

SEVENTEEN

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When Roisin got in from work – entering the flat with a ‘Honey, I’m home!’ – Cora was sitting on the living-room floor surrounded by neon highlighters and pages torn from an A4 pad. Her laptop was open beside her and the stapler was on its side. Roisin could not see her friend sitting amidst this stationary storm, owing to the partition wall between kitchen and living room, but she chatted to Cora as she emptied the remains of her lunch into the bin and began to wash the plastic container. Cora, meanwhile, tried to concentrate.

‘Do you know where all the crazy people in London go, Cora?’ she said, shouting to be heard over the running water. Cora recognised the desperate squeak of the last of the washing-up liquid being forced from the bottle.

‘Well let me tell you. They go to public libraries. And why wouldn’t they? It’s warm and free and there are lots of cosy couches where they can have a little snooze. There’s Internet access to research symptoms of imaginary medical problems – and if they can’t find what they’re looking for well, sure, can’t they ask the library staff because what are

we really except underpaid social workers – and there are free newspapers and magazines to peruse, at their leisure, and there are bathrooms to wash your socks in and the heating’s always on so they’ll be dry in no time. Sure isn’t it a great place altogether?’

Cora heard Roisin shaking out the tea towel. ‘And have I told you about the accessory *de jour* of the Finsbury Park library crazies? This season’s must-have item is the plastic bag. Oh yes, you’re nobody without one. The more the better. No matter how old I may get and how far I may travel, I will never again be able to hear the rustle of a plastic bag without having flashbacks to that place. I might put in for a transfer to Crouch Hill. Apparently the crazies are in small quantities up there. The steep ascent must put them off. There was a woman in today with six plastic bags. She sat in the study area and spent the whole time opening and closing them – rustle, rustle, rustle. One was full of colouring books; another had a jar of mayonnaise. She’d open the bags, take the items out, swap them around, put them back in, close the bags, and then start all over. I thought I was going to— What are you doing?’

Roisin had stepped around the partition, tea towel and lunchbox in hand, and was observing the paper trail that stretched from the TV right up to where she stood. Cora sat in the centre of it, oblivious to the highlighter accidentally streaked like warrior paint across her cheeks.

‘I was going to do it in my bedroom but I’m on early shifts this week so if I sit on that bed, I know I’ll fall asleep.’

‘But what is it you’re doing?’

Cora had thrown herself into the matchmaking chart in the past week. Now that she'd added all these other layers – nationalities, destinations, reason for travel – she could lose herself in it for hours and there was no room in her head for anything else. Whatever tried to get in, the chart just pushed it right out. A bouncer for her brain. 'I didn't have enough information,' explained Cora. 'I was just giving everything a "yes" or "no" but I've been looking at it with more detail and I can see trends. We're getting some good data through on the frequent fliers. Did you know you can tell more about a person by their past behaviour than by what they think they want? And, weirdly, the English speakers are more open to romance; look at this – the success rate for non-native English speakers is one in ten, but twenty per cent of Irish and Americans came back with a match or a maybe, while that was almost thirty per cent for English and Scottish passengers.'

Roisin kicked a page out from under her right foot and watched as her friend held up one pie chart after another.

'That made me think I need to concentrate on the Scots. It's difficult though because most of our flights are London to Dublin. So then I decided to make a little file on each match.' Cora pulled some stapled pages from under the couch. 'I've been searching social media for signs of success and actually there are two couples from back in November that I can probably change to green. This Instagram photo is hard to make out but doesn't it look like the woman he has his arm around is this woman, here – that's the doctor I set him up with. Her hair is a bit shorter but—'

'Cora.'

'I know. Five months? Of course she could have gotten it cut.'

'Cora.'

'What?'

'Look at yourself.' Roisin grabbed a metal plate from the cooker and held it up so Cora could catch her distorted reflection. 'You've been like this for days. Take a good hard look at yourself.'

'So? This is not a skincare competition. It's work.'

'This is not work. Nobody pays you to do this, nobody even asks you. You cancelled on Maeve's dinner.'

'I didn't want, I couldn't... She didn't have time to explain. I was busy.'

'Is it Nancy? Have you talked to her? Or Sheila? You didn't tell me about the last visit.'

Nancy still wasn't talking to her and Cora was starting to feel awful about it. And she couldn't even think about her mum because that was the worst of all. 'I just want to get this right.'

'You were on an early today? Then why were you up half the night?'

'I wasn't.'

'I saw your light on, and I heard Joni.'

'Are you monitoring me, officer?'

'What were you doing?'

'Nothing.'

Roisin was looking at her now as if she was a Finsbury Park crazy. Cora had been up half the night trying to distract herself. She thought about opening her mother's

letter, texting Nancy, calling Charlie. At one point she even considered phoning Friedrich. So she decided the best use of her time was to create some more passenger files.

'You're letting this take over everything. You're obsessed. Obsessed. You sound like Mary.'

'No, Cora. You're the one who's like Mary. If she uses food to distract herself, then you're using this in the exact same way.'

Cora started to gather up her pages.

'Have you talked to Nancy?' she repeated.

'Nothing to do with it,' said Cora. Her hand stopped over a page relating to a recent match on a flight to Holland. She had jotted down the man's phone number. He was an electrician and she'd found it online. What exactly had she been planning to do with that? 'As I said, I'm on earlyies so I'm just going to take these into my room.'

Roisin sighed. 'Is this about seeing Friedrich? Because you need to start getting some perspective on that too. Have you considered he might not actually be the reason for all of life's woes? Maybe it was just a relationship that didn't work out.'

Cora's grasp tightened on the pages, frustrated by how easily her friend had recast something so complex, something she knew nothing about. 'Goodnight, Roisin.'

'You need to stop thinking about everyone else's life and start concentrating on your own. These passengers are total strangers and you're verging on stalker.'

But Cora held her highlighters over her ears as she exited the room and the only audible response was the slam of her bedroom door.

EIGHTEEN

Cora had been huddled over her computer for an hour by the time Joan arrived.

'And there's me thinking I'd be the early bird,' said the older woman, halting halfway up her stool to peer over Cora's shoulder. 'What are you doing there? We don't need passenger lists for at least another hour.'

'Just getting a head start,' said Cora, moving the piece of paper on which she was jotting down private passenger details to the far side of her computer. Cora had found an ally on the 9:20 a.m. to Paris, so now she was sorting potential matches. Alison was an air hostess and an old friend of her mother's. She only worked part time but Cora had run into her that morning when she was getting off the Tube.

'How is Sheila doing?' Alison had asked.

'Good days and bad. Not so many good at the moment.'

'I am sorry to hear that. Will you tell her I was asking for her?'

Cora doubted Sheila would remember Alison, but she said she would anyway. And Alison told her that if there was anything she could do, just to ask. Now Cora hadn't meant

to take advantage of her mother's illness – she hadn't even fully accepted that that was what she was doing – but when she casually enquired about Alison's flights that day and learned she was on a morning route to Paris, she couldn't help but ask if the air hostess would mind keeping an eye on two friends of hers flying in Row 27.

'What do they look like?'

'Hard to describe,' said Cora, who had yet to pick out any candidates. 'But they'll be 27A and B. They, eh, they don't know each other terribly well, you see. So if you could let me know how they get on?' And she had quickly put her number into Alison's phone before the puzzled woman could find any more holes in her story.

It had been weeks since her fight with Nancy, and Cora's working days were slowly being stripped of purpose. Cora kept lining up Row 27s, hoping Nancy would send a little report. But no. Lines of communication remained closed, so Cora was trying to determine the outcomes herself. On Monday, she'd set up Ingrid with a film producer on a flight to Belfast.

Last night Cora couldn't sleep, again, so she checked the producer's Twitter account for any signs of the Swede but all she got were pictures of him having a pint of Guinness at the new *Titanic* visitor centre.

Cora turned her screen away from Joan and started Googling candidates for Alison's Paris flight. It felt good to be back in business, even temporarily. Check-in without matchmaking hardly seemed worthwhile.

'I heard you didn't sign up for redeployment,' said Joan, stifling an early morning yawn.

'That's right. I'm going to stay right here with you.'
'You weren't interested in a promotion?'

'I thought you didn't consider them promotions, Joan.'
'Ah well, not for me, but for you it's different. You're still young.'

'I'm happy here.'

'Well good. If that's true then fair enough.'

Cora continued to type but she could tell Joan wasn't done.

'I went to visit your mother last night.'

'A-ha.' Cora had been in to see her mother once since the forced-feeding-biscuit incident and she'd felt sick the whole time. Sheila kept panicking about her arm and the scars. Her mother, who had never been interested in her appearance, had discovered a hysterical kind of vanity. She wanted to know who had done it to her. Cora, as the only person there, was the number-one suspect. She felt awful when she went to visit, and she felt awful when she didn't. Cora carefully matched a French actress with a recently divorced financier: 27A and 27B. She willed Joan to stop talking. But she didn't.

'That burn business really did a number on her, didn't it? It knocked the stuffing out of her, poor love. Have to say I got a shock when I went in. But I'm sure she'll get better. Haven't they the best doctors? Nothing to worry about at all. At all, at all, at all.' Joan cleared her throat. 'You're very distracted today, Cora, and I can't help thinking you might be daydreaming about your date with a certain Charlie Barrett.'

Cora's attention was finally dragged from the screen.
'How did you know about that?'

'Oh a little birdie told me,' said Joan, enjoying the mystery but ultimately wanting the gossip more. 'Well, not such a little birdie. A fairly hefty birdie actually. Ray told me. He fixed the strap of my handbag yesterday and, you know, I do think I'm starting to see a slimming in him, around the face.'

Charlie had phoned on Monday. Nobody calls after a first date in this day and age. But Charlie didn't do text messages. He reiterated what a nice time he'd had at dinner and Cora couldn't think of any reason not to accept his request (and it really was a request) for a second date this coming Saturday. He *was* handsome and he *was* nice.

Cora groaned. 'Does everyone know?'

'Everyone,' Joan said, tutting. 'Who's everyone, Cora? Don't be daft. I thought you'd be only dying to talk about your new relationship.'

'It's not a relationship!'

'Or whatever it is you call it nowadays. But never mind the words,' said Joan, hopping her stool closer to Cora's. 'How did it go? Go on now, you can tell old Joanie. Apparently Charlie had a great time; he was quite smitten – Charlie's word, not Ray's. He is a lovely chap. A bit of a smart arse at times but he is a catch. A bit of a dish.' She giggled. 'I'm only teasing. Oh but I was delighted when I heard you'd said yes.'

Cora spied a groggy-looking George in the distance. 'Sorry, Joan, I'll be back in a minute.'

She hopped down from her stool and ran towards him. 'Morning, George,' she said brightly, his bleary eyes judging her approach with scepticism.

'It is morning, yes,' he said, dragging sleepy dust from the corner of his left eye. 'What do you want?'

'How's Nancy?'

'She's okay,' he said, still wary. 'She's surviving without you, if that's what you're asking. Still managing to get out of bed in the morning.'

'That's good. Did she get the promotion?'

George shrugged. 'Hasn't heard yet.'

Cora looked at the floor, and waited for George to relent. 'I suppose she is a little snappier since your screaming match.'

'Does she still keep an eye on Row 27?'

'I've seen her throwing a glance that way.' He shrugged again. 'I guess we both do. Monday's set-up – the Belfast flight? – was a total bust. He was a complete a-hole.'

'The film producer,' said Cora nodding. 'He seemed a little delighted with himself alright.' She stopped herself from enquiring about other matches – better to focus on the future. 'Maybe you could report back from the lunchtime flight to Edinburgh?' she said casually. 'I see you and Nancy are on it.'

George's eyes narrowed again. 'And why would I do that?'

'Because of LOVE, George! Isn't that the best reason to do anything? It's for the greater good. And maybe it'll make Nancy see what she's missing. I've tried to contact her a few times.' This was a lie, a white lie, a greater good lie. 'But to no avail. Please. Just once.'

George raised his eyebrows and threw his eyes up after them. 'Alright, alright,' he said. 'But make it a fun one, yeah?'

Make them young and pretty. You're lucky you caught me after a particularly awesome first date myself.' Cora grinned at this but he drew his hand across his mouth to let her know there would be no more details. 'Ah-bap-bap. I'll give you a quick call, very quick, when we're landing. But you have to talk to the operations controller? You'll need to sweet-talk him yourself. Your legs are alright, I guess, but you got nothing on Nancy.'

Cora threw an arm around him. Just the one, mind, she didn't want to overdo it. 'Thank you, George. Eek! Thank you, thank you.'

He gave a non-committal grumble and headed on his way.

Cora went back to her desk and worked through the early Paris check-ins. The TV actress was darker in real life. The financier's face was friendly and open. She felt positive about their chances. Cora could hear the floor polisher buzzing somewhere in the distance. There were more staff than customers walking through the departure area. A new dawn, a new day. She could make this right.

Cora returned from the operation controller and rolled her skirt back down to regulation length. She sent George a text telling him they were good to go. The greater good, she repeated to herself, saddened by the value of an exposed knee.

She ate her lunch at her desk, eager to get a head start on potential matches for George's Edinburgh flight. She was in the zone now, focused and energised. Her phone beeped

and she whipped it out, hoping for Alison's debrief. It was a message from Roisin:

Expanded World War II section opened in library today. Crazyies are v. excited. Currently watching 50yo woman in neon visor sniffing a book called Reich Sons. How's work? Talked to Nancy yet?

Cora slid the phone back under her desk and continued with the Edinburgh passenger list. She found a good-looking young chap with his own YouTube channel and was about to watch him perform an original composition when her phone beeped again:

PS. I'm just going to pretend you're not ignoring me.

PPS. Talk. To. Nancy.

Cora plugged her earphones into her computer. It was fairly standard ballad stuff but this chap could play piano. The music swelled to its cheesy romantic crescendo and Cora scanned the floor to see if she was ignoring any customers. And there was Aiden O'Connor, heading towards her.

'It's Wednesday! Since when do you fly on a Wednesday?' she said, frantically scanning her passenger lists. 'I wasn't ready for you.'

'Ready for me?'

'Not, like, *ready for you*,' she rattled. 'Just not expecting you.'

'Right. You're always so flighty, Cora. Why is that?'
'I don't know. Why are you always so smug?' Not professional. Again. 'Sorry.'

'Is that – are you apologising, Cora Hendricks?'
He was mimicking her from last time. 'Shut up. Where are you off to today?'

'I'm not flying anywhere. My brother's visiting for a couple of days and I'm collecting him. And in answer to your other question I don't know why I'm so smug. But I'll work on it.'

Cora smiled. His hair looked particularly good this week. 'When is your brother due in?'

'Not for another forty minutes.'

'Well I never took my break. If you can keep your smart comments to yourself, you're welcome to join me.'

'I'll do my best.'

Cora came out from behind her desk. 'I know just the place, and the smug one pays.'

'There! See! The two men in suits? They're negotiating their journey.'

Cora and Aiden were sitting on her favourite bench outside Terminal Two, each with a coffee by their side and a Caffè Nero sandwich on their lap. Aiden squinted towards the taxi rank, shielding his eyes from the early April sun, as they tried to decipher conversations between the people waiting in line. For someone who initially

claimed not to understand the joy in 'spying' on people, he got into it very quickly.

'Well look at that, and they seem to be getting on. Sharing cabs is the new breaking bread. Who knew?'

'The best is the approach,' said Cora, pulling a chunk from her tuna melt. 'If you can catch someone before they actually approach the other person, you can tell a lot about them: confidence, friendliness, finances.'

'Finances?'

'You can tell the people who rinsed through their savings on holiday and want to share a taxi out of financial necessity, or the ones who do it for the companionship and excitement, and then there are a few who could afford their own car – it's probably on company expenses anyway – but they're just stingy.'

'You're like Heathrow's answer to David Attenborough.'
Cora dropped her voice to a deep, RP tone. 'The overpaid cheapskate circles the friendly holidaymakers. Identifying his prey, he keeps the receipt.'

'Look at the woman near the back.'

'Where?'

'There,' said Aiden. 'Behind the one in the hijab. I bet she's about to ask that couple where they're going.'

'I can't – oh yes, I see. Yes! Look! She's doing it! Nice spot, for a novice.'

Aiden gave a mock bow.

'You're a lot less annoying outside the terminal,' she said, assuming the external setting also relinquished her from professional requirements.

'Gee. What a compliment.'

'Well you're just so stubborn. You refuse to tell me anything.'

'I'm stubborn? You're like a dog with a bone with every single question. Al Qaeda suspects get less interrogation at this airport.'

'Tell me why you fly home every weekend. I'm curious.'

'You never stop!'

'I do.'

'Mmm.'

'Sometimes I do.'

'I go to Dublin to volunteer at the hospital where I used to work.'

'I know that, but why not a hospital in London?'

'It's part of the diversity policy at the clinic where I work.'

It was my employers' choice, not – actually no, feck that. The truth is I fly home every weekend because I'm hoping to win back my ex-girlfriend who doesn't love me any more and who I now realise I haven't loved for a long time either, but I'm just so incapable of losing at anything that I wanted her back regardless.'

Cora looked at him.

'I don't want her back any more. Obviously.' He laughed. 'It is obvious, isn't it? Jesus. What a waste of time.'

'It's not a waste,' said Cora, carefully. 'You were doing good work – hospital work.'

'I used to do good work. Now the only worthwhile work I do is at the weekends.'

'But you're a doctor.'

'The last patient I had yesterday was the CEO of a shipping firm who wanted a brow lift. Why? Because his company is rebranding with a new "nice guys" image and he believes his natural face makes him look grumpy.'

'Christ.'

'I saved him five grand by sending him for an eyebrow wax instead.' Aiden buried his head in his hands. 'That's not even the most ridiculous conversation I've had this week.'

'Well, that's still . . .' Cora looked at Aiden, trying to find something worthwhile in the situation.

'It's fine. I can't think of anything either.'

'So you're a plastic surgeon?'

'The worst kind. Dublin was different. But here it's wholly cosmetic and largely unnecessary. I sell youth at an ever-inflated price. I get teenage girls into my office crippled with insecurity, clutching pictures that I try to explain are Photoshopped.'

'Did you take a truth serum this morning?'

'Better I get it all out of my system before Colm arrives. I never like to lose face, but doing so in front of my big brother would be unbearable.'

They ate their sandwiches, and Cora thought about her own family. It was nice to be beside Aiden. Much nicer than when there was a counter between them.

'Sheila had an accident a couple of weeks ago and she's been much worse since. She poured boiling water all over her arm and got this awful burn.'

'Scald,' Aiden corrected. 'You get a scald from water, not – Jesus. What is my problem? Sorry. And I'm sorry to hear

about your mum.' There it was again: a kindness in his eyes. It caught her off guard. 'Alzheimer's is an awful disease.'

'She's deteriorating rapidly. She's started forgetting when we visit, even if it was just the day before.' Cora didn't add that she had started to use this to her advantage. While Aiden might be able to admit his shortcomings, she wasn't quite at that stage. 'The nurse suggested a visitor book. She can get quite mean when she forgets we've come – my mother, not the nurse. But that's not her. Sheila is the kindest woman I know. Knew.'

'She's scared.'

'I know.' Cora drew her shoulders back and exhaled loudly. 'She's so upset about the burn marks, scald marks. She has never cared about her appearance. We used to have to beg her to change out of her uniform before parent-teacher meetings but now she can break into tears just looking at the marks.'

'So have it removed – once the skin has fully healed.'

Cora shook her head. 'The institution where she lives doesn't cover unnecessary aesthetic procedures. And it's not up to us. Mum signed up to their rules.' Cora rolled the end of her crusts back and forth between her fingers until they resembled Play-Doh. 'Sometimes I believe everything will be fine, and the next minute I get so dizzy thinking about it all, I'm convinced I'm going to faint. There are too many things.' Cora swallowed hard. 'And she's the only one I want to tell.'

'You're a good person, Cora Hendricks. If you didn't already know.'

Cora gave him a suspicious look but he didn't waver. 'Thank you,' she whispered. She said nothing for a moment – listening to the rhythm of Aiden's breathing, comforted by its consistency and proximity. In a way she had known him a year; in another way she knew him not at all. Yet here was this dizzying urge to tell him more – a sudden rush of trust to the head. Cora lifted her face to the sun. 'What a day.' She told herself this was a moment worth remembering. It felt like something. When Aiden took his next sip of coffee, his hand landed back on the bench, a hair's breadth from her own.

'Airports are where all of humanity meets,' she said quietly, her whole body alert, careful not to move an inch. 'They can seem clinical but then you get together with some strangers, everyone carrying their own ambitions and secrets and plans, and you all go flying in the sky. That's quite magical really.'

'I knew you'd be a romantic. Head. In. The. Clouds,' he mocked and raised his arms when Cora pretended to hit him.

They watched the taxi queue shrink and grow, no more pairs formed and no obvious partnerships presented themselves. Aiden told her about his first time on a plane and how little French he'd learned on that language exchange. She told him about living in Germany – her first time recounting that period of her life not in relation to Friedrich – and how the only French she knew was that you don't pronounce the 'c' in Sauvignon Blanc.

'I can't help thinking my time in London has been a waste,' said Aiden. 'It was never really time spent somewhere so much as time spent away from somewhere.'

'You'll meet someone else,' said Cora, suddenly remembering her failure to find one woman in whom he might be interested.

'It's not that. I don't know why I came here. Taking this job was partly about prestige. It's embarrassing to realise how much that stuff matters. I wanted to know I was getting further up the ladder, doing as well as my brother. But what ladder? And what do I do with the extra money? Bar paying higher rent.'

'You could spring for some new clothes. Just an idea.'

'Not that the flying is all bad. I am glad I met—'

'Cora.'

A voice from behind. They spun around to see Charlie with the stopwatch around his neck. 'Hello,' he said, more to Aiden than her.

'Hi.'

'Charlie. Waiting on Ray?'

He nodded. 'Early run.'

Cora felt Aiden shift beside her. 'Aiden, this is Charlie who . . . I work with. And Charlie, this is Aiden who . . . flies with us.'

'Hello,' Charlie said again.

'Hi,' said the other parrot.

Aiden gathered his rubbish and stood. As he threw it in the bin, Charlie spoke quickly and loudly. 'Are we still on for Saturday, Cora?'

'I better . . .' Aiden trailed off as he pointed towards the terminal. 'Nice talking to you, Cora.'

Before Charlie had a chance to pee around her, his pager

beeped and he had to dash off too. 'I'll call you later,' he said, giving her a meaningful look and Cora's stomach dropped. She was left sitting alone with tepid coffee and discarded crusts. She was gathering her own litter when her phone beeped. She pulled it from her pocket expecting more nagging from Roisin but it was an unregistered number.

Hi Cora. Your friends didn't seem to know each other but were good pals by the end I think. She is a lovely looking girl. Hope you're okay. Alison.

Cora had forgotten all about the Paris flight. Another green mark for the chart. When she got home, she'd add it in. She pulled herself up from the bench and headed in to her desk. She brought her mind back to the task at hand.

NINETEEN

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LHR - > ENB 1.00 p.m.

George put the life jacket and oxygen mask back in their place. Today's safety demonstration had been one of his best. He took a celebratory strut down the aisle, surveying his people and clocking the young duo in Row 27. She was all red wispy bangs and porcelain skin, and he was something between Justin Bieber and a *One Tree Hill* heart-throb. Lots of potential. George would chop off his dick before he admitted as much but he was pretty jazzed to be back on one of Cora's flights of fancy.

Of course it helped that George had spent the previous night with the man he was going to marry and so was very much feeling the love and the greater good and whatever else Cora was selling.

'You want me to take that guitar from you?' he asked the young guy, smiling at the girl as he reached over. 'How you doing, honey?'

'No, it's alright,' said the boy, positioning the instrument in empty 27A. 'I'll leave it here if no one else comes? If that's okay?'

'Ab-so-lutely. Whatever you want. Just making sure you're comfortable. Say, anyone ever tell you you look like Justin Bieber?'

The boy blushed and the girl took a sideways glance. 'Yeah, actually. This weekend.'

'Get out of town.'

'Yeah,' said the boy. That goofy smile would break friggng hearts. 'I was playing this showcase thing and one of the label reps said I had the Bieber factor, if Bieber had grown up on a farm.'

'A musician with label reps crushing on him? Although we're not surprised, are we,' said George, raising an eyebrow at the girl. 'Looks and talent: that's a very attractive combination. Well, if I can get you two anything you just let me know. I am here to help.'

As he shimmied on up the aisle George was aware of his body, and it was practically humming. George had met the man of his dreams three days ago, and last night he'd had it confirmed. Screw Nancy and her strops. She'd been a total drag lately, sabotaging her own professionalism and everybody else's with the efforts she went to in ignoring Row 27. George's whole world had been rocked on its axis and she was going to listen to every detail.

This had not been Nancy's week, and she'd long since chucked Deepak Chopra's positive outlook crap in the recycling. It was all that quack's fault anyway, and his books

had no answer for what to do when you still hadn't heard from your mate or when your mam keeps calling to tell you how your skinny your pregnant sister-in-law is, which by the way was an unhinged thing to be proud of, and there was no meditation exercise that could reverse time and make it so you hadn't made a complete fucking balls of a crucial job interview. And yes, it warranted the curse. So the last thing Nancy needed was the exact thing it seemed she was about to get: an attitude-laden George sashaying towards her with hip thrusts that would make mothers lock up their children.

'Were you talking to Cora's lot?' she asked, adopting the nonchalant tone she'd perfected the summer she played Sandy in Merseyside Community Drama's production of *Grease*. 'And what's with the walk? Never exactly a shrinking violet, George, but that swagger is bordering on indecent.'

'Nancy, babe, you can expect me to be floating on air for the foreseeable. I've met the man of my dreams, and last night he made me come like the fourth of July.'

'For the love of god, George!' beseeched Nancy, pulling over the alcove curtain.

'No, Nancy. I will not be censored and I will not be silenced. My sexual story will not be excluded.'

Nancy sighed. How George had ever gotten the impression he was being censored was utterly ridiculous. She could never shut him up.

George had heard him before he saw him. He was standing at the bar, where the cocktail line was twice as long as the line for beer. It was drag night. Anyway. George heard some guy laying into another dude, hollering how he wasn't going to 'mirror the heteronormative ideal' and that 'his anus was not a vagina with self-esteem issues', and George just full on left the Martini line. It was only liquor. This was love at first sound.

'We left after like a half hour and we just talked and talked. The connection, Nancy? It was, just wow.'

'Your place or his?'

'Em, hello? I told you before I do not go there on the first date so I said goodnight and he was a total gentleman and then last night, after he emailed me several times asking when he could see me again we went for round two and got to know each other in a deeper, more intimate sense. If you know what I mean.'

'I definitely do.'

'It was totally profound. I was existing on a higher plain.'

George sighed, a swoony sigh. Maybe it was the adrenaline from operating on little sleep, or maybe it was the thrill of finding someone you actually wanted to stay up talking to all night, but George was feeling the love. He untangled a pair of earphones from the mound on the top shelf and glided back down to Row 27.

'How's everybody doing here?'

The junior popstar and Irish colleen looked up at him with their adorable little smiles.

'You both like music, right?' He looked at the girl and

she nodded quickly, as if she'd missed a cue. 'Well super. Because we've got a new in-flight playlist that we're trying out, and I wonder if you might give it a listen and let us know what you think? Now we don't usually have this facility for short haul but I've switched it on for you guys. I'm afraid that means I've only the one set of earphones. You don't mind sharing, do you? An earphone each. Super—'

'I've got my own set, if it helps?'

'No, Bieber boy, it does not help. So just put them away.'

The boy shoved the white cord back in his pocket.

'So great.' George smiled again. 'You guys just plug that in there, that's it, and have a listen. Share opinions, go ahead, don't be shy. I'll be back to get the consensus.'



What exactly did a favourite colour have to do with how suitable Nancy was for senior cabin crew anyway?

'An ice-breaker,' the woman on the interview panel had said. 'To get the ball rolling.'

Ask her about procedural structures or company history or the step-by-step process for dealing with an emergency landing. Ask her about the mechanical make-up of the front propellers. It was all at the tip of her tongue. But they wanted to know her favourite colour.

'Em . . .'

She couldn't think. She used to say pink. When she was seven. But she wasn't going to give them any reason to think she was an airhead. She could say green, like their uniforms

and Aer Lingus's colour in general. But green was also the colour of envy. Not a good shade on someone looking to be promoted above her colleagues.

'Really, Nancy, any colour at all. Whatever you like.'

It was one of those trick questions, she knew, where the answer represented something, like a personality type or an intelligence level. She racked her mind for the right response.

'First thing that pops into your head. Seriously now. Anything.'

And then, from somewhere in that spongy part of your brain that stores the home phone numbers of old school mates and lyrics to radio songs you don't even like, something came back to her.

'Well,' she said, sitting up tall and ensuring to make eye contact. 'There isn't really any such thing as colour. Or sound or texture, not in the natural world. It's all about context and perception.' She could hear Deepak in her mind, guiding her in his pursuit of empowerment and her pursuit of getting this job. She'd had his Rabbit Hole series on repeat for a week straight and now it was the only sound in her head. 'We all say a rose is red, but actually what it is, we all have a nervous system and that gets these frequencies from electromagnetic radiation, right, and then we give that *experience* the name "red".'

For a moment none of the interviewers said anything. 'Is that, are you saying "red", then?'

But there was another bit. 'Perception is a passive act, or no, wait, it's *not* a passive act, it's—' What was it? She'd started thinking about what she was saying and it made no

sense. *For the love of god, Nancy, don't think! Just repeat.* 'Hang on, just give me a minute. Perception is not a passive act, it's—'

'Tell you what,' said the woman, the same one who'd asked the stupid question to begin with. 'How about we just put down "undecided". That alright? Good. Now would you like a drink of water? Nice and slowly. That's it.'

And that was it. Nancy answered all the follow-up, *job-related*, questions succinctly. She wowed them with her historical knowledge of Aer Lingus's expansion and changes in hiring procedures. But there was no coming back from being the kind of person who denies the existence of colour.

The rejection letter mightn't have been such a blow if it wasn't for the fight with Cora. Falling out with a friend always made everything else seem worse. It was like trying to build a house on rocky foundations. Nancy felt bad about the Charlie thing — she'd thought she was doing something nice for her friend by setting them up. Nancy wanted to make up but she didn't know how and she was starting to worry Cora wasn't interested.

She took a deep breath and peered out from her station at the rear alcove. George was back at Row 27. Was he trying to annoy her? She shut the curtain quickly, before he caught her looking.



'Don't think so, Cora,' said George, speaking into the receiver as the plane began its descent. Nancy stood beside him,

pretending not to listen. 'Things were going well but then someone insulted Bob Dylan. And, well, now there's a guitar case between them.'

Cora sighed down the line. 'Too young. I've got to make age a permanent factor in my analytics.'

'You're doing analytics now?'

'I'm making things more efficient.'

George gave Nancy an incredulous look but the air hostess was still pretending not to eavesdrop.

'Did you happen to detect any political leanings?' Cora continued. 'Or signs of religious beliefs? Or anything else I might be able to use?'

'Not so much, no,' he said, twisting the cord around his finger. 'Shockingly for a seventy-minute journey with strangers, their fundamental belief systems never came up.'

shift around on the mattress. *She would never be this young again. There was plenty of time. She had options. The world could still be her oyster.*

There was a knock on her door.

'Come in.'

'What are you doing?'

Cora didn't take her eyes off the ceiling. 'Getting some perspective.'

'Glad to hear it,' said Roisin, sitting beside her. 'Aren't you supposed to have a date this evening? Dinner at Charlie's?'

'That's taken care of.'

'How?'

'I cancelled.'

'Cora!'

Cora had phoned Charlie that morning, apologising profusely for the short notice. And when he suggested rescheduling, she told him she didn't think that would work either. Cora told herself she wanted today to concentrate on matchmaking, but she also knew there would never be a time when she got butterflies thinking of Charlie Barrett.

She gripped the phone tightly, heard his slow swallow down the line and pictured his Adam's apple rising as she said it really wasn't him, it was her. She'd pinched the skin on her forearm when he asked solemnly if she was certain and she said that she was. He said he thought she was making a decision 'about us' too quickly, and she shut her eyes at the phrase. He said he thought it could be something good and that she should give it another couple of dates but she said her decision was final and that she was sorry and she

TWENTY

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Cora lay on her bed, staring up at the water cracks on the ceiling. She usually saw them as an outline of London but, positioned with her head at the foot of the bed, they looked more like a poppy. She was tired but too wound up to nap. Her body lay on the only part of the bed not taken up with papers and maps and the chart.

Her bed in Berlin was the only one over which the Ophelia print had not hung. It gave Friedrich the creeps, so she'd moved it into the hallway. She looked at it now, on the opposite wall. Everything was altered from this angle.

Friedrich was just a relationship that hadn't worked out. It sounded so simple. How could it sound so simple? Could she think of everything like that? She writhed around her bed and imagined each shift giving her a new perspective. She was glad Roisin couldn't see her because now she really did look like a woman possessed. As the map of London became a poppy that became a puddle, she considered things differently. *Friedrich was just a relationship that hadn't worked out. Her mother was sick but she was alive. And she loved her. Sheila would always love her.* Cora continued to

heard him sigh and then, proving how fair and kind a man he was, Charlie told her he wouldn't argue so and promised there'd be no awkwardness at work. There was a silence that he probably hoped she would fill by changing her mind but she didn't and she just said she was sorry and goodbye and sorry again. When she hung up she felt remorse and unease, but mainly she felt release.

'Honestly, Roisin, it was the right thing to do.'

Her flatmate was leafing through the spreadsheets scattered across the bed. 'This has to stop.'

'It's just a hobby.'

'Cora.'

'Giving people a bit of happiness, how can that be a bad thing? It's all for the greater—'

'If you say "the greater good" I swear to god I'll throw this stuff out the window and send you flying after. It's a distraction. What are you going to do after the summer? When the embargo lifts? Have you even thought about that?'

'I don't want to go out with Charlie, is that so—'

'I don't give a shite about Charlie!'

'... or anyone else. I don't even want to think about it. I want to do this. Surely it's a good thing to be thinking about other people's happiness?'

'The trouble is, Cora, you're so busy writing everyone else's happy ending that you've forgotten all about your own. Jesus, you're not even the protagonist of your own story. You're a supporting character, and that makes me sad.'

Cora felt hot tears prickling at her eyes but she blinked them away. 'I'd be happy if I could just get this right.'

'But this — *other people* — it's not enough.'

Cora turned her gaze back to the ceiling. There was nothing as useless as self-pity. After a minute or so, Roisin stood. 'You need to call Nancy.'

'I know.'

'And not because you need her to be your spy.'

'I know.'

'And you need to draw a line under Friedrich.'

'That's got nothing... I have—'

'Cora, I see you,' said Roisin, her hand on the door handle.

'And I know you far too well.'

Another twenty minutes of water crack gazing, and Cora pulled herself upright. She opened the bottom cupboard of her bedside cabinet, scooped everything off her bed and dropped it in. Except the original chart. She returned that to the top drawer. Everything in moderation. Then she reached for her phone and began to type:

I'm sorry. I miss you. Meet for a drink tonight? C x

How exactly did people go about figuring out what it was they wanted to do with their lives? It was the kind of thing her mother would know. Not the one who was rapidly disappearing up the road at the Rowan Centre, the one whose failing memory had dragged the rest of her down too, but the mother who was built on courage and strength and protective love, the one who taught Cora how to be a person. The check-in embargo would come to an end in a few months. Cora always knew that, of course, but she

was starting to accept it. And that was enough adulting for now.

Her phone pinged and she scrambled upright again, dizzy from the sudden rush of blood to her head. Nancy.

Cupid! I'm sorry too!!! I'll come to you. Zone 2 is the new Zone 1! See you at seven. Xoxo

Throwing herself back onto the bed, Cora kicked her legs into the air and whooped. She had called her Cupid.

Nancy arrived at quarter-past seven with a bottle of wine under each arm and a head zipping with apologies.

'Oh, Cora, I'm so sorry. I should never have poked my nose in where it wasn't wanted. And I should have been able to apologise instead of getting so bloody stroppy and I know you care, of course you do, but I was just so preoccupied with work and it didn't matter anyway and then my mam was doing me head in and I was a right cow and . . .'

When she finally made it to the kitchen, she placed both bottles on the table and threw her arms around Cora. 'Oh I did miss you.'

'I'm sorry too.' Cora laughed, patting Nancy on the back. 'I was a shit but I was too pig-headed to admit it. I've always been so terribly stubborn – someone pointed it out to me this week and it's true. The Charlie thing wasn't such a big deal. I should have phoned you ages ago.'

Nancy admonished herself for being a meddler and selfish, and Cora insisted she had been inconsiderate and derisive, and there were a few more hugs and apologies and by the time the corkscrew was found and the lukewarm white wine popped, everything was pretty much back to normal.

'Cheers,' said Cora, raising her glass. 'To friendship.'

'To friendship and catching up,' gushed Nancy, rushing to clink glasses. 'There have been so many things, Cupid! George is seeing some lad and my brother is having a baby and then there were the job interviews that I royally cocked up.'

Cora opened a large bag of crisps and divided the contents into two bowls. She handed one to Nancy, who placed it beside her on the couch, and took the other one with her as she repositioned herself on the floor.

'So you didn't get the promotion?'

'No I didn't and I was proper gutted.' She explained how she had done an excellent first interview but she'd botched the second one because of some self-help guru's mumbo-jumbo that Nancy could no longer understand. 'I literally brainwashed myself, Cora,' she said, grabbing a fist of crisps. 'I still hear his voice when I fall asleep.'

'I'm sorry, Nancy.'

'Fuck them,' she said. 'If the strengthening of Nancy's Liverpool accent wasn't proof the wine was working, that was. They said it was down to experience and that I was a shoo-in for next year but who knows, maybe I'll be gone by then.'

'Ah now, Nancy. You love being an air hostess.'

'Yes, well, maybe I'll move to a different airline.'

'Any airline would be lucky to have you.'
'Thanks, Cupid.'

Cora filled her own glass and pushed the bottle across the floor towards Nancy. The television was set to some music channel. Cora switched it off and started to rummage through Roisin's vinyl collection. 'White Stripes or Arcade Fire?'

'Em, Arcade Fire,' said Nancy, and her shoulders began to sway as the needle lowered onto the record.

'I had Friedrich check in for a flight a couple of weeks ago.'

'The German Lothario?' said Nancy, a handful of crisps paused before her face.

'I don't know about Lothario but yes, him. He was flying back to Berlin – with his wife.'

The crisps had rendered Nancy's mouth momentarily out of service but her eyes widened into a non-verbal 'No!' 'Oh yes.'

'The same wife?' she asked, chewing quickly. 'The one he got back with while you were living together?'

'There's only one wife, Nancy. At least as far as I know. He waited for my counter to be free. Can you believe that? And afterwards I thought maybe he was punishing me. That whatever reason he'd come up with to travel with his wife to London was actually just to parade his life in front of me. Isn't that insane? I know it is. I always end up sounding insane around him. But if you knew him.'

'You loved him,' said Nancy, and Cora was grateful for her sincerity. She had loved him.

'The night I told him I loved him we were walking by the Spree. He'd said it from the first night we met – standard Friedrich, all big gestures, so ultimately none of them meant anything – but I refused. Then when I did finally say it, by the river, the sky just opened. As if I had cast a spell with those three words the heavens erupted, and we ran for cover. The hailstones were so big I got a bruise on the back of my calf. I swear to God. I know it sounds like a movie, too unbelievable for a movie almost, but that's just how it happened.'

'That's so romantic.'

'That's what I thought, that the gods must have been on our side and it was something special. But only recently has it occurred to me that, actually, where exactly in the legends of the gods are thunder and lightning and hailstones ever a sign of something *good*?' Cora reached for the wine and emptied the last of it into their glasses. 'Anyway, I think it was positive that I saw him. It was anticlimactic, in a good way, and I'm thinking about it differently now.' In the hour before Nancy had called over, Cora had been scanning job sites just to see what might be possible. The market wasn't half as bleak as it had been the year she'd completed her arts degree. 'And I went on a date with Charlie.'

'I heard! I didn't want to say anything in case you thought I was gloating or something. Which I'm not! But I have been dying to ask.'

'Where did you hear it?'

'From Roger, you know the ginger fella who drives the luggage truck?'

'Where did he hear it? Never mind. We went out once, but that was it and that will be it.'

'I'm just glad you went out with *someone*, Cupid. Was there a kiss?'

Cora nodded.

'How was it? I can't imagine snogging Charlie.'

'It was . . . very polite. Very . . . English.' They both grinned.

Cora told her about the date, and she relayed the details of her earlier phone call. Nancy said she had taken the honourable route. When Nancy ended things with a man, she generally sent a text.

'I was out with a City Jet pilot during the week.'

'I thought you said no more pilots!'

'Yeah but he was dead handsome.'

'Fair enough.' Cora stood to fetch the second bottle of wine.

'But it's not going to work out. He's smaller than me when I wear me favourite heels. Which mightn't be the end of the world 'cept when I pointed it out he goes, "Well it's all the same when we're lying down." On a first date! Who says that? It's just inappropriate.'

Cora laughed. She felt great, and drunk. Nancy told her about a restaurateur before the pilot, but that had been it. The interview preparations had greatly reduced her friend's romantic activities. Cora's mind wandered to Aiden as she remembered his arm against hers, and in her drunken state she considered saying something but ignored the impulse.

Nancy brought up Row 27, much to the delight of Cora who hadn't wanted to broach the subject, lest Nancy think it was why she had extended the olive branch. Nancy told her about the flights Ingrid had been on, although Cora had gotten most of that from Ingrid herself. Then Nancy mentioned Aiden's recent journeys, and Cora shivered at the mention of him. She asked follow-up questions even though she found herself with no interest in the outcome of Aiden's matches. She just wanted to say his name.

'I think I like Aiden.' And that was it. It was out.

Nancy had been lying across the couch attempting to balance her glass on her stomach but now quickly pulled herself to attention. 'As in: like him, like him?'

'He's proud and stubborn and very annoying but he's also smart and kind, and good. I can tell that he's good. And I think about him. Like, a lot. And not only when he says something irritating and I'm trying to come up with a comeback for next time. Although that too.' Cora watched as her friend tried to get her head around this.

'Well then, first things first: stop putting him in Row 27. I know it's been a while, Cupid, but flirting doesn't usually extend to setting the fella you like up with a pile of other girls.'

'Don't you go interfering, Nancy.'

Nancy raised her hands. 'I've learned my lesson. Just a bit of friendly advice. A crush, Cupid! This is exciting.'

'Okay. No more. If I say anything else, I'll scare myself off. Tell me other things. What about that classy couple I set up last week? The ones going to the opera festival? That has to have been a success.'

Nancy relayed all the Row 27 stories she'd been storing up and Cora, who was apparently giving into every urge this evening, got up and went to get the matchmaking chart. After a moment's hesitation, she left the additional paperwork in the bottom drawer. Things needed to return to a healthy level of fixation.

'The mysterious chart!' cooed Nancy, when Cora returned and spread it across the floor. 'Is that me?' she squealed, pointing to a blonde caricature in an Aer Lingus uniform. 'That's dead good, that is! You can really draw. And look! There I am too, and there!'

'All my best matches involve you.'

'Aw, Cupid! I'm gonna cry!'

Cora explained the chart to Nancy, and Nancy told her about George and the new guy he was seeing. 'A messiah in the sack, apparently,' she said, descending into fits of giggles that somewhat ruined her punchline: 'The second coming.' They had just started discussing Ray – who, having lost two and a half stone, was the most 'followed' contestant on *Flight the Flab* and had already been offered an endorsement deal for slimming supplements – when Roisin came in the door.

'Roisin!' exclaimed Cora, clambering up to meet her.

'Row, row, row your boat,' sang Nancy, back in a horizontal position on the couch. 'Row-sheen . . . Is that Gaelic? I never asked.'

'Well hello, Nancy,' said Roisin, throwing her bag down beside the air hostess. 'Yes, it means Little Rose. How are you two? Hammered, I see.'

'Quite drunk, yes,' said Cora. 'Though we've run out of booze.'

'Aww. Have we?'

'Lucky I got here when I did then,' said Roisin, magically producing a bottle of whiskey from her bag.

'Hurrah! We're saved!' Nancy raised her arms triumphantly.

'Where were you?' asked Cora. 'Are you drunk? It's better if we're all in this together.'

'Out with yer man,' she replied, now flicking through her records. 'A house party at his mate's but it was shite so I bailed. I've got my period anyway and he's weird about sex whilst menstruating so if I'm just going to be sleeping, I'd rather do it on my own. I'll swap you a share of whiskey for me getting to choose the tunes.'

'Deal,' said Cora, pulling tumblers from the cupboard. 'We even have the right kind of glass.'

'You're so classy, Cupid!'

'What is this thing doing out again?'

'Don't worry, Roisin, it's just the old chart. No obsessive details involved. Honest.'

'Hmmm,' said Roisin, kicking it under the couch. 'Where's Mary?'

'At her parents.'

'Pity.'

They'd only gotten drunk once with Mary, right when Cora moved in. It was also the only time Cora had heard her housemate express an interest in anyone. Some new guy at work, but he'd never been mentioned again. Mary

didn't have the same closeness Roisin and Cora did, and she hardly ever had friends to visit. Having a marshmallow swiped from the brim of her hot chocolate was the most intimate interaction she had ever seen Mary have. Why had Cora never tried to do something about that?

Roisin, who had always had impressive DJ intuition, stuck on Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* and the three women were instantly crooning along. By the time the slide guitar kicked in on 'Dreams', they were on their feet, throwing shapes and singing, their whiskey still untouched on the counter.

'Thunder only happens when it's raining,' sang Cora.

'Players only love you when they're playing,' sympathised Nancy, hands over her heart as she articulated towards her friend. 'Women they will come and they will go!'

The dramatic pronunciation briefly gave way to unsure mumbles but they soon regrouped: '... you'll know! You'll know. You will know.'

'Are we going to go to Paris, Roisin,' shouted Cora, even though the music had faded down between tracks.

'Why not? You just say when.'

'Paris! Oh I love Paris! Can I come?'

'Absolutely,' said Cora, grabbing Nancy's hands and doing some version of the twist. 'We'll all go to Paris. Maybe we could go for a summer!'

'That sounds great, Cupid! We could all learn French!'

'Yes! And we could eat baguette and cheese for dinner every day.'

'Yes!'

Roisin, in her greater state of sobriety and reason, had bowed out of the conversation and was waiting for the record to end so she could flip it over.

'They say you should go to Paris in the spring but why is that? The winter's probably too cold but surely it's just as good when —' With that, Cora finally tripped over her own legs, landing on the floor and deciding she better leave the whiskey for tonight if she ever wanted the room to stop spinning.

The three women travelled via Cat Stevens and Van Morrison to arrive, lying about the living room in various stages of exhaustion, at the final destination of Joni Mitchell.

'At least you know what you want, Nancy,' said Cora after a long period of silence in which she may or may not have fallen asleep. 'If I was dismissive of your career — I really didn't mean to be. I'm a terrible person.'

'Don't say that, Cupid!'

'But what I'm saying is you know what you want and you're going for it. I'm just lying on the floor listening to the same songs I did when I was fifteen. But like, that's because Joni knows. She just *knows*. Like that bit! *All romantics meet the same fate someday, cynical and bored and boring someone somewhere in some dark café*,' sang Cora, failing to quite keep up with the tongue-twister lyrics. 'I mean, that's it exactly. She's so right.'

'I *knew* what I wanted, Cora. But I didn't get it. Now I don't know. I haven't the foggiest.'

'You'll get it next time. You're on a path, is what I'm saying.'

'But I wanted it this year, I wanted it before I turned twenty-eight.'

'What is with you and turning twenty-eight? It's not that different from twenty-seven.'

'Never mind.'

'What?'

'No.'

'Go on.'

'You'll laugh.'

'I won't.'

Nancy pushed herself upwards from her reclaimed position on the couch. 'Twenty-eight was the cut-off age for women who wanted to be air hostesses with Pan Am. I know times have changed and women's rights and all that and I don't adhere to the weight restrictions that Pan Am had - you know they had monthly weigh-ins to ensure none of the air hostesses went above 125 pounds? I mean, that's never going to happen.' Cora tried to calculate her own weight but her brain was too mushy to break stones down into pounds. 'I don't believe in any of that stuff,' continued Nancy. 'But I always thought of the age thing as the cut-off. It was like they were saying, "You're old at twenty-eight." And I always sort of thought that was true.'

'I'm thirty!' shouted Roisin from where she lay on the floor by the records but Nancy ignored her.

'I just thought I'd be in a better position, something as good as the Pan Am girls, by twenty-eight. But I'm not. Now, I'll turn twenty-eight and I'll be no better off than I was when I started out. That was four years ago! And my brother is having a baby and me mam keeps going on about how "tiny" his wife's bump is. How is that a good thing?' said Nancy,

her hair falling out of its ponytail as she reached for a glass of water on the floor. 'His wife is twenty-seven and she's one of those perfect women. You can't even hate her because she works for it. She puts it all up on Instagram and she's so good, motivating everyone else to follow her workout videos and, like, hashtag clean living. She's one of those women who seriously calls avocado "avo" and you don't even laugh.'

'What?' asked Roisin. 'Like she's on pet-name terms with vegetables? That's fucking ridiculous. When really skinny women get pregnant they just look like those starving Ethiopian children with the swollen bellies.'

'Roisin Kelly!' spluttered Cora. 'That's a dreadful thing to say!' But Nancy was already laughing and Roisin just shrugged.

'That's part of why I loved the matchmaking. This will give you a right laugh, Cora, but I always thought that the fact that it was Row 27 was a sign. Twenty-seven. Like twenty-seven was the year I'd change my life, and maybe change other people's too.'

'If the whole air hostess thing doesn't work out for you, Nancy, you've got a future in Miss World competitions.'

'Sod off, Roisin.'

'I'm deadly serious!'

Cora rolled over to face Nancy: 'I chose 27 by accident and then kept it because it was near where you sit at the rear of the plane.'

'I know but, still, like with you and the thunder and hailstones, I always thought it was a sign. Like something great would come from it.'

'You, Nancy Moone, are goodness personified. I wish my heart was as big as yours.'

'It is Cora!' effused Nancy. 'You're the big-hearted one.'

'No you are! I feel like Paris . . . I'm just like Paris.' Cora was indulging the melancholia now, as the hazy epiphany came to her. 'So cold and old and settled in its ways. That's me – me and Paris . . .' Cora was making an analogy with a song but she couldn't remember the lyrics or what song she was talking about or what her point was exactly. She'd need to go to bed soon.

'I'm the one who's thirty!' said Roisin again, turning towards her drunk flatmate. 'You're not cold or old. Get a grip. Both of you. Would someone so cold be so obsessed with the happiness of others?'

'Well that's one way of looking at it,' said Cora, glad for this positive angle on her recent behaviour, which even in a state of inebriation she could acknowledge had ventured into derangement.

The women lay in silence. The only noise was the needle leaving the vinyl, and then the record spinning of its own accord.

When Cora awoke it was 6 a.m. The sun was starting to come up and Roisin had retreated to bed. She threw a rug over Nancy and went to her own room.

In the morning, Cora and Nancy had toast together and hatched a plan. It was Sunday and they were both on lates. They were hungover and tired, but their renewed comradeship invigorated them and they agreed that the 5.20 p.m. to Barcelona would be their come back show.

TWENTY - ONE

LHR -> BCN 5.20 p.m.

Jeffrey Williams pulled the in-flight menu from the seat pocket in front of him as soon as he had adjusted the seatbelt in 27C. He had eaten out with his daughter on enough occasions to be sceptical of her food choices. The restaurants she chose always specialised in 'small plates'. Maybe all London restaurants were serving small plates these days. He didn't know. She seemed to think it was exciting to bring him to new, trendy places. But every time he ended up wishing he'd eaten at home, where he knew what he was going to get. And there was beetroot in everything now. He hadn't liked it as a boy, and he still didn't like it at sixty-four. His daughter had tried the small plates trick when she was visiting him one weekend. He would be polite in restaurants, but he was not going to eat tiny portions of pink vegetables in his own home. And now they were going to Spain, the home of small plates. Tapas, they called them.

He flicked through the menu. He'd been hoping for a stew or meat and two veg, something substantial. It was all Italian dishes and cheese plates. Wasn't this an Irish airline?

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He settled on lasagne. Jeffrey was glad the check-in lady had been able to seat him and his daughter separately. She'd just be on at him about cholesterol and what was that other one? The bread one? That was the latest. Decades of gobbling up the jerk chicken sandwiches her mother put in her lunchbox and now she didn't eat bread. He'd never heard anything so ridiculous. Well, he was a free man, at least for another two hours, and the menu offered sides of garlic bread.



Never in her entire life, not even when flying transatlantic, had Leonora Talty been at an airport with so much time to spare. They were going to Barcelona, not Beijing. But the head of the retirement group had insisted they congregate at Heathrow at two o'clock. And then - partly because they had three and a half hours to use up, and partly because their group was one-third metal - it had actually taken them that long to get through Security. The woman with the pacemaker and Zimmer frame set the speed. No one wanted a heart attack to ruin the whole trip.

Leonora didn't have anything against the elderly but she did not want to spend her four days in Barcelona seeking out tourist attractions with wheelchair access and eating dinner at five o'clock. She would be like them one day but not yet. Up until last year, she was on yard duty three lunchtimes a week, chasing after children who disobeyed the 'walk don't run' rule. She was only fifty-eight for heaven's sake. When she told people she had taken early retirement, she stressed the *early* part.

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Two of her buddies were in the retirement group. That was the downside of starting your family and career early; you got your life back with a few decades to spare, but most of your pals were older. Anyway, Kay and Carmel were in the retirement group and they had insisted she come along. 'The three amigos,' Kay had said. But now, for some reason, they were seated up the front of the plane with the rest of the pensioners while Leonora was Billy-No-Amigos all the way down in Row 27.

'Excuse me now,' she said to the grey-haired, ebony-skinned man seated on the outside of her row. 'It's a nuisance, isn't it, when the inside person gets here later?'

'I'm always early,' he said, rising from his seat. He was an impressive height – six foot, maybe more – and that really was an excellent head of hair. It was an indulgence, she supposed, to still have a thing for hair at this age. Johnny had been bald as a coot when he died and she hadn't been any less attracted to him, but she would forever cherish that photograph from their wedding day: the two flower girls sitting on his flare-clad legs, braiding either side of his luscious mane.

'Well isn't that a bad match,' she said laughing, feeling her way into the window seat. 'You're always early and I'm afraid I'm always late.'



Jeffrey flagged down a robust-looking flight attendant who was aggressively shutting those high-up storage units. 'Would it be possible to order some food?' he asked.

'Not until we're in the air, dear,' she said, shutting the compartment above his head. 'There's no in-flight service until after take-off.'

Jeffrey hadn't flown since his honeymoon. Air travel was a lot cheaper now but, as with everything else, there were a lot more rules. It had been almost forty years so he was a little sketchy on the details (had that air hostess just called him 'dear'?) but he didn't recall all that fuss with the bag scanners and shoes when he and Jackie had flown to Rome. There were drinks upon boarding the plane then too. Or maybe they had bought those later. All that Al Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden fallout had definitely left its mark, and then there was Heathrow's own security threat last year. That'd nearly put him off the trip. This was Jeffrey's fourth time flying in his entire life. Otherwise there was just the return trip to Rome, and that multi-parted one-way journey from Tobago in 1968.

Jeffrey felt his gut heave at the disappointment of not being fed. 'When did air travel get so complicated,' he muttered.

'Oh I know,' said the woman in the window seat. 'I'm travelling in a retirement group – early retirement, mind. Very early. Try getting through Security with the metal plate gang. Then you'll know all about it.'

'I have a metal plate.'

The woman looked horrified. 'Sorry, oh lord. I didn't think – you seem far too young.'

'I'm sixty-four.'

'You're not!'

'I am.'

'I thought you were younger than me,' she said.

'Well you know what they say, black don't crack.'

The woman was utterly shocked now; her pale, defined cheeks suddenly flushed. He could tell she'd been thinking the same thing. 'I'm only joking,' he said, enjoying himself.

'You're not sixty-four?'

'Oh I am. But I don't have a metal plate. Not yet anyway. Jeffrey Williams,' he said, offering her a handshake.

She laughed, relief spreading across her face. It was a long face, framed by short, free-roaming grey hair. She looked a bit like that woman . . . what was her name. The one that sang with Bob Dylan. He used to have her records.

'Leonora Talty,' she said, her soft, spindly fingers encompassing his coarse skin. 'Or Clear, I suppose. Leonora Clear.'



Black don't crack. Christ. Where had she even heard that? Thank the lord she hadn't said it aloud. He looked great all the same. And no doubt he'd managed it without the aid of pots and potions. Six years older than her and yet had anyone all day to do a wrinkle count, she was sure he would come out triumphant.

'I have a neighbour called Talty,' he said. 'In Kilburn?'

'I wouldn't know that side of the family as well. That's my married name – my late husband. Their lot came from Bath but that's all I know. They weren't close.'

'Sorry to hear about your husband.'

'Thank you.'

'How did he die? If you don't mind me asking?'

Almost two years on and Leonora still balked at this question. She supposed if the answer had been cancer or a stroke or a road traffic accident she wouldn't have minded it as much. When Johnny had decided to go out the back garden and hang himself from the tree, knowing she'd find him when she got home from school, had he thought that as well as leaving her all alone in the world with two sons still not fully reared, he'd be leaving her with the responsibility of explaining his actions to complete strangers? 'Cancer,' she said.

'The same for my wife,' he said. 'Pancreatic cancer, four years ago.'

'I'm sorry.'

He nodded.

Leonora grabbed the arm of her chair as the plane took off and looked at the in-flight magazine poking out from the seat pocket in front of her. She pulled it out, flicking past the cover interview with Colin Farrell. An article on Barcelona, well that was fortunate, and they recommended Montjuïc Park. Some of the younger teachers at school had gone to Barcelona a few years ago and they had raved about the park. Although this article said there were a lot of steps. Leonora couldn't imagine that lot climbing stairs out of choice. She had been blue in the face trying to get them to sign up for the after-school aerobics class. There was a local instructor willing to come by the school if she could get the numbers together but the younger ones were terribly lazy.

One of them – Denise – drove the single kilometre journey from her house to work every day. Leonora missed them though. She missed the whole buzz of work. People said she was right to retire after what happened with Johnny but she thought it was a mistake. She knew it was. Too much had gone too quickly.



'I've never been to Spain,' said Jeffrey. He had always felt less exposed in offering information than asking questions. 'The trip was my daughter's idea, but I bought a guide book and all those Gaudi buildings do look interesting. It won't be the worst, hopefully.'

He watched Leonora smile. Joan Baez: that was the singer she reminded him of. 'That's the spirit,' she said. 'You're on holidays with your daughter, then? Or is she living over there?'

'She lives about five miles from me in Kilburn. For my sins. She's up the front of the plane.' He leaned in to Leonora, lowering his voice. 'I asked the lady at the check-in desk if she could put us sitting separately.'

'You brat,' she teased, both of them laughing.

'Ah. She's a great girl, but she mothers me. She's gotten worse since her mum passed away. Establishing herself as the show-runner.'

'I wish my sons would take that kind of initiative.'

'It's always the girls.'

'That's probably true.'

Jeffrey also had a son, and he was sorry to say that he had yet to amount to much. At the moment he was off in Turkey teaching English. He had phoned Jeffrey to say he'd be back in the summer. And you'll be very welcome at home, Jeffrey had said, but only for a week. He wouldn't be setting up camp this time. His son was thirty-four now and he needed to stand on his own two feet. Tough love – the very thing he could have done with years ago but Jackie was a soft touch. Jeffrey wasn't even allowed to give the children a little smack on the bottom when they were young. Jackie would brandish the wooden spoon but the kids soon learned it was an empty threat. Anyway, Jeffrey's daughter said he was seeing someone now, so maybe that'd sort him out.

'I was in Spain once before,' said Leonora. 'A sun holiday when my children were small. But I've never been to Barcelona. Have you seen this?' She pushed the magazine towards him. 'Montjuic. It's supposed to be gorgeous.'

'A lot of steps, isn't there?' he said. 'It looks nice. So long as it doesn't rain.'

'Paris would be lovely too,' she said, turning the pages of the magazine. 'Look at that now. I've never seen a bad picture of Sacré-Cœur Basilica.'

'That'll be your next trip.'

She guffawed at this. 'I'm a pensioner. Only fifty-eight mind; early retirement.' He nodded. Early, he got it. He'd have known anyway. 'But still,' she said. 'I'm what they call "time rich, cash poor". That's what my son says about himself. He's an actor, or he'd like to be anyway. He's quite terrible really.'

'I read an article recently about how companies are missing a trick by not targeting the over-fifties. We're a neglected market, it said. Apparently older people hold all the disposable income.'

'Maybe some of them do, but it's probably not the ones who have two grown sons still living at home.'

'Boys.' Jeffrey shook his head.

'The pits.'

'Chuck them out.'

'I keep threatening to,' she said, closing the magazine.

'They fool themselves, or maybe they think they're fooling me, that they're there to look after me in my bereavement. As if one of the steps in the grieving process is to constantly be making dinners.'

'You're a fool.'

'I know,' she said. 'And that's the worst of it.'

Then the food trolley pulled up and Jeffrey heard his stomach rumble.



'Oh, Cupid, it is a thing of beauty!'

'I knew it! When he came up early and asked to be seated away from his daughter, I just absolutely knew it!'

'How did you know he wasn't married?'

'"Take pity on a poor widower," he said to me. "Give me a couple of hours' peace." A charmer. Very handsome, don't you think?'

'A total Denzel,' said Nancy. 'And she's pretty too.'

'Details, please!'

'Well,' said Nancy, giddy with such a triumphant return to matchmaking. 'They have been chatting since they got on board – yap, yap, yap. I heard some talk of holidays and flying and the usual, and I didn't fancy interrupting them. So then I brought the trolley down and he asked for the lasagne – she said she hadn't had cheese in an age – and then, guess what. Go on, guess.'

'What Nancy, come on!'

'He bought her one too! Paid for both. Ordered two garlic breads as well but she drew the line at that. And then, just as I was leaving, she calls me back and she goes, "What are your holidays without a glass of the god's nectar?" and they both start laughing and bam! "Two glasses of red please." She meant wine, Cora! They're dead cute, old people. Like they can be proper cute.'



'Young people,' Jeffrey consoled. 'They want to be something different every week.'

'Exactly,' said Leonora, wiping a string of cheese from her mouth. 'And by the time he actually settles on a career, how's his CV going to look? Six months here, six months there. Who'd hire that? He'll be a liability. I complain about them to my daughter sometimes – she lives in Manchester, just had a baby—'

'A grandmother. Congratulations.'

'Thank you. She's the eldest so I complain to her and she

says, she's joking mind, but she always says: "You should have stopped after me."

"That sounds like something my daughter would say, only she wouldn't be joking. She's around my place every few days, putting stuff where it doesn't belong and giving me updates on her useless brother."

'You're lucky to have her so nearby,' said Leonora.
'Maybe.'

Leonora and her daughter were close. It was funny because, had they been peers, they never would have been friends. Sarah was too innocent, too much of a worrier, but she made an excellent daughter. Sarah had been back in London to help with the financial mess – she had found multiple accounts that Johnny had never told Leonora about. Sarah's worries extended to her mother. She tried to set her up on a dating website, but Leonora had heard reports in the staffroom of the sorry state of dating when you were over fifty. Men her age were soliciting women in their thirties. She'd looked at one of the websites and saw that men were actually stating this two-decade age gap as a preference. Leonora was several degrees of dignity off settling for an eighty year old.

'Do you miss your wife?' The question left her mouth before she'd realised.

Jeffrey nodded. 'I do.' He did silent gravitas very well. 'Less and less, though, is the truth. But I can never get used to the silence when I come into the house. It's such a loud silence. I have the radio on in the kitchen now at all times.'

Leonora could relate to this. 'I miss having someone to text,' she said. 'Before the mobile phones it was fine but

once they came in I was ruined. All those funny cat videos the younger teachers still send me, and now I have nobody to send them on to.'

'Is that something with The Twitter?'

'I don't have that. I send them on Viber.'
'Viber?'

'Viber. It's a doodad you can get on your phone. It does messages and calls for free.'

'That sounds good.'

'It really is. It's smashing.'



Jeffrey was done with technology. He'd thrown his computer out two months previously and when his daughter asked, he'd told her he'd sold it.

One of the men who played chess on Sundays had told Jeffrey about all the pornography you could find on the Internet. Jeffrey had read a few dirty magazines in his time, and he'd been to a strip club once, many years ago in Soho. But he wasn't too concerned with it otherwise. The newspapers were always talking about all the bad pornography on the Internet – awful things with children. But this chap promised it wasn't anything like that. Harmless stuff, he told Jeffrey, something to make the nights a little warmer. This chap had been the first widower in the group and he considered himself something of an expert.

A few weeks later, Jeffrey was watching *Dancing on Ice* – they had the loveliest women on that show – and he decided

to have a quick look on the computer. The first website he found was a bit confusing, but when he moved the clicker down he saw a video of a naked lady stuffing her face with cake and biscuits and all sorts of junk food and then touching her private parts. There were crumbs everywhere. Jeffrey had shut the whole thing down immediately. Who would be looking for that? He didn't open it again until a month later when his granddaughter begged to be allowed to use the computer. As soon as he'd fired it up, this little box appeared on screen asking him about cookies. He didn't even shut it down that time. He told his granddaughter it was broken, put it in a black bag, and when her mother came to collect her, he took the bus to the end of the line and stuffed it in a public bin near Brent Cross Shopping Centre. He never got any emails anyway.

'Any rubbish? Any empties?'

The lasagne trolley dolly was back, but with a different trolley this time. She leaned over him and took Leonora's plate and glass. She reached for his glass but he wasn't finished. 'I haven't finished with that.'

'Oh sorry. No rush. Take your time.' The air hostess tightened her long blonde ponytail and started sorting through the rubbish, but it was clear she was stalling for time. Her eyes kept darting back towards Jeffrey. She was pretty, not unlike one of the ladies you'd see on *Dancing on Ice*, and he was flattered but he liked his women a little more seasoned. Jeffrey gave her his glass, although it still wasn't empty, and a sympathetic smile that he hoped would let her down gently and encourage her to move the trolley along.

The lady on the computer had been young, mid-twenties

maybe, but it was hard to tell with the faces she was pulling and all that food. How could that ever be a substitute for the real thing? It just made Jeffrey sad. A naked woman on screen was nothing compared to a fully clothed woman, to whom he was attracted, in real life. Leonora was giving him that tingle. There was life in the old dog yet.

'When are you back from your holidays?' he asked, ignoring the foolish feeling that came with posing questions.

'Thursday. Sometime in the afternoon.'

'Well that's interesting because I just had two thoughts.'

'Go on,' said Leonora.

'There's a matinee at the Royal Court next weekend that I'd like to see.'

'Okay. And the second thought?'

'Oh I was just thinking what it would be like to step off the plane and tell my daughter that I met an intriguing woman on board and we've got plans to step out together.'

Leonora returned his mischievous grin. 'Throw in dinner, and you've got yourself a deal.'

'Done,' he said, offering her his hand once more. 'But no small plates.'

'And no early birds,' she said.

'Deal.'



When Leonora's daughter told her to get back on the dating scene, she made it sound as though she were bestowing a gift. As if Leonora needed her children's permission to go

for dinner or to meet someone for a drink. For all their technology and TV shows about sex, Leonora often found the younger generation to be rather conservative. When Sarah got engaged, she had come to her mother in floods of tears. Leonora had learned not to be alarmed. The problem, whatever it was, usually wasn't worth half the fuss. This time it was about sex and Sarah was embarrassed to be discussing it with her mother but she didn't know where else to go. She was worried about telling Paul how many people she'd had sex with. 'Her number,' she called it. That generation could never say anything straight; everything was a euphemism. Apparently Paul had only ever slept with one other woman. And so Leonora had gently asked her daughter her number. 'Seven,' said Sarah, shamefaced and on the verge of more tears. Leonora had consoled her daughter, advising that if it was such a concern a white lie could easily be excused. Leonora was the mother and she took her role seriously. She knew when to keep quiet, when to make allowances. Leonora would never tell her daughter that her fiancé's number was the real travesty. Nor would she ever mention that her own number was higher than her daughter's, and that she didn't yet consider it fixed.

She had never been with a black man, or indeed any man who was not white. The idea excited her and she quivered at the thought of dark skin stretched over broad shoulders. He had a smell too, a musk she couldn't describe but found highly appealing. This, experience had taught her, was a very good thing.

They discussed restaurants and swapped numbers as

the plane landed. Jeffrey promised to investigate Viber. When the time came to disembark, Leonora could see a woman barrelling up the aeroplane, hurdling in the opposite direction to every other passenger.

'Dad! Dad!' she shouted, craning her neck around the torsos and luggage of other passengers. 'Just one minute, Dad. I'll get your bag.'

Leonora looked at Jeffrey. He shook his head. 'Alright, Chloe,' he said. 'It's alright.' His daughter had reached Row 27 and began to rummage in the overhead compartment. 'I've got it here,' he said, pulling a small bag from under the seat in front of him.

'Well come on then. We've got a cab to catch.'

'One minute, Chloe. The taxis won't all disappear.' Jeffrey turned away from his exasperated daughter. 'Goodbye, Leonora,' he said, taking her right hand and kissing the back of it. 'I will see you next weekend.'

It was a long time since Leonora had been such an overt subject of jealousy. The daughter gave her a distrustful, startled look and, despite herself, Leonora felt great. 'Goodbye, Jeffrey,' she said, and he ambled down the aisle, his daughter charging ahead.

Leonora waited until most passengers had disembarked. Her own group was probably still grappling with the gangway. As she left the row, she called her thanks to the blonde air hostess at the back of the plane. The woman, who was in the middle of a highly animated phone conversation, balanced the receiver against her shoulder and gave Leonora a remarkably enthusiastic two thumbs up.

It occurred to her then that she hadn't been charged for those red wines. This was as pleasant a flight as Leonora could remember.

TWENTY - TWO

Cora felt better than she had in a long time. They'd had an uninterrupted run of Row 27 successes, and she and Nancy were in a stage of rekindled friendship that felt like the platonic equivalent of make-up sex. They kept contacting each other with imagined scenarios for their recent matches: the older couple getting married on a plane; the hippy duo calling their first child Aer (middle name 'Lingus'); or, as Nancy had just texted Cora and she had laughed out loud, the loved-up single parents selling their homes and buying a shared house, not caring where it was so long as it was number 27. And it was Friday, which had a lot to do with her giddiness too.

Aiden wasn't due at the airport for several hours but Cora was already on high alert. She kept thinking back over their exchanges, trying to figure out if he liked her. She thought maybe he did, but every time she considered this she froze. Nothing had changed, but now she'd said it out loud everything was different. What if she couldn't speak normally when she saw him today? His Head in the Clouds badge was pinned to the inside of her jacket collar. Every

time she stretched, it pressed against her clavicle and sent a shiver through her. She would see him today. Even Joan's foul mood couldn't bring her down.

'Someone's been at my stool; it's too bloomin' high,' grumbled the older woman, hoisting herself onto the thing for the umpteenth time. 'And did you hear they're letting the part-timers go?'

The self-check-in embargo was coming to an end. The notices had gone up around the airport the previous afternoon. Heathrow's security status had been returned to neutral; self-service kiosks and Internet check-in would be reinstated at the end of May. This meant the end of allocated seat matchmaking and, despite being in denial for several months, Cora was surprised to find she was relatively okay with it. It also meant they would no longer require extra check-in assistants. It'd only ever been a temporary arrangement (even if it had taken Cora longer than most to accept this) but now Joan was calling it a conspiracy.

'Anything to cut costs,' she said. 'Get muggins here to pick up the slack. It'll mean more work for everyone, mark my words. Tight gits.'

'Is everything alright, Joan?' Cora ushered an ignored passenger towards her own desk.

'I just don't fancy doing more than my fair share is all.'

Cora sent the passenger off to Munich and ran a finger under her eyes to catch any fallen mascara. She rarely wore much make-up to work.

Joan kicked the counter unexpectedly. 'Jim's not coming to Sardinia.'

'Oh, Joan! What happened?'

Joan had been mentally packing for her holidays for months. Last week she finally settled on a sarong over culottes – 'more of a breeze' – and she'd organised for her nephew to call in and feed the pigeons. But now Jim was cancelling because his quiz team was up for the biggest jackpot of the year.

'Says he wasn't about to leave. The Four Wise Men short.' Joan sniffed, pulling a tissue from her sleeve. 'What about me? I says. What about leaving me short? And do you know what he says? He says to bring my sister. He knows bloomin' well she suffers with her circulation and a two-hour flight would have her ankles the size of water balloons.'

'He should have told them no.'

'I should have told *him* no, the day he got down on his knee with that Christmas cracker ring,' she said, dabbing her eyes. 'As soon as that green mark appeared on my finger, I should have given him the boot.'

'Maybe you can reschedule? Swap your leave with someone else?'

'Serves me right for getting excited about something.'

'Here, I'll go get us a couple of teas. Alright?'

Cora took the sniff as agreement and headed for the staffroom. She stopped a few times along the way, quickly looking around before checking her appearance in various reflective surfaces. Catching herself in the staffroom mirror, she shook her head. *Who am I?* But she was smiling so much her cheeks were in danger of engulfing her face. Cora emerged from the staffroom, a mug in each hand,

to find a small huddle of colleagues and Nancy at its centre. 'Have you heard the news?' Her voice was giddy with gossip as she pulled Cora into the group.

Cora noted the official flyer pinned to the wall behind the air hostess. 'About lifting the self-check-in ban? Yeah, I heard. Those notices went up yesterday.'

'No, not that! Although,' – Nancy dropped her voice – 'I was sorry to see that, Cupid. But no. Something bigger!'

'Come on, Nancy!' said a newbie from Baggage Scanning but the air hostess rounded on him, and he quickly piped down. Charlie winked at Cora. They'd talked on Wednesday – mainly at the same time and to each other's feet – but it was getting better.

'It's Ray,' she exhaled. '*Fight the Flab* has been shut down with immediate effect. The whole show cancelled, just like that.' Nancy snapped her fingers high in the air so the polish glimmered. 'A contestant on the American version had a stomach reduction – got it done at one of those backdoor clinics because he didn't want the show to find out – and he had a heart attack and died right there on the table.'

'Oh god.'

'I know. *And* he'd already paid for it. The backlash in America has been massive, and the producers are pulling the whole thing. Worldwide. Ray's sponsorship deal gone, cancelled, just like that!' Her fingernails caught the light once more.

'Well now, we don't actually know that,' interjected Charlie, but Nancy would not be deterred.

'I know how these things work,' she said. 'I know this TV producer—'

'We know, Nigel.'

'And it's a terribly cruel world. Two minutes out of the spotlight and everyone forgets about you.'

'That sponsorship deal was never definite,' said Charlie. 'And Ray hadn't decided to take it.'

'How is Ray?'

'Ah he's okay,' said Charlie, and Cora noted the direct eye contact as progress. Then a tug of guilt. 'Says he doesn't know how he'll keep the weight off without the extra motivation. He cancelled our lunchtime run today.'

'Well if I think of anything to cheer him up, I'll let you know.'

'Don't forget, Cupid,' said Nancy, giving Cora a meaningful look as she went to leave, 'it's not over til the fat lady sings and I'm on the evening flight to Dublin.'

But Aiden was on the evening flight and Cora had no intention of seating him next to anyone, except perhaps a happily married OAP.

She placed the tea in front of Joan, gave her a quick hug, and set about clearing the backlog. The women worked in relative silence, time moving as quickly as the line. Cora had just checked in a quarrelling couple when she saw Aiden, and another man, approaching her desk. Cora bit down on the insides of her cheeks in a bid to keep them in place.

'Hi,' she said. It was as much as she trusted herself with for now.

'Cora. This is my brother Colm. Colm, this is Cora.'

'Oh hi!' she said, extending a hand across the counter and almost knocking her long-cold tea over the two men. 'Whoops. That was close.'

'I'm going to get the paper, Aiden. He can check in for the two of us, yeah?'

'Sure, yes. Absolutely.' Cora moved the mug away from the ledge. 'I'll get you both seated.'

Colm went in search of a newsagent's and Aiden's entire demeanour changed. Stiff and proper just a moment ago, he let out a loud breath as his body flopped against Cora's counter. 'He was only supposed to stay for a few days but some audit went on much longer than expected. It's been ten long days.'

Cora grinned. 'Families, eh?'

'I owe him. He lets me stay with him every weekend, but ten days. Ten days of him trying to catch me out on something. Little brother syndrome maybe, but everything feels like a fecking competition. Jesus but men can be pathetic.'

'Who knew *you* knew you had so many faults?'

'Oh the list is endless,' said Aiden. 'Could you put us sitting apart?'

'Not a problem.' Cora kept Aiden in Row 27 – she was a sucker for tradition – and put his brother further up the plane.

'Don't you have any?'

'What, siblings?'

'No, I know that: one sister, one brother. But don't you have any faults?'

Cora laughed. 'Where to start. Stubborn, as you already noted. Nosy, as you've also pointed out, directionless, daydreaming—'

'That's not a fault.'

Cora couldn't help it; her cheeks shot up.

'It's not,' he repeated, smiling now too.

'I know.' Cora pulled the stiff collar of her shirt back to reveal the badge. 'I wear it with pride.'

And they stood there several moments too long, wide smiles growing in unison like in a house of mirrors, only dropping eye contact when Colm returned. 'Ready?' he asked, *Financial Times* under his arm.

Aiden, back to the poker-up-his-arse stance, gathered his things. 'Let's go.'

'Nice to meet you, Colm.'

'You too,' said the older brother, a tease in his voice.

The next passenger was on top of them before the men had fully vacated the counter but Cora kept peering over the woman's head to catch the last glimpses as Aiden and his brother disappeared towards Departures. A lifetime of people watching fills you with prejudices; you reduce others to their surface components. How easily Cora had defined Aiden. A few superficial conversations and CV details and she thought she had him pegged. In her own arrogance, she never considered there might be more to his defensiveness than a superiority complex. She was glad she had dug further. It felt good to be wrong.

Cora caught the tail-end of an exchange between Joan and a pinch-nosed flyer annoyed that he couldn't have the

seat of his choosing. This was the third passenger Joan had eaten the head off in the past hour. She was in a much better mood now.

'Ray! Over here, Ray!' Joan was waving furiously. 'Did you hear about Big Ray?'

'I did, but it's probably better if we don't—' Cora cut herself off. 'Hi, Ray.'

'I suppose you heard?'

'We did,' said Cora. 'And we were sorry about it. Weren't we, Joan?'

'Was it a stomach stapling? That he died of?'

Ray nodded morosely.

'Sure that's cheating.'

'What does it matter now?' hissed Cora.

'Just trying to get the story straight.'

Ray doubted he could keep going. He said Charlie had been great for the exercise but diet was the main thing and that was where he lacked knowhow and motivation. Joan offered her sympathies and Ray said thanks, but Cora was in the midst of an epiphany. Someone who was an expert on calorie content, who'd been through the weight-loss process, who could do with the company herself . . . Sometimes the universe just fell into place, and today it was playing a blinder.

'Ray, my friend, I have just the person for you.' Cora took a Post-it from her desk and had begun to write down Mary's email address when she noticed two passports sitting on her counter.

'Who's are . . . ?' She opened the burgundy covers to find

a stern-looking Aiden with shorter hair and a wider man of similar features. 'Joan, I'll be right back. Ray . . .' She quickly finished the address. 'Here you go!'

Cora grabbed the O'Connor passports, skidded around her desk, and began to jog towards Departures. They wouldn't get further than that without them, but she didn't want them to have to leave the security queue, come all the way back, and miss their flight. As she hurried across the polished floor she grinned; it felt like she should be on her way to tell some emigrant she loved them and needed them to stay. Cora wasn't quite at that point. But maybe she'd say something to Aiden next week. Not a declaration of undying love, just a heavy suggestion about some restaurant she wanted to try or some film they might possibly agree on. She came to a halt at the security line, nodding to one of the attendants to let her past. She saw the brothers mid-way up the queue and began to shuffle her way through – 'sorry' as she stepped over suitcases; 'not cutting in, just returning something' squeezing through a family; 'official business, pardon me.' She was behind them now, about to tip Aiden on the shoulder when she heard her name.

'Cora,' Aiden was saying.

'Right yes, Cora. You two seem very matey.'

'We're not.'

'Don't be so defensive, Aido, I'm only asking. She seems very . . . agreeable.'

Cora shuffled slowly behind them as the line moved up. It didn't sound like Colm was *only asking*. It sounded like he was teasing Aiden. About her.

'And I'm only answering. We're not matey. She's just the check-in attendant.'

'So there's nothing, eh, romantic, between you two?' Cora wanted to kick this smug man in the back of his smug knees. She couldn't see Colm's face but she knew it was plastered with a smirk. 'The uniform's nice anyway.'

Aiden laughed. 'Look, possibly she likes me, I don't know, and I don't want to be rude, do I? But she's just a check-in attendant. Come on, Colm, I'm not that hard up.'

'Cora.'

'Yes, that's her name. Will you stop—'

'No. Cora.' Colm had turned to pull his suitcase and spotted her. He looked rather sheepish now. 'Hey.'

'Cora. I didn't see — hi. Were you —? What are you —?'

'You forgot these,' she said, holding out the passports. Aiden didn't move.

'Thanks,' said Colm, taking them from her.

'Cora—'

But Cora was out of there. She turned so quickly she stumbled over the luggage of a woman behind her. She righted herself on the elastic queue divider, ducked out under it, and continued to walk upright and at a measured pace until she could be sure she was out of sight.

TWENTY - THREE

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Colm slipped into Row 13 and Aiden continued down the aisle without a word. They hadn't spoken since Security.

'Awkward,' was the last thing Colm had said, as Cora ducked under the elastic rope and disappeared out of sight. 'Good thing you didn't fancy her, Aido. Because you would not be getting too far now.'

Aiden shook his brother's hand from his shoulder. 'Don't. Just . . . don't say another word.'

Aiden stopped, as he always did, at Row 27, and slid into the middle seat. He had the whole row to himself. He had asked to sit away from his brother and Cora had allowed him — a quick look around the plane confirmed it — to be the only passenger with a row of his own. He fastened his seatbelt and pulled it tight. Too tight. Good enough for him. He pushed his head into the grove at the back of the seat and shut his eyes tight. He saw her face, not as it invariably was whenever he arrived at the airport, lost in a secretive world, but as it had been in the crowded security line not an hour ago. The rose tint gone from her cheeks, mouth ready

to speak but no words forthcoming, and those eyes that saw the possibility in everything (even in him, maybe) like wet glass, reflecting and confirming a version of himself he'd rather not see.

'Cora likes the Irish fella.'

'The Row 27 dude?'

'Yep.'

'Does she realise he hasn't changed his clothes since Bush was president?' George offered Nancy a cracker from one of the snack packs. Now that the interviews were over, and Nancy knew she wouldn't be getting promoted, things had relaxed. 'He probably came out of the womb in that sweater. Are you going to do something about it?'

'No.' Nancy sighed. 'I promised I wouldn't. After last time.'

'So you're staying out of it? Completely?'

'Well I'm not going to *interfere*. I might offer him a coffee.'

George raised an eyebrow. 'Make a little conversation?'

'Nothing special. Just routine. Don't look at me like that, George. I gave her my word.'

Aiden had never seen Cora stand until the day they went people watching out by the taxi rank. Could you believe that? He had basically fallen for a mermaid. Which at

least suited the mythological mess he now found himself in, a man undone by his pride. When she came out from behind that counter though. He'd never seen anyone walk like that. All limbs and determination. He'd have followed her anywhere.

Or was he just feeling maudlin and sorry for himself? She was irritating, let's not forget that – every question leading to another, never leaving anything alone. But she had something he had lost. She was curious, she was interested – she was interested in *him* – and he hadn't known to respect it. Always waiting for her counter to be free, finding excuses to let the other passengers skip ahead of him, relishing a quick retort and her indignant replies. That swallow-your-heart-up smile as she revealed the Head in the Clouds pin on the lapel of her uniform jacket. And he'd destroyed it all.

He could blame Colm – as he'd been planning on doing – but the only person he was trying to prove anything to was himself. Hadn't he said as much to Cora in one of the few honest conversations he'd had this year? His brother didn't care who Aiden fancied, who he dated. Why was he so *fixated* on losing? For months Aiden had been flying home, refusing to accept he was miserable. And the best part of it, the only part he looked forward to, was the fleeting encounter, never twice the same, with a woman who could hold her own.

Even with the many questionable things Aiden found himself involved in on a daily basis, this was a novel kind of self-loathing.

Nancy began the in-flight service and considered her game plan. George reckoned she should spell it out to Aiden – he was all heart now he'd found someone of his own. But you don't fall in love through reason, do you? Your heart makes up its mind and then eventually gets around to letting your head know what's going on.

She'd promised not to interfere. But another part of her reasoned that the last three Row 27 matches had been successful – something Nancy put down to the restoration of the rightful world order of her and Cora being mates again – and just because there was only one person sitting in the row this time around, didn't mean they couldn't make it four.

'Coffee, Aiden?'

'Are you going to give it to me for free? Because I do want a coffee, but I want to pay for it. And I want to tip.'

'Okey-dokey.' Nancy filled a plastic mug from the dispenser and took a twenty-pound note.

'No, keep it. I don't want the change. All these months and I've never paid. I probably never even said thank you.'

'You have been flying with us for yonks now, haven't you?' said Nancy, confused by the dramatics but not averse to pocketing a generous tip, something that wasn't technically allowed but protocol could kiss her un-promotable ass. 'How do you find it? Everyone pleasant? Cabin crew? Security officers . . . Check-in attendants?'

'All grand. No, not grand. Great.'

'Good, good. Cause we're all fond of you too . . . Cabin crew. Security officers . . . Check-in attendants.'

'Thanks.'

'In ascending order.'

'What?'

'What?'

'You said – what do you mean, "ascending order"?''

'No I didn't.'

'Yes you did.'

'Don't think so, Aiden.' Nancy shook her head, Merseyside panto frown in position. She pushed the trolley on, folded notes and a few coins forming a slight bump in her pocket. 'Maybe you hear what you want to hear.'



Aiden had never been a quitter. He'd worked hard to get into medicine and he'd worked harder to finish top of his year. Even when it came to spending thousands of pounds on flights to win back a girl who it turned out he didn't actually want and who certainly didn't want him, had he given up? No, he had not. And he wasn't going to give up on Cora – someone he really *did* want, someone he felt panicked at the thought that she may have wanted him too. His heart faltered at the idea of the next forty-eight hours, of Cora going about her business safe in the confirmed knowledge that he was an arsehole. He could feel heat on the back of his neck. The idea of her believing he thought so little of her when, in reality, he thought everything of her.

He was going to make it better. He was going to de-arsehole the situation. He had hurt the very core of her so he'd have to find something at that core that he could make

better. He would make it up to her. He had the weekend to figure it out and he would not be getting back on this plane without a plan. Because really, without Cora, what was the point in coming back at all?

TWENTY - FOUR

Sheila took a turn on Saturday morning. She got all worked up about the arm, poking at it until she'd opened the wound. Then her temperature started to rise. She was shivering and yawning and the doctors put it down to her reduced food intake and delayed shock. 'It's a lot for a body under pressure,' the specialist told them when she and Maeve arrived ready to set up camp for the weekend. But Cora had her own ideas.

They had taken away Sheila's plants. The carer said they were making her agitated. She kept getting the feeding schedules wrong, even when they were written down, and she refused to let anyone else water them. 'They were starting to smell,' he explained. 'I had to do it. Health and safety . . . She's fine with it though. She seems to understand.'

Sheila, who had a temperature of 102, did not look fine. She barely said a word. Her mother had never fit in in the city; were she a dog, she used to tell the kids, she'd be one of those big slobbery ones who ran the fields all day. The plants had masked the sterility of this artificial home. Bit

by bit, her mother was being vanquished. Once they were gone, the rest of her would not be far behind.

Her temperature came down slightly on Sunday and she was smiling recognition at them. Maeve took the morning shift, Cian came in for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and Cora was on duty for the evening. She sat in her mother's armchair and watched the pale, emaciated woman embalmed by pristine sheets as she fell in and out of sleep. Cora struggled to reconcile this invalid with the woman who'd never ironed a sheet in her life, rarely had time for a coffee never mind a lie-in, and had nursed Cora back to health more times than she could count.

'You're getting a break now, Mum,' she said, and the comment hung, undelivered, in the room.

As a child, Cora had done a lot of worrying. She'd worry friends at school didn't like her, that somebody forgot to feed the dog, to lock the back door, that thinking nice things about a woman up the road meant she loved her more than she loved her own mother. She did all this worrying in the dark, when everyone else was asleep.

'You'll have yourself driven demented,' Sheila would say when Cora appeared at her bedroom door desperate to confess everything that was weighing on her mind.

'If I laugh when Cian falls, am I a bad person? What happens if I'm late for school? What would I do if no one was there to collect me? If I walk home alone will something bad happen? Does Maeve love me? Does Cian love me? Do you love me?'

One night, she had worked herself into a state thinking

about death. She couldn't get her head around the 'foreverness' of it. You were alive for eighty or ninety years but that was only a blip because you were dead for a version of eternity that Cora could not comprehend. It made her head spin.

'Mum,' she'd hissed, standing at the doorway of her bedroom. 'Mum. Please. Wake up.'

From the darkness, Sheila groaned. Cora's father, who slept through all night-time concerns, snored beside her.

'I can't stop thinking and it's making my tummy hurt.'

'What is it this time?'

'Death.'

'Oh sweet Jesus,' murmured Sheila, shaking herself awake. 'You better get in the bed so.'

And they talked through the darkness, Cora sticking her feet between her mother's legs for warmth as she lay out all her concerns around mortality and, since her mother was still listening and patiently responding, she emptied the rest of her conscience too. Sheila never told her to be quiet or go to sleep, she never laughed at the minuteness of the things that made Cora's tummy ache. They talked and they talked until the sun was starting to come up and Cora, finally light of mind, fell soundly asleep.

Cora needed to stand on her own feet, to be a grown-up, yes, but more than that she needed Sheila to tell her everything was okay. She needed her mother to call her sweetie pie and hug her and love her and tell her what to do and who to be and remind her that there was someone who would fight the world on her behalf. There had never

been anyone Cora wanted to talk to more than her mother. And she knew they would never have a proper conversation again.

The woman in the bed stirred, the sheets coming away from her shoulders, and Cora stood to gently reposition them.

She was done with the airline. She had decided that on her own. When she thought of her job without being able to designate passenger seating, she no longer relished the idea of going to work. And it was only ever intended as a temporary measure, while she figured out what she wanted to do. So she would hand in her notice and look for jobs. She had applied for two teaching positions this morning and written to the National Gallery on the off-chance they might be hiring tour guides for the summer season.

Her decision had nothing to do with Aiden. She had asked herself this over and over. Friday night's sleep was half dreams of further conversations and text messages and phone calls and every time she woke she checked her phone to clarify what was real, only to remember as she scrolled through her recent calls that Aiden did not have her number. They were, after all, nothing to each other. But she could not get it out of her head.

Just a check-in attendant.

Like a knife turning in her gut. People talked of the heart being ripped out, but Cora felt it all in her stomach. First impressions were to be trusted and hers had been that this man was arrogant, a snob. *Just a check-in attendant.* His words. She was so stupid. And the other bit. She cringed

now as she heard it, exactly as it had been. *Come on, Colm, I'm not that hard up.* That was betrayal. She could hardly believe it had come from his mouth – until she saw his face. Guilt and culpability and, worse still, defiance. She pictured him laughing with his brother and she wanted to die.

She was not leaving because of him, because he thought so little of her occupation. She would not tell him she was leaving. She would not speak another word to him. Someone else could deal with his check-ins. Her stomach lurched again. Stupid as it was to miss him, it was like a minor bereavement before the major.

Sheila stirred, as if on cue, waking in frustration with the mummifying sheets. She should not be thinking of Aiden, not when a part of her more valuable than an arm or leg was rapidly disappearing. 'Too hot,' Sheila muttered, pushing the bedding down. She forced herself up and, seeing her daughter, smiled. Cora returned it gladly.

'Sorry to bother you, dear, but would you have a glass of water?'

'Mum,' said Cora, standing to fetch the jug from the bedside table and hand Sheila her spectacles. 'It's me.'

'Of course,' said Sheila, giving a little laugh as she repositioned the glasses and peered up at a relieved Cora. 'Blind as a bat without these things.' She held out her good hand. 'Nice to meet you again.'

The jug seemed to tip itself downwards, shakily filling the tumbler and righting itself again without Cora's help. Her mother maintained a polite smile, an expression intended to reassure but which did the opposite.

'That's grand, dear. Will you tell Andrew I'm waiting?' Cora continued to stare and her mother continued to smile. Was it her hair, maybe? Would Sheila see her better if she tied it back? Should she stand right in front of her? A lump formed in her throat.

'Mum. It's me. It's Cora.'

'I've been waiting a while now, tell him, and I've plenty to be getting on with.'

Cora pushed her hair behind her ears and stood under the harsh fluorescent tube, but Sheila only raised her eyebrows as if to ask was there anything else. When Cora still did not speak, she directed her gaze towards the door. 'And tell him I need the car.'

Cora slowly picked up her bag. She watched her mother smooth the bedsheets across her lap, and Sheila watched her ex-husband's secretary refusing to do her job. Not knowing what else to do, Cora exited the bedroom. She left a vital limb behind and she walked into the echoing hallway, supposedly to fetch a man Sheila had not wanted to see – or be married to – for thirteen years.

TWENTY - FIVE

I 'll miss you something awful, but I'm delighted for you. I really am.'

Joan continued to ignore the woman who stood in front of her with a passport outstretched.

'This was meant to get you back on your feet, wasn't that it? And you're walking as well as any of them now. Be thankful you don't have bunions, Cora, that's all I'll say. Anyway, if your heart's not in it why would you spend the rest of your ruddy life doing it? You're young, and there's nowt better than being young.'

Joan's only concern was that she hadn't been there to see Weasel's face when Cora handed in her notice. 'Did he consult his clipboard?' she probed, rubbing her hands with glee. 'Or get out the ChapStick? I'd say that sucked all the moisture out of him alright. I bet he wasn't tapping his little frog feet when you said you were off. I bet he didn't know his arse from his elbow.'

Cora, who had always been a better multi-tasker than her colleague, waved the ignored passenger to her counter and made vague sounds of agreement. She was grateful for

Joan's monologue, for the bickering families, for all the distractions from the letter burning in her breast pocket. Sheila had improved since the weekend. She was back fretting about the scar on her arm, asking over and over who had done it to her and when would it go away. She called Cora by name. She even asked about the airport. But this illness only went in one direction and they could never go back.

'How long until you're gone?'

'I gave my notice on Monday, so five weeks and three days.'

'But who's counting, ha? You're right too. Off to start the next adventure.'

But Cora wasn't counting, not like that. The airport had been good to her. It had given her a much-needed purpose, and friends. But maybe the Aiden fallout had been for the best – confirmation that it was time to go. Charlie and Ray had stopped by on their way out for a run earlier. Ray was back on the wagon, thanks to Mary. 'She's dead helpful, and so funny,' he said, and Cora nodded supportively, trying not to show her surprise. She'd miss the little gang that had cocooned her over the past year.

Her hand brushed across her breast pocket – like a passenger obsessively checking their passport was still where they'd left it. This place was eternally tied to Sheila. Heathrow was a bubble in which everyone knew her mother. Every day someone asked after her, divulging some story or detail Cora hadn't known. She could no longer ask her mother about the past, it wasn't worth the embarrassment

when she couldn't remember, so she mined memories at work. What if when this place was gone, the memories went too? She'd been carrying the letter since Sunday night, waiting for the courage to open it.

'So, it seems all is *not* well that ends well?'

Ingrid placed both hands on Cora's counter. She was wearing her usual ill-fitted get-up, a look of urgency across her pristine face.

'How are things, Ingrid?'

'Things were well until I heard the matchmaking was to be terminated.'

'You heard? I only handed in my notice Monday.'

'I mean the embargo being cancelled. But you're leaving? I didn't know that. When?' The Swede tutted. 'Things are not well at all.'

'Five weeks and three days. But who's counting.'

'I have not been matched.' Ingrid sighed. 'I am unmatched.'

'You are not unmatched.'

'The object of the exercise was to match couples. I have been a subject of the exercise for many months and still I am not matched.' Ingrid looked around with her arms outstretched – confirmation that she was here as a single entity. 'The proof is in the pudding.'

'No. Okay, today, I have plenty of time this afternoon.' Cora keyed Ingrid's flight details into the computer. 'Dublin. Plenty of English speakers. You're not leaving for two and a half hours. Plenty of time. I'm clearing the decks. I have two hours left in my shift and it's all for you. We'll find someone

good. Someone bloody marvellous. What are you into lately, except the exercise stuff?’

‘Sex.’

‘Pardon me?’

‘Sex. Sex is what I am into lately except the exercise stuff. Lately I’ve decided I would like to have some sex.’

‘Alright. I can work with that. So we need someone you want to have sex with. Handsome?’ Ingrid nodded. ‘And not too old . . .’ The Swede inclined her head ever so slightly. ‘And . . .’

‘A solid man.’

‘Okay, and by that you mean . . .?’

But that was it. That was her only request.

‘Solid, right. On it.’ Cora’s hand again travelling to her pocket, she pushed the letter down further, relieved to have a reason to ignore it for a couple more hours. ‘Here you go – 27A. Have a pleasant flight.’

Cora went through the Dublin passenger list automatically eliminating females, husbands, anyone younger than twenty-eight and older than forty-five. She was down to eighteen candidates. Seven were blackballed for profile photos or status updates that pointed to relationships. Two were gay. Cora would miss this. She was good at this. She searched for information on the remaining nine and settled on a shortlist of three. She’d wait until the men presented themselves at check-in. She was going back to intuition.

‘I’ll look after the Dublin flight, Joan.’

‘Righto.’

And so they began to arrive. More Irish people than English, several groups of friends destined for the Guinness Storehouse, a small troop of excited scouts, and a young couple barely on speaking terms. Option One – a mechanic from Kent – was a friendly chap and handsome, but he was significantly shorter than Ingrid. Personal preference perhaps, but: blackballed. Not long after him came Option Two.

‘Francis O’Meara,’ said Cora, waiting until she had opened his passport. His profile picture showed a handsome but inexpressive man. In person, he was equally striking and friendlier.

‘Frankie, actually. Only my mother calls me Francis. And airport officials,’ he added, a slight smile behind the stubble.

‘Welcome to Aer Lingus, Frankie.’ Cora had done an extensive search on this man but all social media information seemed to stop a few months back. His LinkedIn told her he was working as an engineer in Dublin – or at least he had been until January. Perhaps he was in London for a job interview. ‘Work or pleasure?’

‘Flying visit, just.’

‘Anything interesting?’ she pressed.

‘Ah.’ He threw his eyes up. ‘Family and whatever.’ But there was a softness to how he said it.

‘Wife?’

‘Mother.’

‘Smashing.’ He was the right age, he was indisputably handsome and his eyes, a dark blue, were flecked with kindness. In the queue behind him Cora spotted Option

Three – arguably better dressed and easier to track online. But there was something about Frankie. She liked how he stood, wide and firm. Like he had nothing to hide. She thought he might qualify as ‘solid’.

‘27B,’ she said, placing the boarding card in his wide hands.

It turned out to be the right choice. Option Three was not good; he was one of the complainers. He lectured Cora slowly and loudly on how if he couldn’t check in online, he should be able to specify his seat at the airport. She said she’d do what she could, and then put him in the very back row between two of the scouts.

With the Dublin check-ins finished, Cora turned off her counter light and slid down from her stool. Her shift had finished twenty minutes ago and there was no more work she could think to do. The staffroom was empty. She changed her shoes, removed her things from the locker, and sat at one of the three white tables, turning the slightly crumpled envelope in her hands. She pulled gently at the seal, thinking how her mother had always liked the taste of envelope adhesive. She used to lick closed their letters to Santa and march the three of them down to the post box. How many more Christmases would they have? How many more turkeys and hams? How long until she could not swallow? Cora inhaled deeply and just as she began to tear the envelope open, her phone rang. Maeve.

‘Is it Sheila?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘It’s good news actually, for a change. She’s as good as I’ve seen her, in fact.’

‘Really?’

‘In a long time, yes. She had a new doctor in with her, a specialist, and he says he can get rid of the scars on her arm. He said a skin graft would likely be too much for her and there was a chance of infection, but he’s going to make up a cream that should vastly reduce the marks. You should see her, Cora. She’s made up.’

‘I thought the Rowan Centre wasn’t going to pay for any cosmetic treatment?’

‘They’re not. This chap is a volunteer. He rang the centre this week offering his services. How’s that for good timing? I thought he seemed a little young but I looked him up and he’s won awards. He’s one of the best burn doctors in the UK. How lucky are we he didn’t call a few months ago, or volunteer at another centre? Very lucky. Cora? You still there?’

‘What’s his name?’

‘I already looked him up and he’s legit, more than legit.’

‘His name, Maeve.’

‘Alright. Hand on.’ She heard her sister put down the phone and her mind began to race. Then the receiver being taken up again. ‘Doctor Aiden O’Connor. He’s Irish.’

Her stomach dropped.

‘Sheila really took to him. Kept playing with her hair. Somewhere in her mind I think she was flirting.’

He had been to see her mother. He had gone uninvited to the research facility – and everyone had fawned over him.

She tried to piece it together but it didn't make sense. What was in it for him? To barge into her life after humiliating her and start throwing his weight around. Was he showing off? Was he messing with her?

'Cora? Hello?'

'Tell him we don't want the help.'

'What? Why in heavens not? Sheila is delighted. And it's free. Anyway, it's not up to us. They had the consultation this morning and he's going to begin the treatment – non-evasive – next week.'

'What clinic is he with?'

'Hang on . . . It's called . . . Blackhall Suites. Harley Street.' Cora, already on her feet, flung the phone and half-opened envelope into her bag, and stormed out of the staffroom.

TWENTY - SIX

.....

I'm here to see Aiden O'Connor. It's urgent.'

'Have you an appointment?'

'No, but he'll want to see me. Cora Hendricks.'

'If you don't have an appointment he won't be able to see you today. I can book you in for next week? A consultation, is it?'

The woman's eyes hovered a moment too long on Cora's forehead. She brushed her hair over her face. 'Can you just tell him I'm here? Cora Hendricks.'

'As I said, he's booked solid all evening.'

'Doctor O'Connor is treating my mother – a woman with Alzheimer's incapable of sound judgement – and if you do not let me see him, I will stand outside this place and tell everyone who comes within a kilometre radius that Blackhall Suites advocates abuse of the elderly.'

The receptionist paused. She got up from her desk. Cora shook her head at the watching security officer. *I'm going nowhere*. A minute later the receptionist returned, with Aiden following.

'This is a surprise – a good one. I'm glad to see you, Cora.'

'Can we talk in your office?'

'Of course. It's grand, Mandy. She's a friend.' Had Cora been a little less enraged, she might have laughed.

She followed down the corridor, not wanting to walk with him, not wanting to start talking only to be interrupted by unexpected turns or distracted by faltering directions. Aiden's office was minimalist, like she'd once pictured his apartment. There were no certificates on the wall or photographs on the desk. It could have been anyone's.

'I never got around to decorating.' Aiden pulled the door behind him as he trailed her into the room. 'You don't need to be Freud to figure that one out.'

Cora exploded. 'What do you think you're doing going to see my mother? Do you think me so incompetent I can't take care of her? Or is this another chance to show the world how great you are? You're a doctor, you're a doctor – and I'm *just* a check-in attendant.'

'Cora, I—'

'Why would a man with such disdain for me want to spend time with my mother – my sick and vulnerable mother? What sort of mind game is that? Have you not humiliated me enough? Do you even realise how humiliated I was? Laughing at me with your brother. I thought – But no.' Cora winced, still incapable of recalling the comments without a physical reaction. 'I felt so stupid.'

This time Aiden waited until he was sure she was done. 'I'm sorry, Cora.'

'Is that it?'

'I never wanted you to feel stupid. I'm the idiot. My

brother always gets to me. I shouldn't let him but he does. And I wanted to make it up to you so I thought I could help with your mother. I wanted to do something for you. Jesus, I like you. A lot. More than anything in this city.'

Cora looked around the room, a sneer in her voice. 'Not a lot of competition there.'

'I wanted to help, if I could. I know how much Sheila means to you and god knows it's better than anything I'm doing here.'

'I don't want you near my mother.'

Aiden looked at her, a plea in his eyes that Cora refused to meet.

'I'm sorry—'

'Leave her alone and I'll forgive you.'

'I'm sorry but I can't renege on my promise. I'm her doctor now and I've a duty of care. Sheila is happy about having her scars treated and the Rowan Centre has already agreed.'

'You're an egotistical snob.'

'I know.'

'You think you're better than everyone, and you're not.'

'I know that too.'

'How dare you scoff at my job, when you don't even like what you do? At least I'm proud of my work!'

'You're right. You should be.'

Cora floundered. 'Good.' She focused on him now finally, unfamiliar in his formal attire. He looked well, so clearly attractive, and it infuriated her further. 'So will you leave her alone?'

'I'm a pompous egotist but I'm also her doctor. I can't.'

'You're unbelievable! Jesus.' Tears of frustration built behind her eyes as she struggled not to blink. 'Have you not done enough?' She had let herself like him; she had let herself *tell people* she liked him. 'Can you not just leave me alone? Hell!' She tried to steady her voice. 'I don't want you to speak to me and I don't want you to come near me. I won't be at the airport much longer anyway; I've handed in my notice. Which has nothing to do with you.'

'I won't be there any more either.'

'What? Actually, I don't care. But good, that's good news.'

'I'm not flying back to Dublin any more. I'm volunteering in London for people like your mother instead. The whole thing was ridiculous. I was miserable. The only good thing about flying home was seeing you.'

She managed only a whisper: 'What are you trying to do?'

'I'm trying to say sorry. I'm trying to tell you that I like you. A lot. I like you a lot, Cora. I think you're one of the best people I've ever met.'

'You hardly know me.'

'I don't know your birthday or if you're a dog person, no, but I know that I want to stand and sit beside you as much as possible. I want to be around you because you're kind and funny and magnetic. I like your face – the big cheeks that engulf all your other features when you smile – I like the way you think, the way you walk, I even like the way you insult me. And I never like that. I was an arrogant arsehole and I'm sorry. I'm trying to get you to forgive me.'

Cora willed herself not to blink, not to let the dam break. For a moment, she almost believed him. Her eyes started to

sting. 'I don't trust you. I don't...'. Cora placed one hand on the table. She spoke slowly, the only way to stop her voice from cracking. 'I came here to talk about my mother. If you want to make it up to me, you'll leave her be.'

'I think when you calm down you'll—'

And there it was. 'Don't tell me to calm down! Don't—' He moved towards her and she moved away. 'Don't talk to me.' In the corridor now – shinier than the airport, oozing money and arrogance – she walked fast. Out on the street. Where was she going? Home. She needed to go home. She walked on. But she couldn't get the conversation, the sequence of events right. She grappled for her phone. And then she stopped. She couldn't call her. Even if it hadn't been about her. She could not call her. There it was: the stomach-churning truth. She could never call her mum again. Cora closed her eyes, suddenly aware of the tears prickling her cheeks. She sat at an empty bus stop, hand still in her bag. She redirected it away from the phone and took out the envelope. She wiped at her face, took two deep breaths and ripped it open.

My dear sweetie pie,

it's hard to imagine all that will happen as I sit

here writing this, feeling so sturdy, so evergreen.

But my branches are weakening and my leaves

are shedding. The doctors have confirmed it. One

by one they are dropping off. And I need to tell you

all that seems impossible to forget before they have

all gone.

I want to tell you that I love you. That's all this letter is: 'I love you, I love you' written over and over in different ways. Your mum loves you. Whatever else gets lost, that bit is unforgettable. It's engraved in my bark, it's at the tips of my roots. I'm so proud of you, Cora. Do you know that? You're stitched into me.

I'm sorry for the awful things I'll have said to you by now and all the important details I've forgotten. How is that possible? When now I can conjure up a thousand images for every stage of your life. But my branches are weakening. I know. And I'm sorry for everything I will miss, for every time you need me and I'm not there. I'm sorry for abandoning you, Cora.

Please forgive me.

And please listen to me. Because I want to tell you a few things I fear you may have forgotten.

1. You are worth so much more than you give yourself credit for. That's a fact. Listen to your mother.
2. Yours is a big heart. It's always been like that. And a heart that big is bound to get caught in the crossfire, but that's okay. If it breaks, it mends. It is there to be used.

3. You have always had great tenacity. As you should, as I taught you. But remember that pride comes before a fall. None of us can do it all on our own.

4. Some people are worth the risk. This is very important. I've seen you shrink from the world and it's no good. Do you hear me? We all get scared; the test is to carry on regardless. Give people a chance, my sweet girl. Put your trust in them.

And remember, for ever and always and long after that: your mum loves you.

X

How's it going?

'Why not?'

'Ah, they use it like "hello". And if someone does answer it, they just say "grand". Everyone is grand. I often thought what it would be like to stop someone and say, "Well actually, I'm glad you asked. Come here till I tell you everything that's been getting me down for the past few months." The hairy man chuckled. 'An honest answer, like.'

'And what would your honest answer be?'

'Probably grand.'

His name was Frankie and he was farming 'temporarily', but didn't go into further detail. He'd come to London that morning to drop off his mother – she was going on a holiday and didn't like to fly alone – and he'd be back to collect her in a few days. That was it. He was a man of few words. Which was attractive because he was attractive. Ingrid was aware of the double standards allowed to beautiful people, but she was not immune. Mostly she talked.

When Nancy appeared with the coffees, Ingrid was relieved. She'd gotten into a bit of a monologue about the optimum time slot when presenting a conference paper.

'Free? Are you sure? We paid three euro on the way over.'

'It's only free in Row 27,' Ingrid told him.

'Never heard of that,' he said, taking the UHT milk from Nancy. 'But sure, make hay while the sun shines.' He removed the lid, his hands dwarfing the paper cup.

'You wouldn't be making much hay in this weather,' Ingrid gushed – nervous, excited, the flutter now in her loins. 'More like silage!'

TWENTY - SEVEN (A)

LHR -> DUB 2.30 p.m.

Ingrid had been watching him from the moment he boarded the plane. As he passed the first row, she could distinguish broad shoulders and a general hairiness. Then she lost him behind another passenger, which was a feat because he was definitely above average height. By the emergency exit, she'd registered the manly stubble and watched him help an elderly couple put their luggage in the storage compartment. He had no bag of his own. With every row, the stakes grew and she did not glance away for fear the magnet would break and he'd be sucked into an earlier row.

When he stopped, nodding and sliding in beside her, careful not to spill into her personal space, Ingrid was fairly certain that what she felt was her heart flutter. Cora had done well.

'How's it going?'

Ingrid thought for a moment. 'Average to good.'

He laughed. 'You're not Irish, anyway.'

'No,' she said, cautiously defensive. 'I'm Swedish.'

'It's just no one in Ireland ever answers that question.'

She was referring, of course, to the unusually high humidity, which had been the focus of all weather reports that day. But Frankie didn't laugh, just took a sip of his coffee. She'd always found it hard to gauge humour.

'I grew up on a farm.' She tried again.

He swallowed his coffee. 'They've farms in Sweden, so?' Ingrid frowned. Hadn't he heard of their famously long growth seasons?

'Ah I'm only coddin' with you.'

'Coddin?'

'Messing,' he said. 'Joking, like.'

'Coddin. I see.'

'Sure of course they have farms in Sweden.'



Of course they had farms in Sweden. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, Frankie. Was that meant to be a joke? Hadn't there been a contingent of Swedes at the ploughing championships? And on the last night they took them out on the lash, to show some hospitality, and the session ended with all the Irish lads drunk as skunks, singing 'go home to your sexy wives' over and over at the bemused Scandinavians. Frankie didn't mention that though; he wasn't sure the story worked in sobriety. He was a bit rusty at this. Between the farm, the pub, the creamery and an occasional mass, Frankie hadn't spoken to a woman – other than the one who gave birth to him – in the four months since he moved back home to help with the farm.

'What is your mother doing in England?'

'Visiting a sister in Bromley. She only does it every five years but even then can't bear to fly on her own. I hadn't flown in months. Hadn't been in Dublin in months.'

'Do you live far from Dublin?'

'Not too far. 'Bout hour and a half. I was working above in Dublin but had to head home after Christmas.'

'Why?'

They were very direct, the Europeans. Asked a lot of questions.

'They needed a hand on the farm. My dad passed away and Ma couldn't handle the place on her own.'

'I'm sorry for your loss,' she said and Frankie couldn't help smiling at her studious solemnity.

'These things happen. He was almost eighty.'

'And he was still working!'

Frankie laughed. 'See now, farming in Sweden can't be like Ireland. Nobody retires where I'm from. They're all obsessed with the land. Afraid some foreigner will toss them off it again if they turn their back for a minute.'

'But don't the children take over?'

'Yeah, well.'

They fell into silence.

'We probably should have,' he said finally. 'But nobody wanted to.'

'So why are you doing it now?'

'Ah.' And this time he left it at that.



Ingrid enjoyed a challenge, and now she'd gotten him talking she had a new one: understanding what he was saying. But she liked the seasick rhythm. Up and down and crashing back up again. And excessive hair was a sign of virility. Which she enjoyed too.

'I've never been to an Irish farm. Even though my work is concerned with agricultural policy and Ireland is the largest beef exporter in Europe and in the top three for dairy.'

'Is it?'

'Yes. Is that not common knowledge?'

Frankie shook his head.

'Interesting. Well yes, it is, and yet they never do farm visits. I'd like to see one. Peculiar how all decision-making for rural areas is done in urban settings.'

'You're more interested than me.'

'You're not interested? It's your livelihood.'

'Temporarily. I was into it when I was younger, driving the tractors, helping with the harvest and all that. But I was an engineer until my dad . . . like I said. And I'll be going back to it. Once we convince Ma to sell.'

'Difficult?'

'Says the only way she's leaving is in a box.'

Frankie was bored of talking about the farm. They didn't talk much at home but when they did, it was the only topic.

When he was in Dublin, he'd barely thought about the place. Another life.

He knew the conversation was lopsided but he'd never been good at direct questions. He asked Ingrid (nice name) about farming in Sweden – good and general, nothing awkward – which led to the one she grew up on and, without really asking, her parents. It turned out conversations were like riding a bike; once you get going it all comes back.

She was smart and funny, though possibly not on purpose. He'd pulled a girl from Sweden when he was in college. Ingrid was even better-looking. And he wasn't laughing at her. Not at all. Her sincerity made him happy.

'Do you get back often? To Sweden, like.'

'Once in a pale moon.'

'A blue moon?'

'Yes. A blue moon.' He could see her thinking and he grinned.

'I don't know why it's blue either.'

'Maybe somewhere they have blue moons?'

'But not very often.'

And she smiled too.

Ingrid talked at length about Ireland's position as a dairy farming nation and its high rate of greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector but she worried she was delivering it wrong.

'I'm talking too much.'

'No, you're grand. It's interesting.'

Ingrid considered this. 'It's difficult to know what other people find interesting.'

'You've got a sort of practical passion. It's nice.'

'I haven't even told you about running – that's my big passion.'

'I'm listening.'

'Do you run?'

Frankie shook his head. 'You'd see them out on the streets in Dublin. But what is everyone running *from*, that's what I'd like to know.'

Ingrid grinned. 'At the beginning, you are running away. From being sick or lonely or how you look. But once you get into it, you're running towards something: happiness or health or a longer life.'

'See, now. Even that. Very interesting.'

She glanced at him. He was smiling but he wasn't teasing. She tucked her chin into her neck and let the warmth wash over her.

'Could I visit your farm?'

'My, er . . .'

'For a farm visit. If it was convenient.'

'It's just it's not really my farm. It's my mother's.'

'Would she object?'

Frankie knew exactly how his mother would react to a foreigner on her land: with great fecking suspicion. Not that

she feared her son being stolen away, but rather that this beautiful woman with a successful career elsewhere would have her eye on Maureen O'Meara's few dozen acres.

Good thing she was in London so.

'What she doesn't know won't kill her.'

'I'm in Ireland for two days,' said Ingrid. 'I have meetings until 4 p.m. tomorrow and then an hour and a half of travel, allowing twenty minutes for rental pick-up . . . I could be there for 6 p.m.'

'I'll throw on some dinner so.'

'You cook?'

'We have modern men in Ireland, you know.'

She went pink. 'I never said—'

'I know. I'm only messing.'

'Coddin'?' She looked straight at him. He found the urge.

'Yeah. I'm only coddin'.'

And then he gave in. He leaned over, lingering a moment lest she objected, and placed his lips on hers so quickly it sounded like a rubber sucker being pulled from an udder.

'Jaysus. Sorry.'

Ingrid leaned forward, hiding her face as she rummaged in her briefcase.

'On a plane and all. Sorry, Ingrid.'

But when she resurfaced she handed him a pen and paper. 'I'm going to need your address.'

And as he wrote the familiar directions – 'right at the post office, two lefts, and a sharp right at the bend' – she leaned in and whispered, with that endearing, formal sincerity: 'Thank you, Frankie. That was lovely.'

TWENTY - SEVEN (B)

It was more than a week since she'd stormed into Aiden's office and she hadn't heard from him. Which was what she'd asked him to do. Friday had come and gone, but he had not. Which he'd told her would be the case. All of a sudden he was infuriatingly true to his word.

Aiden had been back to the Rowan Centre to see her mother. (Another promise he insisted on keeping.) Maeve had been there but Cora had made up an excuse. He'd applied the ointment once, showing the staff, Maeve, and Sheila how to do it in the future. It was straightforward, Maeve said. So that was it. There was no need for him to go and see her again. Unless something went wrong. And, of course, Cora didn't want something to go wrong.

'Penny for them,' asked Joan, arriving for her shift two hours after Cora had started hers. Terminal Two was dead.

'Nothing. Just thinking.'

Cora had an interview next week at the Tate – a coordinator for kids' summer camps – and she was thinking about that, but mainly she was thinking for the millionth time that maybe she'd been too stubborn. She kept thinking

about what Aiden had said. And her mother. The more time passed, the more she wanted to trust him. Couldn't she have just taken him at his word? She didn't want to shrink from the world.

Beside her, Joan was whistling. Loudly. The cartoon representation of a postman carrying good news. 'Anything to tell me, Joan?'

'Well now that you mention it, yes. Sardinia is a-go!'

'Really? That's great. Who'd you get to take Jim's place?'

'No one. He's coming. Two of the Four Wise Men got busted for selling knock-off washing machines.' Even if Joan had managed to keep the glee from her voice, the manner in which she rubbed her hands together gave it away. 'They tried to delay the start of the sentence but no joy. And no stand-ins know as much about history and the classics. Jim's beside himself naturally – been out wallowing with the pigeons. Poor sod.'

Cora smiled.

'I do love him really. Though god knows why. Any road, a bit of colour on that belly and he'll forget all about it.'

It was possible, wasn't it, that Aiden meant what he said? About being sorry, about liking her. *A lot*. He'd said he liked her a lot. But Cora had always trusted her instincts. He barely knew her. How could he think she was the best thing in this city? He clearly hadn't been to the National Gallery. She convinced herself it was a line. And yet she knew him as little as he knew her, and she had liked him. *A lot*. And she hadn't liked anyone in a long time. How can you be sure what is instinct and what is fear? With each passing day,

this horrible sensation grew – a sensation she was starting to recognise as regret.

She saw Ray across the floor and waved. He blushed. They'd met only five hours ago; Cora was heading into the bathroom to clean her teeth and Ray was leaving after a shower. He now spent as much time at Cora's apartment as she did, only for most of it he was cloistered away in Mary's room. And then there was Ingrid. She'd stopped by Cora's counter on the way back from her Dublin conference with Frankie, who it turned out was a farmer, in tow. He was collecting his mother and Ingrid, looking like the proverbial cream-getting cat, already had her next flight booked to the Emerald Isle.

All this lifted Cora's spirits. The happiness of others did nothing to detract from her own. It wasn't like there was a finite amount in the world, and when a lot was taken by other people there was none for her. You make your own happiness. And the only thing that stood in Cora's way was herself. It wasn't that she couldn't forgive, it had just been easier not to.

Cora watched Ray disappear behind the escalator, probably off to start his shift. In a semi-trance, she stared at the last spot she had seen him, fragmented feelings whirling through her mind. The daze wasn't broken until someone else appeared from the shadows, heading into the terminal.

Is it possible to will something into being? Cora had never considered it before now, before she recognised Aiden O'Connor coming towards her.

'I know you told me not to talk to you.'

'I – yes.'

'But I thought I'd make one last attempt before I did that. I finished the treatment with your mother.'

'I heard.'

'I think it'll work well.'

Cora said nothing.

'I came out two days ago but you weren't working. Your colleague said you'd be in today.' He glanced towards Joan, who was openly eavesdropping.

'I meant to tell you some chap was looking for you, Cora. Must've got distracted by the holiday. I'm off to Sardinia next week.'

'Very good,' said Aiden. 'It's meant to be nice. Very clean water.'

'I've work to be getting on with so—'

'What are you talking about, Cora, this place is dead!'

Cora threw Joan a look but the older woman continued to position herself like she was the third point in this conversation.

'I'm sorry.'

'You said.'

'I really am. I'm sorry. Tell me what I can do to make you forgive me.'

'It's fine. I forgive you.' Joan's chair creaked. Cora did not want to discuss it, not in front of other people. 'Is there anything else?'

'I wanted to say . . .' Aiden lowered his voice and Joan leaned further forward again.

'Look. You've said enough. Let's just leave it, okay? I forgave you and you agreed not to talk to me, so let's just stick with that.' Cora was going red now. Passengers were starting to arrive and while they didn't seem to see Joan, who practically had the popcorn out, there was a family making a beeline for her.

'Cora, can we—?'

But the various generations were upon her, arguing in Spanish and English about who had the passports and how many children there were, and Aiden was pushed to one side. She'd hurt his feelings – not quite like he'd hurt hers and she shouldn't care but she did.

'It's seven, Papa! We're not taking Maria.'

'Then why is Maria here?'

'That's not Maria, Grandpa! That's Gabrielle.'

Cora took the available documentation and counted the passengers. The final three passports were located – the last one extracted from the mouth of a toddler – and she did her best to accommodate their contradictory seating requests.

When they finally left she noticed that Aiden had too. She stood up on the footrest of her stool and surveyed the terminal but she couldn't see him.

'Where did he go, Joan? Did you see where he went?'

'Who, pet?'

'Aiden – the man, the man who was looking for me.' But the older woman shook her head, busy herself now – several minutes too late – with customers.

'Will you – I'll be back.' Cora hopped down from the stool. 'I won't be long.' She started to walk quicker, ignoring

Joan's response, turning her head and whole body as she went, trying to spot Aiden in the crowds that had suddenly appeared. She hesitated outside the men's toilets, wondering if it was worth waiting, but she couldn't risk losing the time. She looked in Costa and WHSmith, her walk now a jog. She stopped at the underground entrance, looking around her once more, careful not to miss anything in her panic, before she jogged down the conveyor belt. Her heart was pounding like it was a sprint. She'd lost him. He'd come back and she'd made him think she wasn't interested and she'd sent him away. He had given her a chance and she'd been too stubborn, too proud, to take it.

She stumbled on the escalator, straightened herself and kept going. She didn't want to be scared. She wanted to be able to tell him that she liked him too, a lot, that she liked his smile and his hair, she liked him in a suit and in that stupid rugby jersey, she liked his know-it-all-ness and she did actually like that he knew a lot, but she also liked that he was kind and considerate and, yes, that he'd made her mother happy and that he made her happy – irritated and incensed but happy too. She even liked his stubbornness and how, in ways, including her reluctance to admit it, they weren't all that dissimilar.

She got to the platform to find it empty and the gentle breeze of a recently departed train. She looked up at the real-time display – the Tube was arriving in five-minute intervals. She'd just missed one. She stood on the platform edge, the end of the line, and dropped her hands to her side. Fuck. She did a 360 and stared again down the dark tunnel

as if, what? The Tube might reverse back into the station? Fuckidy, fuckidy, fuck. She'd lost him. It hit her then, like a wave breaking inside her; like she'd ruined her entire life. A wildly exaggerated assessment, and she knew even then it would lessen, but in that moment there was nothing she wanted to do.

Cora turned and slowly made her way back towards the terminal, back up the escalator, the conveyor belt, back past the shops and cafes, the arrivals gate, the crowd of expectant faces and chauffeurs with iPads and handmade signs.

Already it was less. It was fine. She told herself she'd be fine. She'd learn from it. It was a lesson – in her own pride, her fear, her reluctance. And then the wave again. A crashing tsunami of what-ifs. The drowning sense of dread. What if she had just told him? What if she had allowed him to like her, to have her, to sit beside her all the time and listen to all she wanted to tell him? Side-by-side, a little team. What-if.

Walking across the terminal floor, she saw the airport differently. It was not a long-term surrogate, this place, and she knew that was why she was leaving. A place so transient could not be her grounding; a place so sterile could not be a womb. At the Aer Lingus counter, Joan was dealing with a passenger but there was no queue. Cora retook her seat, nodded her thanks to the older woman, and tried to force a smile. Coming around the corner were two familiar faces: teenage siblings from the multi-generation Spanish family that had just checked in. Cora looked about her desk for a forgotten passport or bag or teddy bear but there was nothing.

'Cora Hendricks' said the older girl, the one with the best English.

'Yes, how can I—'

'I not finished.' The teenager shushed Cora and cleared her throat. 'Cora Hendricks, as you can see, I am not talked to you.'

Cora frowned. She didn't dare interrupt again but something was lost in translation.

'Because you told me not to do that. It may not seem like it but I have always listened to you. The first time we met you told me about, ah . . . ' The Spaniard leaned over to her younger brother, standing awkwardly beside her, and took a piece of paper from him. 'Ah si! You told me about a dream you had the night before where you were a pilot on a massive purple plane. You read me your horoscope that morning and asked if I thought your dream meant you were dealing with a great deal of responsibility.'

This story was familiar . . . This dream . . . Yes! She had told Aiden about it, and he had responded glibly that it probably just meant she worked at an airport and had seen a pilot the previous day.

'And . . . ' The younger brother piped up, grabbing the page back as he read – 'You insisted on reading my 'oroscope-ay.'

'Horoscope,' his sister hissed.

'Horoscope. Even though I told you repeatedly that I did not believe in them. You did not listen to me, but that is not my point. My point is that I listened to you. I even remember what the . . . ' oroscope said.'

'It said,' the sister resuming oration as Cora looked around but could see no familiar faces, 'that I would be tested. But if I took the challenge on headfirst, it would stop looking like a bad thing and become something wonderful. You're a challenge, Cora Hendricks. And I remember everything.'

'*El final*,' whispered the boy and his sister reluctantly let him take the paper from her. 'If you do not want me to talk to you, that's okay. But I want to hear more from you. I watch you at the counter and wish I could be part of your world, which always seems so much more interesting than the one the rest of us are living in. I want to hear everything you dream, everything you think. Even if it's you pulling me up on my nonsense. I want to hear all of it. Because I'd rather get insults from you than kisses from anyone else.'

The siblings stopped and looked at Cora expectantly, proud of their oratory.

'Am I - is he - do you want a reply?'

The boy looked at his sister and she looked back at Cora. 'You will give him insults?'

'I - if that's what he wants. They didn't budge.

'Yes. I will give him insults.'

The girl whistled, her gaze at the wall to the end of the Aer Lingus row, and the siblings stood where they were until Aiden appeared. They swapped the page-long speech for two twenty-pound notes, and hurried off giggling.

'Can I talk?'

Cora looked at Joan, who had half an eye on her customer and the other one and a half on Aiden. Further up the row,

the rest of the attendants were also staring at the man who stood several feet from Cora's counter. She looked at him too, sheepish and vulnerable, like she'd never seen him. He brushed curls from his face and shifted awkwardly. Cora got down from her stool, forgetting about the watchful eyes, refusing to feel fear as she walked out from behind the desk and slowly moved towards him.

'Do you still want to stand beside me?' she said, stopping directly in front of him.

'Always.'

'And will there be more cheesy rom-com gestures?'

'If you promise there'll be more arguments.'

'I'm not the one who starts the arguments.'

'Mmm.'

'Don't mmm me. You're always doing that. Mmm is not a word.'

He smiled, dimple pronounced, and she melted a little. 'That's my girl.'

Cora was in uniform and she was on duty. But what were they going to do, fire her? She took another step towards him, stood on her tippy-toes though it was not necessary - she just liked the sensation, the precariousness of it - and then she kissed him, resolute but careful, on the mouth. She quivered on her toes but she did not come back to earth until their lips had parted.

'Can we get out of here?' he whispered.

'I still have three hours on my shift.'

'Right. Of course,' he said, eyes open now. 'I'll wait.'

'For three hours?'

'Sure. I'll sit over there and pretend to read a paper or my phone but mainly I'll watch you.'

Cora laughed. 'No thanks.'

'Tough luck, sweet cheeks. This is a public space.'

Cora looked at him, long since given up on trying to remove the grin from her face, but he didn't yield.

'Alright,' she said with a shrug. 'If you insist.'

'I do. Three hours,' he said, pulling his phone from his pocket. 'Better let the clinic know my meeting is going to run late. Mr Gordon-Oxley's neck will have to live with gravity for another day.' And he started to move towards the benches.

'I'll just go back to it so.'

'And wave over at me every now and again,' he said. 'Big, crazy waves. We're both out of here shortly.'

'So why not act like total dolts?'

'Exactly.'

Aiden went and took a seat in the waiting area, and Cora returned to her desk.

'Everything alright?' asked Joan, gasping for gossip as the rest of the attendants craned their necks behind her.

'Yep, all good, thanks,' said Cora, her cheeks starting to hurt.

The next passenger approached, passport in hand, and Cora glanced over to see Aiden watching. She smiled as he half raised a hand, held it in the air for a moment, and frantically started waving from side to side as if in the midst of an epileptic fit. Cora dropped her gaze and laughed. How much easier it was to chance looking stupid when there were

two of you taking the risk. If it breaks, it mends. She looked up again.

'Now,' she said, beaming at the woman with the outstretched passport. 'Where are we off to today?'