a game and she didn't even know what the rules were.

"She's here," said Carol going to the door to greet the old woman. "*Buenos dias, señora.*"

Diane watched Carol kiss the woman on both cheeks.

"*Buenos dias, señora,*" Diane said when her time came to greet her.

The old woman looked like a tiny hobbit and Diane towered over her. She wished she had worn her flat shoes and had to squash the urge to kick off her heels and stand in her bare feet. But even then, she would still be like a giant to the little old lady. She was looking Diane up and down and this was doing nothing for Diane's already fraught nerves.

Diane loved the shop on the website but when she saw it in the flesh she decided it had to be hers. The only thing that stood between her and her future business plans was this woman. The woman's entourage included two other women who were introduced to Diane as the woman's daughters. They were looking her up and down and quite obviously talking about her. Diane decided to interject herself into the conversation as the women seemed to want to exclude her. She directed her conversation to the daughter nearest to her

"So? Do you live here? In Marbella?"

“*Si*. Yes. I live just outside the city and my sister lives in Malaga. You will like it here, I think. The weather is better than Ireland, no?”

“It certainly is. I’m looking forward to getting to know the area and meeting new people.” Diane was distracted by the old woman who was still looking her up and down. “Is your mother OK? I mean, does she need to ask me something?”

“She speaks only Spanish. She is old, traditional. Please do not let her make you uncomfortable.”

Diane tried to ignore the stares and continued to indulge in small talk with the one daughter who deigned to speak to her.

It seemed like an age before the women finished their visual interrogation of her. Diane felt naked under the scrutiny and almost laughed at the absurdity of the situation.

Eventually they were ready to leave. The old woman said something to Diane on the way out. Diane’s Spanish was almost non-existent and it wasn’t helped by the fact that the woman didn’t have her teeth in. The lack of dentures made her accent more indecipherable. But she was smiling. That had to mean something good? Diane just smiled through her gritted teeth.

When they were alone again in the shop she turned to Carol.

“What the hell was all that about?”

“They liked you!”

“Fucking hell. I feel like I’ve been interrogated by the Gestapo. My nerves are gone. When will I know if I passed their test?”

“You passed with flying colours. Congratulations, Diane, the shop is yours.”

“What? That was it? I didn’t even speak. So it did come down to the colour of my shoes?”

“Who knows? Forget about it now and concentrate on getting your business up and running. By the way, we have to meet them at the town hall tomorrow at four to finalise all the paperwork.”

“Fine. Great. Sorry I just need to let it sink in. You didn’t catch what the old dear said to me on her way out by any chance?”

“Yes, she said she was going to send you something special.”

“Probably a plant or something. Flowers maybe?”

“Yes. Or cake. The Spanish love their cakes.”

Sarah was waiting with bated breath for Diane to come back. She hoped that the old woman had given Diane her blessing. It seemed odd to Sarah to have to get the approval of the owner, but she hoped the decision went in her friend’s favour. Sarah remembered the moment years ago when she got the lease on The Bakery and appreciated the importance of such a day.

When Diane came in there was no mistaking the joy in her face.

“So?”

“She loved me,” laughed Diane.

“I told you, Diane, I’m thrilled for you. I’m taking you to lunch to celebrate.”

While Diane was gone, Sarah, certain that the news would be good, had googled restaurants and had chosen a small seafood place in San Pedro.

“It’s not far. Let’s walk. I’ll just change my shoes,” said Diane.

The two women walked the short distance to the restaurant in the afternoon sunshine. Sarah tried not to think about getting on the plane and leaving Diane behind. She would miss her dreadfully.

The waiter showed them to their table and Sarah ordered a bottle of champagne.

“To Señora Messine and brave new adventures!” Sarah said as she raised her glass to Diane.

“To selling fabulous clothes and making loads of money!” said Diane with a laugh.

“I’m going to miss you. It’s going to be strange, you not living in Dublin anymore. I still wish you confided in me about the house and Will. You needn’t have gone through all of this on your own.”

“It’s more than just Will and the house. Mum told me something a few months back. I’ve been trying to get my head

around it since.”

“She’s not sick, is she? She looks great. I saw her in Tesco a few weeks ago.”

“She was raped.”

“What? Oh my God! At her age? That’s –”

“When she was twenty. Her boss took advantage of her. I exist because she was raped.”

“Jesus, Diane.”

“It’s a lot to process.”

“Did she press charges? Did he go to jail?”

“It was 1973. Who would have believed her? He was a big wig in a law firm she was working at. She had to leave her job. He would have sabotaged her whole career if she told anyone what happened.”

“How are you? Are you OK? Will you confront him?”

“He’s dead. And just as well because I would have fucking killed him myself.”

After lunch Sarah got a taxi to the airport. She was worn out. She had put her feelings on hold since Rome and she now had two and a half hours on an aeroplane to think about Tom. It was as if her mind wouldn’t allow her to entertain thoughts about anything else.

Images of Tom swam in front of her eyes the whole way home and by the time they touched down in Dublin airport she felt very blue indeed. She didn’t have long to wait for her bags at the carousel and made her way out to the Arrivals Hall.

She heard him call her name. She had been thinking about him for so long that she thought her ears were playing tricks on her. She was startled when he caught her by the arm. His face, his smell. It was no trick. He tried to take her bags, but she firmly held on to them. She moved away from him, sidestepping people, hoping he wouldn’t follow.

“Sarah. May told me you were coming back today. I need to tell you I’m so sorry,” he said, striding to keep up with her.

“Look Tom, it’s OK. I’m a big girl. I’ve experienced rejection before.” She kept walking.

“Sarah. Stop. Please. I didn’t reject you. I would never do that. I can’t explain what happened. It was like my brain stopped functioning. I could hardly breathe. The nearest thing I can compare it to is a panic attack. I was paralysed by memories and left completely helpless. I’ve been kicking myself the last few days. What you did, booking the weekend was so lovely and I threw it back in your face. I’m an idiot. I’m so sorry.”

Sarah stopped and turned towards him.

“I’m embarrassed, Tom. I had the idea that we’d have this big romantic weekend away and that we’d have a wonderful time wandering the windy streets holding hands. I thought we’d drink wine and eat great food and fall madly in love. Seriously, I’m the idiot here, not you.”

“I wanted that too. I love you, Sarah.”

“Don’t say that. You don’t mean it. You’ve hurt me enough. Now please don’t follow me. I don’t ever want to see you again.”

Chapter 33



Suze and Laurie settled into a companionable routine. Suze's medication was cut back, and she was allowed to drive again. This made her feel like she was less of a burden. Laurie was miserable and missed Kevin like crazy. She said she hated him and never wanted to see him again, but Suze could see that deep down she was in a lot of pain without him.

Suze knew that Laurie had to go through the process herself and that she would come to the realisation and to the place where she might forgive Kevin, but it would have to be in her own time. Laurie spent a lot of time in her room and Suze heard her sighs and her thumping her pillows from the living room.

She had asked Laurie if she wanted her to move in with Sarah now that she was back from her travels, but Laurie insisted that she wanted her to stay. Suze couldn't believe how far she had come in her rehabilitation. For months, maybe years even she hadn't been able to think about anybody else's welfare besides her own. She had been so caught up in her own misery that she was unable to pick up on someone else's unhappiness, never mind help them.

"I'm just having a look at the 'Dear Laurie' letters," said Suze to Laurie who was pottering around the apartment without actually doing anything.

"Oh God. I have to have my column in by midday tomorrow. My mind is blank. I can't think why I took this job in the first place. I'm not equipped to give anybody advice. I can't even ... well, I ... Oh, God, I'm such a screw-up!"

"You're not a screw-up. Kevin is. Anyway – I could help you if you want."

"Would you? Are you sure you don't mind? It would really get me out of a jam."

Suze had already picked out the letters she thought should feature in this month's magazine and had written a few notes on each one.

"I have a few here, I'll just run them by you and see what you think."

Suze took her top five and started to read them out. Laurie tried to muster up a bit of interest and enthusiasm but really was happy to leave it all to Suze. Suze was sitting on the couch with her legs tucked up underneath her, looking as good as Laurie had ever seen her look. She had been to the hairdresser the day before and had coloured her hair. It had been in bad need of a colour, but Laurie was amazed at what a difference the vibrant dark colour made. It looked glossy and was longer than Suze had worn it in years. The colour picked up the dark brown of her eyes and made her look foreign. She had been out walking on the road between Portmarnock and Malahide every day and she had a light tan despite wearing her sun protection.

Watching her reading off the letters looking all girly made Laurie very happy. They had failed Suze in the past, that was for sure, but the women had brought her back to life with their love and kindness. Laurie knew she had hit a bit of a wall herself and she was glad that Suze was there for her to stop her from going crazy with longing for Kevin. She knew it was going to be hard, but she hadn't bargained on just how hard. She looked back at Sue who was still reading the letters. She was squinting with the effort.

"Don't you normally wear reading glasses?" asked Laurie.

"Yes, but I left them in Diane's spare bedroom. I might go round there and see if I can get in and get them. The housekeeper is still going in twice a week as far as I know."

Suze got into the sporty Mercedes that Diane had so generously given her. She remembered pulling up to tennis in her old Nissan and feeling ashamed of her transportation. She now knew that it doesn't matter what car you drive, you're still the same person inside the car. And inside yourself. She had to

admit that she got a lot more admiring glances driving the Mercedes though.

She pulled up at the security gate and was buzzed right through. They were obviously used to Diane's car. She drove up the long avenue to Copper Beech House where there was no sign that there was anybody around. She pulled up into the driveway and walked up to the front door. She went to ring the bell but noticed that the door was already open.

She called hello into the cavernous hallway, but nobody answered. The housekeeper could be anywhere in the house and wouldn't hear her. She went upstairs to the suite where she had slept during her stay with Diane. She checked the bedside locker, and her glasses were there, neatly folded beside the lamp. Just where she left them.

She went back out into the hallway and walked right into someone. A man. She screamed. Then he screamed. It was like something out of a horror film and Suze thought she was going to have a heart attack. Or get slain by some kind of serial killer. She put her hands over her head and dropped to the ground.

"Jesus Fucking H. Christ. What are you doing in my house?" roared the voice.

Suze looked up into the face above her.

"Kevin! Jesus, I thought you were going to murder me. My bloody heart!" she said, getting up off the floor.

"Suze! What are you doing here?" he said, relieved that he wasn't being trailed by paparazzi.

"I left my glasses here when I was staying with Diane. I thought the housekeeper was here. I did shout hello when I came in."

"I was in the bathroom. I was just going back downstairs. You frightened the crap out of me, I thought I was alone in the house."

"Sorry." Suze couldn't believe it. She was here with a bona fide Hollywood superstar. She thought of asking him for an autograph for Emma. She used to collect autographs when she was younger. Then she remembered what he did to Laurie and all thoughts of autographs went out the window.

“That was a shitty thing you did to Laurie, you know. I hope you’re proud of yourself.”

Suze heard herself sounding like a mammy. She used to say things like that to Paul and Emma when they were small. It sounded stupid saying it to another adult. And she noticed that Kevin looked like he was not very proud of himself at all.

“I know. How is she?”

Suze didn’t want to let him off the hook, but she didn’t want to get into it with him either. It was between him and Laurie and Suze knew that feelings ran deep on both sides.

“She’s OK. She’s keeping herself busy.”

Laurie had spent most days alone in her room, no doubt struggling with the reality of facing the rest of her life without him.

“Please tell her I’m sorry. I was such an idiot.”

He seemed genuinely distraught. Or was it just a big act? He was an actor after all. No, somehow Suze thought it was real. He looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Laurie looked like that too. It was crazy that one mistake, no matter how epic it was, would be the template for the rest of your life. There had to be a way for these two people to get past this, thought Suze.

They went downstairs.

“How come you’re back in Ireland?” asked Suze.

“I’m selling the house. I had to go through stuff with the estate agent and my solicitor. I was buying it for Laurie. I wanted us to live here and have our babies here but now it just reminds me of how much of an arse I am. I’m going to base myself in the States. It’s too painful to be near her but not able to see her.”

Suze wanted to be able to tell Laurie all of this, but she knew Laurie wouldn’t listen. She could imagine her with her hands over her ears, blocking out any talk of him.

“I’m on the *Late Late Show* tonight and I’m flying back to LA tomorrow. Please tell Laurie I’m sorry and that I’m going to live with the consequences of what I did for the rest of my life.”

Suzie knew she had to do something about Laurie and Kevin. She would somehow have to make sure Laurie was watching the

Late Late Show that night.

Suze drove back to the apartment. Laurie was watching trash TV. The printouts of the letters were on the coffee table where Suze had left them. She was shaking. She felt like she was holding the Holy Grail in her hands. She was nervous and terrified that she might blurt out the fact that she had just seen the man who Laurie missed like crazy.

“I got my glasses.”

“OK, cool,” said Laurie, not taking her eyes off Jeremy Kyle.

“Laurie, the deadline for your column is tomorrow. You need to get these answered – you need to write your replies.”

“Would you just do them for me, Suze? You’re really good at it. Just this time. I’m sorry – I can’t face other people’s problems right now. I’ll be ready for the next edition. Pretty please?”

“OK. Just this once,” said Suze, secretly delighted to be tasked with such an important job.

Suze got to work straight away. She gave what she considered to be good, sensible advice. She adopted a no-nonsense approach with a dose of kindness and understanding thrown in for good measure. She couldn’t believe how easily the advice came to her and she reckoned, even if she said so herself, she was pretty good at it.

Being removed from a problem gave her the perspective that the person experiencing the problem couldn’t have. She wished it was as easy to fix her own life or fix Laurie and Kevin for that matter. It seemed like such a waste that these two extraordinary people who were so obviously meant to be together could have driven such a wedge between themselves.

She knew Kevin had been a complete moron but surely there wasn’t anything in this life that was beyond forgiveness. She had

tried to kill herself, for goodness' sake. She had almost caused the ultimate hurt to Peter and the kids but they didn't turn her away or berate her for her mistake. They were being wonderful really. They were giving her all the space she needed but letting her know that they were right there when she needed them. Was what Kevin did any worse than what she had done?

Later that evening, Laurie announced that she was going to bed.

“*Aw*, don't go. Watch the *Late Late Show* with me,” said Suze.

“God, no. I'd rather stick pins in my eyes.”

Suze had to make Laurie stay and watch. Maybe when she saw Kevin, she would admit that she still loved him and that she'd give him another chance.

“It's just there's an item on suicide tonight and I thought you'd watch with me,” lied Suze.

“Oh my God, Suze, why didn't you say? Of course I'll watch it. Move over in the bed,” she said, shoving Suze further up the couch.

The old familiar music for the *Late Late Show* started and Ryan Tubridy, the show's host, came on the TV. He told the viewers that tonight he had an up-and-coming rock band, an award-winning journalist who had written a book about the war in Syria, an Irish actor who had got the starring role in the much-anticipated movie of the life of Mick Jagger and a woman who was having a baby for her sister who was infertile.

“Nothing about suicide,” said Laurie. “Are you sure it's tonight?”

“Yes, one hundred per cent. He probably doesn't want people to turn off. It's not exactly a sexy topic.”

“Yeah, you're right. I wonder who the actor playing Mick Jagger is? He must have huge lips.”

You know the lips better than anyone else, thought Suze. Her stomach was in knots and she hoped that they didn't keep Kevin until last. When the presenter told them that after the break, the

big Hollywood actor would be on, Suze nearly threw up. She wondered what Laurie's reaction would be. She would probably run over and put her foot through the TV. Suze wondered if she could sit on her and pin her down, but Laurie was much taller than she was and would beat Suze in a fight any day. She hoped it wouldn't come to that.

"Welcome back, folks!" Ryan said.

Suze stole a glance at Laurie, and she seemed to be completely oblivious as to who the next guest was. Ryan gave his introduction and asked the audience to give a huge round of applause for Kevin Flynn. Suze looked across at Laurie, who was sitting there, stunned. As Suze anticipated, she went for the remote control, but Suze stopped her.

"*Sit, Laurie. And watch. Watch him.* You're going to see him on TV for a long time to come so just sit through this. It'll help you. I promise." Suze took Laurie's shaking hand.

The two women sat there in silence as Ryan probed Kevin about his new illustrious Hollywood career. Kevin looked like a million dollars. Laurie looked like she was broken into millions of pieces, and Suze felt her pain beside her. Ryan was asking Kevin all the usual Hollywood questions and, to anyone who didn't know him, it sounded like he was the luckiest guy in the world. He had gone up against well-established names for the Jagger role and was picked above all of them. If he thought getting to play Dan Calhoun meant he arrived, he well and truly had now.

"And you're leaving Ireland for good?" said Ryan to a chorus of "*Noooo!*" from the females in the audience.

"Yes, I arranged the sale of my house just today, in fact," he said.

"Do you not want to have a base here?" asked Ryan.

"Well, Ryan, I bought a house here a few months ago for me and my girlfriend."

More "*Nooo!*" from the ladies could be heard. Kevin smiled and acknowledged their disappointment that he was spoken for.

"And what? Your girlfriend is going back to the States with you?"

“*Em.* No. I did something to hurt her. I’m deeply ashamed of what I did. She doesn’t want anything to do with me now and I can’t blame her. But I can’t live here without her. It’s too hard.”

The audience were open-mouthed, willing Ryan to ask the next question.

“What did you do? What could be that bad?” he asked.

“I’m not going to say what it was, but you can believe me when I say it was unforgiveable. She’s the most beautiful woman in the world and I don’t deserve her.”

Suze looked at Laurie and there were tears falling down her face. Suze was relieved. She hadn’t seen Laurie cry since it all began. She threw things and cursed like a sailor, but she didn’t cry.

Ryan was wishing Kevin well and the audience were applauding. Then he was gone.

“I still love him,” said Laurie simply.

“I know. He loves you too.”

“How can I ...? How do I ...?” Laurie wiped the tears from her face. “God, Suze, imagine if it wasn’t for the thing on suicide, we wouldn’t have even been watching this.”

“*Em, er,* yes. Imagine.”

“Can I forgive him? Should I forgive him?”

“Only you know that, Laurie. You’re the only one who knows how you feel.” She paused and took a deep breath. “Look, Laurie ... I met him. Today at Diane’s house. His house. I talked to him.”

“You spoke to him? How could you?”

“The first thing he asked me was about you. Well, that’s after we established that I wasn’t there to rob the place and that he wasn’t going to bludgeon me to death. He really is sorry, Laurie. Genuinely. He did an awful thing. He did. It was unbelievably stupid and dangerous, and it did a lot of damage. But I did a terrible thing too. I made a huge mistake, but everyone forgave me. I’m just saying.”

Laurie suddenly wanted nothing more than to forgive Kevin. “He’s selling the house.”

“He said he couldn’t bear it there without you. He said he wanted you guys to have your babies there.”

Suze knew that was mean, below the belt. She knew how much Laurie wanted to have a family with Kevin. It was the ace she had up her sleeve and she could see by Laurie’s face that she had hit a raw nerve.

“That’s what I wanted too. I wanted to ...” and Laurie broke down.

Suze put her arms around her and rocked her while she got all the pent-up tears out of her system.

Suze was woken up by her phone ringing the following morning. It was Peter.

“Hi, Peter, what’s up?” she asked blearily.

“Hi. Did I wake you?”

“Yeah, but it’s grand. Are you OK?”

“I wonder could you meet me in Howth today? I have something I want to show you.”

Suze was intrigued. Peter didn’t do mysterious or surprises.

“Eh, yeah, sure. What time?”

“Meet me at twelve at the Summit car park,” he said and hung up.

Suze couldn’t get back to sleep after that. It was nice to hear his voice. It was as familiar to her as her own.

She remembered the events of last night and knocked on Laurie’s bedroom door. She hoped Laurie was OK. She had been in pretty bad shape going to bed. She had cried for an hour and she looked like she might be related to a bullfrog by the time she stopped. Even beautiful people look ugly when they cry, thought Suze.

There was no reply to her knock, so Suze opened the door. Someone had opened a bedroom door and saved her life once. She panicked for a moment when Laurie wasn’t in her bed. Had

her friend done something stupid? There was no sign of her anywhere in the room. The bed had been slept in and the bathroom was empty. She probably went out for a run, Suze thought. Laurie ran when things got on top of her. Suze ate cake. That was one of the differences between them.

Laurie hadn't slept a wink. Her puffy eyes were wide awake all night. She wrestled with why she was lying alone in her bed missing the love of her life while he lay somewhere else equally as miserable. She got up and put cucumber slices on her swollen eyelids. She welcomed the coolness against the hot stinging.

She watched Kevin's interview again on her iPad. She paused it and stared at his face for a long time. He was an incredible actor, but she knew that what she saw wasn't an act. He loved her. She loved him. She missed everything about him. She missed that she wasn't even herself when he wasn't there. She had to see him. Suze said he was flying back to the States.

She checked the Dublin airport website and saw that there was a flight to Los Angeles leaving in three hours. She could be there in fifteen minutes if the traffic was kind. He would probably be in the VIP lounge and she wouldn't see him, but she had to try. She didn't want to call him. She wanted to catch him unawares and see what his genuine reaction to her was.

Suze got ready to go meet Peter. She picked out a pair of jeans that Sarah had given her and a white shirt. She put on wedge sandals and looked at herself in the mirror. The white looked good against her tanned skin and overall she was pleased about the woman looking back at her. She remembered the last time she looked at herself in a mirror and how much she hated that woman's reflection.

She had done a lot of work with her psychotherapists and she didn't hate that woman anymore. The old Suze was ill. She

forgave her.

She drove the old familiar route out to Howth. It reminded her of all the Sunday drives they used to take when the Paul and Emma were small. They wanted to spend time with their parents back then. She would look at all the houses for sale and dream about living there some day. It was dead posh, and all the famous celebs had a place there.

She loved the ocean and if she won the Lotto in the morning, she would buy a place by the seaside. Peter used to laugh at her for wanting to live in Howth. They were fine where they were, weren't they, he'd argue. "I suppose we are," she used to say.

She still felt a thrill whenever she drove out towards the Hill of Howth. She wished she had pushed him more. They could have afforded a place there. Not one of the big houses on the hill, but one of the houses in one of the estates. She could have walked to the sea front every day.

But *could've, should've, would've* were words that belonged in Suze's past. The future was all about possibility and the pursuit of happiness. Suze pulled up to the Summit at just before twelve. Peter's van was in the car park and she parked alongside it.

He was staring at her like he'd never seen her before as she got out of the car.

"Jaysus, I didn't recognise you. The car, the gear, you look totally different. You look great, love," he said.

She hadn't done anything to change herself on purpose, but she was glad that he noticed something different about her all the same. She wasn't the same Suze he married. She was the new and improved Suze.

"You look good yourself," she said. "You're slimmer? The belly is going."

"I've been eatin' me own cookin'. I'm not great at it, to be honest."

She had a pang of anxiety. For a moment she felt guilty for not being at home cooking his meals for him. She needed to stop it. She needed to reinforce her reasons for leaving.

"It's good to do things you never did before. It makes you a more rounded person," she said, trying to convince herself as well as Peter. She didn't want him to sense any weakness on her

part. Whatever he wanted today, she had to put her own needs first, something she still needed a lot of practice at.

“Or less round, wha’?” he said, rubbing where his belly used to be. “I’m off the pints as well. Well, not off them exactly but I’m not goin’ to the pub every five minutes.”

She hoped that he wasn’t saying these things for her benefit. She hoped he wasn’t trying to convince her to go back to him. What she did wasn’t about Peter. She hoped he knew that. This was about her.

“What did you want me to come to Howth for?” she asked him.

“Hop into the van an’ I’ll show you.”

They drove around the summit towards the sea. It was a magnificent day, a rarity, and there were people pacing everywhere. Peter turned into a house where there seemed to be a lot of building activity going on. It was one of the big houses. Well, it wasn’t a house exactly, more of a mansion. Suze was puzzled. Peter explained that he was doing the electrical work on site. The house had been bought by some gazillionaire who founded some big online company who was going to use it for about two weeks every year. Suze was still wondering what the hell any of this had to do with her.

“Wait till you see,” he said.

They got out of the van and went around the back of the house. Suze’s breath was literally taken away. She was looking at acres of garden which swept down to the sea. This was what she would buy if she won the lottery. The sea was a light emerald-green and even though the gardens were overgrown and covered with brambles and weeds, someone had loved this place once.

The main planting was careful with nothing that grew too big to take away from the amazing view of the sea beyond. There was a cluster of trees at the end of the garden and Peter was walking towards it. She was getting worried now. She hoped Peter wasn’t going to take her down to the trees and try and do something mad like kiss her. Or ask her to go back to him. She didn’t know how she would react. She didn’t know if she could cope with the guilt of turning him down. She was advised not to get into any relationships for a long time. And that especially included the one she had just come out of.

They were almost at the little cluster of trees and Peter told her to go ahead through. There was a gap in the bushes underneath the trees and she walked through. The trees overhung a path that was about twenty metres long. She could literally see the light at the end of the tunnel but turned around to make sure that Peter was still there.

He was following her with a big grin on his face. She came to the clearing and the vision in front of her made her want to cry. There was a tiny cottage with a blue door sitting on the edge of a tiny beach. It was like a kid's fort except the cottage was built of bricks and mortar. She looked at Peter.

"Well, what d'ya think?" he said.

"It's gorgeous, Peter. Who owns it?"

"*Em*, you do if you want."

"What do you mean? I don't get it. Me?"

Peter came across the little cottage while he was having his lunch break one day. He remembered how Suze wanted to live by the sea and as he sat on the tiny beach eating his lunch, he thought about her. He thought about her all the time and how much he had let her down during their marriage.

He went back to work after lunch and asked the owner about the little house at the end of the garden. It turned out the guy hadn't even known it was there. It wasn't marked on the land map and when they checked the land registry there was no record of it either. He had enough on his plate with turning the big house into a liveable space and didn't need another house that needed doing up. Peter came right out and asked him if he could buy the piece of land off him.

They examined the cottage and they both reckoned that the house had been built almost a hundred years previously. It had no heating system and had big thick walls. It had only two main rooms and a small room that could easily be converted to a bathroom. Peter knew it was perfect. It could be accessed by foot from the road and was completely private from the big house.

Suze would be near to all of her friends and would be able to step outside her door and be literally a stone's throw from the sea. The owner wasn't in favour of selling the parcel of land, but he said he would lease it out to Peter long term for a nominal

sum if Peter checked the house for him and became a sort of caretaker.

Houses in Howth rented for thousands of euros per month and Peter jumped at the chance. Checking the house wouldn't put Peter out at all. He only lived a couple of miles away and he would enjoy calling out to Howth every week. If Suze agreed to take the house, she might even let him visit her sometimes too.

Peter wondered how someone could be so rich that he'd spend millions doing up a house that he'd barely live in, but he shrugged it off. He wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He would have to pay for any improvements he made to the cottage, but he would gladly do it for Suze. He had worked every evening and weekends for months to get the house finished for her.

"I don't believe any of this, Peter. Why would he do that?"

"I think he likes me. No, not like that," he said when Suze arched her eyebrows. "I was nice to his kid. He's special. You know, like he's a handful. ADHD or somethin'. I let him wear me tool belt and he was following me around the place like a puppy for a few days. The da got loads of stuff done while the young fella was with me. That's the only thing I can think of."

Suze couldn't make any sense of it. The inside of the cottage was done up in the Cape Cod style she loved, with all shades of sand and sea. She could imagine sitting outside on summer mornings having breakfast while the waves lapped a few feet away from her feet. She looked at Peter, then at the sea. In her wildest dreams, she wouldn't have guessed this was going to happen. This was just like winning the lottery. Peter was giving her this house to live in for as long as she wanted.

"Emma did the inside. I wouldn't have had a clue what to put in it, but she seemed to know what you'd like. She did a great job, didn't she? And Paul helped me with all the building stuff. He's not bad, he isn't. Pity he's wastin' himself on a good education!" Peter laughed.

Tears started to well up in Suze's eyes. She was supposed to avoid highly emotional situations such as this but the thought of Peter, Paul and Emma doing something so wonderful and kind for her was nearly more than she could bear.

“What are you cryin’ for? This is a good thing, Suze. It’s for you. I know you want to be on your own and I’ll always respect that. I wanted to do somethin’ that makes you happy. To say I’m sorry for all the ... ya know. I don’t want you to be cryin’ over it.”

“It’s gorgeous, Peter. It’s the nicest thing that anyone has ever done for me. I don’t know how to accept it graciously, that’s all.”

“Ah here, all this cryin’ and I’ll be at it meself.”

He put his arm around her and brought her back out through the pathway to the main garden. It was like *The Secret Garden*, a book that Suze had read when she was little. Except it was a secret house. She looked back and couldn’t even tell there was anything beyond the trees only the sea.

Peter dropped her back to her car at the Summit. She was overwhelmed by his kind act and she didn’t know exactly how to deal with his generosity. He could see she was struggling as she played with the keys in her hand.

“Suze, I did a lot of stuff wrong. I didn’t do everythin’ wrong, I know that, but I didn’t listen to you. I thought everythin’ was hunky dory. The kids, the house, I thought it was all grand. It was only when you, you know, well, it was only then that I realised that I never did anythin’ I didn’t want to. I never listened to you properly and I’m sorry for tha’. I was actin’ like our lives were over and tha’ we were already old fogies. I don’t want anythin’ from you. I just want you to have a house in Howth. An’ it’s in the swanky part, wha’?”

He was sweet. Sweet Pete. She used to call him that when they were going out together, but the sweet part had fallen away over the years. He wasn’t a bad person at all. She never thought that about him, but she had forgotten how lovely he could be too. She needed to get away from him and think about the cottage and him and what it all meant. She walked to her car and gave him a little wave goodbye. She didn’t want to kiss him, or want him to take her in his arms and hug her. Her emotional self was way too fragile for that right now.

Laurie walked into the departures building and scanned the check-in lines for any sign of Kevin. She imagined he would have an entourage and looked around for a group of Hollywood-type people. The check-in desk for LA was just closing. The ground staff were moving on to another desk. She called one of the chaps back to the counter.

“Has everyone checked in for the flight? Can I get through to see someone who’s on the flight?”

“You can’t go past security unless you have a boarding pass.”

Laurie knew this. It wasn’t a movie. But she had to see him. She left the desk and scanned every single face in the check-in area and when she didn’t find him there, she went to the departures. She checked the food outlets and the queue for security. Nothing.

He was nowhere to be seen. He must have already gone through.

The lack of sleep was beginning to kick in. She needed to get some coffee into her system and then come up with another plan. She would call his Dublin agent, Gavin. He would have his number. Or Laurie would ask Gavin to get a message to him. She couldn’t give up. CaraBean was open and the smell of coffee was calling out to her. She checked the coins in her purse to see if she had enough or if she’d have to pay by card.

“Allow me.” The voice was as smooth as caramel.

She would know that voice anywhere. She looked up into his green eyes.

“Double-mocha-hazelnut-skinny-frappolatte-chocolatte-lattechino extra foam?”

“Exactly what I had in mind,” she replied.

They had always made up silly names for their coffees while they waited in the line in CaraBean. She sat down and watched him queue up for her coffee. He knew she liked it made with an extra shot. He knew everything about her. She looked around for his entourage but of course there was none. This was Ireland. People didn’t bother famous people in Dublin. Well, that’s what people told themselves when they were actually bothering the famous people! Irish people wouldn’t want anyone to think they were anything special.

She watched the girl behind the counter flirting with him. He might not have an entourage, but he looked pretty damn famous. There was something that set him apart. He was dressed casually like always, but he was groomed to within an inch of his life. His shaggy hair was just the right shaggy. Not a millimetre longer than it should be.

Nothing about Kevin was ever left to chance. She liked that about him. He covered his bases and took responsibility for everything he did. Even making *that* video. He took his punishment on the chin and seeing him now Laurie knew he had been punished enough. Since they met each other they had increased each other's lives beyond measure. She could stay mad at him forever but the person she hurt most would be herself. He came back to the table and gave her the coffee.

“Mocha-latte-choco-skinny-frappe-double-cappuccino!” he said, handing her a plain old Americano.

She smiled at him. It was as if the last few months hadn't happened and they were sitting in town waiting for him to go for an audition or rehearsal. He put his hand out to hers and she took it. His hand folded over hers and it felt good. A part of her didn't want to give in straight away. She wanted to make him put up another fight for her. But mostly, she was exhausted. She had wasted so much energy missing him and being miserable without him and she leaned over and kissed his mouth and breathed him in.

“I thought you went for a run.”

“I went to the airport. I went to see if I could catch Kevin before his flight,” said Laurie.

“And?”

“I saw him. It was like nothing had ever happened between us. It was like nothing had changed. He was still the old Kevin. My Kevin.”

“Your Kevin? Does that mean what I think it means?” asked Suze hopefully.

“Yeah, it does. We’re back together. He wants me to go to LA. He’s going to be filming there for the next six months. God, Suze, am I a complete idiot to go running back to him?”

“You’re not exactly running back to him. He got on national television last night and declared his love for you. And he told the whole nation that he was a stupid knob. I think you’d be daft not to take him back,” said Suze gently. “Look, Laurie, you have to do what makes you happy. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that. Your main responsibility is to yourself and your own happiness. End of story. So if Kevin is the one who makes you happy, then it’s a no-brainer.”

“He had a private detective track down the guy who robbed his phone.”

“Your friend from the docks?”

“Yes. He had to make sure that there were no other copies made. He’s one-hundred-per-cent certain that the video isn’t going to surface anywhere, ever.”

“See? That’s great news.”

“What will I do about the column?” said Laurie, letting the question float in the air between them.

Suze was gutted. The column would be moving to LA with Laurie. She had enjoyed it so much and even entertained the thought of maybe doing it again.

“Will you do it, Suze? You’re so good at it. I’ll talk to Penny and get the OK on it, of course.”

Suze wanted it more than anything but she was also a pragmatist.

“But I have no experience in journalism, I’m in my forties, and there’s no way she’ll want to hire me,” said Suze.

“You might not have any experience in journalism, but you’ve got life experience and that’s what’s needed for the magazine. If I talk to Penny, will you take the job?”

“Yes. Oh my God, yes!”

Chapter 34



Sarah got stuck into her old life. She kept herself busy so that she wouldn't have time to think about him. It was funny – she was over Joe. She wasn't annoyed with him anymore, only ridiculously pleased that he was happy. If a thought about Tom came into her mind, she immediately switched to a different channel in her head. She painted the already immaculate bakery and changed the seating area.

She overhauled her website and added more products, making it even more popular. She had to hire another person just to meet the demands of the online store. She wondered what would happen when she ran out of things to do. She thought about remodelling the kitchen in her own house and maybe even putting on a glass extension.

She wasn't going to risk giving into her feelings and calling Tom and telling him that she loved him. He had said he loved her, and the words were on a loop in her head. She had muted the sound, but she couldn't turn it off completely.

What was she meant to do with that information? OK, say he did love her. But he still loved his dead wife. How was that ever going to work? Would they go places and everywhere he looked, he would be reminded of Lennon? Sarah couldn't take that risk for her heart's sake. She had been through too much emotional turmoil in the past few months to withstand any more heartache.

She was standing in the middle of the biscuit aisle in Tesco. Tom hijacked everything she did. She looked at the picture she had taken of the shopping list that hung on her fridge. She and May added things as they needed. Toilet paper, *tick*. Milk, *tick*. Dried oregano, *tick*. Shampoo and conditioner, *tick*. Tampons ...

Sarah was rooted to the spot. She couldn't remember the last time she bought tampons for herself. It had been at least two months ago. The fear came out through her skin and she started to panic. No, she thought pragmatically. There was no way. Sure how could it be?

Tom had used a condom every time. Every time except for the first time. What were the chances that she would get pregnant the first time they did it? It was ridiculous. But not so ridiculous that she didn't abandon her trolley and run down the street to the pharmacy. She bought a pregnancy test and then bought another two just in case. She knew the girls in the pharmacy. They came into The Bakery every day for their lunch.

"For a friend," she said as she handed over the money to the familiar shop assistant.

She wished it was for a friend. She stuffed the packet in her bag. She didn't remember the drive home. She ran up the stairs to her ensuite bathroom and banged the door shut. She put down the toilet seat and sat down and endured the longest three minutes of her life.

Diane loved her new life. Waking up to blue skies every morning did wonders for her head and for her soul. She had never given much thought to her soul before moving to Spain. A busy career as a barrister didn't leave much room for naval-gazing. She quickly got used to working shorter hours and spending time outdoors. In Dublin, apart from her stints on the tennis courts, she barely spent any time outside. They had a beautifully landscaped garden in Copper Beech House but she used to admire it from the inside of the patio doors.

Once she took possession of the shop she started to fit it out to her own specification. With Carol's help she hired one of Marbella's top designers and decorated the store from top to bottom. It took a few weeks but by the time she was finished it looked like a five-star hotel. There were sumptuous chairs and enormous dressing rooms. The lighting was stylish and perfectly

showed off the fabulous array of designer clothes on the rails and shelves.

Diane wasn't sure what she expected when she opened her doors for the first time but she was pleasantly surprised by the steady stream of well-coiffed, sun-kissed women who stopped by. She studied the women and found out what they wanted. She'd streamlined her ranges and made sure that her shop would not be found wanting.

One evening when there was a lull she was looking online for a jewellery supplier. She reckoned that a woman who was going to spend hundreds or thousands of euro on an outfit might like the option of buying a piece of jewellery to go with it.

She heard the ancient bell ding and looked up to see an attractive older man in the doorway. She was just as happy to see a man as a woman in the shop. Men tended to spend even more than women and she gave him a broad smile.

“*Buenas noches,*” she said.

“Good evening.”

So much for my pronunciation, thought Diane. It obviously needed more work if he felt the need to speak English for her.

“Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

She went back to her online search to allow the man to browse. There was nothing worse than overattentive shop assistants. The man barely looked at the clothes and appeared at the cash desk.

“You are Diane?”

“Yes, that's me.”

Diane had been to a few social gatherings with Carol and her husband. She wondered if she had met him at some shindig. She would have remembered him. He was very attractive. He had dark skin, greying hair and piercing blue eyes, unusual for a Spaniard.

“You met my mother.”

“I'm sorry. *Em.* Maybe, yes. I don't remember every customer. Did your mother want you to get something for her?”

He laughed. He had nice teeth. He smelled amazing. And he was shopping for his mother. He was too good to be true,

thought Diane.

“*Señora* Messine. The shop owner.”

“Oh. Yes. Yes. Of course I know your mother. I thought her method of choosing a tenant was a little unorthodox, but she was very nice. I was very grateful because old people generally don’t like me. Sorry, I’m talking too much. Did she want something? Your mother?”

“She told you I was coming.”

Diane was puzzled. She hadn’t seen the old woman since the day they agreed the lease.

“No. I’d definitely have remembered. She said she would send me something. A cake maybe?”

“It’s me. She is a bad lady. She disagrees that I do not marry. She looks everywhere for a wife. She says I must come here to see the beautiful Irish lady.”

Diane didn’t believe what she was hearing. The old woman was pimping Diane out to her son. That was what all the scrutiny was about. The cheek of the old bat. No wonder Diane didn’t like old people. They were evil, the lot of them.

“Oh right. Well, now that you’ve seen me, you can go. I have no interest in being part of any twisted arrangement you have going on with your mother.”

Diane put her hand on his back and steered him towards the door.

“You can tell your mother thanks but no thanks,” she said and slammed the door shut after him.

She was shaken from the encounter and slammed her laptop shut too. She needed a drink. She took her coat off the hook in the little office behind the dressing rooms. She could still smell his aftershave. There was no mistaking that he was very good-looking and would ordinarily be the type Diane would go for. But if he thought that signing a lease meant signing away her morals, then he was deadly mistaken.

Diane had just ordered a glass of wine when her phone rang. It was Sarah.

“Hiya. I was just about to call you. You’ll never guess what? I got the ‘something’ from *Señora* Messine.”

“I’m late,” Sarah said, completely ignoring Diane.

“What the hell are you ringing me for then? Call me when you’ve got more time.”

“No. I’m late. My period is late. I’m pregnant.”

“Is this a joke?” asked Diane, hoping for her friend’s sake it was.

“I wouldn’t joke about something like this. I’m going to have a baby.”

Diane was stunned and completely forgot about Senora Messine’s good-looking son.

“What? But aren’t we too old to get pregnant?”

“Apparently not.”

“Fucking hell. I thought Joe leaving you was bad. This is ten times worse.”

“OK, Diane, maybe you weren’t the best person to ring. I’ll give Suze a call and maybe she’ll be more sympathetic.”

“No. Don’t. I’m sorry. I’m glad you rang me. Are you absolutely sure? Is there any way you could be mistaken?”

“I’m certain. I did three tests and they’re all positive,” and she started to cry.

“How can a doctor get you pregnant? I know he’s not a gynaecologist, but he must know how these things work.”

“It was the first night we went out. You know the day I got the new clothes and the new hair. We did get carried away. I mean I didn’t know we were going to end up having sex. I thought there might be a bit of you know, feeling each –”

“OK. I get the picture.”

“Sorry but I was just trying to explain. It’s my fault. I should have made sure that he pulled out on time.”

“Don’t you dare blame yourself for this. Tom is equally as liable as you are.”

“We were stupid. We were a bit drunk too.”

“For god’s sake, Sarah, this is schoolgirl stuff. You’d go crazy if May was having sex and not using anything.”

“Do you not think I’ve beaten myself up about this already?” said Sarah through her tears.

She didn’t want a lecture from Diane, but her stupidity didn’t deserve to go unpunished.

“How does Tom feel about it?” asked Diane, still not believing they were having this conversation.

“I didn’t tell him. I want to get my head around it first. You know, before bringing him back into my life.” Sarah was almost inconsolable by now.

“Do you want me to fly over? I can be there in the morning if you want,” offered Diane.

“No, it’s fine. I need to think about this myself. I need to lie in a dark room for a few hours and figure out what I should do.”

Diane sipped her drink as Sarah cried some more and blew her nose into the phone several times.

“It’s going to be fine, Sarah. You have options.” She was sure Sarah had considered these. She listened to the silence and the nose-blowing until Sarah spoke again.

“What were you going to tell me? When you answered you said you were about to call me about the woman in the shop?”

“Oh yeah. Do you remember the old woman told Carol that she was going to send me something?”

“Yes.”

“Well, she did.”

“Was it cake?”

“It was her son.”

“*What?*”

Diane could hear Sarah perk up. No doubt she was glad to give her something to take her mind off her enormous problem, if only for a few minutes.

“Yeah. She told him to go to see ‘the beautiful Irish woman in the shop’. She wants him to find a wife and seemingly that’s what she had in mind when she was leasing the shop to me.”

“You need to be careful. He’s probably some kind of weirdo.”

“I’m not sure if he is.”

“What man would walk up to a woman he’s never met before and tell her that his mother thinks they should get married? You don’t think he might be a bit odd?”

“Yeah, well, when you put it like that ...”

Summer had fully arrived on the Costa Del Sol. Business was booming and Diane could barely keep up. She had to hire two staff to wait hand and foot on her demanding, wealthy clientele. Diane wasn’t surprised at the extent of her success. She had done her homework, researched what was selling at home and tailored that to suit the warmer climate.

Marbella was the social hub of the Costa and there were several parties every night of the week. She was invited to some of them but mostly didn’t go because of how tired she was at the end of each day, having been on her feet the whole time. Even Diane was amazed at how much money women spent on outfits that they would only wear once. It was obviously akin to a criminal offence to appear in the same dress twice.

Diane had finished ordering stock after the shop closed for the evening. She was hungry and tired but reckoned if it was a toss-up between food and sleep, sleep would win by a mile. She turned off the lights and locked the door of her little shop from the outside.

“Good evening.”

She recognised his voice immediately. It was deep and sexy and unmistakable.

“Oh. Hello. Did your mother send you?”

“I must apologise. It was idiotic. I should not listen to my mother.”

“I’m glad that you see the error of your ways. Not only was it idiotic, it was insulting.”

Diane could see that the guy was mortified.

“I would like to make amends. I wish to invite you to have dinner with me.”

“I will accept your apology but not your offer of dinner. Thank you.”

“Please, *señora*. Diane. I want to show you that Spanish men are not pigs.”

Diane was tired. Her feet ached. She didn't have the energy to argue.

“My car is here,” he said, pointing to a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce whose engine was purring quietly.

Diane sighed. She had forgotten to put a pair of flat shoes into her bag this morning and the soles of her feet were screaming at her.

“OK. But only because my feet are killing me.”

The driver navigated the tiny streets in what felt like a Sherman tank.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Serge.”

Diane wasn't sure if she should shake his hand but instead simply nodded at him. The car was full of his intoxicating smell. The handsewn cream-leather upholstery was spotless and looked brand new. She began to berate herself for getting in. She could have hopped into a taxi a few streets away.

“How is it? Your shop?”

“Busy.”

“That is good, yes?”

“Yes, it's great. It's just that I left a busy career in Ireland and envisioned a more relaxing lifestyle over here.”

“What was your career in Ireland?”

“I was a barrister. You know? Defending people in court?”

“Ah yes. Brains and beauty.”

Diane frowned. “Let's get this straight. I'm not for sale. I didn't come free with the lease, OK? You can let me out here. I'll get a taxi home.”

“I do not think that. I would abhor such a notion. Please do not go. I would like your company over dinner. The restaurant is just around the corner.”

Diane could hear Sarah's warning in her head but somehow she didn't think that he was a weirdo. She hadn't had a proper conversation with anybody in days. She craved it.

"I suppose I am quite hungry."

"You will like the place we are going. The food is excellent."

The restaurant was not at all what Diane was expecting. They got out of the Rolls Royce and stepped back in time into what looked like a cantina. Diane wouldn't have been surprised to see sawdust on the floor. A waiter who obviously knew Serge made a big fuss about them and directed them to a dimly lit table at the back of the restaurant.

"My friend for a long time," said Serge. "This is his family's restaurant. They do the best octopus dish in all of Spain. *Pulpo a la feria*. It's boiled, grilled and then slathered in olive oil and paprika."

Diane loved octopus. She and Will honeymooned in Spain. Their first romantic meal as a married couple was near to where she sat now. It had been the first time Diane tasted pulpo and she had loved it ever since.

"Great. I'm famished."

He smiled at her. It unnerved her a little bit. She wasn't looking for a relationship and she definitely wasn't going to be a party to his mother's fucked up idea of matchmaking. She looked away. That way she couldn't see his handsome face and dancing blue eyes.

"I usually have this wine. It's made in Andalusia," he said, pointing to the wine list. "But if you would prefer something else?"

"That looks fine," she said.

To keep her gaze averted from his, she glanced around the room. She took back her earlier impression of the restaurant. It was old-fashioned but it was also quite classic. The white tablecloths were an excellent quality linen and the glassware had been polished until it gleamed.

“So what do you do? When you’re not on errands for your mother, that is.”

“I have some business interests. This wine for instance. I have a share in the vineyard. I would like to show you sometime.”

Diane wondered what was happening. Did he think they were going to have some kind of romantic liaison? She didn’t need the complication of a man in her life right now. She had just left Will. She had to take some time to mourn the end of her marriage. The end of her life in Ireland. There was so much upheaval. An affair would be disastrous right now.

“I don’t think I’ll have time to see anything except the inside of my shop for a long time. So your friend? Is he the chef here?”

“No. He is a stockbroker in Madrid. His little brother manages it. We try to keep this place a secret from the tourists. It would be tragic not to be able to get a table.”

“It looks like they’d make room for you no matter what,” Diane said.

“We go back a long way. And I have a share in the restaurant also.”

“Fingers in lots of pies.”

She could see he didn’t understand.

“You have an interest in a lot of different businesses?”

“When the recession hit, this place lost a lot of money. My friend thought they would have to sell. I made an investment.”

“I see. You weren’t affected badly then?”

“Some of my businesses were. Others were not.”

Diane was surprised by her own interest in the man sitting opposite her. His clothes were expensive and he was perfectly groomed. His nails were short and recently manicured. His hands were tanned and strong. She started to wonder what it would be like to feel his hands on hers. What was she doing? She excused herself and made her way to the bathroom.

She looked at herself in the mirror. She was tired but her eyes were bright in her head. She looked a bit drunk but she had barely had a sip of her wine. The hunger was obviously affecting her mind. Or else she was attracted to Serge after all. She hoped it was hunger.

When she got back to the table, Serge was gone. She looked around and saw him returning.

“I am very sorry. There is a soccer match on the television.”

“Oh well, why didn’t you say?” she said sarcastically. “A match is much more important than having dinner with me.”

“Please, no. We are playing the team next week.”

Diane detested football. She was one of those people who didn’t understand off-side rules and couldn’t care less about an overpaid bunch of babies running around after a ball.

“I’m not a fan.”

“Nor am I technically. I own the team.”

Diane knew that he had to have flaws. She supposed it could be worse than a football obsession.

“Oh yeah.”

“Yes. We are playing Barcelona next week.”

“Are they any good?”

“*Si! Muy bueno!*”

Chapter 35



“May, I need to talk to you.”

Sarah was dreading telling May her news.

“OK, I’m all ears.”

“I don’t know how else to say this. You’re going to have a little brother or sister.”

There. It was said. It could not be unsaid by her or unheard by May. It was out there. *Real. Fact. She. Was. Going. To. Have. A. Baby.*

“What? You mean Dad and Paolo? They’re going to adopt?”

Sarah was thrown for a moment.

“No, love. It’s me. I’m going to have a baby.”

May ran from the room. She let out a little whine as she was leaving. Sarah sat there wringing her hands in her lap. She hadn’t anticipated any particular response so this one was as reasonable as any. Poor May. She probably hated her right now, but the fact was that they were stuck with each other. Mother and daughter. Family.

Sarah waited. Eventually May came back downstairs, her big stripey sailing bag stuffed to the gills.

“You know, Mum, I thought that Dad being gay was the most humiliating thing that was going to happen in my life. But you’ve managed to top that. *Ew.* What were you even doing having ... God, this is so embarrassing! I’m going to live with Granny. Don’t come looking for me, because I am never, ever coming back here. Ever again.”

She was gone, slamming the door, before Sarah could get a chance to reason with her. But what reasoning could she do?

What could she say to a sixteen-year-old girl that would make everything OK? Nothing.

Granny would have a field day, that was for sure. First the gay son and now the promiscuous daughter-in-law. If it wasn't so serious, if May's life wasn't being torn apart by them, it might even be slightly amusing. She needed to tell Joe. May would need her father now.

She picked up the phone and dialled his number. She couldn't believe the relief she felt when she heard his voice. Joe always calmed her, but she could tell that he was shocked. She had wanted him to give her absolution and to tell her that everything was going to be fine, the way she was going to do with May.

He said he had a call coming in and told her he would call her back. Sarah sat rooted to the spot, waiting for ... waiting for what? For someone to tell her that she was a fool, an idiot, an irresponsible mother? Well, enough, no more negative, she decided. She had a new life growing inside her.

She remembered how happy she was when she found out she was pregnant with May. She had been on cloud nine for the whole nine months of her pregnancy. Didn't the baby she was carrying now deserve to spark the same joy in her?

For the first time she realised or admitted that she was glad to be pregnant. Yes, it would be hard being an older mother. It would be a bummer to be the oldest woman at the school pick-up. Or at the parent and toddler classes they would go to. But she was willing to endure anything for the privilege of being a mother again. To hell with the begrudgers, she thought just as the phone rang.

It was Diane.

"I'm going to have the baby," Sarah blurted.

"OK. Not what I'd do but I suppose I knew you'd keep it. Catholic guilt never leaves you."

"It's not Catholic guilt. Well, maybe a bit but I want this baby, Diane. I really do. I can already feel her in my arms. I think it's going to be a little girl. I know it was totally irresponsible for an adult to have unprotected sex but maybe it happened for a reason."

“It happened because neither of you could keep it in your pants. Anyway, if you’re happy with your decision then I’m happy for you. And if this baby is anything like May, you’ll be fine.”

Sarah’s phone rang again. Joe was back.

“Sorry, that was May calling me. She’s upset. I told her not to tell my mother, that we would do it, but I can’t guarantee she listened to me. Are you OK?”

“I’m fine. I’m happy actually. I know we never thought about having more children. We were such a happy little unit. I know it wasn’t planned but I’m glad it’s happening. Some women only have their first child at my age, you know?” she said, as if arguing her case in front of a judge.

“Hey, yes, of course. I know that. Lots of women leave it until their careers are established so it’s not uncommon. And what about Tom? How does he feel?”

“I didn’t tell him. I was hoping that I won’t have to. That me and the baby, May, Paolo and you can be the baby’s family. We’re a bit of a motley crew but, hell, we’ll all look out for each other.”

The tears came again, and Joe wished he could be there with her.

“Of course we’re all one big family and we will love the baby. But Tom has a right to know. May said he’s been calling you non-stop but you won’t take his calls. No matter what happened in Amalfi, Sarah, you’re going to have to let it go. You have to tell him.”

Sarah knew she had writing paper somewhere. She pulled everything out of every drawer until she found it. She hadn’t written a letter in, well, forever. She didn’t want to see Tom and she didn’t want to talk to him either. She certainly didn’t want to text him to tell him that he was going to become a father. She decided that a letter would be the best method. She started to write a few letters but couldn’t find the right words.

She looked at the balled-up pieces of paper on the table. She eventually just picked up her phone.

“Hey, you! I’d almost given up hope that you’d ever speak to me again. I’m so sorry about Amalfi. I—”

“Forget Amalfi. We’ve got bigger fish to fry. Can you call over?”

“Eh, yeah sure. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Tom pulled up in his car outside the house. Sarah tried to compose herself before he came in. She didn’t want to be emotional when she was telling him. She also didn’t want him to feel in any way beholden to her to do “the right thing”.

She wanted to make it clear to him that it was her decision to have the baby and that she was only telling him out of courtesy. She was nervous and her hand was shaking slightly as she opened the door to him. He was standing there all George Clooney-like as he had been on that night. The night they conceived a child.

“Can I come in?” he said.

Sarah realised she had been staring at him, holding the door open without speaking.

“Oh, yes of course. Sorry, I ... Come on through.”

He followed her into the kitchen. She indicated a seat at the island and he sat down. She couldn’t sit so remained standing.

He was smiling. “I’m glad you called. I’ve been miserable without you, Sarah. I’ve missed you every day. I was a complete idiot. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I only called you over because I have something very important to tell you,” she said and wiped the smile off his face with one sentence. “I’m pregnant.”

There. She looked at him, but she couldn’t read his expression. She could see his mouth was about to form a word. How? But he was a doctor. He knew the how. She could see him rewinding his mind and coming up with the answer all by himself. He had

pulled out but not before it was too late. They had been like a couple of teenagers, horny and kinda drunk and totally irresponsible. And like many couples before them, they thought it wouldn't happen to them.

"The first night? *Jesus. Fuck.* I should have been more careful. This is totally my fault. Tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it. I'm ... Christ, Sarah, I'm so sorry."

He knew that sorry wasn't an adequate response, but he had nothing else. He had hoped that Sarah was going to take him back. She was dealing with an unwanted pregnancy and he didn't know what she was thinking. He would do anything she wanted him to do. He meant that. He would arrange everything for her. She would have the best surgeon and after-care available. He was going over the procedure in his head when she spoke again.

"I'm only telling you because you have a right to know. I'm not looking for anything from you."

What she wanted to say was that she wasn't looking for anything that he didn't want to give. She would love to have a partner in all of this. She had forgiven Tom for Amalfi. On a very strange level she understood his fears about wiping away all memories of Lennon. He was a good man and he only wanted to do the right thing by his late wife. But she didn't want him to come on board out of a sense of duty to her. She only wanted him if he wanted her. And the baby.

"OK, you're over forty. This isn't ideal. I take my share of the blame. I can arrange for you to see one of my colleagues and get this over with. Jesus, Sarah, I'm sorry you have to go through this. I'll be right here for you."

"For what? To hold my hand while I get rid of it?"

"If that's what you want."

"But it was your first thought? You want me to get rid of it?"

"Sarah, I'll go along with anything you want to do. I'll be right here for you."

"I want you to leave."

"But I want to ..."

Sarah walked into the hall with Tom in her wake. She opened the door and waited for him to walk through it.

“Go.”

She heard him sigh as he left the house. It was a few minutes before she heard his car engine start.

Sarah sat by herself in her kitchen. Tom was gone. For good, this time. How could he want to get rid of their baby? He wanted to have children with Lennon. He obviously didn't see Sarah as mother material. Well, he could fuck off, thought Sarah. She would be mother and father to the little one growing inside her.

Chapter 36



Diane walked into the shop. It smelled like a florist's and looked like an undertaker's. There were bouquets of flowers everywhere.

"What's all this?" Diane asked Guillermo, one of the new assistants she had hired.

"All for you," he said, handing her a white linen envelope.

The paper smelled of him. She opened the envelope. Guillermo was standing close enough to read the contents so she went into her little office.

Cenar conmigo esta noche. Serge.

She put it into her phone for Google to translate it. She had seen the way he looked at her the night before. In the restaurant, she was certain that he found her attractive. When he didn't try to kiss her, she thought that she was wrong. The flowers this morning confirmed her first suspicion. If she said yes, she reckoned she would be saying yes to more than dinner. They were both old enough to know what they wanted.

It had been a long time since she felt attractive and sexy. Will had been unable to show any interest in her since he found himself up shit creek without a paddle. Up until last night she hadn't given sex a second thought. She had been busy with the move to Spain and then with the shop. Now she couldn't think of anything else. She held the envelope to her face and breathed in the scented paper.

She saw the car pull up outside at nine that evening. She had plucked a couple of ludicrously expensive items off the rails and

was quite confident that she looked amazing.

“Was that an order? This morning?”

“*Que?*”

“Have dinner with me tonight. I thought it might be an invitation but you didn’t give me an opportunity to say yes or no. Are you always so dictatorial or is it just with women?”

“My number was on the other side of the card. Did you turn it over?”

Diane felt like a total eejit. She hadn’t. She’d been so busy sniffing it that she hadn’t even thought to look at the other side.

“Just kidding. I know,” she said and got into the car.

She hoped he would ignore her blunder. She was wrong.

“So you thought I was being a pig again?”

“No. No, not at all. I told you, I was joking with you.”

She could tell he didn’t believe her.

“You still came.”

Busted. She did. She looked at him.

“Let’s be frank here,” she said. “We’re not children. We are mature adults. I know what I want. I hope that you do too.”

“Will we skip dinner?” he asked.

“I wasn’t hungry anyway,” she managed to say before he leaned over and kissed her passionately on the mouth.

Chapter 37



It was six months since Suze had checked into the airport hotel with the intention of checking out for good. She was living in her new house in Howth and it felt like the person who had tried to end her life was someone else altogether. Thanks to her doctors and her family and friends, she felt well and for the first time in decades she felt like herself.

She was grateful beyond belief for the second chance she was given. Of course trying to kill herself couldn't be considered a reasonable course of action but the very act and its aftermath had made her take time out and figure out what she really wanted out of life. She had made decisions that she never thought she was capable of making. Deciding to leave her family was a biggie. Nobody did that. Not women anyway. She knew that people thought she was a terrible person for doing what she did. But not the people who mattered. Peter, Paul and Emma. Diane, Sarah and Laurie.

They loved her more fiercely now than they ever did. The old Suze would have thought she didn't deserve them. But not new Suze. New Suze understood that leaving home was the only way she could save herself and be the person that her family needed her to be.

The house was tiny but it was hers. Suze got up each morning and walked the few metres to the seashore. She stood on the little stony beach and stared out over the Irish Sea. She was privileged and was keenly aware that Peter had made her new life possible. She would forever be grateful to him for giving her the house, their children and her freedom.

She still had her regular check-ins with her doctor and her psychotherapist. She looked forward to these sessions every week. She reckoned everybody could benefit from regular introspection. Her head had been a mess. She was blocked.

Unable to move forward. When she started talking to the doctors, began to try to articulate her feelings, she felt like she wasn't making any sense at all.

She was good at therapy now. She looked for answers and she found them, mostly. Life had derailed her. As a child growing up she had a certain vision of what her future might be. She imagined foreign cities and being surrounded by art and artists. Instead, she ended up living a few miles from her mam's house with a husband who had lived a few streets away from her.

Children didn't feature in the future she considered back then. Yet she had two children straight away. She felt like the life she was given was meant for someone else and her life was possibly being lived out by some other lucky sod. She never fully engaged with it, feeling that it wasn't hers in the first place.

She loved her children. More than anything else. She had been a good mother in that she put them first in every decision she made. She had no regrets about having them. They were the ones who gave her the most joy. First though she had to understand the life that she thought was meant to be hers.

She was her life. Not Paris or art galleries. Not Peter, Emma or Paul. Her. She realised that she would have brought her perceived shortcomings anywhere she went. A different geographical location or a different job wouldn't have made any difference.

Laurie did a lot of soul-searching before she finally agreed to move to LA. Kevin had done a terrible thing and she had to be sure that she was able to forgive him and trust him again. She knew that if she went to him it had to be forever. Her heart couldn't withstand another make-up and break-up. She loved him. That was a fact. She wondered if she would ever feel like that about another man. She decided that she wouldn't.

“OK. I'm coming out.”

“You mean it?”

“I love you. I don’t want to live without you. What you did – it was almost unforgiveable. But not completely.”

“You won’t regret it, Laurie. I will do everything to make it up to you. I will dedicate my life to making you happy. I’ll bring you _”

“Kevin. I don’t want that. I want us to be like we used to be. You’ve shown you’re sorry for what you did and I forgive you. I wouldn’t be going to LA if I didn’t understand that what you did was out of character. That it was a massive mistake.”

“You know, Laurie, I was afraid that you wouldn’t give me a second chance. I thought I might have to live my life without you.”

A woman arrived at the apartment and went about cancelling Laurie and Kevin’s life in Ireland. She cancelled insurances, utilities and everything else associated with the apartment. Flights were booked and brand-new luggage appeared in Laurie’s bedroom. This was how things were going to be from now on. No more hands-on. Whatever she thought of doing, something else’s hands would do the actual heavy lifting.

Laurie loved the apartment and she loved the life she had there with Kevin. They were broke most of the time but they had their love to sustain them. She had to remind herself that the love was still there, still as strong.

She looked around her one last time to make sure she hadn’t forgotten anything. Though the crack squad Kevin’s agent sent had made sure of that. This was finally it. She was leaving Dublin. Leaving Ireland. What was waiting on the other side of the Atlantic? She thought of Kevin. He was waiting. That was everything.

May sat in the café and waited for Emma to show up. She hadn’t seen Emma in a while. Ages, really. They were friends of a sort. It happened when your mothers were best friends. You were brought along and your company was forced upon the other children. Emma and Paul were older than May but the age-gap only became apparent in the last few years.

Emma had called May up out of the blue. She knew about Suze. She felt bad for Emma and wanted to reach out to her when it happened. But she didn't. She felt bad now. It was going to be awkward. Like the elephant in the room if May didn't mention it. She idly stirred her coffee and wondered what Emma wanted. Hardly a catch-up after nearly five years?

She used to see Emma around the village. She hung around with same kids all the time. They were loud and May used to cross the road if she saw them coming. They weren't horrible people but they weren't nice either. May had seen them tear some poor innocent apart for wearing the wrong trainers. Or for being even the tiniest bit different. May couldn't imagine being friends with a girl like Emma now.

She walked into the café and May immediately noticed something different about her. She lacked the surety that being with a gang gave a person. She entered quietly, shyly, and looked around for May. When she saw her, a broad grin crossed her face. May was surprised to find herself smiling just as broadly back at her.

Then May almost fell off her chair when Emma leaned down to hug her.

"Hey, old buddy. How are you doing?" Emma greeted her.

"Eh, yeah. Fine. Good. How about you?"

"Let me get a coffee first. Do you want another?"

"Sure. Here, let me get them," May said, getting up.

"No. Sit. We don't want to be like that episode of *Father Ted* where the women bash each other with handbags trying to pay first."

"OK. OK. Thanks."

Emma arrived back at the table with two coffees, a slice of millionaire's shortbread and two forks.

"*Yum*. Thanks a mil."

"So? How have you been?"

"Oh, you know. Just when I was coming to terms with my dad being gay, Mum goes and gets herself pregnant." May could see Emma trying not to laugh. "It's not funny." But May was now laughing too.

“No. It’s not. But it kind of is!”

“Thanks for coming here to make fun of me!”

“Fucking parents,” said Emma.

“I know.” The two started to laugh helplessly again.

“I’m sorry about your mum. I should have messaged you,” May said when they settled down.

“It’s OK. What could you have said?”

“She’s OK now, though? Mum said she’s doing really well.”

“If you call living in a tiny house at the bottom of somebody’s garden doing well.”

“It must have been awful.”

“It was. If you ever want to make somebody feel guilty about the way they treated you, then trying to kill yourself is the way to go.”

“Emma!”

“No. You’re right. It was awful. I’ve never been so scared in all my life. Or so sad. As for Dad, he was in bits. Paul sort of held it together but me and Dad were useless.”

“Have you spoken to her about it? Is that something you can do?”

“Yeah, she’s really open about it actually. On some level I know she’s ashamed and sorry for what she did but, at the same time, she’s convinced that she had to do something to change her life.”

“Who’d be an adult?”

“Yeah. I’m afraid it’s going to be thrust upon us soon.”

“Well, you first,” said May.

“You’re only two years younger than me. Anyway, what about you? Can you talk to Sarah?”

“I can but I choose not to.”

“Tell me to butt out if you want but I think you need to talk to her. They’re all fuck-ups, the whole lot of them. But they’re our fuck-ups and we have a responsibility to them to be there for them.”

“When did you turn into the Dalai Lama?”

“I just don’t want you to regret not being there for your mum. I was a complete bitch to mine. Sure, who am I telling? You know what I was like. I blamed her for every bad thing that ever happened. Homelessness. The recession. Both world wars. Honestly, when I think of how badly I treated her, I get this rush of shame and go red from my head to my feet. I don’t want things to get as bad as that for you.”

“I don’t know. I mean, they obviously don’t care about me. They just went ahead and did things that they wanted to do. They didn’t think about how I would be affected. It isn’t fun going to school and the whole class knowing your mum is pregnant. I mean I know parents must have sex and things but Mum just put it out there. It’s mortifying.”

“I don’t mean to be cruel but you sound like a baby.”

May looked at her. Emma was meant to be her friend. She came across like a special envoy sent by her mother.

“Did Suze ask you to talk to me?”

“No. I swear. I think a lot about things lately. Sarah was in Mum’s house the other night and I overheard them talking about you. Sarah was saying how much she missed you. Mum was going on about hurting the people we love most *blah blah blah*. Your mum was upset. Like, really upset.”

“*Hm.*”

“I love Sarah. She’s my godmother after all.”

“I forgot that.”

“Just give her a chance.”

“I’ll see,” said May and drained the end of her coffee.

Sarah had the beginnings of a bump and knew that the sight of it would probably drive May further away from her. The empty house gave her far too much time to think. She phoned Joe to see if he could help her.

“She won’t come home. Can you ask your mam to have a word?”

“She did and May refused. Just give her a bit of time, Sarah. Between the two of us we’ve sort of blown up her life.”

Sarah was well aware. Poor May. She was almost seventeen and had to contend with things no child should have to. Sarah knew that she would not have coped well if it happened to her. But she wanted her daughter back. She missed her like crazy.

“She barely talks to me at The Bakery. At least she’s still coming though.”

“It’s a good sign. If she hated you as much as she says she does, she wouldn’t go anywhere near the place.”

“She hates me? Is that what she says?” Sarah almost burst into tears. When May was young, she was glued to Sarah’s side. She looked up to her and said she wanted to be like her. Now she hated her. Oh my God.

“She doesn’t hate you. She just says that. She said it about me when I left too. She loves us. That’s what’s wrong with her. She’s trying to reconcile the things we’ve done ‘to her’ with how much she loves us. You need to give her time.”

Joe was right. But how much more time did she have to give her? She had been patient beyond belief. When May ignored her or said horrible things to her, Sarah turned the other cheek. She sent her messages telling her how sorry she was and how much she missed her. May ignored each one.

“I don’t know how much longer I can take it, Joe. She should be at home. With me.”

“How is the pregnancy going? You getting big yet?”

“It’s fine. It’s text book really. They’re scanning me every few weeks due to my enormous age but, other than that, it’s grand.”

“What about Tom? Any sign?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Sarah!”

“What? He doesn’t want the baby. He made that quite clear.”

“Well, he didn’t exactly ...”

“Joe! I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Right. But when you do, I’ll be right here.”

Sarah hung up the phone. Fuck Joe for bringing up Tom. He texted her all the time. Long texts asking how she is. How the baby is. May. When she deigned to text back it was usually with one word. 'Fine' or 'Grand'. She wanted to talk to him. She wanted to share being pregnant with him but what was the point? She was having the baby on her own. She would still be on her own when the baby was born. Why open herself up to more hurt?

Since Diane left, they had given up playing tennis and it cut out the risk of Sarah bumping into Tom at the club. She didn't know what she would do if she saw him. She felt that she might come undone. Nothing was going the way she wanted it to go. She had gone from married with one daughter to being a single mother with two children.

It bothered Sarah that Tom wanted to have children so badly with Lennon but when she told him about their baby, his first instinct was to get rid of it. He said he loved her but he lied. People lied for lots of reasons.

She missed Diane. They were constantly on the phone to each other but it wasn't the same. They couldn't just meet for a coffee or a drink. Diane's presence always reassured Sarah. It was like having a big sister who was willing to fight your battles with you and for you. It was a rare thing and it depressed Sarah greatly to think that she might never get that back.

She dialled May's number again. She would be home from school by now. She expected the phone to ring out and go to May's voicemail.

"What?"

"May?"

"*Duh!* You rang my number."

"I wasn't exp— I didn't think you'd pick up."

"Well, I did. What do you want to say?"

"I want you to come home. I miss you."

"Can you come and get me then? My books weigh a tonne."

Sarah couldn't believe her ears. She looked at the phone to make sure she was connected to the right person. May had already ended the call. Sarah grabbed her car keys off the kitchen counter and raced over to retrieve her.

“Mum. Stop standing there staring at me like that.”

“Sorry, love. I’m just so happy that you’re home. I missed you like mad.”

“Well, only for the fact Granny’s smells like cabbage, I’d still be there.”

Sarah didn’t care why May came back, she was just glad that she did. Granny had waved them off at the front door and Sarah got the feeling that she was glad to have the house back to herself.

“What do you fancy for dinner?”

“Something that’s not bacon and cabbage, please,” said May, opening the fridge. “What about tortellini? I’ll stuff them with ricotta and spinach.”

“Sounds lovely. Will I give you a hand?”

“No. Go and watch TV and I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

Sarah left the kitchen. She didn’t want to ask May too many questions in case she said the wrong thing and May took off again. She texted Joe to tell her that May was back. He texted back a thumbs-up emoji. Sarah put her feet up on the couch. She didn’t even manage to turn on the TV before she fell asleep. She woke to a gentle nudge from May.

“Dinner’s ready.”

Sarah peeled herself off the couch and followed the delicious smell coming from the kitchen. It was nice to have somebody cook for her for a change. Had May not been home, she wouldn’t have bothered cooking anything for herself. She was tired. Standing on her feet all day as well as being pregnant was taking its toll on her body.

“This looks and smells delicious. Thank you, love. For dinner and for coming home.” There were tears in her eyes. She saw May roll hers.

“Save it, Mum.”

“What made you come home?”

“A wise person told me something today.”

“Oh? What?” Sarah couldn’t wait to hear it. Granny O’Hara was full of old sayings. No doubt May had picked up something from her.

“That you and Dad are fuck-ups. But you’re my fuck-ups.”

“May!”

“What? It’s true.”

“Granny never said that.”

“Who said anything about Granny? No, it was another wise person who shall remain nameless.”

Whoever it was, Sarah was grateful to be sitting opposite her daughter eating delicious mouthfuls of tortellini.

“Do you really think that? That I’m a fuck-up?”

“Kind of. But not in a bad way. I thought parents didn’t make mistakes. I thought the kids were meant to be the ones acting irresponsibly but in my case it’s the other way around.”

“I’m sorry, love. You know I never wanted to hurt you.”

“I know. And I’m sorry for staying away for so long. I missed you. Granny doesn’t have E either so no Kardashians.”

“So that’s why you came home! Because I have a good Sky package?” said Sarah, laughing.

Chapter 38



The four friends were together again in the first time in ages. Diane was pouring them all champagne.

“I shouldn’t,” said Sarah, putting her hand on her quite enormous belly.

“It’s a bit late for shouldn’t, Sarah. Have a small glass – it won’t do you any harm.”

Sarah sipped a tiny bit and pushed the glass away from her. Nothing was agreeing with her tonight.

They were all in Rome to witness Joe and Paolo’s “Celebration of Our Love” in a commitment ceremony the following day. The women had ditched their significant others to have a long overdue catch-up.

“How is May?” asked Suze.

“She’s just about stopped treating me like I’m the biggest slut in Malahide. I think she’s secretly excited about having a little brother or sister. She’s been a great help in The Bakery and is keeping up with all her schoolwork. Honestly, I don’t know where I got her.”

“She’s a great mix of the two of you,” said Suze. “How does she feel about Joe and Paolo making it official?”

“She can’t wait. Apart from having to granny-sit tonight, she’s having a ball.”

“Granny O’Hara’s great to be taking all of this in her stride, isn’t she?” said Suze. “Old women are amazing – they’re so wise and intuitive. Like, who would have thought that she’d be fine with her son getting married to another man? Fair play to her.”

“She had plenty to say about the whole thing, believe me,” said Sarah “And not all of it kind! But she’s come around. I think she secretly fancies Paolo.”

“Don’t we all? He’s divine,” said Diane.

“Yeah, right, Di. You and Serge look pretty happy to me,” said Suze.

“Yes, we’re fine.

“Fine? I’d say it’s better than that, Diane,” said Sarah.

“OK, maybe it is. He’s great in bed, he adores me, he’s made me forget all about Will and what a prick he was to do what he did to me. And best of all he gives me my space.”

“But why do you want space? Don’t you want to be together all the time?” asked Laurie who couldn’t bear to be parted from Kevin again.

Diane couldn’t think of anything worse. “No way. I like it when he sleeps over and I’m also happy when I have my bed to myself. What we have now is exciting and fun and I know if we lived together, we’d lose it. We’d start to take each other for granted. That just happens. I don’t want to pick up his dirty underwear or clean up after him. I don’t want to see his hairs in the bathroom sink. Or get pissed off if he squeezes the toothpaste from the top of the tube. Been there, bought the T-shirt, threw it out and don’t want another one.”

“You’re so cynical, Diane. I hope I never get like that. No offence,” said Laurie.

“I’ll come back to you in twenty years and see how you’re getting on with the dirty jocks.”

“Laurie will never have to wash dirty jocks,” said Suze. “Kevin’s so famous now, I’m sure she has someone to do all that for her.”

“He doesn’t wear any.”

They all screeched and toasted Commando Kevin.

“I love him. I’d pick up and wash his stuff no problem,” said Laurie, sounding like a true woman in love.

Or on drugs, thought Diane. “Well, we’re happy for you, Laurie. Here’s to love and no jocks!” she said, raising her glass again.

Kevin and Laurie had got married in secret in Los Angeles a few months previously. Kevin's every move was forensically examined by reporters. Even while Laurie was in LA before they got married, she often read stories in the newspapers and online about Kevin sleeping with or dating other leading ladies. Kevin knew it was horrible for Laurie to have to put up with the rumours that constantly followed him around.

He went to a little church in West Hollywood and found an Irish priest who happily agreed to marry them. He did all the paperwork, and everything was ready for the big day. Kevin told Laurie they were going to a première and to go out and buy the most fabulous, most expensive dress she could find. Laurie could wear a black sack and look fabulous, but Kevin wanted her to look back on her wedding pictures and be happy with what she wore.

Laurie came home with a Versace gold dress which draped down her back in a cowl but looked demure from the front. She looked like a goddess and Kevin was mesmerised by her. She thought it was a bit much and wanted to take it back for something less glamorous. Kevin had a hard job convincing her to keep it and that it would be perfect for the "première". He hired a car to take them to the "event" that evening. He wore a tux and looked really handsome.

"I love you in a suit," Laurie said, fixing his dickie bow.

"And I love you in anything. And in nothing!" said Kevin, kissing her and hoping she wouldn't freak out when they got to the church.

"I love you, Kevin Flynn," said Laurie, kissing him back.

"I love you too, Laurie Henderson."

The limo pulled up outside the address Kevin had given the driver. He looked back at Kevin, puzzled, and pressed the button to lower the glass between them.

"You sure this is the right place, Mr. Flynn?"

"It's exactly the right place," said Kevin, getting out of the car and holding out his hand for Laurie.

She got out of the car and looked around for an auditorium. It was dusk and the sky was all shades of pink and blue. She didn't

know LA very well, but she was pretty sure there were no swanky venues in this neighbourhood. Nowhere that an A-List celebrity event was going to take place.

She looked at Kevin and he looked so happy. A door opened and a priest appeared in the doorway. Laurie was totally at a loss as to what was going on. She was wearing a dress that cost a small fortune, done up to the nines, and Kevin had brought her to a neighbourhood where they could have their throats cut just for looking the way they did.

He held her hand so tightly she thought he was going to snap a bone.

“Hey, Larry. Could you come with us, please?” he said to the driver.

“I dunno, Mr. Flynn. The car ain’t safe around here.”

“Larry, if there’s any damage to your car, I’ll pay for it.”

Larry reluctantly followed the pair into the tiny church. There was a gospel choir singing as they walked to the top of the church. Laurie then knew she was attending her own wedding. She had always said that she wanted a gospel choir to sing as she walked down the aisle and Kevin had made it happen.

She was overcome with emotion but was too stunned to cry. Kevin had handed Larry the ring box and he stood behind them like a WWE wrestler-cum-bodyguard. The choir faded out and the priest started the ceremony. Laurie had never been happier in her whole life. She had no parents there, no friends or no family. Kevin was all those people rolled into one. The tears finally came when the priest pronounced them husband and wife and the gospel choir’s voices rose in another joyous song.

They went to a 1950s-style diner for dinner. Larry didn’t join them but sat outside in the parking lot. They ordered cheeseburgers and sides of chilli cheese fries. They sat opposite each other holding hands while they put quarters into the tiny juke box on the table. The waitresses thought they must be celebrating something and brought them over a piece of Key Lime Pie. They fed each other off their forks and when they finished Kevin put another quarter in the juke box and pressed two buttons. He stood up and held his hand out to his new wife. She took it and they had their first dance in the Hollywood Diner to the strains of “Blue Moon”.

“Suze, how is Howth? How is the new house?” said Laurie.

“It’s great. I have this feeling that it will all disappear as quickly as it came to me though. It still seems unreal. It’s got this tiny entrance into it and it’s in the most fabulous spot on the beach. I can’t see anyone, and they can’t see me. I don’t know how Peter ever found it in the first place.”

“That was so sweet of him,” said Sarah. “Do you remember we all used to call him Sweet Pete because of the way he used to follow you around?”

“It was. And he doesn’t want anything in return. He did it out of kindness. He wanted to do something nice for me. It’s humbling to have someone do you a great kindness. All of you have been wonderful too. I want to thank you all for all that you did for me when ...” Suze was getting tired and emotional.

“It’s grand, Suze, you’re welcome. Now cheer the fuck up. We’re at a hen party not a funeral,” said Diane.

“Well, technically it’s not a hen party because there’s no bride,” said Sarah.

“Right, smartarse, it’s just a party then. Whatever it is, we’re going to get very pissed and you’re going to take us all back to the hotel in a taxi.”

“You can forget that. I can hardly drag myself around, never mind three drunk women, so take it easy.” Sarah was really enjoying being with her best friends again. She had spent the last few months thinking about nothing else but babies and babies and more babies. She had been monitored and scanned to within an inch of her life because, as the doctor so delicately put it, of “her mature years”.

She was being minded like she was about to go into labour at any moment. She was worried about coming to Rome and even the commercial airlines wouldn’t take her because she was in third trimester.

When Diane offered to bring her on Serge’s private jet, she jumped at the chance even though her doctor advised against it.

She wouldn't miss Joe's big day for anything. And she wouldn't have missed this night with her girlfriends for anything either.

They were laughing and finishing each other's sentences and slagging each other just like they had done when they were all together in Dublin. Occasions when they were all together would become even more rare in the future. Kevin and Laurie hardly ever came to Dublin now. Diane still had fugitive status and, since she had met Serge, she had more reason to stay in Spain.

"Sarah, you're in dreamland," said Diane. "I was just saying that tomorrow would've been your mum's worst nightmare."

"What are you going on about now?"

"You walking up the aisle eight months preggers!" laughed Diane.

"*Mm*. I don't know which would horrify her most. Me walking up the aisle eight months pregnant for my own wedding or me walking up the aisle eight months pregnant to give away my gay ex-husband. It's a tough one!" said Sarah, laughing too.

"Hey, Suze, guess who's here for the ceremony?" said Sarah.

"Who?"

"Seán Collins."

"Mr. Muscle?" said Suze and Diane in unison.

They used to call Seán Mr. Muscle due to the fact that he showed no evidence of having any muscular tissue whatsoever. They started to sing the music to the Mr. Muscle ad that used to be on TV. Seán was a techie nerd like Joe, and they kept in touch and stayed friends over the years.

"Well, he doesn't look like he used to," warned Sarah. "He is very successful at whatever it is he does and he's single. He married some American when he was in Silicon Valley but they're divorced now."

"All I can remember is a dopey young fella who drove me mad. Did he try to be a Goth at one stage to try to impress me?" asked Suze.

"Yes, he did. His mother killed him by all accounts when she saw him dressed up in all the make-up and the black."

The women had a good laugh at poor Seán's expense.

“He kinda disappeared off the face of the earth then. What happened to him?” asked Suze.

“He went to his room for about fifteen years. He became best friends with his computer, and they lived happily ever after is my guess,” said Diane.

“No, really, Suze, wait until you see him,” said Sarah. “He’s really attractive. He didn’t morph into Brad Pitt or anything, but he just looks very sophisticated and comfortable in his skin. There’s something very sexy about a man with confidence.”

The women made their way back to the hotel in the Piazza Navona.

They walked into the lobby where they saw a group of mainly middle-aged men. Diane then realised it was their men.

“Christ, we’re so old!” she Diane. “We should be going out now, not coming back home. When did this happen to us?”

“I don’t care,” said Sarah, already dreaming about her big double bed in the beautifully appointed hotel room. “I’m glad I’m old. I’m wrecked. I’m fat. My ankles are the size of balloons and I have a bad dose of wind. I’m going to bed. Good night, everyone.”

“Far too much information, thanks. OK, who’s up for a drink at the bar?” said Diane, not giving up on them.

Serge and Suze followed her into the bar. Suze was putting her bag on chair beside her when a man came up and asked if he could sit down. It took her a moment to realise it was Seán. She couldn’t believe she remembered his green eyes after all the years.

Diane was winking and nudging Suze and she wanted to kill her or at least make her stop.

“Hi, Suze, I’m Seán. I don’t know if you remember me,” he said. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“Yes, I remember you. I hope you don’t remember my terrible fashion sense in the eighties though,” said Suze, laughing.

“We were all guilty of crimes against fashion back then,” he said, laughing too.

He was really easy to talk to and Suze was delighted to take a trip down memory lane with him. He had figured more largely in their lives than she had remembered at first. Soon they were so caught up in their conversation that they hardly batted an eyelid when Diane and Serge said goodnight.

“Yeah, goodnight, Di, Serge. See you guys tomorrow. We’ll just stay up for another drink.”

“Diane hasn’t changed at all, has she?” said Seán when they were alone. “She’s just a more grown-up version of her fifteen-year-old self. You haven’t changed a bit either. I’d know you anywhere.”

Suze wasn’t used to being scrutinised or commented on and didn’t know what to say. Seán was looking at her with those lovely green eyes and she couldn’t tell if he was waiting for an answer or not.

“Diane is terrific. She’s not afraid to say what she means. She’s not afraid of anyone or anything –”

“I don’t want to talk about Diane, Suze. I’d prefer to talk about you.”

Suze wasn’t sure if anybody had told Seán about her suicide attempt and she knew it could be a short-lived conversation if she brought it up now. But, if he wanted to talk about her, then it was a big part of her story.

“Well, I don’t know where to start. I’ve got two kids, Paul and Emma. They’re both at college. I’m separated from Peter and I’m working for a magazine. I tried to kill myself last year. And I’m glad I didn’t succeed. I’m glad I’m here.”

Shit. She hoped he didn’t think she meant she was glad she was here, in the hotel with him. She meant she was glad to be *here*. Alive. Well, he hadn’t run screaming out of the bar, so he obviously wasn’t completely freaked out.

“Yes, I heard about that. Life is too hard sometimes. I’m glad you didn’t succeed too.”

“To life!” Suze said and took a sip of champagne.

It was good to be toasting so many good things in her life. She loved her friends, and she was feeling very pleased to be sitting in the hotel bar with Seán talking about things past and present. Seán told her he was divorced and didn’t have any children.

He had sold the online share trading company he had founded and was looking for something new to do. He said he had bought a house in Howth and had done it up. He didn't plan to spend much time there, but he always fancied having a house on the hill.

A little bell started ringing in the back of Suze's mind. Peter had told her a little about the guy he had leased her house from. He too had sold an online company and didn't plan to spend much time there either. But Peter had said that guy had a kid so it couldn't be Seán.

"I just moved to Howth too," said Suze.

"Really? Well, maybe I will be spending more time there after all. Where did you move to?"

Suze wondered if Seán was flirting with her. She was so unaccustomed to a man paying her attention that she didn't know how to react. She wished she had Diane's or Sarah's confidence or Laurie's youth to bolster her.

"Oh, it's just a little place on the Coast Road. When I say little, it really is tiny. It's down a little side lane sitting right on the beach hidden from everyone's view. It's amazing."

"I'm on the Coast Road too." He stared at her. "Hold on, are you by any chance living in the invisible house at the bottom of my garden?"

The invisible house. That's what Peter had called it too. It had to be the one.

"Yes, my husband. My ex-husband Peter worked on a house. Was it your house? Sorry, I'm confused. He said the owner was an American and that he had a child. Could there be two houses with invisible cottages at the end of their gardens?"

"No, it's me alright. It takes a while for me to shake the twang when I come back from the States. And the kid. That's my nephew Owen. He's got behavioural problems. I had him for a few days while my sister took a short vacation. He's a special kid. He's great. Peter was terrific with him. But, wow, you're my neighbour! That's crazy. And great."

"Well, I think you're actually my landlord not my neighbour," said Suze.

“No. I leased the land to Peter. He said his wife had been through a terrible ordeal. I thought it was a lovely thing for him to do. Especially as you two weren’t together anymore. I don’t think my ex-wife and I would be as kind to one another. He must think the world of you.”

“And I think the world of him. We just can’t be married, that’s all. We want different things and compromising would just make us more miserable. Sorry, I’m sure you don’t want to hear about my marriage difficulties.”

“Sure I do. But I promise I won’t inflict my painful tales of marriage on you in return. That would just be cruel,” he said, laughing.

“Oh, come on, she couldn’t have been that bad,” said Suze.

“No, you’re right. She was way worse.”

Suze was sorry that he had such a miserable marriage, but she was really enjoying his company. He wasn’t afraid to laugh at himself and she liked that about him. He seemed so free. She wondered if she would ever get to be as free herself.

“Would you like to go to Venice?” he asked her.

“Yes, some day. I love it here. I’ve never been to Italy before. Peter never really wanted to go anywhere but I love to travel. Venice is definitely on my places to visit list.”

“No, I mean would you like to go to Venice with me after this? After the celebrations? I’d love to have a travel companion. I don’t want to be a total saddo going on my own.”

“Oh no, I don’t think so. I have work and I have to get back to the, well ...” Suze couldn’t come up with one other single reason not to go. She had nobody waiting for her at home. Peter had everything under control with Paul and Emma. Her house would be sitting there waiting for her on her return. Maybe she was becoming free.

“Can you get off work? Can you call them?” he asked her.

He seemed to really want her to go.

Suze was getting excited at the thought of flitting off to Venice on a whim.

“Actually, work is not an issue. I have my laptop, so I’ll be able to work on the go. But how can we go to Venice together? We

hardly know each other.”

“We’ve known each other for years. If we don’t get along, we can always cut the trip short, but I don’t see that happening. We’re not strangers, we like to travel, I think we’ll get on just fine. We’ve both got stuff that happened to us but I’m sure it won’t stop us enjoying being together.”

Suze was feeling ridiculously pleased with herself. She thought the glamorous life was only for her friends but maybe she was going to have her share of fun too. And, boy, could she do with it!

“OK, it’s a deal. We’ll go to Venice after the celebrations. Jesus, I can’t believe I’m being so spontaneous. I normally plan things months in advance.”

“Here’s to doing things differently!” Seán said, raising his glass.

Chapter 39



Rome has over nine hundred churches but only one of them would agree to bless Joe and Paolo's union. Sarah, Joe and May pulled up outside the tiny church of Santa Maria della Rosa on a busy shopping street on a bright Saturday afternoon.

Sarah was glad that it was cool inside the porch of the church. She felt like an elephant and the heat was not suiting her one bit due to the extra weight she was carrying. She peeped inside the church and she saw all the people they loved sitting there. Diane was there with Serge. Serge adored her and Sarah was glad for that. Diane deserved adoration. She never compromised and she never bent to anyone else's wishes. She stayed true to herself and she had risked a lot to build her new life.

Suze was there beside them. Brave Suze. She had been to hell and back and had a perspective on life that Sarah supposed only those who have been so near to death can have. Suze was looking around her. For someone in particular? Yes! She was looking for Seán. He moved to sit in the pew beside her. They looked really comfortable together, thought Sarah. Could this be the start of something? Laurie and Kevin sat there like something out of *Hello!* magazine all shiny and set apart by their superstar status.

"So? How do I look?" asked Joe nervously.

"You look handsome," said Sarah, brushing non-existent fluff off the shoulders of his suit jacket and begging the tears that were welling up in her eyes not to fall.

"Thanks for doing this. Thanks for giving me away," he said to Sarah and May.

"Are you kidding? I'm the only person in my school who ever did this. Can we do a selfie so I can put it up on Instagram?"

Sarah, Joe and May smiled for the camera. May fiddled with her phone, uploading the pictures while Sarah and Joe held each

other and tried not to cry.

“I said some terrible things about you after you told me about Paolo and I’m sorry,” said Sarah. “I want you both to be really happy. He is perfect for you. I just hope he knows what a great guy he’s getting.”

“Thank you for being here today. I wouldn’t have felt it was right without you here. Are you ready? Are you OK?” Joe asked as Sarah put her hand on the small of her back and made a contorted face.

“Yes, I’m ready and I’m fine. The baby’s just letting me know she’s there, that’s all.”

The usher opened the door of the little chapel and Joe walked up the aisle to Paolo with Sarah and May on his arms.

Sarah gave Joe’s hand to Paolo and Paolo kissed her.

“*Grazie*, Sarah,” he said into her cheek.

They were all in tears as Sarah sat down beside Granny O’Hara to watch the two men commit their lives to each other.

“Are you OK?” May asked.

“I’m happy,” she said, beaming at her and squeezing her hand.

Sarah had felt very uncomfortable all day. The heat didn’t agree with her, nor did the champagne the night before. She would kill Diane for making her drink it. She also thought the calamari must have been off too as her stomach had been cramping.

They were listening to the lilting voice of the Italian padre when she felt something wet in her seat. She sat up straight and prayed it wasn’t what she thought it was. She then heard a *drip, drip, drip* as the water dripped from the seat down onto the tiled floor. May looked at her like it was the last shame she could bear.

They were in the front pew and Sarah wasn’t sure if those behind knew what was happening. Joe looked over at her, but she mouthed to him to continue. But hurry! As soon as Paolo and Joe’s union was celebrated and the small congregation was clapping, Sarah was clutching May’s arm with a death grip that made her wince.

Then Diane, Suze and Laurie gathered around her and May gladly took a backseat.

“Oh Christ! The pain!” Sarah said louder than she wanted but not able to help herself.

“Paolo, call an ambulance!” said Suze, taking charge.

Soon everyone was gathered around Sarah. Granny O’Hara was clutching her rosary beads and asked May to take her back to the hotel. Obviously seeing your gay son commit to another man was enough excitement for one day.

“Please, love, take her back. I’ll phone you if anything happens,” Sarah said between contractions.

Joe went outside and got them a taxi back to the hotel.

Sarah screamed and this time the whole church winced. The faint-hearted decided to go and stand outside.

“Aaaaah, the pain!” Sarah wailed with big crazy-looking eyes.

“The ambulance is on the way,” said Suze, hoping to God she wouldn’t be delivering a baby.

“I thought it was the octopus,” said Sarah.

“The octopus?” Suze hoped that Sarah wasn’t hallucinating.

“That gave me food poisoning. I thought the cramps were from dodgy octopus not labour pains. Jesus!” she cried.

“Where the hell is the ambulance?” said Suze with panic in her voice.

“I want Tom. He should be here. He should be here to see his baby!” cried Sarah.

“OK, well, that’s not going to happen. You’re stuck with us,” said Diane, looking over at Suze.

Suze had Sarah’s head in her hands. She could almost feel every contraction that her friend was having as they racked Sarah’s body. She could feel Sarah tense and got ready for Sarah to squeeze the life out of her hand again.

“Oh, thank God, they’re here!” said Suze as the medics came in and put Sarah on a gurney and into the back of the ambulance.

Sarah let out a guttural scream as the doors of the ambulance closed and, not for the first time that day, Diane congratulated herself on her decision not to have children.

The women got a taxi and followed the ambulance to the Giamelli Hospital. They were glad that Joe was there before them as he was able to communicate with the medical staff. May and Granny O'Hara were there too as May had insisted that they go to the hospital instead of to the hotel. Granny could rest later! All they knew was that Sarah had been taken to the labour ward and all they could do now was sit and wait nervously.

"Where's Paolo?" asked Suze.

"He's with Sarah. I couldn't do it. I wasn't even there for May's birth. All that pain and gory stuff going on. She knows I'm a total wuss. I hope Paolo is a help to her."

"Typical of Sarah to try to upstage your big day," Diane said.

"Yes, typical. Why do you think I left her?" said Joe and they all laughed.

Joe loved those women. Even though he still thought of them as girls. He had cut, pierced, dyed and styled each and every one of them at one stage in their young lives.

In the labour ward, Sarah was trying her best to deliver her baby. She had grabbed Paolo while her gurney was being pushed through the hospital doors. She knew Joe wouldn't want to be there. He almost fainted when she went into labour with May. And that was before they even left the house.

Poor Paolo was trying to calm her now. He was talking to her soothingly in his beautiful Italian accent. She tried to tune out of the excruciating pain and tune into the voice beside her. She imagined him singing like Andrea Bocelli until the next contraction made her squeeze his hand until he gasped in pain.

The spell was broken. She noticed the midwives were not as breezy as they had been and were talking to each other more urgently than they had been previously. Even though she couldn't understand what they were saying, she knew instinctively that something was wrong. She looked at Paolo who was listening intently to the midwives and watching their every move.

“They are concerned about the baby’s heartbeat,” he said. “They will take you to the theatre if the baby does not come soon.”

The gas and air were making her a little whacky. But the gravity of the situation soon kicked in. She looked into Paolo’s brown eyes.

“Please don’t let anything bad happen to my baby!” she pleaded. “Please, Paolo. Promise me.”

“Nothing bad will happen. It is normal, no?” he said to the midwife who had some English.

“Si,” she replied but Sarah didn’t think she sounded too convincing.

Sarah started to cry. Paolo had explained that they were waiting for the doctor to come and for an operating theatre to be ready.

“It’s because I didn’t want her at the start!” she cried.

“*Shhh!* Your baby knows you love her. *Shhh!*” he said more calmly than he looked. His face had gone pale underneath his tanned skin. He was hanging on every word that was being said.

Sarah was screaming at him to tell her what was going on. She wanted to push. She was being ordered not to push by the midwives, but she was being ordered by her body to do it. She pushed. She almost broke Paolo’s hand in the process, but she couldn’t stop herself.

The doctor walked in to see her baby making its way out of her body with the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck. In one amazing movement, she took the baby’s head and unwrapped the cord.

The baby slid from her body into her hands and the whole room was silent. Sarah sat up on her hands and looked at the doctor and the tiny bundle she was holding. Seconds passed and still no sound or no movement from anybody. Then there was the tiniest cry from the bundle that was starting to pink up.

It was as if everyone who had been frozen in time had regained their human form and sprang into action. Paolo was given an enormous scissors to cut the cord. He looked at Sarah who shrugged at him to go ahead. The baby was taken to a side table where she started to cry with gusto. It was music to Sarah’s

ears. She was handed back to Sarah wrapped in a pink blanket. Sarah looked up at Paolo who was crying.

“Thank you for being here,” she said to him.

“No – thank *you*. It is the greatest day of my life.”

The doctor came out to the waiting room to impart the good news.

“It’s a girl!” she said, smiling broadly.

“Can we see her?” Diane shouted.

“*Si*. Mrs. O’Hara is waiting to introduce you all to her daughter,” said the doctor who was almost bowled over by the gang in their rush to Sarah’s side.

Sarah was sitting up in bed, staring at the bundle of wonder in her arms. She looked up and smiled beatifically when her door opened. They all *ooohed* and *aaahed* over the tiny pink lady Sarah was cradling and took turns to hold her.

“Everyone, this is Rosa. Rosa, meet your family,” said Sarah.

“Rosa?” said Laurie.

“The church was the Santa della Rosa and I saw the name as the ambulance door was closing. It suits her, don’t you think? She’s all rosy-looking too.”

“It’s perfect!”

May took Rosa in her arms and sat on the bed beside her mum. Joe and Paolo were on either side of the bed with Granny O’Hara looking over May’s shoulder at the little bundle. Laurie caught them all in the lens of her camera. The joy on each face was so pure and so beautiful that it almost made her cry.

Joe and Paolo took Granny and May back to the hotel and told the others they were looking forward to seeing them at the

celebration dinner later.

“Sorry about all this, for putting such a spanner in the works,” said Sarah as Joe was saying goodbye.

“Are you kidding? It’s the best spanner ever,” he said and kissed her forehead. “Rest and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

The room was quiet now with only the women left with the new arrival.

“You asked for Tom,” said Suze. “Did you really want him here? Did you miss him?”

“I did? God, I don’t remember. Maybe it was the pain making me talk crazy. God, now that she’s here I’m nervous. Will I be able to do everything for her? Will I be able to bring her up on my own, give her everything she needs?”

“Of course you will,” said Diane. “And you’re not on your own. You’ve got us. Whether you let Tom be a part of all of this or not, Rosa is a lucky girl to have you for her mother.”

Laurie showed Sarah the photograph she had taken earlier. Sarah looked at the faces about to burst with happiness. Joe looking like he was so proud of her. Granny O’Hara still not too hardened to be touched by the beauty of a brand-new life. Paolo looking shell-shocked by the whole experience. He had been wonderful, and Sarah was glad to have had him in the labour ward with her.

And May. Well, May didn’t look at all embarrassed. She was looking at Rosa with a love so true that Sarah knew it was all going to be alright. The nurse came in and told them all to leave Sarah to rest. At least that’s what they assumed the nurse was telling them in Italian.

When everyone was gone, Sarah sat alone in the room with Rosa cradled in the crook of her arm and started to cry. This wasn’t the way it was all supposed to turn out. She wasn’t meant to be lying in a room in a Roman hospital. Alone.

She had been big and brave all along, but she was terrified now that Rosa was here. How the hell was she going to do this? Really? And run The Bakery? And be a good mother to May? She felt alone and isolated.

She could hear the nurses at the station outside, but she couldn’t understand a word they were saying which only added

to her feeling of isolation. She reached for her bag and almost fell off the bed in her attempt to get it. She was sore everywhere. Whoever said that childbirth was natural obviously never had a baby themselves. There was nothing natural about it. It was like pushing a cow through a cat-flap and her cat-flap hurt like frigging hell.

She dialled his number. Sometimes, if he was on duty, he didn't answer so she wasn't really expecting to hear his voice. She was about to hang up when she heard his hello.

"It's me," she said.

"Yes, your name came up," he said. "Are you OK?"

His tone was professional, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

"She's here."

"Who? Who's where?" He had no idea what she was saying. He was in the middle of a busy shift at the hospital and his mind was split between his patients and Sarah's call.

"Our daughter. She arrived a couple of hours ago. One fifteen p.m., Rome time, to be precise."

Silence.

"Tom. Did you hear what I said?"

Tom had taken a seat in a waiting room amid all the people waiting to be seen in the Accident and Emergency department.

"But how? You aren't due for another six weeks. Are you sure?"

"*Am I sure?* She's in my arms and my fanny is in flitters. So, yes, I'm sure." She was almost sorry she bothered ringing him now.

"Is she OK? She's very early. Did you get her checked out? Oh God. Are you OK?"

"She's fine. Perfect. I wish you ..."

"What?"

He wanted her to say that she wished he was there with her. With their daughter. He wished he could unsay those

unforgivable things he said when she told him she was pregnant.

“Oh nothing. The staff here are wonderful. We can leave the hospital tomorrow, so I’ll arrange to fly home straight away. I’ll, *em*, I’ll call you when we get home.”

Tom was broken-hearted. He had gone over the scenario where Sarah went into labour in his head dozens of times. He was always there. She had called him at the last minute. He was there when his daughter came into the world. She had always been ‘she’. In Tom’s fantasy they all lived happily ever after, but he wasn’t sure that it was going to play out this time.

“Yes, please. I can’t wait to see her. And you.”

Sarah didn’t say anything.

“Does she have a name yet?” he asked.

“Rosa. I called her Rosa. It suits her. She’s pink and beautiful. You’ll love her.”

I will, thought Tom. I will love both of you.

Sarah didn’t sleep. Rosa cooed in the cot beside her. She had cried her head off for ages in the early hours of the morning. A kind nurse took her to the nursery so that Sarah could get some sleep. Chance would be a fine thing, Sarah thought. She looked at her phone. It was almost seven a.m. She dialled Tom’s number. He would probably be dying for a progress report on Rosa. The woman from Vodafone told her that he probably had his phone powered off. For fuck’s sake, she thought. He was more concerned about getting a good night’s sleep.

The nurse appeared with Rosa. Sarah almost didn’t believe that Rosa was hers. Even though she carried her for nine months, it still came as a bit of a shock that she had a baby. Physically she felt like she had a baby. The feeling was akin to being run over by a lorry, she imagined. She felt like a wrung-out dishcloth. Her head felt fuzzy and the rest of her wasn’t too far behind.

Rosa roared when she took her in her arms. The nurse helped Sarah to latch Rosa onto her breast. It kind of worked. Better than the night before anyway. What a difference when May was

born! Joe fluffed up pillows and waited on Sarah hand and foot while she devoted herself to feeding her baby girl. There would be nobody to fluff her pillows this time, she thought sadly.

Rosa cried a bit more and eventually exhausted herself and slept. A nurse came in and took her from Sarah's arms and put her in her cot.

"You should try to sleep too," said the nurse.

Sarah didn't need to be told twice. She was exhausted. She looked at the tiny bundle in the cot beside her bed. She was overwhelmed. Her daughter. Their daughter. Hers and Tom's. She started to cry. It was all too much. The pain. The exhilaration. The tiredness. The nurse came to Sarah's side and started to rub her head. Sarah found it strangely comforting. She drifted off to the Land of Nod.

Sarah woke and opened her eyes. She couldn't focus properly. It looked like somebody was standing at the end of the bed with a baby. It took her a few seconds to remember where she was. A man was cooing at the baby in the crook of his arm.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

"I hope you don't mind. I had to come."

She didn't mind at all. He was exactly what she wanted. What she needed. A human being who was equally responsible for the tiny little human he was now holding. Sarah picked up her phone and saw the time. Ten past eleven.

"How did you get here? You were in Dublin at nine o'clock last night."

"I flew to London first thing and got the earliest flight to Rome. I couldn't wait to see you. To see Rosa."

Sarah could see he was obsessed already. He barely took his eyes off his baby daughter. Sarah was glad that he only had eyes for Rosa. She looked a fright. She hadn't a scrap of make-up on and her hair was all over the place.

“I spoke to your doctor. He said you should recover quite quickly.”

Sarah felt like Tom was a stranger. She was just another patient to him. A woman who just had his baby but a patient nonetheless.

“I’m sure I will. It was no big deal after all. Millions of women do it every day. I was thinking, if the Rome marathon is on while I’m here I might do it.”

“Sarah! That’s not what I’m saying. Look at her. She’s here and she’s perfect and she’s healthy because of you.”

Sarah felt vaguely mollified. She was being testy with him. She wanted a fight. Naturally her hormones were all over the shop and she was capable of saying anything. Luckily for Tom, the door opened and half a dozen people came into the room. They all gushed over Tom and how tiny Rosa was in his arms. She pushed a human being out of her vagina and Tom hops on an early flight and gets all the kudos. Life wasn’t fair.

“Have you got everything?” Tom asked.

Sarah looked around the hospital room. She picked up a tiny pink cardigan and a sock that was caught in the sheet of the cot. She put them into her bag. Rosa already had a wardrobe befitting of the little princess she was and she almost had as much luggage as Sarah herself.

“Yes, I think so.”

“Are you sure you’re well enough to fly? We could rent somewhere in Rome for a few weeks.”

“I want to go home. Everything seems abstract. Rosa. Being in Rome. I need a healthy dose of reality.”

“I can move in with you.” He saw Sarah recoil. “Only if ... you know ... to help with Rosa.”

Sarah wanted nothing more than Tom to move in but she knew she would never be able to bear his leaving if that were to happen. The pain of the rejection in Amalfi was still raw.

“I’ll be fine. I have May to help if I need her. And you can see Rosa any time you want.”

As if recognising her name, Rosa woke up and started to wail. Sarah watched Tom tenderly lift her out of her carrycot and soothe her back to sleep. The sight of their tiny daughter in his strong arms almost made her agree to him moving in after all. But she had to be real. Tom was still emotionally unavailable to her. She wanted him, of that there was no doubt. But she wanted all of him, every little bit.

“OK. You ready?” he eventually said.

Sarah looked around the small hospital room for the last time. Not a thing left behind. Except perhaps her dignity, but every pregnant woman loses that, she figured.

“Yeah,” she said.

“And so have I. I have the two most important things in the world.”

Tom picked up Rosa in her carrycot and put his arm around Sarah. He pulled her to him and kissed her hair.

“I’m never going to give up on you, Sarah. On us.”

His words soothed her fraught nerves. She wanted nothing more than to surrender. To him, to his love. She didn’t say anything but she leaned into him and let him take her and their daughter home to start a new life.

THE END