

Christmas Magic
at
**Inishbeg
Cove**



Izzy Bayliss

CHRISTMAS MAGIC AT INISHBEG COVE

INISHBEG COVE SERIES

IZZY BAYLISS

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Plump snowflakes fell heavily from the sky and landed in thick clumps on the windscreen of Faye O’Leary’s Mercedes convertible. Her wipers were doing their best to clear it but they couldn’t keep up with the deluge that was falling and snow was building up thickly along the edges of the glass leaving her with an increasingly smaller gap to peer out through. Her knuckles were white from gripping the steering wheel as she crawled along the road – well ‘road’ was being generous - it was no more than a boreen really. A thick strip of snow cut a seam down the middle and she had to rely on the tracks made by the other drivers to stay on course. It was lethal driving along these country lanes in this weather and she knew if she didn’t get there soon, she could end up stuck out here in the middle of nowhere.

Faye had left Dublin over seven hours ago and should have arrived in Inishbeg Cove long before now but the weather conditions had made the journey treacherous. She had vaguely heard something on the news the night before about a snow storm coming in off the Atlantic, but she been engrossed in her work and hadn’t paid it much attention. She wished she had now; it would have been the perfect excuse to get out of this trip. She had only got as far as Kildare by the time the snow had begun to fall and as she had headed west along the motorway, the landscape had gradually changed to white as it began to lodge. When she eventually came off the motorway, she had travelled through villages lit up with jewel coloured Christmas lights where people thronged the streets with paper shopping bags hanging off their arms as they made a panic dash for some forgotten gift. As she neared Limerick, the snow had started to fall with alarming intensity and she felt the first prick

of worry as she still had a long way left to go until she reached the village.

Chris Rea's Driving Home for Christmas came on the radio and she shot out her hand to turn it off. Why was it that radio stations assumed everyone liked Christmas? She couldn't understand why people made such a fuss for just one day. She hated the way people lost the run of themselves as soon as Halloween was over. The shops piled up the selection boxes and the ads on TV became full of happy, perfect families. It wasn't realistic. Not every family was like that. She should know.

When her boss Margo Flynn had heard that Faye planned to spend Christmas alone, she had been insistent that Mistletoe Cottage was the perfect place for her to spend the holidays. Margo normally spent Christmas there herself but this year she was hosting her elderly mother-in-law and didn't think she'd be able for the journey to the west coast of Ireland so the cottage was lying empty. She knew Margo was taking pity on her and only because Margo was her boss, Faye had reluctantly agreed to take Mistletoe Cottage. Faye had tried telling Margo that she was happy to work over Christmas. The advertising agency where they both worked closed for the break but notwithstanding that, Faye usually worked from home all through the holidays. Last year she had got loads done on Christmas day when everyone else was occupied with their own celebrations and weren't disturbing her with petty requests. But Margo had been adamant that Christmas was not a time for work. Most companies would be delighted to have an employee like her, Faye couldn't help think churlishly.

Now, as she gripped the steering wheel tightly, trying her best to keep her car from veering off into a ditch, she cursed Margo once again for sending her on this hare-brained road trip. Why hadn't she just told Margo that she was perfectly content to spend Christmas alone like she always did? This was a ridiculous jaunt across the countryside; in fact it was positively dangerous given the weather conditions outside. Why did people care so much that she didn't celebrate Christmas? Faye wondered, as she crawled along the icy road. Whenever people in the office asked her if she had any plans for Christmas they would stand with their mouths agape when she told them that she would be spending it alone. What did it matter to everyone if she preferred spending it on her own? She could lounge round in her pyjamas; she didn't have to get dressed up in some ridiculous sparkly dress or novelty Christmas jumper, she didn't have to spend hours slaving over a dinner that people would be too full to eat because they had stuffed their faces with

Cadbury's Roses and mince pies. She could stick a microwaveable meal in the oven and pour herself a glass of Barolo and have a perfectly fine day.

She glanced at the satnav which told her she was only five minutes away. She exhaled heavily and felt her shoulders climb down from her ears. Nearly there now.

She passed a row of redbrick cottages and rounded a bend to see a snow covered anchor perched on some rocks making a roundabout of sorts and she realised this must be Inishbeg Cove. The village was small, even smaller than she had expected. She saw a post office, a pub and a pretty, snow-covered church looming at the end of the street. The place was deserted, which wasn't surprising given the weather conditions. Margo had raved about the views across the cove but all Faye could see was thick, leaden cloud hanging low over the water.

The satnav told her to take a left so she signalled and the road began to climb up along a headland. As the gradient grew steeper, her car began to stall on the hill, she pressed the accelerator harder but the wheels began to spin. She tried again, pressing more gently on the accelerator this time and she was relieved when the car gained purchase on the slippery road but once the road climbed higher, the tyres began to spin and alarmingly, it fishtailed from side-to-side across the road. She eased off the accelerator and suddenly she felt her car slip backwards. She screamed as she veered to the left before eventually coming to a stop at the bottom where the road levelled out. Blood was pounding in her ears and her hands were trembling. How the hell was she going to get up this blasted hill? Suddenly she saw a shadow appear beside her, startling her. She unwound her window and a settling of icy snow fell in through the gap and landed in her lap. Great, she thought, as it melted into her jeans, just great. A man dressed in wellingtons and a bottle green wax jacket was standing there. He had a cable-knit woollen hat pulled down over his unruly, dark hair.

'You frightened the life out of me!' she admonished.

'You're wasting your time,' he said to her, thumbing towards the red Mercedes. 'It's rear wheel drive.'

'And?' she demanded impatiently.

'Well, it's more suited to city roads. It's not going to get you up that hill in this weather.'

'Of course it will,' she said stubbornly. Who the hell did he think he was telling her what her car could or couldn't do?

He shrugged. 'Suit yourself.'

She raised the window and put the car into drive again and lightly pressed the accelerator. She slowly began to move forward and she thought she might just make it this time but as soon as the road grew steeper, the same thing happened again. She pressed harder on the accelerator, determined to prove him wrong but the wheels spun as she lost traction and her car slipped sideways down the road. It felt as though she was sliding for an eternity until eventually she heard the clang of metal on metal as she collided with something. She was shunted forward as the car finally came to a stop. She tried to open the door but it took several attempts because her hands were trembling so much. Tears filled her eyes as she flicked on her hazard lights, then she pulled up the hood of her coat, bracing herself for the cold onslaught before stepping outside to survey the damage.

'Are you okay?' the man asked. She realised she had collided into his Land Rover which had been parked at the bottom of the hill.

'I'm so sorry,' she said abashed, following him as he inspected the damage.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'You came out worst.' She looked at his jeep and saw the bull-bars on the front of it had taken the impact without even a dent. She wanted to cry when she saw the passenger door of her lovely red coupe was mangled. Her car was her pride and joy. Damn Margo anyway for bringing her to this place! And what was she supposed to do now? She couldn't turn around and go home and she wasn't going to get the car up the hill. She would have to abandon the car here and trudge the rest of the way on foot, lugging her case with her.

'I told you, you wouldn't make it up the hill,' he said grinning at her with amusement written all over his face.

'I think I've figured that out!' she snapped. 'Is there a tow company or something who can get the car up the hill?'

The man shook his head. 'The nearest town to here is Ballymconnell and I don't think you'd have a hope of getting anyone to come out here in this weather.'

'What am I meant to do?' she wailed. 'I knew this was a ridiculous idea...' she muttered to herself. 'Coming to this backwater place in the middle of nowhere...'

'Where are you trying to go?'

'Mistletoe Cottage.'

A flicker of recognition passed across his eyes. 'Ah,' he said, nodding his head. 'So you're the one.'

She put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at him. 'And what exactly is that supposed to mean?'

'My aunt owns Mistletoe Cottage.'

Faye blinked. 'Margo is your aunt?'

'Uh-huh, she's my father's sister.'

'Really?' she asked, looking at the stranger sceptically. It felt a little too coincidental.

'Look, I can give you a lift up the road and then I can come back later with my tractor and tow your car up to the cottage. How does that sound?'

She eyed him warily. She shouldn't have mentioned Margo's name. How did she know he wasn't pretending to be related to her boss? She could get into his jeep and never be seen again.

'Unless you've any better ideas?' he continued, obviously noticing her reluctance.

'Well, no...' she conceded knowing she had no other options. 'Right, okay... thank you, I guess.'

'Don't mention it. My name's Conor.'

'Pleased to meet you, Conor,' she said offering him her hand. 'I'm Faye.'

'You'd better give me a hand moving this off the road,' he said moving towards the bonnet. We can push it in to the side.'

She thought he was joking but when he rolled up his sleeves and began to push the car, she knew he was serious. She moved alongside him and did the same. Her trainers slipped and slid as they pushed. As she summoned all her strength to match his, she cursed herself once again for not having the guts to tell Margo that she didn't bloody want her middle-of-nowhere holiday cottage. She could be at home in her comfortable apartment, with her feet up right now, watching the snow fall over Sandymount Strand instead of being stuck in this godforsaken place.

Eventually, when her fingers were throbbing from the cold, they finally had moved her car in off the road. Conor made his way over to his Land Rover. 'Right, let's go,' he said blowing on his hands to warm them up.

'I just need to get my case,' she said, opening the boot of the Mercedes.

He climbed into his jeep and waited as she took out her wheely case and her laptop bag. She felt ridiculous as she dragged it through the snow and put it into the back seat.

‘Hop in,’ Conor said patting the passenger seat as she opened the door. She climbed up into it, wrinkling her nose as she took in the dirty jeep and smell of animals. He was clearly a farmer judging from the state of it. He started the engine and they set off.

‘So you work with Margo then?’ he asked as the Land Rover made easy work of ascending up the snow covered headland.

‘Yes, she’s my boss,’ Faye said cautiously, rubbing her hands together to warm them up.

‘She told us all about you!’ He winked and Faye felt herself start to blush. ‘She said you’re spending Christmas all on your own? That you’ve no one else coming to stay with you?’

‘Yes...’ she sighed, weary from experiencing the same reaction whenever she told people her plans for Christmas. She looked out the window where the landscape was like a picture postcard as the snow fell over the steel coloured sea.

He shook his head. ‘It’s not right being on your own for Christmas. I’m sure Mum wouldn’t mind setting another place for you at our table if you want to join us?’ he continued.

‘Not everyone likes Christmas believe it or not. I’m perfectly happy on my own, thank you very much,’ she replied primly.

He exhaled heavily and his fingers clenched the steering wheel. ‘Well suit yourself then...’

Up on the exposed headland, the wind howled and snow swirled around her, as she made her way through the virgin snow towards Mistletoe Cottage. Conor had dropped her off outside and she had taken her suitcase and laptop bag from his Land Rover and trudged through the snow towards the front door. It was a two-story house with a thatched roof and with its plump coating of snow, reminded her of a gingerbread house. Margo had told her that the key was hanging inside the shed at the back of the house so she left her case at the door before making her way around the back to find the shed. Conor had explained that the cottage was part of Mistletoe Farm, which was the farm owned by the Flynn family and where Margo had grown up. Conor's father had taken over the running of the farm when his father died, while his sister, Margo had moved to Dublin for work. Nowadays Margo used the cottage to stay in whenever she returned home to visit. Faye located the key exactly as Margo had explained and hurried back around the front, keen to get inside the cottage and warm up. She planned on lighting the stove and pouring herself a very generous glass of the red wine she had brought with her. She felt she had earned it after the events of the day.

She put the key in the door and after some effort, eventually managed to push it open as a pile of snow fell inside. She lugged her suitcase in behind her and wrestled the door closed against the howling wind. The first thing she saw was a freshly cut Christmas tree twinkling with fairy lights in the corner. 'Oh for God's sake', she groaned. Was there no escaping it? She walked over and switched off the lights on the tree. Someone had lit the stove too and so at least the cottage was toasty. She noticed a handwritten note left beside a

plate of freshly baked mince pies on the table. 'Welcome to Mistletoe Cottage', the note read. She placed it down again. Who on Earth had Margo got to do all of this? she wondered. It seemed the woman was determined to get her to embrace Christmas but Faye thought the traditional Christmas paraphernalia was ridiculous; there was absolutely no Christmas tat in her minimalist apartment with its views across Dublin bay. She couldn't understand why people went to the effort of putting up a tree and decorating it, only to have to go and take it down a few short weeks later? At least she didn't have to tear her hair out untangling fairy lights in January because she didn't bother putting them up in the first place.

She took off her coat and hung it over the back of a chair. As she wandered around the open plan kitchen and living area, she noticed that Margo had decorated the cottage tastefully. Shiplap panelling painted in a rich shade of moss green ran half way up the walls. The small kitchen area had pale-blue timber, shaker-style cabinets and a circular mahogany antique dining table sat to one side. Margo had positioned an L-shaped sofa with brass legs to divide the kitchen area from the living area and a tan-leather armchair sat to one side of the stove. Fluffy cushions and woollen throws in bright colours were draped across the sofa. The whole effect was cosy and elegant and now that she was finally here, she was looking forward to curling up in front of the stove with her laptop. She saw a narrow staircase leading upstairs so she carried her case up and found two bedrooms. She entered the first room and found a steel bedframe clothed in plain white bedlinen. Exposed timber beams ran across the ceiling and patterned rugs covered the floorboards, giving the place a rustic feel. She unzipped her case and took out the bottle of wine she had brought with her. She returned downstairs where the room was lit by the soft amber glow of the stove. She could hear the wind picking up outside, a gale was howling around the four walls of the cottage. She was glad to be inside on a night like this. She rooted around in the drawers and eventually found a corkscrew. She opened the wine and as she listened to the soothing sound of it filling the glass, she felt herself start to relax. She took a sip savouring its heady aroma and instantly her shoulders began to soften as the wine worked its magic. She curled her feet up beneath her on the sofa, opened her laptop and began working through her emails, as she finally started to relax. She was using her phone to hotspot off for an internet connection but it was slow and nothing was loading as fast as it normally would at home. She forwarded an email to Margo and saw a reply

from her boss land in her inbox just a few minutes later. She clicked onto the email and saw her boss's reply was typed in block capitals:

'I SAID NO WORKING!'

Faye smiled to herself and picked up the phone and dialled Margo's number. 'Well it looks like I'm not the only one checking my emails,' she began triumphantly.

'I'm not checking mine,' Margo said with a hint of exasperation. 'I just saw the notification come in on my phone. So I take it you've arrived in Inishbeg Cove then?'

'Just about. I nearly didn't make it. My car couldn't make it up the hill in the snow. I met your nephew actually, he brought me up the headland when my car wouldn't make it.' She didn't tell Margo that she had crashed into his jeep. That chestnut could wait until Faye was able to talk about it without burning with humiliation.

'You met Conor?' Faye could practically hear Margo smiling down the phone. 'And what do you think of the cottage?'

'It's nice and homely. You really didn't need to put up a tree though.'

Margo laughed. 'That must have been my brother Paul's doing – that's Conor's father. I asked him to make the place cosy for you but I didn't think he'd go to all that trouble.'

'He even had the stove lighting and a plate of mince pies left out too.'

'I'll have to call him to say thanks. Anyway, Faye, I'd better go, Martin is drowning in potato peels in the kitchen and I have about a hundred presents to wrap here, but put that laptop away now, do you hear me? I want you to relax and enjoy Christmas this year.'

'I promise you I will once I have my inbox up to date.'

'Come on, Faye,' Margo urged. 'There's more important things in life than work. You have to have to learn how to switch off. The last thing you want to do is burn out.'

'It'll only take me ten minutes to catch up on my emails and then I'll be able to properly relax knowing I'm on top of my inbox.'

She heard Margo sigh heavily down the phone. Her boss was used to her ways. 'Okay, but you have to promise me that that will be the end of it then. I don't want to see any more emails from you until we get back to the office in January.'

'I won't,' Faye lied, making a mental note not to copy Margo in on any more emails. She planned on getting stuck into strategizing their revenue

streams for the first quarter of next year so that was something she could work on without Margo knowing.

She had just picked up her laptop again when she heard a knock at the door startling her. Who on earth could that be? She pushed her laptop aside, pulled back the throw that she had covering her legs and got up to answer it, still holding onto her glass of wine. Cautiously she opened the door and was relieved when she saw Conor standing there.

‘That’s parked around the side there,’ he said handing her back the keys. Snow was swirling around him and settling thickly on his hair and shoulders.

She had forgotten about her car. She noticed that his tractor was parked outside.

‘Oh, thank you so much... I really appreciate it.’

‘Don’t mention it. You’re all settled in then,’ he said nodding towards the glass of wine.

‘I’m getting there.’

‘Right, so, I’d better head on, I don’t want to get stranded on the headland in this weather. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight,’ she said, shutting the door against the force of the wind.

She had just sat back down and was getting back into the flow again when the lights flickered. Oh no, she thought looking up at the light bulb, don’t you dare.... They blinked again and then darkness descended on the cottage. The only light available was coming from the orange glow of the stove. She got up, pushed aside the curtain and peered out the window. She saw the whole headland seemed to have gone dark, so she knew the power cut must be affecting more than just her. Using the torch on her phone she rooted around in the drawers and finally found a torch in the cupboard under the sink but when she went to switch it on it wouldn’t work. She wondered how long the power would be out for? If this happened in Dublin, ESB Networks would have crews out straight away repairing the damage, but here in this remote village, she knew she could be waiting days for the power to be restored. Even if there was a crew available, she doubted they’d be able to access the village in these conditions. There was nothing else she could do but go to bed and pray that the cottage would be reconnected overnight. She used her phone to guide her way up the stairs and then slipped under Margo’s crisp sheets and cursed her boss once again for dragging her to this godforsaken village.

When Faye woke the next morning, she was relieved to hear that the ferocious wind had finally died down. It had kept her awake for hours the night before as it rattled the windows in their frames and howled down the chimney. At one stage during a particularly vicious gust, Faye had begun to worry that the roof might lift off, but the old stone cottage had held firm.

She pushed up her eye mask, climbed down from the bed and padded over to the sash window that looked out over the cove. The room was cool and the floorboards were chilly against her bare feet. She pulled back the curtains and was immediately met with dazzling white light. The landscape was thickly coated in powder as far as the eye could see and snow topped the hedgerows like a layer of icing fondant. The sky was pristine blue and the morning so calm that it was like the storm the previous night had been a figment of her imagination. She walked over to the light switch and flicked it to see if the power had been restored but it was still out. She heard her tummy grumble and she realised she had hardly eaten anything. She had been planning on stocking up in the village grocery store when she arrived so she hadn't brought any food with her, but now she wished she had. She had demolished the mince pies that had been left on the table by Margo's brother to welcome her and she had found a protein bar in her handbag but that had been it. There was no way her car was going anywhere in this snow so she would have to walk into the village and she estimated from her spin in Conor's Land Rover the day before, that it was at least five kilometres there and back. Because she hadn't paid any attention to the weather forecast

before leaving Dublin, she hadn't brought snow boots or even wellingtons. The only footwear she had with her were a pair of designer trainers that wouldn't be much use in this weather. And what was she going to do without electricity? Her phone would run out of charge soon, not to mention her laptop... The timing couldn't be worse; with today being Christmas Eve she knew the ESB probably only had a skeleton crew in operation. Inishbeg Cove was so far off the beaten track that it could take days before they managed to restore electricity to the remote village. She was grateful to have the stove so she had some form of heat and thankfully the cottage had a gas hob so at least she would be able to use that to cook and make coffee until the electricity came back, but she had brought no food with her and there weren't many logs left in the basket. She would need to venture out in the snow unless she wanted to starve or freeze to death over Christmas.

She dressed, put on her coat and pulled a woollen bobble hat over her glossy, dark waves. She opened the door to find the snow had built up right past her knees and she realised she would be soaked to the skin if she tried to make her way through it in the jeans and trainers she was wearing. She went back inside and rooted around in the drawer and found a roll of black sacks. She pulled off two and then slipped one around each leg. She found some string in the drawer beneath and used it to secure the plastic bags around her thighs. She looked at herself in the mirror; she looked a right state with the bin liners billowing around her legs. She would be mortified if anyone saw her, but she had no other choice. She locked the cottage and stepped out into the snow, hearing it crunch beneath her feet. She turned right and began walking down the road she had come up the day before. The wind had more bite up here on the exposed headland and it nipped at her skin. Although she was moving downhill, she had a hard time trudging through the snow and taking care not to slip because the bin liners didn't give her much grip. She knew it would take her hours to reach the village at this rate. She heard an engine coming behind her and turned around to see a tractor which was about the only vehicle which would make it down this hill today. She stepped to the side of the road to let it pass, when it came to a stop beside her. She looked inside and realised it was Conor.

He opened the door of the tractor. 'Where are you off to?' he called out to her over the heavy thrum of the engine.

'Into the village to get some supplies.'

'I can give you a lift if you want?'

‘Would you mind?’ she asked gratefully. ‘It will take me ages at this rate.’

She stepped up into the tractor and wrinkled her nose at the smell. The cabin stank even worse than his jeep had the day before and the passenger seat was dirty and covered in dog hair but beggars couldn’t be choosers and she was just thankful to have a lift into the village.

‘Nice bin liners,’ he said.

‘What?’ she asked. It was difficult to hear him over the heavy engine as they ploughed slowly through the snow.

‘I said nice bin liners,’ he repeated.

She rolled her eyes at his sarcasm. ‘Well I wasn’t expecting to be staying in the Alps,’ she quipped as she untied the string and took the black sacks off her legs. She looked out the window at the pristine white fields rolling down towards the sea. Everything looking clean and new, like on the first day of creation. She might be able to appreciate the beauty of her surroundings if she wasn’t stuck here in the middle of nowhere with no electricity.

They eventually arrived in the village and he parked across the street from a supermarket with the name ‘O’Herlihy’s’ over the front door. ‘I have a few errands to run but if you don’t mind waiting, I can run you back up the road in around in about an hour?’

‘That would be great, thanks, Conor.’

‘If you’re finished earlier than that, The Anchor is open and you could get yourself a drink while you’re waiting,’ he suggested.

‘Okay, sounds good.’

She crossed the road towards the supermarket and saw the snow had been cleared from the path. A Christmas tree had been erected in front of the cove and it twinkled prettily. The shopfronts had holly garlands strewn across their facades and looked like a scene from a Christmas card. She pushed the door to O’Herlihy’s and went inside.

‘You’re lucky,’ a woman called to her startling her from her thoughts as she entered, ‘I was just about to close up for the day. Nobody is about in this weather.’ She shook her head.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Faye said picking up a basket. ‘I’ll be really quick, I promise.’ Tinsel that looked like it had been used every year since the seventies was strung diagonally across the ceiling in an a weak effort at decorating.

‘We’ve no fresh milk or bread and I’m afraid if you’re looking for a

turkey, we've none left,' the woman continued. 'The delivery drivers weren't able to get out here this morning.'

Margo had warned her that the supermarket was small and that she should bring supplies with her, especially if she wanted anything special like goose fat or brandy butter. Little did Margo know that Faye had eaten a microwaveable lasagne for Christmas dinner for the last three years in a row, but with no electricity in the cottage, it looked like this year she'd have to make do with pasta and a jar of sauce.

'Don't worry I can manage without those,' Faye said. 'Sorry I'll grab what I need really quickly and then I'll leave you alone.'

She began to browse the aisles and found a bag of pasta and a creamy tomato sauce. She also put a tin of beans, pot noodles, a jar of instant coffee and a large bar of chocolate into her basket. She found batteries for the torch, candles and a box of matches too. Then she came to the wine aisle and put a bottle of Malbec into her basket, before reaching for a second one. She knew she'd probably need it. Lastly, she found a bag of logs and she hauled everything up to the checkout.

'You're not from 'round these parts then?' the woman remarked.

'No, I'm down from Dublin. I'm staying in Mistletoe Cottage for a few days.'

'I believe ye've no power up on the headland.'

'No, the lights went out last night. Hopefully it will be back soon.'

'I wouldn't count on it... They always get it worse up there on the headland. Well, you're very welcome to Inishbeg Cove. I'm Audrey O'Herlihy.' She stuck out her hand and shook Faye's.

'Nice to meet you, Audrey. I'm Faye.' She returned the woman's handshake. 'Faye O'Leary.'

'Are you a friend of the Flynn's then?' Audrey enquired still pumping her hand heartily.

Faye nodded. 'Well I don't know the whole Flynn family. Only Margo – she's my boss. She wasn't able to make it home for Christmas this year so she gave me her cottage for the holidays.'

'She didn't come home for Christmas?' Audrey tutted, her tone full of judgement. 'Too busy with that high fallutin' job she has, I suppose...' She eyed up Faye's purchases as she scanned them through the checkout. 'I hope these aren't for your Christmas dinner?'

'I'm not much of a cook,' Faye admitted.

She lifted a bag of penne pasta and looked at Faye in horror. ‘You can’t eat pasta on Christmas day!’

‘It really doesn’t bother me,’ Faye said, wishing the woman would just scan her groceries and leave her alone.

‘The Flynns wouldn’t see you stuck. Úna – she’s married to Margo’s brother Paul - is a lovely woman and a great cook too, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind you joining her family,’ Mrs O’Herlihy suggested.

‘I prefer to spend the day on my own,’ Faye replied, and took perverse satisfaction in watching Audrey’s jaw drop. She bagged up her groceries and used her other hand to haul the bag of logs. She said goodbye to Mrs O’Herlihy and stepped outside onto the main street again, shivering as the chilly air invaded the gap beneath her coat. She checked her watch and saw she had a while still to wait for Conor, so she decided to head to The Anchor like he’d told her to.

She made way up the street taking care on the icy pavement. Although the snow had been cleared into mounds on either side, the path was icy. She found the pub and pushed the timber door and went inside. She was glad to see the fire was on and the air was scented with the comforting smell of woodsmoke. An elderly dog was sprawled in front of the fire and gave a wag of his tail without raising his head. Christmas music was playing softly in the background. She made her way up to the bar and deposited her groceries at her feet, her hands glad of the break. Once again she was thankful that Conor was able to bring her home; she knew there was no way she’d manage to haul the logs and all her groceries back up to the cottage through the knee-deep snow.

‘What can I get you?’ The barman asked. He had a round and friendly face.

‘Something warm,’ Faye said, rubbing her hands together.

‘We have mulled wine or I could make you a hot whiskey?’ he offered.

‘A mulled wine sounds heavenly. Do you do food?’ she asked.

He gestured towards a blackboard on the wall adjacent with the menu handwritten in chalk.

‘Could I take the beef and Guinness stew please?’ She knew this might be the only decent meal she would get for a while.

‘You take a seat and I’ll bring it down to you.’

She sat into a snug near the fire and saw there was a socket. Thankfully she always carried a charger in her bag and she plugged in her phone which

was almost dead. Although her laptop hadn't much charge left, at least she would still be able to use her phone to check her emails. She looked around the pub and saw there were a few people having lunch. Some were in family groups, clearly starting their Christmas celebrations. She guessed lots of families had reunited for Christmas; maybe grown up children returning to the village from various cities or places around the world. She watched them as they interacted gaily with one another. Warm hugs and merry laughter. She wondered what that must be like. To have all your family gathered around and where everyone actually liked one another. It was surreal to think there were people who actually looked forward to Christmas day.

She didn't have time to dwell on it, as soon the barman arrived down with her mulled wine. The heavenly aroma of cloves and star anise filled her nostrils as she took a sip and let the wine warm her cold bones.

The stew arrived a short time later and she devoured the tender beef that melted in her mouth and the creamy mashed potato it was served with. She finished the whole thing and was pleasantly full when she saw Conor entering the pub in his wellies and wax jacket.

'So you seem be settling in well,' he said taking a stool opposite her and leaning his folded arms onto the table.

'It was delicious.'

When she had finished the mulled wine, he stood up and gestured towards the door. 'Right then, my lady, your carriage awaits.'

She gathered up her belongings and followed him out. She was grateful when he carried the logs leaving her with just the groceries. They walked down the street to where he had parked the tractor and she braced herself for the smell as she climbed up into it. She held her breath, trying not to inhale through her nose as they drove up the headland.

When they arrived at the cottage, Conor turned off the engine. She opened the passenger door and hopped down. Her feet crunched over the snow as she made her way to the front door. She put the key in the lock and opened it. The first thing she did was check the light switch to see if the electricity had been restored. 'Still not back,' she groaned.

'Look, Faye, you can't spend Christmas here with no electricity,' he said carrying the logs inside. 'Why don't you come up to the farmhouse. We've a generator so it's business as usual up there. Mum won't mind, she has loads of spare rooms. The more the merrier as far as she's concerned.'

'No, thank you. I'm perfectly fine where I am. Anyway I'm sure it'll be

back soon.'

'I wouldn't be so confident. It's Christmas Eve so if they don't reconnect you today, you'll be spending Christmas in the dark. You won't be able to put on the heating or even cook a turkey.'

'Even if I had electricity I wouldn't be cooking a turkey,' she snapped.

'Well whatever you like to eat on Christmas, goose or roast beef...' he went on.

'I have the stove, and the cooker has a gas hob so I'll manage perfectly fine.'

He tilted his head to one side and looked at her dead on as if he couldn't quite figure her out. Eventually he sighed and shrugged his shoulders. 'Well you know where we are if you change your mind...'

The next morning, Faye rose, bracing herself for the chill once she pulled back the plump goose-feather duvet. Her breath fogged on the air in front of her and she noticed ice crystals had formed on the inside of the glass. She climbed down from the bed, slipped her feet into her slippers and wrapped her dressing robe snugly around her before heading downstairs.

The first thing she did was light the stove once again to get some warmth back into the house. Then she boiled water on the gas hob to make herself a coffee. This is ridiculous, she thought as she waited for the water to boil. For the millionth time since she had arrived in Inishbeg Cove she wondered what the hell she was doing here? She thought about her modern, cosy apartment back in Dublin lying empty and wanted to cry. When she had managed to finally make something resembling coffee, she brought the mug down to the sofa and sat in front of the stove. She opened her laptop, knowing she didn't have much time until her battery would go dead but she hoped to get a little bit more done on her strategy document for next year. She took a sip of the instant coffee and grimaced at its bitter after-taste; it was yet another reminder of what she was missing as she longed for the barista machine that she had at home.

She was working away through the document when she heard a knock on the door. She cast her laptop aside, put the mug down and got up to answer it. She found Conor standing outside. She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly feeling self-conscious that she was in her dressing gown while he was nicely dressed wearing a shirt beneath a knitted jumper and chinos. It was her first time seeing him out of his farming clothes and she had to admit

her looked well. A fresh hint of stubble darkened his jaw.

‘Happy Christmas!’ he beamed at her, entering the cottage without waiting to be invited in. It took her a moment to realise that it was Christmas day. She had completely forgotten about it. He thrust a gift wrapped in gold paper and tied with green velvet ribbon into her hands.

‘W-what’s this?’ she asked taken aback by the gesture. ‘I didn’t get you anything...’

‘It’s just something small from my mum.’

She pulled on one end of the ribbon and opened the present to see it was a woollen scarf in a buttercup yellow colour. She lifted it out to admire it.

‘She knit it herself,’ he said proudly. ‘It’ll keep you warm in this weather anyway.’

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said, suddenly feeling overcome. ‘It was so thoughtful of her. Tell her I said thanks.’

‘Still no electricity then?’ he asked.

She shook her head. ‘I’m dangerously low on battery now.’ She gestured towards her laptop sitting open on the coffee table.

‘You’re not seriously working on Christmas day are you?’ he asked in disbelief looking over at the laptop.

‘Best day of the year if you need to get things done!’

‘Margo must be a right slave driver if she won’t give you Christmas off.’

Faye shook her head. ‘Margo wants me to take the time off but I find it’s a really productive time. I get loads done while everyone else is off.’

He looked at her incredulously.

‘What?’ she said.

‘So besides working, have you any plans for the day?’

‘Nope, I just want it all to be over and then the world can back to normal. It’s ridiculous the way everyone gets into a tizzy for just one day.’

‘You’re not a fan of Christmas then?’ he asked.

‘Definitely not. The sooner it’s finished the better.’

‘Okay, Scrooge.’

It wasn’t the first time she had been called that.

‘Look, Mum sent me down to ask you to come up to the farmhouse,’ he continued. ‘She does the best dinner. Nobody does roast potatoes like hers.’

‘I’ve already told you, I’m perfectly happy here.’

‘But she’s expecting you. She said there’s no way she’s allowing you to spend the day alone.’

‘Please thank her for her concern,’ Faye said primly, ‘but I’ve got plans.’

‘What? You’re just going to spend the day on your laptop?’ He shook his head.

‘And what’s wrong with that?’

He rolled his eyes and shrugged. ‘I’ve done my bit.’

She put her hands on her hips. ‘And what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Well, it’s Margo... She’s asked us to check in with you and to make sure you’re okay especially when she heard about the power cut. Mum thinks that if you spend Christmas day alone, Margo will think we didn’t look after you properly.’

She groaned. ‘I don’t get why everyone is so obsessed with how I spend Christmas!’ She threw her hands up into the air in despair.

‘Please,’ he begged, bringing his hands together in a prayer, ‘just come up for an hour and I’ll bring you home as soon as dinner is finished. If you show your face for a bit, it’ll get Mum off my back and keep Margo happy too.’

Faye knew he wasn’t going to back down and the last thing she wanted was to offend Margo’s family. ‘Oh, okay then...’ she exhaled heavily. ‘I’ll go for an hour seeing as though you’re not going to take no as an answer.’

‘Great,’ he beamed. ‘If we go now, we’ll make it back for Gran’s sherry party.’

‘Woah, there a minute...’ She put her palms up to face him. ‘I said I’d go for dinner. You said nothing about a sherry party!’

He splayed his hands towards the ceiling. ‘But it’s a Flynn family tradition.’

‘I agreed to come for dinner, not a bloody sherry party too.’

‘Look, it’s on our way up to the farmhouse, it won’t take long I promise.’

‘Oh, alright,’ she snapped. ‘But I need to get dressed.’

She stormed up the stairs towards her bedroom. She opened her case which she still hadn’t unpacked and looked inside. The whole thing was farcical. It felt as though she was on one of those hidden camera shows; she was waiting for someone to jump out and say ‘Gotcha!’ except she knew that wasn’t going to happen. Just when she thought things couldn’t get worse, they always did. If these people hadn’t been related to Margo, she would have told them all to get lost but she didn’t want Margo getting any bad reports about her being rude. As she lifted out her leggings and sweatshirts, she wondered what she was supposed to wear? She hadn’t brought any dressy clothes because she didn’t think she’d be socialising. She would have to

make do with a pair of jeans teamed with an emerald green cashmere crew neck. It was hardly festive attire but the Flynnns would have to take her as they got her. She ran a brush through her hair and put on some tinted moisturiser to give her skin a glow, then she headed back down to Conor.

He smiled at her as she descended the stairs.

‘Is this okay?’ she asked. She didn’t know how formal Christmas was in the Flynn household and she didn’t want to look like she hadn’t made an effort.

‘You look great.’

She hurried past him and picked up her laptop bag. ‘Right, let’s go then.’

‘Where are you going with that?’

‘I need to charge it and I think that’s a fair trade-off given the circumstances.’

‘All right,’ he conceded. ‘It’s a deal.’ He grinned at her and the smile spread right up to his eyes. He had an infuriating way of making her feel bad for her grumpiness. She had only known him for two days and he always seemed so laid back, like nothing would ever stress him out. She slipped her arms down into the sleeves of her coat and wound her new scarf around her neck before they headed outside to the tractor.

Faye hopped up into the passenger seat and they trundled up the hill towards Conor's grandmother's house. It was ironic that she had never been in a tractor before she had come to Inishbeg Cove and now since she had arrived in the village, it had become her main mode of transport. She looked out the windscreen at the white landscape where snow was still piled up in drifts on either side of the boreen. Her heart filled with a sinking feeling; she had been planning on returning to Dublin the following day but as she looked at the tracks of compacted snow left behind by the tractor's chunky tyres, she knew there was no way she would be going home any time soon.

They travelled a short distance up the road, the tractor's tyres making easy work of the snow covered road and finally they turned into a gateway and followed the road down to a traditional two storey farmhouse clad in white-tipped ivy. 'This is Gran's house. It's where my dad and Margo grew up. My parents built their house across the field over there,' he gestured towards another house in the distance. That's where I live too. I've renovated an old barn into my own place. The cottage you're staying in belonged to my uncle and when he died, Margo inherited it.'

'Quite the family dynasty you've got,' she quipped.

He looked wounded. 'Well it might not be your cup of tea but I like having all my family all around me.'

She immediately felt ashamed of herself. 'I'm sorry, it's lovely that you're so close to your family.'

He silenced the engine and they made their way up to the farmhouse

through the snow. The front door was painted glossy red and a wreath of fresh holly hung upon a brass knocker to welcome them. As she got closer, she saw icicles were hanging down from the eaves.

‘Gran’s ninety-two so she’s starting to get a little confused, but she misses nothing,’ he whispered as they went inside. The door wasn’t locked and Conor just walked straight in without even a knock.

‘What?’ Conor said noticing her surprise. ‘Nobody locks their doors around here.’

The entered into a chequered tiled hallway decorated with heavy antique furniture. A sheep dog rushed out to greet them wagging its tail excitedly. ‘Hey, there, Toby,’ Conor said making a fuss of the dog and scratching him behind the ears. ‘They’ll all be in here,’ he said pushing the door to the living room which was full with people. A large open fire smouldered in the grate and in the corner a gigantic fir tree brushed off the ceiling. The warmth of the room was heavenly after coming from her freezing cottage. A piano with framed photos standing on top sat against the back wall and two chesterfield sofas faced one another in front of the fire. Everyone turned to look at them as they entered.

‘A woman rushed forward and gripped her palms. ‘You like it then?’ she asked nodding towards the scarf that Faye had wound around her neck before leaving the cottage.

‘It’s beautiful. Thank you,’ Faye said.

‘The colour suits you,’ she said approvingly.

‘Faye, this is my mum, Úna and my dad, Paul,’ Conor gestured to a grey-haired man that had followed Úna over.

‘Pleased to meet you both,’ Faye said shaking their hands.

‘I’m so glad you came,’ Úna said, pulling her into a hug and Faye felt herself freeze. She didn’t know this woman and here she was acting like she was long lost family. ‘I couldn’t stand the thought of you being stuck in that cottage on your own for Christmas.’

‘It’s not right,’ Paul concurred.

‘Well I’m not really a fan of Christmas...’ Faye explained before remembering her manners. ‘But thank you for inviting me.’

‘Well maybe we can change your mind,’ Úna said with a wink.

‘This is my sister, Laura and her husband, Philip,’ Conor said continuing with the introductions. He leant in conspiratorially and pointed at a curly haired little girl wearing a sequined dress. ‘That’s their daughter, Róisín.’

Watch out for her, she looks like butter wouldn't melt but she's lethal.' Faye couldn't help but laugh. She plastered a smile on her face as he introduced her to various members of the Flynn family. Her head was spinning as she tried to keep up with everyone's name.

'And over this side we have Auntie June and Uncle Harry. And this is my cousin, Orla,' he said leading her over to the other sofa. 'And this is the main lady herself; Faye I'd like you to meet my gran, Kitty.' he finally finished.

A diminutive lady with wispy white hair came forward. She was glamorously dressed with a twinset skirt and cardigan that was held closed with a delicate brooch in the centre of her chest.

'Hello, dear, you're very welcome to Inishbeg Cove. Margo has told us all about you. How are you getting on in the village?'

'I'm pleased to be here,' she lied and she caught Conor snorting behind his grandmother's back.

'It's so good to finally meet Conor's sweetheart.' She squeezed both of Faye's hands inside her own. They were covered in age spots and lined but as soft as baby skin. She turned to Conor's mother. 'And there was me starting to wonder if he might be gay!' She chuckled heartily.

'She's not my sweetheart, Gran,' Conor said through gritted teeth. 'And I'm definitely not gay.' His whole face had turned puce.

'Well whatever you young people call yourselves these days.' His gran gave an impatient wave of her hand. 'Girlfriend or partner...'

'Kitty, Faye works with Margo, remember?' She could hear Úna explain as Conor placed a hand on the small of Faye's back and steered her away. 'Don't mind Gran, she's a bit dodderly today.'

'No I'm not, Conor,' his grandmother called after them wagging her finger at him and Faye couldn't help but laugh.

'Conor, pour the girl a sherry,' Úna instructed as she linked Faye's arm and led her over to another large group of people, who she introduced as various aunts and uncles. Conor did as he was told and returned after a few moments and handed her a glass.

Everyone was lovely and welcoming and by the time Conor had refilled her glass, Faye had begun to relax as they chatted. They teased one another good-naturedly but she knew they all had each other's back. Just like a family should.

'So my dear why are you spending Christmas with us, instead of with your own family,' Kitty asked bluntly, linking Faye's arm as she joined them

once more.

‘Gran!’ Conor exclaimed.

‘What?’ she asked, unsure of what she had done wrong.

‘That’s a very personal question.’

‘Nonsense, Conor!’ Kitty waved her hand theatrically.

‘Well, um, I don’t have a family actually,’ Faye explained.

All the heads swivelled in her direction as silence descended on the room.

‘No family—’ Kitty gasped.

Suddenly Conor clapped his hands together. ‘Right then,’ he said. ‘Who wants more sherry?’ He lifted the bottle and began to refill the glasses.

‘The turkey will nearly be ready,’ Úna said looking at her watch. ‘Come on, you lot.’

They all put on their coats and wellington boots. Conor found an old pair by the door

for Faye. ‘We’ve to go across the field,’ he explained, as he handed them to her.

She grimaced at the cobwebs as she put her feet into them, trying not to think about

the spiders that were probably feasting on her toes right now.

They headed outside and she shoved her hands deep into her pockets. The snow dazzled her with its blinding whiteness as they walked the short distance across the field to Conor’s parents’ house.

‘I’m sorry about that,’ Conor said falling into step beside her. Snow sat heavy on the boughs of the old oak trees and glistened where the sunlight hit it.

She shook her head. ‘You don’t have to apologise—’

‘You know what that generation are like; they think they can just say whatever they like.’ He waved his hand in the air.

‘Well maybe they’re right.’ She couldn’t help but think that maybe if she hadn’t been so polite, she would have told Margo that she didn’t want to spend Christmas stuck in her remote cottage in the middle of nowhere.

After a few minutes they reached Conor’s parents’ house, which she noticed was a smaller version of his grandmother’s house. They all went around to the back door and filed into the kitchen. Conor’s father popped the cork on a bottle of champagne and handed a glass to everyone. While Úna and Paul served the dinner, everyone helped them to carry the dishes into the dining room. Conor picked up a bowl of crispy roast potatoes and he handed

Faye a dish full of caramelised sprouts. Her mouth watered as she brought it into the dining room and placed it alongside the other dishes on the table. Paul brought up the rear and placed the bronzed bird, down as the centrepiece.

Everyone went to sit down and they realised they were short a place for Faye. 'Oh I'm sorry, Faye, I must have done my sums wrong.' Úna turned to Conor. 'Conor, go set a place for Faye. Paul, you get her a chair from the kitchen.'

Both men sprang into action at Úna's command, and when the place setting was ready, Faye squeezed in beside Conor. The table was meant for eight but there was almost double that number squashed in around it elbow to elbow.

When everyone was finally sitting down, Paul lit the candles and the room was filled with a warm glow. Her mouth watered as she looked at the spread on the table before her. She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten a proper dinner on Christmas day, if ever. The family bowed their heads and she realised they were saying grace. When they had finished, they all tucked into the food. She heaped roast and mashed potatoes, sprouts and peas, carrots and parsnips and milk white slices of tender turkey onto her plate. She had barely eaten since she left Dublin and she realised with all this food before her, she was starving.

'You're hungry,' Úna remarked.

'Oh, I'm sorry.' She blushed and replaced the serving spoon back into the bowl. She was being greedy.

'Don't be silly,' Úna said smiling kindly, 'We have plenty so you fill your plate.'

Faye didn't need to be told twice as she continued heaping more potatoes onto her plate.

'You weren't lying about the roast potatoes,' she said to Conor through a mouthful. 'These are good.'

'I told you.'

After dinner Paul lit a brandy doused pudding and they devoured it. By the time they had finished eating, Faye could barely move. A warm fuzzy feeling spread through her as she watched the family chatting and laughing together. She noticed old school photos of Conor and Laura hanging on the wall behind her.

'You really rocked those sideburns,' Faye said nodding at Conor's

communion photo. A blonde haired Conor was dressed in a grey suit with a ruffled shirt beneath. ‘You were setting trends even back in the eighties,’ she teased.

Conor groaned. ‘I keep asking Mum to take that one down but she refuses.’

‘You were very cute.’

‘Right, Conor, help your father to clear off the table.’

Conor stood up and began gathering up the dirty plates before heading into the kitchen.

‘Are you Conor’s girlfriend?’ Róisín marched up to Faye and stared at her with big green eyes that didn’t blink.

‘No, no,’ she said quickly.

‘Faye is a friend of Auntie Margo’s,’ Laura followed her over and explained to the child.

‘Oh...’ she seemed disappointed. ‘Well, maybe you could you be his girlfriend first and then you could get married?’ she suggested.

‘Róisín!’ Laura chastised. ‘I’m sorry about that, Faye.’

‘But I reeeally want a cousin and you said the only way I can get a cousin is if Uncle Conor ever decides to finally settle down.’

‘I-I didn’t say that—’ Laura said blushing furiously as she took the child by the hand. ‘Come here and leave, Faye alone,’ she hissed.

Faye saw Conor return to the room and she shot a look in his direction begging him to rescue her.

‘But that’s what you said!’ Róisín whined as Laura led her away.

‘What did they say now?’ Conor asked as he came over to her.

‘Oh, nothing really, just your niece asked me if I could marry you because she really wants a cousin.’

Conor laughed and shook his head. ‘Sorry about that,’ he said. ‘Guessing when I might get married is a family past-time.’

‘I can see that.’

‘Right then,’ Úna said clapping her hands together. ‘Time for charades. Same teams as last year.’

‘Faye you can come on my team,’ Kitty said patting the sofa beside her. ‘We’re the defending champions you know.’ She winked.

The game commenced and Faye was in tears laughing as Conor grew ever more frustrated as he tried to describe a film for his team. After a while Úna brought out turkey sandwiches and Conor kept her wine glass topped up.

Conor wasn't drinking any alcohol because he knew he needed to drive her home.

She was laughing hard as Úna tried to mime a Lady Gaga song, when Conor came up alongside her.

'I'll bring you home now if you want,' he whispered into her ear. 'You've been stuck here long enough, I'm sure you're eager to get back to work.'

'Of course...' she said, snapping back to reality. A feeling that she couldn't yet identify weighed her down. Suddenly the thought of leaving this warm, family-filled home and returning to her own cold and lonely cottage filled her with dread.

'Do you have to go?' Úna turned to Faye, her face creased with disappointment. 'We're having so much fun. Why don't you stay the night?' she urged. 'There's no point in you staying down in that freezing cottage catching your death when we have plenty of spare beds here.'

'Faye has work to do, Mum,' Conor answered for her.

She unplugged her laptop from where she had left it charging on a side-table and gathered up her belongings.

'On Christmas day?' Paul asked. 'Surely, Margo doesn't expect you to work today?'

'No of course not,' Faye said quickly, fearing that Paul would have a word with his sister for working her employees too hard. 'Actually, Margo has me under strict instructions not to work today but I always find it's a good day to catch up on a few things—'

Úna and Paul both looked at her with something akin to disappointment. 'I guess so...' Úna said eventually. 'Well thank you for joining us, Faye. It was nice to meet you.'

She said goodbye to everyone and followed Conor outside into the night where the cold air hit her skin like a slap. The navy-blue sky was studded with jewel like stars as she climbed up into the tractor. Conor started the engine and his family gathered on the front step to wave her off. As Conor turned the tractor in the direction of her cottage, she waved goodbye to them all.

'Thank you, Conor,' she said.

'Well look... I know you had your own plans but at least Mum can tell Margo that she's done her bit,' Conor said concentrating on keep the tractor on the road.

Faye felt her heart sink. Was that how they saw her? As an inconvenience

that needed to be crossed off the family's to-do list? Despite her initial reluctance to join Conor's family for Christmas day, she was surprised to discover she had enjoyed herself. The Flynn family had been so warm, so welcoming, that it was hard not to get caught up in their festive spirit.

She fell quiet, looking out the window at the inky darkness until he pulled up outside Mistletoe Cottage.

'Goodnight, Conor.'

'Goodnight,' he said as she climbed down from the tractor. She closed the door and began walking towards the door of the cottage as he turned the tractor to go back up the hill. She thought about the warmth of the family she had left behind and shivered. Suddenly she didn't want to be alone. She ran back over and waved him down on the road.

'Are you okay?' he asked, opening the door to her.

'I was just wondering if you em... well... do you want to come in?' She found herself holding her breath for his response. What the hell was she doing?

'Don't you have work to do?' he asked.

She shook her head and sighed. 'Maybe your mother was right, Christmas isn't a day for work.'

He nodded and silenced the engine. He hopped down into the snow. 'I'll help you get the fire started.'

Faye put her key in the door and Conor followed her inside. They both knelt in front of the stove and he helped her to pile the logs into it, while she stacked up the firelighters and then lit the match. The whole room glowed orange as the flames licked the timber when the fire eventually took hold.

‘Will you stay for a drink?’ she asked. ‘I mean unless you have to get back... It’d be my way to say thank you for a lovely day.’

‘Alright then. I need to fortify myself before heading back to the madness,’ he laughed.

She took one of the bottles she had bought in O’Herlihy’s out of the cupboard and uncorked it. She found two wine glasses in another press and poured two generous glasses. They both sat down on the sofa with the crackling of the logs as the only sound. They left their coats on and only when the room eventually began to heat up, did they dare remove them.

‘Right then, I’ll leave you to it,’ Conor said when he had finished his glass.

‘Don’t go—’ the words slipped out before she even realised it. ‘

He cocked his head and looked at her sceptically.

‘I mean... only if you want to stay...’ she added.

He sat back down on the sofa and refilled his glass with heady wine. ‘Can I ask you a question, Faye?’ he asked after a beat.

‘Sure,’ she replied. The wine had loosened her normally closed off stance.

‘Well why do you hate Christmas so much?’

‘I don’t hate Christmas. I’m just not into it.’

‘Really? You normally spend it alone. You prefer to work. It looks that way to me.’

‘I really enjoyed myself today,’ she admitted.

‘You did?’ His face lit up in surprise. ‘I know my family can be a bit much but they’re good people.’

‘They are. It wasn’t an act, you know...’ she added. ‘I had fun today. They made me feel so welcome. It’s been a long time since I enjoyed Christmas day. Thank you for inviting me.’

‘Well, I’m glad you had a good day,’ he said. They both fell quiet until finally Conor spoke again. ‘What happened to you, Faye?’

She sat up straight. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Well usually when someone has such a dislike for Christmas there’s a reason.’

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at him. ‘Did Margo tell you something?’

He shook his head vehemently. ‘I swear on Gran’s life, Margo said nothing only that you two work together and she was giving you her cottage for Christmas. That’s it, that’s all I know about you, I promise.’

How was it that they had only met a few days ago and yet he already knew her better than some people who had known her for years? It was as if he could see through her hardened exterior, past all the pain and the façade she normally displayed for the world. Conor could see deep down into her soul.

‘My mum left, when I was six. On Christmas day.’

‘Faye, I’m sorry—’ Conor rushed in shaking his head. ‘I should never have asked. It’s none of my business...’

‘No, it’s okay,’ she said. What was it about him that made her open up to him when she had never spoken about it to anyone before? ‘My dad raised me for a while but he was an alcoholic and things got so bad after my mother left that my grandmother – my dad’s mother – took me in. I used to write to Santa every year asking him to bring my mother home and of course he never did. I’d wake up on Christmas morning and my grandmother would have saved so hard for the latest toy and I’d be disappointed because it wasn’t my mum waiting for me by the Christmas tree and she’d wonder what she had done wrong and I was too embarrassed to tell her what I had really wished for. You can probably see why I hate Christmas now...’ she trailed off.

‘Is your grandmother still alive?’

Faye shook her head. ‘She passed away when I was eighteen so I’ve been on my own since then.’

‘Where’s your dad now?’

‘Still a drunken mess. He’s in an assisted-living unit for vulnerable people now because he can’t take care of himself. I visit him occasionally but he doesn’t seem to know who I am.’

‘That’s awful. Did you ever reunite with your mother?’

She shook her head. ‘After my grandmother died I felt completely lost in the world. She was the only person I could count on and she was taken away from me. So then I started thinking about my mother and I thought that maybe she might be looking for me too. I had myself convinced that perhaps she was too embarrassed to make contact after leaving me so young and was waiting for me to make the first move. I had imagined this big, tearful reunion over and over again in my head, where she explained her reasons for leaving, I forgave her and we all lived happily ever after. It sounds so ridiculous now when I say it out loud,’ Faye said bitterly. ‘Anyway, I managed to track her down in County Wexford. She had remarried and had a new family. She had three more children that I guessed were around the same age as I was when she left. That killed me. Like she had just wiped the slate clean and started again, replacing my family with a new one. I’m sure life probably wasn’t easy for her with an alcoholic husband and a young child but why didn’t she take me with her? How could she leave me behind? So I chickened out in the end, I left her alone and never contacted her and she’s never contacted me either..’

‘I’m so sorry for what you’ve been through,’ Conor said. ‘There’s me with a big family that drive me mad half the time but they always have my back. I take them for granted. We just assume everyone has a happy time at Christmas; it must be so annoying when people keep asking you why you hate it so much. I can totally understand it now. I’m sorry for not being more sensitive.’

‘It’s not your fault. I get that for everyone else Christmas is a fun time, it just wasn’t that way for me. But being with your family today... well, I saw another side to it. A side that I don’t remember ever experiencing. It was nice.’

His eyes searched hers. ‘I liked having you there today.’

‘Oh, I’m sure you would have had a lovely day with or without me.’

‘It felt good bringing someone with me, even if it kept Gran happy for a few hours.’ He laughed. ‘She’s always nagging me because I haven’t met anyone yet.’

‘Really? A handsome guy like you, I’m sure you’re not short of offers.’

‘Well it’s been a while since I’ve been in a serious relationship. You see I was engaged before...’ he admitted.

‘Really?’ she gasped.

He nodded. ‘Thought she was the one until she left me two weeks before the wedding.’

‘Why did she do that?’

‘She did me a favour. I can see that now. She never would have liked being a farmer’s wife. She liked city life, the convenience of having shops and cafés in walking distance. I hated that, it made me feel claustrophobic.’

‘But surely if you loved one another, you would have compromised?’ Faye probed.

‘Exactly. That’s how I knew it wasn’t the real deal. She wasn’t willing to give up her lifestyle and I wasn’t going to leave the farm. We parted amicably, we’re still friends. She married a good guy and they have two children. She seems happy.’

‘How long ago was that?’

‘Five years ago now.’ He shrugged. ‘Times flies.’

‘And you haven’t met anyone since?’

He shook his head. ‘It’s not easy to meet someone here in the village. I’m so busy on the farm that it doesn’t leave much time for socialising.’

‘So that’s why your gran was making all those digs about you being single?’

He nodded. ‘She’s said far too many novenas for me. They think I’m a lost cause at this stage.’

They both laughed. ‘Well, maybe you just haven’t met the right person,’ she suggested.

He shrugged. ‘Maybe...’

‘What about you?’

‘Well, I’ve been perpetually single. It’s the same old story every time. I’ve been in a few relationships but they never really go anywhere. I’ve a habit of putting work first...’ She grinned at him.

‘I can see that. Well, I would argue that it means that we both haven’t found the right person yet. Maybe I’m naïve, but I always think whenever I

do meet the 'one' I'd be willing to give up anything, I'd go anywhere, do everything to make it work.'

She looked at him, suddenly seeing him in a new light. 'Me too...' she trailed off.

They had more in common than she realised. He was clearly a workaholic just like her but he also believed that once he found the right person, that he would love just as hard as he worked.

He moved closer to her so that his face was mere inches from hers and his breath was hot on her face. Suddenly his mouth covered hers and she kissed him back with the same ferocity. For the first time in her life, this felt right. This felt exactly like where she was meant to be in this remote village, stranded in a freezing cold cottage with no electricity or Wi-Fi connection and knee-deep snow outside. She had opened up to someone and he hadn't run away. In fact he had listened to her story and been tender in his reaction. He hadn't flinched as she bared her soul. Just a few days ago she never could have believed she would feel this way about anyone but there was no denying the connection between them. It was so strong it felt as though she could physically grip onto it and she never wanted to let it go.

Faye woke with a start the next morning when she heard somebody pounding on the door outside. She looked beside her and saw Conor was still asleep. They had stayed up late talking and then had fallen asleep in front of the dying embers of the fire. She quickly tried to fix herself as she hurried over to the door. She opened it and was startled to find Úna standing outside.

‘Is Conor there, love? He never came back last night and we’ve been ringing his phone but can’t get hold of him. I saw his tractor outside so thought he might be here. It’s his gran, something has happened–’

‘Come in,’ Faye ushered, as she self-consciously tried to tidy her hair. Úna’s eyes scanned the room and landed on Conor who had begun to stir under the blanket on the sofa. She saw Úna looking at the two wine glasses and empty bottle on the coffee table and back to Faye again who was still dressed in the same clothes as she had been wearing the day before. As Úna began to put two and two together, Faye wanted the ground to swallow her whole.

‘Mum?’ Conor asked rubbing his eyes. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘It’s your gran. She’s had a fall. They’ve taken her to the hospital.’

‘Shit,’ he said jumping up and buttoning up his shirt and pulling his sweater on over it. ‘What happened?’

‘We’re not sure. I walked her home last night and made sure she was alright and that the house was warm for her but she must have gone back outside for some reason. Your dad found her lying on the path outside when he went to check on her this morning. She seems to have slipped on ice.’

‘Was she conscious when Dad found her?’

Úna shook her head. ‘We don’t know how long she was there, but she was blue when your dad found her. Toby was standing over her whining, he wouldn’t leave her side. She has been airlifted to hospital because the ambulance couldn’t get through the snow. Your dad went with her and Margo is on her way from Dublin and will meet them at the hospital.’

‘Oh god,’ Conor held his head in his hands as he paced the room.

Faye felt sick in the pit of her stomach. Her heart ached for this family; although she had only just met them, she knew how close they were. It took her back to being eighteen again when her own grandmother had passed away. Cancer had stolen her so the circumstances were different but she still remembered the searing pain as if it were yesterday. The doctors shaking their heads and telling her in their stark, bleak words that there was nothing more they could do for her. She just prayed that Conor’s grandmother would pull through; although Kitty was frail, she was a spritely woman and young at heart and Faye knew those qualities would stand to her.

‘We have to get to the hospital,’ Conor said, finally jumping into action.

‘But you’ll have to take the tractor and that will take you hours,’ Úna said.

‘I know,’ Conor said running his hands through his hair. ‘But it’s better than sitting here waiting for news.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ Faye offered, without thinking.

They both turned to look at her. ‘Are you sure?’ Conor asked.

‘I’d be glad to keep you company.’

He nodded. ‘Thanks, Faye.’

‘Well I’ll go back up to the house and keep an eye on the farm. Be sure to call me if you have any news,’ Úna said. ‘And drive safely, you two.’

The journey to the hospital in Limerick seemed to take forever. Once they left Inishbeg Cove, the snow had been cleared from the main roads but it still took over an hour just to reach Ballymccconnell. Not long into the journey Conor had realised that if they were to have any hope of arriving at the hospital before nightfall, he needed to get a car. He decided to call into a friend in the town and after Conor had explained the situation to him, he offered them his car. As they set off the rest of the way to Limerick, it was a relief to escape the bouncy, cold tractor and be in the comfort of a car as they travelled the rest of the way there.

Conor didn't say much as they drove along, whether it was because of lingering awkwardness from the night before or maybe he just wanted to be left alone to process the worries inside his head. Faye knew he was fearing the worst and she wanted to give him the space to deal with that, so she stayed quiet and stared out at the passing scenery.

Conor had phoned his dad to see if there was any update on his grandmother's condition but Paul said they had taken her to theatre as soon as the helicopter had landed at the hospital and he hadn't heard a thing from anyone since.

They eventually arrived at the hospital and sprinted from the carpark to the hospital building. They explained to the receptionist in urgent tones that they were the family of Kitty Flynn. She directed them to a family waiting room where they found Conor's father, Paul pacing up and down inside.

'Any news?' Conor asked urgently.

Paul shook his head. 'Nobody will tell me anything. She's been in that

theatre for ages.'

A breathless Margo ran into the room a short time after. She embraced her brother, then she hugged Conor, before finally turning to Faye.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' she said, squeezing Faye's hands inside her own.

'I'm so sorry to hear about your mum,' Faye said.

'The one Christmas I didn't come home...' Margo's voice waivered and Faye noticed tears welling in her eyes. 'If she doesn't pull through, Faye, I'll never forgive myself.'

'Come on, Margo, your mum is a force to be reckoned with,' Faye reassured her. She put her arm around her boss and then wondered if she had crossed a line but when Margo pulled her closer and sobbed into her shoulder, Faye knew it was okay.

'Oh, I hope you're right.' Margo shook her head before slumping down into a chair.

They all took seats in the waiting room each lost inside their own heads, held prisoner by their worries.

Eventually a doctor wearing scrubs entered the room. 'Are you the family of Kitty Flynn?'

'We are,' Conor said standing up, closely followed by his father and Margo.

'The good news is that she's awake.'

'Oh thank god,' Conor exhaled heavily as Margo began to release great sobs of relief.

'She sustained a fractured hip in the fall and she was also showing signs of hypothermia but she's stable now if you'd like to come and see her?' The doctor smiled at them all. 'She's in St Joseph's ward, it's the last bed on the left.'

Gratitude warm and joyous flooded through Faye that Kitty was going to be okay. She was so happy for the Flynn family that they would get more time with their precious mother and grandmother. They hugged one another tightly while Faye remained on the fringes. She was acutely aware that she was not part of the Flynn family and now she felt like an interloper in the midst of this family scene.

'You all go, I'll go get you some coffees,' Faye said as they began walking in the direction of the ward.

'Are you sure?' Conor asked, as if only just noticing she was there.

‘Absolutely. I’m sure you could all do with a hot drink.’

‘Thanks Faye,’ he said gratefully.

As she walked down the corridor following the signs to the coffee shop, she thought about the events of that morning. She was so relieved that Kitty was going to be okay. Although a hip fracture and hypothermia were dangerous complications for an elderly person, Faye had no doubt that the Flynn family would rally around Kitty and help her back on her feet again. She had only known this family for a matter of days and they had already been so kind to her, opening their house and hearts to her on Christmas day but she knew this was an emotional time for them all and she didn’t want to intrude. She needed to let them be together right now.

Her trainers squeaked along the rubber floor as she passed old people on walkers and sick people with wan faces in dressing gowns, some wheeling drips along beside them. Trolleys pushed by hospital porters hurried past her. The last time she had been in a hospital was when her grandmother was sick. She thought about the sense of togetherness that the Flynn family displayed, but she had had no support network back then. She had been the only person to sit at her grandmother’s bedside, to hear the prognosis that she wasn’t going to get better. Faye’s father, her grandmother’s only child, hadn’t come anywhere near the hospital. Faye had been the only one there to hold her hand as she gasped her last breath and then she had been left to make the funeral arrangements on her own. She couldn’t believe the route her life had taken since she had left Dublin before Christmas. The whole thing felt surreal. Just a few days ago, she could never have imagined her life taking this turn and yet here she was keeping the Flynn family company at the bedside of their family’s matriarch and it was the only place she wanted to be.

She queued up in the coffee shop and ordered a mixture of soups, sandwiches, teas and coffees. She paid for it and then borrowed a tray to carry it all back to the ward. She knew the Flynns must be starving after their various journeys to the hospital and they would need nourishment.

She located St Joseph’s and made her way down past the cubicles until she reached the curtain at the end where she knew Kitty was.

She heard Margo’s voice from inside the curtain. ‘I see Faye kept you company on the way here,’ she was teasing. ‘Is there something going on between you two?’

Faye couldn’t help but smile. Margo missed nothing. She knew she was

going to have to explain things to her boss but what was she supposed to tell her? As Conor had kissed her tenderly the night before it had felt thrilling, every synapse and nerve ending had tingled. As she had lain against his bare chest, it was like she was exactly where she belonged. As he had held her close all night, she had felt safe and secure and never wanted him to let her go but they hadn't had time to talk about what had happened between them since they had spent the night together.

'It was just a bit of fun. I don't think she's the settling down type,' she heard Conor reply.

Faye felt everything stop. The noises, the people talking around her, the nurses hurrying past faded into the background until she was left with just his stinging words. Just a bit of fun. That was it. That was how he felt about her. How could she have been so stupid to open her heart to him? She had learnt a long time ago that when you opened yourself up to people, they inevitably let you down. How could she have been so naïve to trust Conor Flynn? She turned, still clutching the tray and left the ward. She kept walking and saw a catering trolley in the corridor. She placed the tray down onto it and then started to run. She needed to get out of there. She tried to remember the way but it felt like she was in a maze of corridors and her head wasn't thinking straight. She finally found a stairs and she took the steps two at a time until she eventually found herself on the ground floor. Her legs felt as though they might not support her for much longer and her breath was coming quick and shallow. She exited through the revolving door in the entrance foyer and stood outside the hospital building, resting her back against the brickwork and forced herself to pull great heaving gulps of air into her lungs. Damn him anyway. Damn her for being so stupid.

Faye fished her phone out of her pocket and began keying the word ‘taxi’ into the search engine but couldn’t find a service provider. She needed to get away from here; she wanted to be as far away from Conor and the Flynn family as she could possibly get.

‘Faye? Are you all right?’ a voice called her from behind.

She swung around and saw him standing there.

‘Is everything okay?’ he continued.

Faye shook her head, too upset to speak. Seeing him standing before her now was an unbearable sting.

‘I thought you were going to get coffees? I came looking for you to give you a hand carrying them back and then I saw you running down the corridor. What’s going on?’

‘I’m going home,’ she said unable to look him in the eye after everything she had heard.

‘Now?’ He glanced at his watch. ‘I know you’ve probably stuff to do but if you can hang on a little longer, I’ll be heading back to the village soon and I can give you a lift. I just want to make sure Gran is okay first...’

She shook her head. ‘I’m going back to Dublin, Conor.’

She watched his face crease in confusion and then pain filled his eyes. ‘But why? Has something happened?’

‘I heard what you said to Margo about what happened between us just being a “bit of fun” and me not being “the settling down type”.’

His whole face fell and Faye could tell that he knew what she was talking about. ‘And did you hear what else I said?’

‘I didn’t have to. I heard all I needed to hear.’

She looked down at her phone screen and continued looking for a taxi. ‘Don’t you have FREENOW down here?’ she asked growing impatient.

‘Believe it or not, technology has actually reached other cities beyond Dublin,’ he said sarcastically.

‘Ah there, I found it,’ she said after a beat.

‘Well, if that’s how you feel then maybe I was right!’ He spat angrily. ‘It would never work between us.’

‘My sentiments exactly!’ she retorted.

Moments later a taxi pulled up and Faye walked over to it and opened the back door.

‘What about your car and your belongings? You’ve left everything in Inishbeg Cove?’ Conor called after her.

She waved her hand. ‘I’ll figure something out.’

She watched his whole face flame with anger as she turned away from him, got into the car and pulled the door shut. The driver raised his brows when she told him she wanted to go to Dublin but seemed delighted to get the fare. It was only when the hospital building began to fade into the distance that she finally allowed the tears of bitter disappointment, that had been threatening ever since she had overheard his conversation with Margo, to fall. Salty tears pierced the skin on her face which had been left raw from the biting wind. She wished she had never come here or set eyes on Conor Flynn. It could never have worked anyway, she told herself. I’m in Dublin he’s in Inishbeg Cove. Just put the Flynnns out of your head and forget about them. She should never have let her guard down; she had learnt that lesson a long time ago.

As the taxi travelled through the Limerick suburbs, she mulled over everything that had happened; it wasn’t just leaving Conor that left her distraught, but it was leaving the whole Flynn family too. It was the first Christmas since before her mother had left that she had enjoyed; Conor’s family had embraced her and she had felt she belonged there. She had got a fleeting glimpse at what it was like to have a loving family and now it was all going to be taken away from her again just as quickly. She had been fine the way she used to be, when she hadn’t known what she was missing out on. How was she meant to go back to that person, now that she knew what life could be like? It was cruel.

Just then her phone rang and she saw that it was Margo.

‘Where did you go to?’ Margo demanded, before Faye even had time to say hello.

‘I need to get back to Dublin, something’s come up...’ Faye said hoping Margo would buy it.

‘Are you sure that’s the full story, Faye?’ Margo’s tone was stern and laced with scepticism. ‘Only I’ve just seen Conor and he’s in a right state.’

Faye winced. She didn’t want to get on Margo’s wrong side. ‘What did he say?’

‘That you left without saying goodbye to him. He said you just got into a taxi over something you thought you heard.’

‘I overheard you both talking,’ Faye admitted. ‘I heard Conor saying how it was all just a bit of fun and that I wasn’t the settling down type.’

‘So you didn’t hear the rest of what he said?’ Margo probed.

‘No...’ Faye admitted suddenly feeling unsure of herself.

‘Yes, when I asked him initially if there was anything going on between you two, he tried to deny it and bluff his way out of it by telling me it was nothing serious but I knew by the way he was acting that he had feelings for you. Did you hear the bit about how he has fallen head over heels for you but that he was terrified because he didn’t know if you felt the same way?’

Faye’s heart stopped. ‘He said that?’

‘He’s crazy about you, Faye and if you can’t see that then you’re crazier than him.’

‘But even if we were both mad about each other, how would it work with my job? Conor is tied to the farm. A long distance relationship would never last and I can’t see the agency relocating to Inishbeg Cove anytime soon,’ she quipped.

‘Forgive me if I’m speaking out of turn, Faye but you can work remotely. I know the internet connection isn’t always the greatest down there but I’ve worked with you for years, I know you’re good at your job. If you wanted to move to Inishbeg Cove and work from home, I’d have no issues with it.’

‘But all of our clients are in Dublin,’ Faye protested.

‘You could arrange to be in Dublin a couple of times a month for meetings or you could do them online. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.’

‘You seem to have a solution for everything,’ Faye replied.

‘You know that work isn’t going to care for you when you get sick, or keep you warm on the cold winter nights, or travel the world with you when you retire... There’s more to life than your job. You have to think now, Faye

and think properly. I know Conor is my nephew, so I'm biased, but he's a good man. Men like him don't come around too often. You can either take a risk and open your heart or spend the rest of your life alone.'

'So you want me to move to Inishbeg Cove?'

'Well, obviously that's between you and Conor but don't let your job hold you back. You've sacrificed enough of your life for work. It's time to live and grow and open your heart to the possibility of love and you never know what might happen...' She broke off and sighed. 'Look, it's your decision, Faye, just make sure you really think this through properly... I'd better go back into Mum.'

Faye hung up and thought about what Margo had said. She took time to digest her boss's words. Could she really do that? Give up everything to risk it all on a relationship that might not even work? She thought about her life in Dublin – oh, who was she kidding? – she didn't have a life, not really. Life as she knew it was consumed with work; she worked late every evening and on weekends too. She knew she was guilty of filling a void with work but that was what got her through. She realised now how sorely lacking her life in Dublin was; she wanted him, his family, she wanted that life for herself but her heart had been damaged enough as a child, could she really risk opening it now and exposing her barest soul to Conor, like Margo had suggested? She thought about the conversation they had had the night before about being willing to compromise once you found the right person and she finally felt that she might be willing to do that but that was assuming that Conor felt just as strongly as she did. Who knew, he might see her just as a Christmas fling but then she remembered what Margo had said about him falling for her. The connection between them had felt so strong, she was sure it had to be real.

'Stop the car!' she called out.

Faye was shunted forward in her seat as the driver slammed on the brakes.

‘What’s wrong?’ he asked checking in the rear view mirror to make sure he was hearing her correctly. ‘Are you okay?’

‘We need to turn around!’

‘Did you forget something?’

‘Something like that.’

He waited until the traffic was clear, before doing a U-turn on the road and travelling back towards Limerick. Cars were lined up bumper to bumper as they sat in the heavy traffic. Her heart was thumping wildly and doubts poured into her mind. What the hell was she doing? She was taking a risk; possibly the biggest risk of her life. Faye never did things like this. She never let herself feel vulnerable. If she went back to the hospital, she would be exposing her heart to Conor and she was scared. Nothing good ever happened when she let people get close to her but Margo’s words had changed something in her. If there was a chance, even a small chance, that Conor’s feelings for her were as strong as Margo had suggested, then she knew she’d never be able to go back to Dublin and just forget about him. She would spend the rest of her life wondering ‘what if?’ So even though every cell in her body was screaming at her to go home, she told herself to go back to the hospital and just hear him out.

The taxi eventually turned into the hospital gates and Faye gripped the door handle, ready to hop out once the car came to a stop. He pulled up in the taxi set-down area just outside the entrance to the building. Faye paid the

driver hurriedly, giving him a generous tip for wasting his time and then jumped out of the car. As she made her way across the tarmac towards the entrance, she saw him. Her heart flipped at the sight of him standing outside the hospital with his back leaning against the wall. It was almost like he was waiting for her. She took a second to look at him, he was slightly dishevelled looking, with his unshaven face. There was something about the set of his shoulders that gave him an air of defeat. A force that felt magnetic in its strength, pulled her towards him. Before she realised she was doing it, her legs began running towards him and she collided with the solidness of his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. She closed her eyes and felt a sense of safety that she hadn't felt for years.

'You came back,' he whispered into her hair as he kissed her hair and held her in his strong arms.

'Margo called me,' she explained. 'I'm sorry—' she began, tears filling her eyes. 'I just got scared.'

His arms moved up to both sides of her face as he pulled her in close and she could feel the bristle of his stubble against her cheek. Their lips met and this kiss was every bit as magical as the first time. All the noises and sounds faded around them until it was only the two of them left in the world.

'I'm sorry too. I just wish you'd heard the full conversation,' he groaned. 'What I actually said was that I was worried that you might not be the settling down type and that you would trample all over my heart because I knew my feelings for you were too strong to withstand that. I couldn't understand why you just left without saying goodbye. I was so hurt. I thought I meant nothing to you. That the connection between us had all been in my imagination.'

She shook her head. 'I felt it too, that's why I was so upset when I heard you say that to Margo. I thought maybe it was just a fling to you. If Margo hadn't called me I would have gone back to Dublin, tried to get on with my life again and forget all about you.'

'I'm glad you didn't do that because I've never felt this way about anyone before. What we have is special. I know we don't know one another very long but the chemistry between us is undeniable. Remember when I told you how I was engaged and wasn't willing to leave Inishbeg Cove?'

Faye nodded.

'Well, that's how I know that what I feel for you is the real deal, I would give up everything for you. If you asked me turn my back on my life in Inishbeg Cove to be with you, I would.'

‘I’d never ask you to do that—’ she said quietly.

‘But how will it work unless I move to Dublin? I want all of you, Faye. I don’t want a part-time relationship. I want to go to sleep with you wrapped in my arms every night and wake up beside you in the morning. I want to tell you when you’ve got a piece of sleep stuck in your eye, or that I’m just nipping to shop because we’re out of milk. I want the good bits and I want all the normal, boring every day bits - I want it all.’

She couldn’t help but grin. ‘Well, thanks to Margo, I think I’ve already worked it all out.’

She filled him in on the conversation she had had with her boss about working from Inishbeg Cove and commuting to Dublin a couple of times a month.

‘But could you be happy in Inishbeg Cove, Faye? Village life is a lot different to city life.’

‘If I survived being stranded in a remote cottage in a snowstorm with no electricity, I think I’ll be okay.’ She laughed. ‘Since I met you I’ve realised that I’ve been filling a void in my life with work. It took meeting you to show me that. I thought I was happy but now that I’ve found you, I realise how much I’ve been missing. It’s like you’ve opened a door to a whole new world; my life before was black and white and you bring the colour and the music. Spending the day with your family yesterday, well it was... special... I felt—’ she paused for the right word, ‘—well a part of something... I know it sounds stupid when it was my first time meeting everyone, but I felt like I belonged there. I’d never had that experience, I don’t remember ever having all my family together around the table. It was usually just me and my nan and although she did her best, it was always a sombre day, like we were both thinking about the people who should be around the table with us. What happened between us last night was special, I’ve never felt a connection like that before. I don’t know if you realise but I’ve never opened up to anyone about my childhood - nobody knows what happened. My Gran was the only person who knew everything and she’s passed away – you’re the only person on the planet that I felt comfortable opening up to and I didn’t do it easily. And you didn’t judge me or pity me or offer platitudes, you just listened and it felt so good to have someone I can trust. When I was leaving the farmhouse last night and heading back to my cold and empty cottage, I wanted to stay there with your family. I didn’t want to leave. Then when you kissed me, it felt so right. I realised it wasn’t just your family I was falling for, but it was

you too. I wanted it all.'

'Well I'm glad you want my family too because they're all part of the package. If you get one Flynn you get us all. That's the way we work.'

Faye laughed. 'Speaking of your family,' she said linking his arm, 'come on, let's go find them. I want to see your Gran.'

They entered the hospital building and walked down the corridors both grinning. Faye's head was still spinning. How was it just a few days since she had travelled from Dublin and in that time, managed to meet the man of her dreams and his entire family and what was even more surprising was that she didn't want to bolt like she normally would if she felt she was getting too close to someone. It felt like a dream. They took the stairs and then Conor led them around a corner and they entered St Joseph's ward. They continued to the end of the room where the curtain was still drawn around the bed. They ducked around the side of it and saw Margo was sitting at Kitty's bedside. The elderly lady looked far more frail lying there in the big hospital bed compared with the glamorous lady in her elegant twinset that Faye had met the day previous. Her white hair which had been set in soft curls on Christmas day now hung wispily around her pale face.

'Faye!' Margo exclaimed, standing up and hugging her as she came in.

'How're you doing?' Faye said making her way up to the head of the bed where Kitty lay.

'Faye,' the elderly lady whispered. 'You came back, dear!'

Margo smiled at Faye. 'I've been filling her in...'

'Of course I did. How are you feeling?'

'I'm a bit sore but when you get to my age that's normal.'

'Well I'm so happy you're okay, you gave everyone quite the fright.'

'I was trying to get Toby in, I had let him out to go to the toilet but he wouldn't come back when I called him so I went outside to fetch him and I must have slipped on ice. What a commotion I've caused.' She chuckled. 'So tell me, dear, are you Conor's girlfriend now or are you not?' she croaked.

Faye looked across at Conor and they both grinned. She felt like she couldn't stop smiling ever since she had arrived back at the hospital.

She nodded. 'I guess I finally figured out where my heart belongs.'

Kitty reached out and grasped Faye's hand with surprising strength. 'I'm so glad to hear that.'

'I always knew you two would be perfect together,' Margo chimed in.

Faye turned to Margo and looked at her suspiciously. 'You planned this,

didn't you?'

'What?' Margo asked faux-innocently.

Faye grinned at her and jabbed a finger in her direction. 'You sent me down here, hoping this would happen, didn't you?'

'Well, maybe...' Margo laughed. 'I knew you two would be good for one another but I just didn't know how to bring you together so then when Martin's mother had her operation and I knew we'd be staying in Dublin for Christmas instead of travelling down to Inishbeg Cove like we usually did, the cottage was lying empty. I happened to ask you what your plans were for Christmas and that's when I had the brainwave. I just had to hope that the Christmas magic would do its thing and it seems as though it did...'

'Well thank you,' Conor said sliding his arm around Faye's waist. She liked how it felt there; although she was very self-sufficient after years of fending for herself, it was a nice feeling to have someone by her side. Someone to take care of her. 'Thank you for interfering in both our love lives.' Conor laughed.

Faye wondered how her boss had got it so right. 'You know I was cursing you when I first arrived here, Margo. Driving all the way down to Inishbeg Cove during a snowstorm, getting stranded in the middle of nowhere with no electricity... and then I met Conor and your family and everything changed...' Her voice wavered with emotion and she knew she wasn't going to be able to hold it together for much longer. Conor squeezed her hand encouraging her to continue. 'I finally found where I belong...' she said looking from Kitty, to Margo until finally her eyes settled on Conor. Then she moved closer to him, reached up and took his face in her hands. Their mouths met once more and she knew this was the start of something wonderful. When they had finished she looked into his shining eyes and whispered, 'thank you for making me believe in Christmas again.'

Did you enjoy *Christmas Magic at Inishbeg Cove*?

Why not try the first book in the Inishbeg Cove series, *The Secrets of Inishbeg Cove*. Here's the first chapter:

THE SECRETS OF INISHBEG COVE

CHAPTER 1

The slow drip, drip, drip of the morphine IV as the clear liquid drained from the bag and entered his mother's veins was the only sound to be heard in the room. Greg was holding her cold hand in his own; cold because her body was too weak to keep her warm anymore. He gripped her papery skin, speckled with age spots, as tightly as he dared—he didn't want to hurt her, but at the same time he wanted to squeeze her hand hard, he wanted to pull her back from wherever she was about to go and keep her here with him forever. He wasn't ready yet to lose her, but he knew that soon he would have no choice. Her body was giving up. He had had forty-two years with her, but now it still didn't seem like enough. He felt greedy; he wanted another year, another ten.

Kimberly, her nurse, had dimmed the lights so the room was filled with a soft glow. He leant in close and listened to her breathing. It was so faint now, barely audible. Sometimes it would catch and gurgle in her throat like water passing over stones, and his heart would pound as he thought, is this it? Is she about to leave this world? He would selfishly think, please, not now, I'm not ready yet, and then she would take a shuddering breath once more and he would start to breathe again too. He knew he needed to be courageous, but he was scared.

Kimberly came back into the room to check on her. She fixed her pillows before feeling her pulse. His mother let out a groan, and Greg gently raised a water-soaked cloth to moisten her lips.

'It's close now, Greg,' Kimberly whispered when she had finished. She was kind and sympathetic but in a manner that told Greg this was part of her job. She would go home when her shift had ended and maybe she would tell

a husband about the patient who had died during the night. They might talk about it for a few minutes and then the topic would invariably change to taking out the trash or what they would eat for dinner that evening.

Kimberly went to leave the room, but she hesitated at the door and tilted her head to the side. ‘Are you sure I can’t call anyone to come be with you, Greg?’

He shook his head like he had done all the other times she had asked him the same question.

‘I’m okay,’ he said.

She nodded before dimming the lights once more and creeping out of the room.

Greg looked back down at his mother’s face, creased with pain. The morphine seemed to be losing the battle at keeping her comfortable. He hated seeing her like this and being powerless to help.

‘It’s okay to go, Mom,’ he whispered. ‘I’ll be okay; you don’t need to hang on for me. I’m ready to let you leave—you go find Dad.’ He had heard that our hearing was the last sense to depart, and he really hoped it was true.

Suddenly her eyes flickered open and her lips began to twitch. He realised she was trying to speak.

‘In—’

‘What is it, Mom?’ He quickly moved in close to her.

‘In—In.’

He racked his brains to think of what she might need. ‘Do you need something?’

‘Inishbeg—’ The word was propelled suddenly from her dry, scratchy throat.

‘What is it? What are you trying to say?’ He leant in closer to her so that his ear was almost touching her parched lips.

‘We . . .’ Her voice was liquidy and rasping. ‘Inishbeg Cove’—she stopped for a breath—‘Ireland.’

He slumped back against his chair. She was on a lot of morphine and was rambling now. Kimberly had warned him that this might happen. ‘It’s okay, Mom, just relax,’ he soothed as he traced delicate circles on her skin.

‘We got you’—she paused for a breath—‘in Inishbeg—’ She stopped again for a moment, clearly trying to summon the power to say whatever it was that she felt was so urgent. ‘A cottage—I’m sorry—’

Suddenly a rattle sounded deep in her throat. Then she took a few shallow

breaths followed by one long exhale as the air left her lungs and her spirit left this world.

Greg jumped up and pressed the call bell, and Kimberly hurried back into the room.

‘I—I—think she’s gone—’

He stood back in shock and let Kimberly in beside the bed to listen to her breathing. She used a torch to check his mother’s pupils before nodding at him to confirm what he already knew. ‘She’s passed on. I’m so sorry, Greg,’ she offered her condolences.

After Kimberly had recorded the time of death and completed her paperwork, she crept out of the room leaving them alone together. As Greg whispered his final goodbyes, tears fell down along his face and onto the bed sheets leaving damp circles.

He woke some time later to the sound of birdsong and early morning light filling the room. He didn’t know how long he had been sitting holding his mom’s hand for, but it was now cold and stiff in his own. He noticed someone had opened the window, and there was a blanket covering him where he had been sleeping in the armchair.

‘I’m so sorry for your loss,’ a voice said as they entered the room. Kimberly was gone and a new nurse, full of vigour and energy having only just started on the morning shift had taken over.

Greg nodded, unable to get the words out of his mouth.

‘Do you need me to notify anyone?’ she asked.

He had texted two cousins and an elderly brother of his dad’s, but they weren’t close. He didn’t think they would even bother to travel to North Carolina for the funeral.

‘I’ve let our relatives know, thanks.’

She pursed her lips in a kindly half-smile before retreating quietly out of the room again. A feeling that he didn’t recognise suddenly overwhelmed him. He guessed it was fear. He was scared for the future. They had never had a big circle, it had always been just his mom, dad, and him, and they were content like that. His father had passed away almost seven years earlier, a massive heart attack had taken him instantly as they had been watching the Super Bowl together. Greg still missed him every day, but he always feared the day that his mother passed on because that would be the day he would have no family left.

He had visions of future Christmas dinners sitting alone at the table or not

getting a phone call on his birthday. For the first time ever, he found himself longing for a brother or a sister. He imagined it would have been easier to have someone else to go through this with, someone to share the load and your worries about the future. Someone else who knew exactly how much you missed that person, how much the pain of your loss cut right down to the bone. To have somebody who was there for him so he knew that he wasn't alone in the world.

Over the years people had often asked him in a pitying tone how it had been growing up as an only child, as if by not having brothers and sisters that he had missed out on something fundamental in his upbringing. He had always been taken aback by it, his childhood had never felt lacking, they had had each other, it had always been enough, but now he knew what they meant. He envied all those people with a band of siblings. He felt a longing to be near someone, to have closeness. He needed to hold someone or for someone to hold him. It occurred to him then just how few people he had in his life. Sure, he had friends, but they were people he worked with or went to a game with or had a few beers with. They didn't talk on a deep level. And anyway, they had their own lives, careers, wives, and children. He briefly thought about calling Selena, but he knew it probably wasn't a good idea. He would just come away from it feeling worse. He had to remind himself of that, especially now when he was feeling so low.

Selena and Greg were on a break, although technically it had been over two months now, so he wasn't sure you could even call it a break anymore. She had been the one who wanted some time apart; he had wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. They had been together for three years, and he was sure she was 'the one'. He had loved her—he still did. He had hoped to propose to her and one day had delicately tested the waters about how she might react if he did pop the question, but she had blown his tentative actions out of the water with jet-powered propulsion. A few days later she had announced that she needed some time away from him 'to think about their future together'. Greg had respected her wishes and given her all the space that she needed. He guessed she wasn't ready to commit to marriage right then, but he still harboured hope that she might be one day.

Later that day, after Greg had made arrangements for his mom to be brought to the funeral home, he gathered up his stuff to leave. Her forehead was startlingly cool against his lips as he kissed her goodbye.

His bones ached with tiredness, his eyes stung, and his heart hurt as he

walked out of the hospice for the last time. He had spent so much time here over the last few months; in a weird way, it was almost bittersweet saying goodbye to the place.

He started driving on autopilot but didn't take the route home to his apartment. Instead he found himself heading in the direction of his childhood home. It was like a force pulling him there. He drove through the familiar streets, feeling detached from everything, like he was watching the world around him through a glass screen. He had just lost his mother but that hadn't even hit him yet. He was still in a dense fog.

He found himself thinking about his mother's last words to him, what had she been talking about Ireland for? She had never even been there; they weren't an Irish-American family. His father's family had been German immigrants who set sail for America in the 1800s, and his mom was second generation Italian. He couldn't help but smile; it would actually be quite funny, if it weren't so sad. It was crazy to witness the delirium that morphine could induce. The bittersweet thing was that he didn't even have anyone in his life to share the anecdote with.

When he reached his mother's house, he put his key in the lock and let himself in. He breathed in that soothing smell that was home. Photos hanging in the hallway greeted him. He usually paid no attention to them, he had seen them so many times, but now as he studied them, they made his stomach sink with the weight of grief. There was one of the three of them at a wedding back when he was about seven. Another one was of his parents beaming the proudest of smiles at his graduation from Duke. They had been a perfect unit. He had felt so happy as a child when he walked along in between them with his small hands cased inside their bigger hands. If he ever had children—and he really hoped he would—he wanted to give them that same love and security that he had always felt.

Greg went through to the living room, and the walls seemed to echo with memories of happier times. Christmas morning opening presents, birthday parties, movie nights with a bowl of popcorn overflowing onto the sofa around them. His swim trophies lined the wall, and pride of place was the rose he had made for his mom out of clay when he was in second grade. He walked over and drew the curtains. He knew his mother would hate the curtains being open at night. Then he opened the doors of the cabinet and pulled out some old photo albums. He pored over the now yellowed pages where a lifetime of memories graced each leaf. There was an album full of

pictures of him as a baby. Another one had photos of him on his first day of little league and of his dad teaching him how to fish at the lake on one of their camping trips. He guessed from his toothless grin he must have been about six or seven. He traced his finger over the outlines of their familiar faces.

When he reached the end of that one, he lifted down a different one. There seemed to be an album for every year of his life. He opened it, and his absence from the photos inside told him that these were from an earlier time before he was born. As he turned the pages, he could see his parents looking so much younger than he had ever remembered as they posed in front of the Eiffel Tower or at the Trevi Fountain. He couldn't help but smile at his mother looking so young and girlish and his dad with his wiry sideburns and denim flares. He knew his parents had gone to Europe for their tenth wedding anniversary. They had visited Paris and Rome, and as a kid he had always loved hearing about their trip. On the next page there was a photo of them standing on top of steep cliffs, with foam-topped waves crashing in the background. The image for some reason was familiar to him. He had seen those cliffs before. He tried to place them, and then it hit him—he was pretty sure that they were the Cliffs of Moher. When he was in the fourth grade he had done a project on Ireland, but he was certain that his mom and dad had never visited Ireland. He peeled back the film covering it and pulled the photo out. He turned it over and saw his mom had written 'Ireland, Aug 1976' on the back. It was a habit of hers to date every photo she took. He thought it was strange that they had never told him they had gone there. He had listened to them reminiscing about their trip to Europe so many times over the years, but they had never mentioned stopping off in Ireland. He suddenly realised that he had been born in the September of 1976, so if this photo was taken the month previous, shouldn't his mom be heavily pregnant in it? His heart stumbled; in this photo, she was so slender and her stomach was too flat to carry a baby. She was definitely not almost forty weeks pregnant. Trembling, he brought it closer to his eyes. A memory came rushing back to him then of his dad helping him with the project, and when Greg had said that he would like to visit Ireland one day, he had said, 'We might get there someday, son, it looks like a swell place.' He could remember his words so clearly.

Maybe his mom had got the date wrong, a voice said hopefully. He thought about her dying words, and a cool shiver washed over him. Was it

the morphine talking or was there something more here? Greg put the albums away and stood up from where he had been kneeling.

He fished his phone out of his pocket and found himself typing 'Inishbeg Cove' into Google. He clicked on the first link and was shocked to see it was an actual place. An image on the town's website showed grassy dunes reaching up to high cliffs hovering over a beautiful horseshoe-shaped beach. So even though his mother had been high on morphine in the end, she had still managed to get this village name right? What the hell was going on? The warm, fuzzy feeling was gone, and the watery doubts had now started to crystallise into something bigger inside his head.

If you would like to continue reading *The Secrets of Inishbeg Cove* you can get it [here](#)

BOOKS BY IZZY BAYLISS

The Lily McDermott Series

The Girl I was Before

Baked with Love



The Inishbeg Cove Series

The Secrets of Inishbeg Cove

Coming Home to Inishbeg Cove

Escape to Inishbeg Cove

Midsummer Dreams at Inishbeg Cove

Christmas Magic at Inishbeg Cove

A LETTER FROM IZZY

Thank you so very much for reading *Christmas Magic at Inishbeg Cove*. I actually never set out to write a Christmas book; what started as a seed of an idea in my imagination while I had some downtime between projects, took hold until I was consumed with Faye and Conor's romance. What a joy it was to write this story. I hope that you, as the reader, enjoyed it and hopefully felt that Christmas magic as you turned the pages.

I enjoy writing the Inishbeg Cove series so much and the village and its characters are very dear to me. I am touched that so many people have taken these stories to their hearts. If you enjoyed the Inishbeg Cove books, I would really appreciate it if you could leave a short review on Amazon. Reviews help a book get noticed, which helps promote the book to new readers, so they are hugely important to us authors. It doesn't have to be long – just one line will do – and I will be very grateful. You can click the link to the Amazon page [here](#).

If you would like to keep up to date with my latest releases, please sign up to my newsletter [here](#). I promise never to spam you, and you can unsubscribe at any time.

Wishing you and yours a wonderful Christmas.

Love, Izzy x

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Izzy Bayliss lives in Ireland with her husband and four young children and their hyperactive puggle. A romantic at heart, she loves nothing more than cosying up in front of a roaring fire with a good book. You can find out more about Izzy Bayliss at www.izzybayliss.com.

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