

Aiden hadn't told anyone the real reason he came home every weekend. He stayed at his brother's house, in the spare room, and gave him the same story he gave everyone else: he was fulfilling his clinic's charitable obligations.

His brother thought Izzy was too good for him.

'That's not true,' said Colm when Aiden brought it up. 'I just never saw it lasting. I didn't get it.'

Aiden shook his head. He loved her. Nothing else mattered. He brought his mind back to the beginning. Walking by the Irish Sea, feeling their way across pebbles in the dark. If he could get her to remember those nights. He needed Izzy to see that he wanted her back. That this time apart *was* a change. That things would be good again.

EIGHT

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Jaysus, look at these lads,' said Roisin, stopping in front of a Renaissance painting of three cheerful musicians. She read the wall panel aloud, 'A Concert by Lorenzo Costa,' and then commented, 'Yer man in the middle is actually alright-looking. The poor fucker to the right probably wrote all the music but this dude got to go out in front.'

Cora sidled up next to her best friend and rested her head on Roisin's. There was a mild throbbing at the front of her skull. The painting's subjects, with their glossy locks and groovy velvet, did seem out of place in the fifteenth century. The frontman should have been in Led Zeppelin. 'I reckon I would have done well in the 1970s,' said Cora. 'I've a strong jaw and being tall . . . I think flares would have suited me.'

Earlier, while browsing paintings of Louis XIV's court, Roisin had identified the seventeenth century as her optimum time period. 'Now they look like people who knew how to party,' she'd said, pointing to a large fresco of decadently naked women, their ample, pinkish bodies

flung wide open. Roisin was not ample, she was actually quite neat, but her Irish skin was pale and she had curves. 'I would've been quids in,' she said. 'Kings lining up to ply me with wine; I could get on board with that. And sure they wouldn't know what to think of the freckles; that would have made me a deity.'

'If you're getting in with the royalty, your children are probably going to look like that,' said Cora, pointing to the portrait hall of misshapen monarchs. 'There's no escaping inbreeding. And you would have been dead by thirty-five.'

'Ah yeah, but I would have had a good innings.'

The two women were strolling the rooms of the National Gallery on the third Thursday of February. Cora wasn't due in work until 2 p.m. – a blessing given she'd been on the whiskey the night before, hence the throbbing frontal lobe – and Roisin had the day off from her job at the local library. Roisin used to work in music publicity, but she wasn't good enough at pretending that shit songs were great. Plus, the money was terrible. The music industry's loss was Finsbury Park library's gain: their CD collection had never been so progressive – it even got a shout out in *Time Out*. When the two women first moved in together, they used to go to galleries all the time.

It had started with the Tate Britain. Cora hadn't seen Millais's *Ophelia* – the image that hung in every bedroom she had ever occupied – in real life since she was a teenager. So the Saturday she lugged her worldly possessions along the Piccadilly line and moved into Finsbury Park, she and Roisin celebrated by getting back on the Tube and going

to the gallery. Roisin wasn't particularly interested in art but she enjoyed a 'good day out'. They had made their way through the Tate Britain's expansive rooms until they reached the Pre-Raphaelites and spied the drowned Ophelia lying amongst a bric-a-brac of paintings. Cora had been underwhelmed to the point of grief. The green of the reeds seemed garish, almost fluorescent, and the image was so much smaller than it should have been. Perhaps time had faded the poster she had just stuck to her new Finsbury Park bedroom wall but she preferred its muted tones. After a lifetime of falling in love with the reproduction, the original seemed a cheap imitation.

They returned to the Tate Britain twice more that first month and had been in every display room by the end. Each time they bought a postcard of a painting they had liked and hung it in the kitchen. Since then, they had been to all the rooms in all of London's major galleries, and the history of art was plastered all over their kitchen wall. Cora had a penchant for the sea and Roisin swooned for female nudes.

'It's all free,' said Cora, sweeping her arms dramatically at the echoing walls. 'So many people have lived here all their lives and never been to the national gallery. The majority, probably.'

They were sitting on a bench, staring up at a large-scale painting of a tiger and a woman cradling her baby. Cora had read the description on a previous visit and knew it was an allegory, but she couldn't remember for what.

'So, go on, tell us about last night,' said Roisin. 'I saw a glow stick in the bathroom this morning.'

'They gave us those on our way in. I just put mine on my wrist but Nancy made a headband out of two because it matched her neon leggings. She looked great actually.'

Roisin laughed. 'Where was it again?'

'The Imperial College. South Kensington. I thought it was going to be a few staged shots of Ray running, but all the contestants were there and they had a professional track set up.'

The Fight the Flab run had been more fun than expected. It ended with five whiskeys and the last Tube home and was as close to a proper night out as Cora had had in months – weddings excluded. She'd arrived at 7 p.m. to find a hall jammed with neon supporters. She spied Ray standing on a platform at the front in yet another shiny new Adidas tracksuit. Losing weight must be costing him a fortune.

To Cora's left was a large group of shirtless men. Across their convex bellies they had each written a letter in neon green body paint. Cora stood for a minute, trying to solve the ever-shifting anagram: GO ZIM, possibly? Or GO MIZ? Neither an acceptable nickname for a grown man. But behind the bustling bellies was a bunch of recognisable faces. Cora shouldered her way through the crowd towards Joan, Charlie, George, two men from security, and a woman from baggage scanning.

'I didn't know you were coming,' she said to Joan, giving her a quick embrace. The older woman's hair was in curls for the occasion.

'Thought I might get some motivation. I lost my new year's resolutions somewhere in the Quality Street tin,' said

Joan, wiggling her glow stick at Cora. 'Maybe they're taking contestants for next year.'

'Good thing you're here,' said Charlie, who was wearing his trademark dark slacks and sweater over a light-blue shirt. Having never seen him outside work before, Cora had assumed this ensemble was a uniform. She noted a strip of neon green in his trainers. Subtle, but definitely not an accident. 'Ray's family is over there.' Charlie pointed into a crowd of people she could not distinguish. 'And some other friends are around somewhere, but we're one of the smaller groups. The Newcastle and Cardiff leaders put on buses.' He made it sound as if the out-of-town contestants had cheated.

'Nancy didn't come then?'

Charlie nudged his shoulder against hers and pointed towards the stage, but Cora could see nothing. 'Right at the starting line,' said Charlie.

Cora shifted her gaze to the marked running track, and there was her friend. Dressed in neon leggings and a Fight the Flab tank top, she was holding a sign that said 'Steady' and chatting excitedly to the director from the first airport shoot.

'See the woman with the "Ready" sign? She's the Bristol contestant's wife.' The hall was getting noisier by the minute and Charlie moved closer so as to speak into Cora's ear. 'And the child with the "Go" sign is the Newcastle woman's son.'

Cora knew better than to question what qualified Nancy to be up there. She shook her head and grinned. 'Does she even know Ray's surname?'

'Butter would not melt,' said Joan, her attention still aimed at the glow stick that kept flying from her hand. 'What the hell am I supposed to do with this contraption?'

Charlie took the stick from her and drove it through the front of her hair. 'There now, Joan. You'll be turning all the boys' heads.'

The contestants were brought to the starting line where tracksuit tops were removed to reveal *Fight the Flab* T-shirts with their names printed on the reverse. Ray was not the largest of the seven. The first man – mid-fifties, a tattoo either side of his neck – stepped forward and lifted his arms into the air. He turned his back to the audience to reveal his name: GIZMO. The shirtless brigade beside Cora went ballistic. The camera panned over them but the excitement was too much and they couldn't get their bellies in order in time. When Ray's turn came to step forward, their little enclave erupted. Cora gave her loudest scream. 'Go on, Ray, my son!'

The director instructed the crowd to step into the middle of the track; the leaders were going to run around them. Then he called for an 'atmospheric hush'.

'Look!' whispered Joan, nudging Cora in the side. A glum-looking child was now holding the 'Steady' sign and Nancy was front and centre, ready to instruct the runners to 'Go'. 'She's been upgraded.'

'And rolling!'

The whistle blew and they were off. The leaders kept a good pace for the first couple of laps but soon three of them had given up in favour of walking and two more were opting

for intervals. Ray, however, was still jogging and Charlie was getting excited. She'd never seen him get excited. He pushed his way to the frontline and Cora could hear him yelling, 'That's it, Ray mate, you're almost there! Invest in yourself! Own the pain!' The run wasn't meant to be a race but suddenly everyone was shouting 'Ray!' or 'Carol!', for the only other contestant still jogging, and it was like the whole room had money on the outcome. As Ray hobbled over the finish line, the room broke into cheers. The difficulty was sustaining this level of enthusiasm until the last contestant – Gizmo – finally completed the circuit twelve minutes later.

Ray was walking on air after the run. He barely noticed Nancy grabbing his arm every time the local photographer came near, nor did he seem to mind when she started answering the journalist's questions for him: 'He's in training now and he's got a great network of friends behind him. That's Moone, with an e.' The rest of them were feeling the adrenaline too and it was Cora who suggested they go to the pub.

Joan bowed out. Jim was away at a match and she was on pigeon-feeding duty. But the rest of the Heathrow contingent and Ray's two sisters headed for the pub around the corner. Nancy had water; a sure sign, thought Cora, that she had plans for later – a date, probably. Camera phones were produced for Ray's impromptu speech and the woman behind the bar took a group shot.

After three drinks, Cora could feel the alcohol. She went to the bathroom for a breather and when she came back Nancy was talking about Pan Am to the woman from baggage

scanning. If Nancy were ever to go on *Mastermind*, she'd have her speciality subject sorted. 'The Pan Am air hostess I saw interviewed ended up marrying a man from her third flight. Swear to god. They were like movie stars. Every glass of champagne the passengers bought for themselves, they got one for the air hostesses too. Did you ever see the uniforms . . . ?'

At the bar, the drunker of the two security guards was buying Ray another gin. 'But seriously, mate, you're bridging the gap. All sections of the airport brought together for the sake of helping you get healthy. A pilot from British Airways asked me about it yesterday. It was like Apollo coming to Rocky.' He handed Ray a glass and raised his own pint. 'Closing the divide, mate, that's what you're doing.'

Cora took a glass of water from the barmaid and returned to the table. Nancy was now sitting beside Charlie, speaking in hushed tones. When Cora approached them, Charlie did a double-take and Nancy quickly excused herself to go to the loo.

'What was that about?'

'Nothing.'

'Can I?' said Cora, pointing to the seat beside Charlie.

He slid up the bench awkwardly. 'I got you this,' he added, placing a whiskey before her.

'Thanks.'

'Nice, ah, frock by the way.'

Cora looked down at her very old, very unremarkable dress. 'Cheers.'

'Cheers,' he said, raising his own pint. When he lowered it

again, he hoisted himself up and moved even further away. He was acting strange. 'You know you're getting old when you can't sit without groaning.'

'How old are you, Charlie? Because you talk like you're ninety.'

'Thirty-four – so I've made it further than Jesus at least. You?'

'Twenty-eight last month.'

'Happy belated birthday.'

'Thanks.'

Cora surveyed the table. Glow sticks bobbed in the dregs of pints and protruded from flower vases. She picked up a damp beermat and tried to spin it like a coin, but it was capable only of a limp tumble. Nancy returned from the bathroom, and slid in beside George at the opposite end of the table. George started talking furtively, while eyeballing Cora.

'What?'

'Nothing,' replied George, shaking his head like a martyred diva. 'We were just talking about human rights. Don't know if you'd be interested though, Cora. You know they're voting on gay marriage in Ireland soon?'

'I do,' she said. 'I hope it passes.'

'Ha!'

'What, George? What is your problem?'

'He's annoyed because you don't offer your mile-high matchmaking services to the gays,' said Nancy, on her second sparkling water. George narrowed his eyes at her, and then shot Cora a look daring her to disagree.

'There are less of them,' said Cora, who had tried to

diversify her matches and failed. 'They're trickier to spot, and it's difficult to make casual enquiries about someone's sexual orientation.'

George turned his attention to a point on the ceiling.

'It's harder, George,' Cora continued. 'And you told me before – when I tried to set you up with Naomi's brother, George, remember? – that only gays should set up other gays.'

'It's about equal opportunities, Cora,' he said, standing now. 'Nancy, would you like a drink?'

'Ta, but no. Fine with this.'

George did a power turn and glided towards the bar. Cora knew he was camping it up for her benefit. She rolled her eyes towards Nancy: 'So dramatic!'

'Well now that's discrimination too, Cupid,' mocked Nancy. 'Stereotyping.'

After a fifth whiskey and two existential arguments – whether having children is a selfish act and, shortly afterwards, whether there's any such a thing as a selfless act – Cora decided it was time for home. She looked around but Nancy was gone.

'Said she had to study,' the baggage scanning woman told her, and Cora laughed. She wondered if her friend was meeting the *Fight the Flab* director. George was in the corner now, talking to Ray's sisters who were laughing outrageously. His eyes narrowed when he caught Cora looking at them. She just shook her head.

Charlie and Ray walked with her to Kensington (Olympia) station. Charlie told them about last summer's security scare, about how the fault lay with a Slovakian airport not Heathrow, but it had shown up weaknesses in their system nonetheless.

'The Slovaks planted a sample of explosives between passengers' luggage on their end, as a test for their sniffer dogs. The dogs found the explosive but some bell-end security guard forgot to remove them,' said Charlie, animated by the drink and sudden hit of fresh air. 'The explosive stuck to this chap's bag – a Slovakian brewer, in London on business. He hadn't the foggiest about any of it, poor sod – and it wasn't detected until he was back in Heathrow a couple of days later, on his way home.'

'So then, the problem is with this other airport's security?' asked Cora, looking around to see where Ray had gotten to. He was loitering a few metres behind.

'Well that, too. But this Slovakian chap was on the plane before we knew about the substance. It was only a sample, not enough to do any damage. Still. We should have spotted it.'

Cora worried they were moving too fast for Ray, but every time she slowed down he did the same. She was starting to think he was doing it on purpose. He was trailing well behind by the time Cora and Charlie reached the station. They descended the escalator, laughing at Charlie's use of the word 'frock'.

'What's wrong with it?'

'Oh nothing. But tell me this, do you see girls wearing them at the hop?'

'Now I know you're teasing me, Cora.'
'I've just never heard you talk so much.'

'I like talking to you.'

Cora hesitated. 'Should we go back for Ray?'

'No. He's - I asked him to fall back.'

Oh fuck.

'Listen, Cora. If you wanted to go out sometime, I would like that.'

If she ran, she could make it to the other end of the tunnel in ten seconds. No bother.

'And if you didn't, that's fine too. Up to you. No pressure. And no hops.'

'Well that's a relief.'

'So up to you,' he repeated.

'Okay. I better ...'

'Course. We're heading south anyway.' Charlie saluted her and turned back towards the escalator. 'I'll go tell Ray the coast is clear.'

'So I think he asked me out ...'

'Yes, Sherlock, I think he did.'

The two women were still sitting in front of the allegorical painting. They had been joined by a tour group of elderly Welsh women and were wedged in a sea of blue rinses. The passers-by listening to audio guides looked like spies with walkie-talkies, and Cora watched carefully to see if their mouths moved. Her hangover paranoia was in full swing. It

was one downside to having an active imagination. Another was the unwanted thoughts that pounded at her mind's door whenever even a sliver of possible interest in someone else, or from someone else, occurred. Charlie was kind - a dignified, masculine kindness that shone from him. But this only made her think of Friedrich, who abhorred the trait above all others. Kind, to him, was the antithesis of brilliant. Cora had called him 'cruel' on one occasion and he almost curtsied with gratitude. She closed her eyes and let her head fall on to her friend's. This had been a position of comfort since they were teenagers; Roisin had always been half a foot smaller. 'It came out of nowhere. One minute we're having great fun, the next he can't come up with anything to say to me - nice *frock*? - and then he's asking me out.'

'Sounds standard to me.'

'Why'd he have to do it? Now it's awkward.'

'Eh, maybe because he likes you? Do you like him?'

'Not like that. Do you think I said something to make him think I did? At one point I did sit beside him even though there were plenty of other chairs. Maybe I should have—'

'Alright, relax,' said Roisin, who had been in Cora's hung-over company enough times to know when to indulge and when to disregard. 'I just wonder if it's that you don't want to go out with *him*, or you don't want to go out with *anyone*?'
'I don't see the difference. He's very nice but he's not for me. Maybe you'd like him?'

Roisin hooted, and the blue-haired pensioner beside her jumped. 'Classic Hendricks. Sort your own love life out, yeah? You already sorted mine.'

'You still seeing Prince Charming?'

'Sporadically. A girl's got needs and it does the job. You gotta get under someone to get over someone else – as the wise proverb goes.'

'Come on,' said Cora, standing from the bench and pulling Roisin up. 'Let's go. We should get a postcard before I head to the grindstone.'

They breezed back through the sixteenth and seventeenth-century rooms, heading for the exit. Cora felt a little awkward about going into Heathrow that evening but here now, in the company of her best friend and the great masters, she felt content. They passed a portrait of Marie Antoinette. 'How would you feel about a trip to Paris?'

Roisin stopped walking and regarded her friend. She looked like she was going to say something else but changed her mind. 'I'd feel very in favour of it, is how I'd feel. About time you used those free flights. A jolly good idea.' The last bit was said with Roisin's terrible faux English accent. It always sounded like she was voicing a Scottish Terrier in some American kids film.

'Here, Cora, don't worry about the auld love life. I've got you sorted. Look.' Roisin nodded towards a fifteenth-century portrait of a man with pudgy face, bulging eyes, and the most ridiculous of hats. 'There's a grand boyfriend for you now.'

The two friends collapsed into laughter and descended the staircase towards Trafalgar Square.

NINE

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Cora entered the staffroom to find Joan sitting alone at one of the three plastic tables, feet resting on a second chair and crossword book open in front of her. Hardened gum was wedged to the sole of her right shoe. Joan was the only member of staff who got away with wearing flats. She'd brought in a doctor's note containing intimate details of bunions, and management never said another word.

'Weasel has been sniffing around,' said Joan. She was drinking tea from a novelty mug. The side facing Cora read: 'I Like My Coffee Like I Like My Men – Strong And Bitter'. 'Promotions and redeployment are next month and he's looking to find out who's interested in a change. Or what was it he called it? "Parties interested in moving onwards and upwards". He was practically licking himself. He has these little forms with *private and confidential* stamped on the top, and they *must* be returned to him personally.' Joan threw her eyes up to heaven.

Restructuring was earmarked for spring. Cora had forgotten. She had been here eight months already. How

had that happened? 'Did he ask if you were interested?'

'Oh yes,' said Joan, hoisting herself up from a slouch to a sit. 'And I told him what I've been telling them for more than thirty years. I'm perfectly happy on my stool, ta very much. They can call it a promotion all they like, but I have no ambition to spend hours on end standing at a gate.'

Check-in was seen as a starter position. When you joined the airline as ground staff, check-in was where you went. You got a few weeks' training and were expected to learn along the way. Most recruits moved on to boarding or arrivals within a year. But not Joan. She had been sitting at check-in for the past thirty-three years and did not intend to leave that stool until the day she was presented with a gold watch – or whatever lesser gift would mark her retirement. They might consider bequeathing the stool.

When Cora started at the airline, she intended to get herself together and make a plan for the future. But then the self-check-in embargo came in and Cora thought that this might be the plan after all. Since she didn't know what she wanted for herself, she would just put her energies into other people. And it had worked. But there were still several unattached frequent fliers on her books, so she didn't really have time to worry about her own future right now. She had enough to be getting on with in the present. It was unlikely Weasel would accept matchmaking as a reason for not wanting to 'move up' in the company. In which case, she'd just have to avoid him.

Cora's university choices were made haphazardly. She chose art history not fully appreciating that it had very little

to do with drawing and a lot more to do with reading about other people drawing. After graduation she still didn't know what to do so she took an internship with an art journal. The money was a pittance and the work depressing. So much more value was placed on everything that surrounded an artwork – the artist's training, their spiel, and how well they networked – than the actual piece itself. Cora's last assignment before she finally called 'bullshit' on the whole thing was a three-thousand-word interview with an emerging sensation whose greatest artistry was adding 'Inc.' to the end of his name. Joseph Mason Walter Inc. had been the darling of the Frieze art fair where his entire *oeuvre* was 'the art of no production', aka making and selling absolutely nothing – and at a rapidly growing price.

She took directionless, part-time work, thinking a career would just present itself to her. But it didn't. So she went to Berlin. Leaving England felt like a valid alternative to having a career path. When relatives asked Sheila what her wayward daughter was doing, she could say 'Cora's in Germany', and there would rarely be any follow-up questions. Being in a different geographical location qualified as doing something.

In Berlin, she worked as a copywriter for an English-language company and thought seriously about going back to university. Then she met Friedrich and the idea that she could make any important life decision *and* be in this relationship was utterly inconceivable. She'd never been in love before and it was all-consuming. Keeping up with Friedrich, or perhaps just keeping Friedrich, was a full-time occupation.

In her better moments Cora thought of Berlin as her wilderness years and that that was okay. In darker moments, it was the point at which she fucked-up her life. As Cora approached thirty she became aware that being directionless wasn't as romantic as it used to be. Your twenties were for fucking up. Soon, she feared, it would just be tragic.

Since she'd come home from Berlin, and her mother had gotten sick, it was that feeling of a giant, invisible hand grabbing her by the core and shaking and shaking until everything became dislodged. Cora's insides no longer seemed to sit right. She was constantly afraid that if she made any sudden movements, everything would come toppling down. And she could no longer rely on anyone else. So she stayed where she was and tried to realign herself. For pleasure, of course, there was always the happiness of others.

Cora left Joan to her crosswords and headed out to the floor. It was a busy Thursday evening, and there were four women already behind the Aer Lingus desks. She logged into a fifth computer and started working her way through passengers destined for Edinburgh and Madrid. Charlie passed the Aer Lingus queue and saluted Cora, holding up his stopwatch. Another lunchtime run. She waved back. He was not the sort to make things awkward. Still, she wished she could go back in time and leave the pub early so the whole thing had never happened.

'Nancy!' Cora shouted as her friend glided past her desk. The air hostess redirected her path, her blonde ponytail swinging as she came to a halt at the Aer Lingus counter. 'I

never heard from you yesterday,' said Cora. 'How did Row 27 go?'

'With the Icelandic fella? That one was very interesting.'

'I thought it might be! I could just see them together, you know? Those pale complexions and sensible shoes.'

'Oh, well no,' said Nancy, who was travelling with her favourite Louis Vuitton suitcase, the Harrods tag still attached as proof of authenticity. Nancy was eager to distinguish herself from the long-haul air hostesses who picked up knock-off gear in Beijing and Marrakesh. 'I don't think the match went anywhere. She pulled out an eye mask as soon as she got on board. But the Icelandic fella was dead interesting. We had a great chat. Did you know he's a life coach?'

'Of course I knew. He specialises in careers and the woman I matched him with had recently been made unemployed. It was perfect. Hence why they were supposed to be doing the flirting, not you!'

'I wasn't flirting. We were talking about work and, like I said, the woman was asleep. Anyway, anyway,' said Nancy, shaking off Cora's protestations, 'how did the rest of the other night go? After Ray's race. Anything *interesting* happen?'

'What? No,' said Cora, flustered. 'A couple too many drinks but that was it. Now, about this evening's Dublin flight: I'm thinking a young couple for Row 27. They can be flighty but it's been a while since we've given youth a chance. What do you reckon?'

'Sure, Cupid. You line 'em up, I'll do what I can.'

The first lull came at 4 p.m. and Cora started to research passengers on the 6.20 p.m. to Dublin. It was the only

outbound flight Nancy was on that day. She had selected a twenty-two-year-old Irish woman who'd flown into Heathrow that morning. Megan O'Neill. Experience had taught Cora that most young people who flew in and out of London in a day were there for job interviews. She matched Megan with Philip Mellon, a twenty-two-year-old law graduate originally from near Dublin and now interning at a London non-governmental organisation. His LinkedIn page was very impressive. Almost as soon as Cora had started using social media as a research tool, she'd changed all her own settings to private. The amount of information people divulged was staggering.

Megan was one of the first to present at the desk.

'Meg—' Cora caught herself in time, biting her tongue until she had actually opened the passport. There was no reason for her to know this woman's name. 'Megan O'Neill! Welcome to Aer Lingus. Any check-in bags?'

She wasn't as chatty as Cora had hoped: 'Did you have a nice day in London?' got a mumbled response about meeting friends — but she assigned her to 27A.

'Cora Hendricks. A word in my office?' Weasel was standing behind her, peering disapprovingly at the crusts of a half-eaten sandwich on the shelf below her desk while hugging a pile of documents to himself. His lips were flaking at the edges. In all his managerial excitement, he must have forgotten the ChapStick.

'I'm in the middle of check-in.'

'Your colleagues can look after your flight. This, however, concerns your future.'

With no excuse to stay, Cora quickly pre-assigned Philips's seat — 27B — and hoped she'd be back to catch a glimpse.

She followed Weasel to the Aer Lingus staffroom, studying his feet as she went. They moved like one of those wind-up ducks, yet all that rapid movement didn't seem to propel him any faster. In the staffroom, there was a handwritten 'reserved' sign in the centre of the furthest plastic table. Weasel's 'office', she presumed.

'Have a seat.'

He cleared his throat and tapped the collective documents against the table. 'In this business we call air travel, there's no month as important as March. As you'll no doubt be aware, March is when new recruits across the entire airline confirm who they are and decide who they want to become. I'm sure you've heard about it from your mother. It's the time when we separate the boys from the men, the wheat from the chaff, the curds from the whey, the—'

'I get it.'

'This' — he shook his beloved documents — 'is the difference between gold circle lounge and baggage tracing.'

'Right.'

'There are a lot of other areas where you might like to spend some time, get a more varied insight to how we work.'

'Indeed.'

Cora watched Weasel's chin quiver. It seemed everything trembled on the higher plane of responsibility. An uninvited image of Weasel experiencing orgasmic pleasure popped into her head. *Sweet lord*, Cora admonished her imagination: *Behave.*

Weasel was content not to receive a concrete answer, sympathising that it was a big decision. He banded around the word 'future' for a little longer, and then handed her a form. 'It's private and confidential,' he said, reluctant to relinquish eye contact or his end of the document. 'Return it to me, and me only.'

Cora was back at check-in just in time to see Philip striding up to a colleague's desk. She checked the system; he was still down for his designated seat. She watched him talk to the other check-in attendant. He was smaller than his profile picture suggested and he had glasses. He was wearing the ill-fitted black jeans and white T-shirt that was uniform among young men with no interest in fashion. Cora sat back to read the slogan on his T-shirt: Straight Up For Equality.

Her mobile phone vibrated on the shelf beside her discarded sandwich. A text from Roisin:

How go things with Charlie? Has he asked for your hand in marriage yet, or does he wanna get your father's permission first? Bagsy bridesmaid.

When Cora looked back, Philip was gone.

TEN

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LHR - > DUB 6.20 p.m.

As she struggled down the aisle, banging into seats as she went, Megan O'Neill thought how, for the first time, it reminded her of a church. Her pew was near the back of the plane and she held herself upright as she made her way through the teens and into the twenties - 24, 25, 26, finally. She lowered her body into the seat, a heat rising in her that had nothing to do with the coat she was still wearing, buttoned up but left untied at the waist. She sat for a minute and collected herself, before standing again to remove the jacket. She kept it on her knee, fashioned like a blanket.

Megan put her hand to her face and thought about her appearance. She wondered if it gave something away. She had kept an eagle eye out for people she knew at Dublin Airport that morning, an alibi on the tip of her tongue, but she had forgotten to do the same on the way home. What had she told that check-in lady? She scanned the plane and then something came back to her: she had given the nurse Rachel's address. She had panicked. Shit shit. What

if they contacted her? What if they wrote to that address and Rachel's parents opened it or, worse, what if they sent it over to Megan's house and her parents opened it? The best friends had grown up minutes from each other and, as a kid, Megan had sent a postcard meant for Rachel to her own address. She often rang her best friend's house phone when she meant to ring her own. She had precedence. Megan dug her mobile from her coat pocket and frantically began to Google, worried she would be made to turn off her phone before she had found the answer. But there it was on a message board: Postal information is for records and statistics only. Megan's last two searches had been cramping and bleeding. She deleted her search history. She wondered about all the information that was never deleted.

Philip Mellon lugged his bulging carry-on down the passageway. Why didn't they open the rear entrance for boarding? They'd be ready for take-off twice as quick. The only good thing about having to parade the whole way down the aisle was that it gave the other passengers a chance to see his T-shirt and consider its message. He used his free hand to pull down the cheap cotton, removing the creases. His bag caught against a seated woman's foot and gave a little jolt. He lifted it over her and kept lugging. He had never before brought such a packed suitcase for a weekend at home. Usually it was two pairs of boxers, a T-shirt, and

some study material. Usually it all fitted in his shoulder bag. There were no clothes in this weekend's luggage and, it now occurred to him, no underwear. Never mind. It was only three nights. The suitcase was filled with posters, badges, a staple gun, Straight Up for Equality T-shirts, petitions of signatures he and other Oxford alumni had collected, and flags. The monetary value was low, but this was the most important piece of luggage on board. Philip moved another suitcase from the compartment directly above his seat so he could keep the cargo as close as possible. Well this was his allocated seat and, as such, his allocated storage space.

He looked at the girl beside him and saw the passport resting on her knee. Irish, and about his own age; she'd appreciate him sacrificing his weekend. There was so much studying to do – even after you'd gotten your law degree. People had no idea.

'Do you live in Ireland?' he asked as he sat, startling the girl to attention.

'Yes,' she said.

'I'm from Wicklow myself, but living in London now. Been over here for, what, six years? Feels like home really. I couldn't imagine going back to Ireland; it just seems so small.'

She smiled without eye contact. He judged her demeanour to be not so much rude as lazy. Apathy was a terrible disease. *Engage, woman*, he thought. It's an electrifying world. Awake from your indifference.

'But I still care about the place. I'm going home to campaign, actually. A whole weekend of it. I'll be exhausted by

the end but what else can you do? The vote is nearly upon us, for marriage equality, you know?' He turned to face her and pulled at his T-shirt. She nodded her recognition. Legalising gay marriage had been the only thing debated on Irish airwaves for the past year. 'I'm a human rights lawyer,' he continued, wondering if his tone was casual enough. 'And every day we see these third-world cases cross our desk and all I can think about is what's going on in my own country. I tell my colleagues, "Ireland is home to a litany of human rights violations." That's how I describe it. I say, "I come from a third-world country."'



His voice was so loud, like a fog horn. Megan tried to end the conversation, but she couldn't because it wasn't actually a conversation. She knew his type. He was one of those people who asked unforgivably long questions after film screenings or public interviews – only there was never actually a question, just a declaration of their intelligence. She had guessed Trinity College, but the length of time he'd been in England suggested Oxbridge, which made even more sense. He probably meant well but she didn't care. Megan had willed the gods to let her sit alone on the journey home but she supposed they weren't best pleased with her. She didn't believe in God, of course, it was all a nonsense, but still she could never stop herself making little deals with an unseen power. Lately, though, these deals weren't being honoured.

She found out she was pregnant three weeks after breaking up with Darragh, and one week after they had met up again and she had collapsed on O'Connell Bridge when he would not consent to take her back. Megan had sat on the cold, grey concrete and thought of how they'd strolled to the Iveagh Gardens wrapped up in each other on a Saturday morning just two months before. She remembered worrying that she'd become half a person, someone who could only walk when the other half was there to prop her up. Then that other half had severed itself completely and she could not stand. Others would not believe it but she knew she had felt the moment when her heart broke and everything around it came tumbling down.

She did not hear from him between that evening on the bridge and the Friday morning she took the pregnancy test in the bathroom of the RTE Radio building. Seven hours after her pee had turned the stick blue, she went home from her job as a radio researcher and bought a box of granola en route. She vowed that it would be the only thing she would eat. If she had not heard from Darragh by the time she had finished the box, it meant he was never coming back. Then her mother had eaten the end of the cereal and Megan had melted into floods of tears. The deal was null and void, but she persevered. Megan promised that if she was not pregnant, she would donate to charity the €900 she had saved since getting her first proper job; she picked her four favourite pieces of clothing from her wardrobe and vowed to drop them off at the local Oxfam; she would eat no chocolate for three months. But the family planning clinic confirmed that these sacrifices had not been enough. She was pregnant.

She could never imagine eating again, least of all chocolate, and her €900 bequest now constituted the abortion fund.

She had told Rachel, and together they booked flights. Rachel had offered to go to London with her but she hadn't found work since graduation and Megan did not have the money to pay for the both of them. The night before she flew to London for the procedure, Megan stayed at Rachel's house – telling her parents she was visiting old university friends on the other side of town. She slipped out before the sun came up and before Rachel's parents noticed their overnight guest.

Megan had flown out of Dublin Airport at 6.40 a.m. that morning. When she landed at home in an hour's time, she would have to get the bus straight into the city centre to her brother's eighteenth birthday dinner. Her stomach churned as she thought of the McDonald's she had vomited up in the Heathrow bathroom.

'Just throw a quick eye on them, George, when you're taking the food cart around.'

George let out a pointed sigh and snatched the trolley from Nancy. She was still making her way through the procedural manual. 'Fine. But I'm doing it for you, not for Cora.'

He'd had another car crash of a date yesterday. This one was actually a friend of a friend, and George's *friend* swore nothing had ever happened between them – which turned

out to be a total lie. George had sat for an hour in Starbucks counselling this kid who had slept with his friend months ago and then been dropped quicker than a Beyoncé album. George didn't know what to say except to tell him to get used to it. 'They tell you coming out is the hardest part,' he said, as the kid scratched at a pimple on his chin. 'But that's only where it begins.'

'Ireland has been before the HRC – that's the Human Rights Commission, the UN? – anyway, Ireland has been called up three times in as many years. It's mortifying. I feel shame, genuinely I do, to come from somewhere so backwards. Nobody listens to the oppressed. Nobody lets them speak. Straight white men make all the decisions. We tell women and homosexuals and lesbians, we tell them all what they should and shouldn't do. It never ends ...'

Megan tried to tune him out but his nasal tone kept drilling its way into her mind. She thought about the after-care sheet she had read on the bus back to the airport, before discarding it in a bin when no one was looking. Rachel had found her a clinic that did cheaper rates for Irish citizens. That's why she had given a Dublin address. How illegal was abortion, exactly? There was no chance the authorities would stop someone at Dublin Airport. Was there? At school

there'd been a rumour that they sometimes did. They said you shouldn't travel for twenty-four hours after a procedure and Megan had gotten the latest flight that she could. But she had to make that dinner. The main concern was that women would start bleeding heavily mid-air. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her body; it didn't feel like more blood than a period, but she'd never had cramps like these before.



'... The problem is middle Ireland. You're in Dublin and you think, "Okay, maybe this country isn't such an embarrassment" but then you go into the Midlands or, you know, basically anywhere else and it's like nobody can think for themselves. That's where we should be campaigning, probably, but we'd actually be lynched – or whatever it is they do down there. Wicklow is as far as we're going. There are a lot of older people there but they just need it explained to them that everyone should be allowed to marry...'



Megan no longer experienced the waves of guilt that had made her feel ill on the way to the airport this morning. The primary emotion was relief. She no longer felt bad about lying to her parents – although she had wished her mother had been there. She wished she'd been holding her hand in the waiting room and sitting with her afterwards. She

wished she could have told her. Whenever Megan was at her saddest, she thought of her mother and she thought of her as 'Mummy' – a name she hadn't called her out loud for fifteen years. As she lay on the bed after the procedure, she had thought of her mammy. She had imagined seeing herself from above, flying up and up until she was so far in the sky that she could see both herself on a bed in a discreet clinic beside a council estate in Brentford and her mother at her school desk, running through times tables with ten year olds in North County Dublin.

That the doctor had been male had made it worse. She wasn't expecting a man and it made her embarrassed and ashamed. She didn't think she should feel that way but she did. Megan felt the flush in her cheeks and the tear ducts beginning to widen behind her eyes. She steadied herself. She would give her mother a big hug when she reached the restaurant tonight. And her mother would return it because she was a loving person; she just happened to have different beliefs.

'... From the trolley? Anything?'

The nasal boy and a man, standing in the aisle with a trolley. They were looking at her. 'Sorry,' said Megan. 'No thanks.'

'Are you sure? It's on the house. We just love Row 27.' The air steward said the last line loudly, turning his head towards the rear of the plane. A blonde woman was watching him.

'No thanks.'

'Well I'll have a coffee anyway, cheers, pal. Any chance of something a little foamy or is it just regular?'

'It's instant.'

'Don't worry about it, that'll do. So yes, the T-shirt ...'

Darragh had liked coffee. Megan didn't. He had tried to get her into it but to no avail. Would she always associate coffee with him, she wondered. She was, at least, thinking of him in the past tense. Did it take getting pregnant to get over someone?

'... Well that's the thing, George. It is George, right? The name-tag. Anyway, I'm not gay but I believe you have the right to be. It's the same with all those things. The right to choose, you know? I'm just standing up for your rights ...'

The boy was white noise to Megan but she watched the flight attendant's stony reaction. His face was void of emotion. 'How wonderful of you,' he said, and pushed the trolley onwards. But the boy was immune to sarcasm.

'Free drinks?' he said, as much to Megan as any of his previous statements had been. 'Irish airlines certainly have come a long way since I last flew with one. You should have taken something.'

Megan felt her stomach spasm and instinctively put her hand to it. She had found herself protecting her midriff for three weeks now. Knowing it was ridiculous hadn't been enough to make her stop. She yanked her hand away and rubbed her fingers together, as if trying to remove the magnets that drew them. She dropped her head back against the rest and feigned sleep.



The girl didn't seem to care one way or the other about the country she was still living in. Or maybe Philip was boring her. That was how it was now, though, he thought, people expressing opinions on Facebook but never in real life. He watched her, pretending to snooze. But he knew she was awake because her breathing hadn't changed. He looked past her, out the window, and saw Dublin in the distance. The boy was distinctive. He was meeting the others for some pre-campaigning pints this evening. They'd like the T-shirt – oh, and the door-to-door pins! He lifted himself slightly and pulled a badge from his back pocket: Make Up Your Own Mind. Yes, they'd all love that.

ELEVEN

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No matter what way she looked at it – and Cora had considered the document from every angle now – the dominant colour on her matchmaking chart was still red. The duvet pushed down and pillows propping her up, she set the rainbow pen to failure and added more results. It had been a disappointing month.

Her frequent fliers were proving particularly irksome. It had been four flights since Ingrid had even thrown her a yellow, and Cora was starting to think of Aiden as an episode of *Sesame Street* – brought to you by the colour red, and the number zero. Cora ignored Nancy's feedback on the young pair who'd flown to Dublin last week – Megan was the girl, she forgot the boy's name – and put it down as 'undecided'. Nancy had sent George to assess the situation and, Cora reassured herself as she shaded the box yellow, George would say anything to annoy her.

She felt a flash of irritation when she looked at the red mark that represented the Icelandic match Nancy had thrown off course. There were enough men in the world without Nancy having to interfere with Row 27. How was she supposed to up

the amount of green on the chart, when her only accomplice was doing her best to keep them in the red?

Cora slipped the chart back into her bedside table drawer and threw her legs out from under the covers. She stretched her toes against the warm lino. Weren't dreams supposed to be forgotten once your feet hit the floor? Yet a vague sensation of discombobulation remained.

Cora wound up the blind and looked out of her narrow bedroom window straight into the upstairs deck of the 253 bus and the eyes of a teenage girl. Cora liked to imagine Seven Sisters Road as a safari route; the red London buses were road-hardy vehicles carrying curious tourists, and she was the exotic animal. As the 253 pulled away, Cora tilted her head to the side (she was an ostrich on this particular Saturday) and the girl waved. Some mornings, halfway through dressing, Cora would remember that the blind was open. But as this was not a safari route – and they were distracted commuters, not curious tourists – it never mattered. They were always too preoccupied with their mobile phones to notice her clammy flesh.

The television made itself known before Cora had entered the kitchen and, standing at the doorway, she spied a colander and the Weight Watchers scales on the draining board. No matter what meal-for-one Mary made, she always used more dishes than the basin could contain. This morning's breakfast consisted of a carefully constructed egg white omelette, oven-roasted squash, and some form of green smoothie. Spirulina lingered in the air and the discarded egg yolks sat at the bottom of a mug – Cora's favourite mug.

'What are you watching?' Cora asked, putting her porridge in the microwave and searching for a clean cup.

'Super-size *Always Dies*.'

'That's quite the title.'

'It's where really overweight people are told how long they have before their fat kills them,' said Mary, her eyes never flickering from the screen. An obese woman stood in front of a white curtain while a man in a crisp coat attached pegs to her flab. Mary watched in rapture, sucking on her fork.

Cora added a teabag and hot water to the only clean vessel she could find. 'My mother is fifty-eight today and we're having a birthday lunch this afternoon.'

'That's nice.'

'It should be good, I think. Just a few hours – that's all she could handle really, and then perhaps I'll go to the Tate.' Her flatmate chortled. 'You're obsessed with art galleries.'

'I'm hardly obsessed, Mary. I haven't been in weeks. Three weeks, probably.'

Cora waited for a response, but Mary didn't so much as glance at her flatmate. She didn't budge. Perhaps the fork had become lodged in her throat.

Cora took her bowl from the microwave and carried it into Roisin's bedroom. 'Mary just called me obsessed,' she said, plonking herself down beside her drowsy friend. 'With art galleries, apparently. I could have gotten the Mona Lisa tattooed on my forehead this morning for all Mary would have known. She couldn't take her eyes off those exploited creatures. But oh yes, of course: *I'm* the obsessed one.'

Roisin grinned, stretching her arms above her head.

'You'd have liked her breakfast though. She basically constructed an edible Irish flag.'

'Ah, the tricolour.' Roisin rolled over to reach for her phone and check the time. Roisin didn't eat breakfast but she lived for tea. Cora handed her the mug and started to open the curtains. Her friend sat up and watched.

'You're giving me your tea, and daylight? Sure you're as good as two women.' Roisin's grandfather had said that to her father once, when he'd presented the old man with a sandwich and immediately started to set the fire. It was now one of Roisin's principal sayings. 'You're looking well, Cora.'

'Why thank you.' She curtsied, spreading the skirt of a floral dress originally bought for a wedding. 'We're having lunch at Maeve's house for Sheila's birthday.'

'How old is she?'

'Fifty-eight today, and it's making me feel old. I thought this dress might be too young actually.'

'It's not.'

'I hope not; I've barely worn it. It's funny how a bit of colour makes you feel better – which reminds me I need to get flowers for Mum and Maeve. What time are you leaving for Brighton?'

Roisin was going to a gig that evening. Prince Charming played in a band. 'Pure shite' was how Roisin described Avoid the Slam's sound, but they got free accommodation when they giggered away from London and it allowed her to wear the 'I'm with the Drummer' T-shirt she bought years

ago. The purchase had originally been ironic because, as Roisin explained at the time, 'nobody boasts about being with the drummer'.

'Leaving at three and I'll be back tomorrow, probably not till late because we have to wait for the bassist to get over his hangover before he can drive the van back. Avoid the Slam are headlining, which tells you just how god-awful a shithole the venue will be, but I've never had Brighton fish 'n' chips before.'

Cora tuned in Roisin's radio and lay across the bed. She listened to Frank Skinner comparing some soap storyline to an obscure Greek tragedy. Cora stared at the lanyard hanging from Roisin's bed post – FINSBURY PARK LIBRARY N4: STAFF – and her friend began to dress.

'I found this the other day,' said Roisin, producing a letter from her underwear drawer. 'You sent it to me from Germany right after you'd met Friedrich and letters were the only way you could express *how you truly felt*.' Roisin was the only person Cora knew capable of making mockery sound like affection. 'You switched back to emails fast enough when the shit hit the fan though.'

Cora shoved her face into the duvet and groaned. She could barely conceive of how sycophantic she'd once been, but the evidence persisted. 'Throw it away, please.'

'Some of it is quite good, Cora. Whatever about Fredi the Yeti—'

'He wasn't hairy!'

Roisin shrugged. 'Still an arsehole though, wasn't he? There are some really clever passages about museums and

art and stuff. Don't know half of what you're on about, but you say it well.'

Cora pulled herself up from the bed. 'Right, I better go.' She squeezed her friend's shoulders as she headed out the door. 'Enjoy tonight, and have some chips for me.'

The flower shop in Stoke Newington was closed for a family bereavement so Cora cycled the streets, familiar only with that one florist and its morose window display of wreaths and lilies, until she came across a stall in Dalston. She was now late arriving at Maeve's red-brick, semi-detached home. She noted the fresh mauve paint on the gate and the robust geraniums that ruled her sister's modest garden. Maeve had inherited their mother's green fingers. Cora, on the other hand, could just about tell a deciduous from an evergreen. She rang the bell and heard her niece squeal with excitement. Cora imagined a mild electric current running from this buzzer to the three-year-old Primrose. She considered pressing it again, just to check.

'Come in, come in,' said Chris, ushering her inside but still holding the door ajar. Cora stooped to pass under his arm, and he gave her an awkward embrace. Maeve's husband was the quintessential bumbling Englishman. He had an endless supply of red linen trousers that made Cora picture him on a camel, colonising some region of India.

'Hello, hello,' he said, jittering as he fixed his tortoiseshell glasses. 'It's, ahem, good to see you.'

'Good to see you too, Chris,' she said, handing him the slightly cheaper bunch of flowers.

'Oh they're just – well, yes, thank you.' He cleared his throat in what was a regular tic. 'Jolly good. Everyone is in here. Just, ahem, flowers, need some water . . .' He led her through the short hallway into the bright kitchen-cum-dining room.

It was a scene of such domestic contentment that Cora's heart swelled for how much her mother would enjoy it. Sheila had yet to arrive but Maeve was bent over the oven, an apron tied around her waist and a mitten on one hand. She was chatting to a dolled-up Joan, whose prosecco glass was adorned with overlapping rings of lipstick. Cian was at the table, studiously constructing Lego while Primrose used him as a climbing frame. A banner hung above them: 'Happy Twenty-first Birthday'. The old jokes were the best.

'Cora, Cora!' shouted Primrose, flinging herself from Cian and somehow bouncing off the tiled floor. She was up and running at her aunt but stopped, shyly, just in front of her.

Cora bundled the skinny child into her arms and blew raspberries all over her stomach until Primrose, through tears of laughter, begged to be put back down. Cora embraced her sister and Joan, and took a glass of prosecco from Chris who then went back to ineffectually searching for a vase. He opened and closed the same few cupboards, patting his pockets as he went. *You're not going to find one in there*, *mate*, thought Cora. There were two empty vases over the sink, but she decided it best to leave him to it.

'Where's Sheila?'

'They should be here any minute,' said Maeve, glancing at the bird clock by the backdoor. A housewarming present from Sheila, it made the noise of a different bird on the hour every hour. 'The nurse is bringing her and Tom. You know Tom's son ordered a bracelet online for Sheila birthday? Tom found it wrapped up yesterday and thought it was for him. He was wearing it when the nurse did the night-time checks.'

'The red-faced chap?' asked Joan, prosecco sloshing in her glass.

'The very one. Flannel pyjamas and a string of pearls.'

The women grinned, but just for a moment. Cora watched Maeve measure out the makings of a salad dressing. Since Sheila had gone to live in the research facility, her sister had assumed a matriarchal role. She phoned Cora every week to check in and invite her to dinner.

Maeve's mobile rang. 'Hi, Trish! Are you all on your way? I've just—' She cut herself off and scooted around Cora and Joan, stepping into the back garden with the screen door left ajar.

'Trish is a nurse at the facility,' Cora informed Joan as the older woman topped up their glasses. The screen door slid back and Maeve reappeared.

'They're running a little late. Should be here within the hour.' Maeve dropped her phone on the counter and opened the fridge. 'Will you hand me the pavlova? If I can fit it in the fridge, it should keep without the fruit.'

'Is anything wrong?'

'Trish said Sheila was a little muddled this morning, but she's back on track now. She had that long session for the

research paper yesterday. I knew it would be too much with a party the next day but that's the thing with her being in that place; nothing is movable.'

'It's nice she can still come and go,' offered Joan.

'It's a research facility, not a home.'

'But what was she muddled about?'

'Honestly, Cora, I don't know the details.' Maeve stopped rearranging clingfilmed bowls. 'Will you pop down to the shop like the dear that you are and get some more cream – double cream?'

Closing the garden gate behind her, a shard of paint chipped off. Cora pulled her phone from her bag and texted Nancy:

Hey! Are you about later? Fancy a chat and drink? I will even venture south of the river. C x

When the Rowan Centre people-carrier finally pulled up outside the end-of-terrace house, Sheila was an hour and a half late. Cora knew something was wrong. The way other people felt the rain in their bones, she knew it in her stomach.

'Hi, Mum.' Cora stepped forward to kiss the top of her head. Sheila's hair was damp and she breathed in the shampoo. Cora offered her hand to Tom but he only looked at it. 'It's Cora, Tom. Sheila's daughter? How are you?' But he just moved closer to Trish.

Maeve followed the nurse out to the car, and Chris led Tom to the dining table. It was barely three months since

Cora had last seen the old man and the transformation made her insides lurch. Sheila and Joan positioned themselves around one end of the dining table and were immediately giggling conspiratorially.

'Get us a glass of bubbly stuff, Cora.'

'Are you sure?'

'Is it not my birthday?'

Chastened, Cora went to the kitchen and fetched her mother a champagne flute. Sheila placed the glass beside her fork and turned to wink at her friend: 'So tell me, Joan: how is Jim? Asking for me?' Joan slapped Sheila on the shoulder. It was an old tease that Jim had first had his eye on Cora's mother.

Maeve returned looking happy and relaxed. But still something stirred inside Cora. The appetiser tray got passed around and she suffocated the unease with sourdough and hummus. The food was delicious. Maeve's potato gratin was always on point. Tom became overwhelmed after the main course and retired to the sitting room to watch Sky News with the sound on mute. Maeve considered phoning Trish but the others dissuaded her.

'He'll survive another hour,' said Joan, poking at the cheese board. 'I can never remember which is which. Suppose I'll have to try them all.' Maeve slid the cheese slicer towards her but Joan was already attacking the platter with her butter knife. 'That was a top meal. You're blessed to have such a talented daughter, Sheila.'

'Maeve is so good at maths. Did you know?'

'And Cora at drawing,' Maeve added.

'You're one of the best in the country. You win all the trophies, don't you, Maeve?'

'I used to, Mum.'

Joan patted Sheila's hand. 'It's great to have daughters. But Sheila no longer seemed to be listening. She excused herself to go to the bathroom and Chris went to stick on the kettle.

'Tea or, ahem, coffee?'

Cora could hear her mother upstairs opening and closing doors until she found the toilet. Always that feeling of insides being shook out of place. Cora sat up straight and tried to align her internal jumble.

Sheila returned with her hair brushed. She nudged Joan gently as she took her seat: 'So, has Jim been asking after me?' Coffee cups were being clattered across the table, and Joan looked around to see if anyone had heard. Cora averted her gaze.

'Oh, Sheila, you know he's always asking for you.'

The unease stirring again, torpedoing up through hummus, roast chicken, and pavlova.

'What sort of cheese is this then, Maeve?' Joan's voice louder now, her hand still on Sheila's shoulder.

'Emmental, I think.'

'They have that in the new Lidl but Jim reckons it's like chewing on a bicycle wheel. He's convinced a body couldn't digest it.'

The bird clock chimed from the kitchen and Sheila tilted her head: 'A blue tit.'

'We love that clock,' said Maeve. 'Primrose knows all

the sounds. Don't you, petal?'

Primrose, who was sitting in a booster seat between her mother and grandmother, had missed the question but squeezed her juice box at the sound of her name: 'I'm here! I'm here!'

'Oh now, look at your dress. You've got a wee stain . . . Sheila dabbed the child's skirt with a napkin, and Maeve fetched a cloth from the sink. 'Mind now, Maeve, I've got it.' Sheila's elbow knocked the juice box over again. A tiny puddle dribbled onto the child's lap and Sheila started to wipe at it frantically.

'It's fine, Mum. Don't worry.'

'I just wasn't minding. Too much of the bubbly stuff . . . Sheila trailed off. 'I'm sorry, Primrose, I am now, I'm sorry.' But the little girl was as delighted as before and Cora, who was on the verge of vomiting, feared it was everyone else's forgiveness her mother was entreating.

'Maeve's got it, Mum,' she said, sliding her hand across the table but Sheila snapped her own hand back.

'I'm not a child. Do not treat me like a child!'

The harsh words fired like elastic bands against the skin of Cora's outstretched arm. She pulled it back as Maeve stood and started to talk loudly. She gestured to her husband to take Sheila into the sitting room.

Cora climbed the stairs to her sister's bedroom and sat at the end of their king-sized mattress. Her niece's drawings were Blu-Tacked to the wardrobe and a pair of red linen trousers hung over the edge of a wicker basket. Maeve followed her into the room and closed the door. 'Corey . . .'

Cora turned to look at her sister and, as she opened her mouth, the pain in her stomach finally escaped. It jumped straight into her throat, flooding her head and pushing at the dam.

'She had a long day yesterday.' Maeve sat beside her at the foot of the bed, rubbing her back gently. Cora missed hugs. Suddenly she felt starved of them. She squeezed her sister as if to steady her balance. She tried to absorb some of Maeve's sturdiness and transmitted all the things she could not say. One day her mother would die and Cora would be all alone. When the fear slowed, she pulled herself apart.

'I know. It's not like I don't know. But she was fine last week. She was fine every other week.'

Maeve smiled. Concern caused her brow to furrow, just like their mother.

'Was it just the extra sessions – you know, the ones you were talking about?'

'It's a degenerative condition, Cora.'

'So this it then, the bit where it all goes quickly downhill?'

'It wasn't that bad. Look at Tom.'

'I don't want to look at Tom. Tom is the future. You can't go back, can you? People don't get worse, then better, then worse, then better. It's a one-way thing. I didn't think, I just—' Cora was about to admit that she'd never fully believed their mother was sick, but she stopped. She had a flashback to when she was ten, standing in their bathroom in Kew while her older sister told her about periods. Maeve had shown her the sanitary pads in the cupboard under the sink and Cora had been horrified to think of their mother

wearing nappies. Cora shook out her arms and her sister reached for a hand.

'Why was she late today, Maeve?'

'There was a problem with the plants. She had a seedling, this delicate young thing in the blue pot, and it was flooded today. Sopping with water. Their little roots can't handle much liquid. Sheila started accusing the aides of killing her shrub. But nobody had been in her room all day.'

'So what was it then?'

'She forgot, Cora. She had watered the plant and forgot and then she did it again. It'll probably die now. The poor thing.'

'Poor Sheila.'

'We should go down,' said Maeve. 'I need to keep an eye.'

'Did she give you a...?'

'A letter? Yes.'

'Did you open it?'

'No.'

'Me neither.'

'How are other things? How is the airport?'

'That's all fine.'

'Have you thought any more about going back to university?'

'Work is fine,' Cora repeated, and she pulled a tissue from a box at the side of the bed and blew her nose. 'And what, Maeve Hendricks, are these tissues intended for?' Cora arched an eyebrow and did her best to smile. 'These tissues right here beside the marital bed? Hmmm?'

Maeve grinned and took a tissue herself. 'Primrose is obsessed with people blowing their nose at the moment.'

She can't understand why she has to wipe her bottom in the bathroom but daddy is allowed to wipe his nose in public. She refers to snots as "nose pee".

Cora snorted.

'I'm raising a right lady.'

'She has a point.'

The women stood and, arm-in-arm, they descended to the hallway just in time to see a Trish-shaped shadow through the frosted glass. Maeve opened the front door.

'So, ladies, how did we get on?' Trish gave Maeve the leave form to fill out. Everything had to be recorded. Trish went into the sitting room to observe Tom and Sheila sitting side-by-side watching a report about a plane crash. Sheila was explaining how a black box operates. Cora offered Trish some tea. She politely declined and continued her markings.

As they pulled on their coats, the clock chimed again.

'A woodpecker,' said Sheila to Trish. 'I bought them that.'

'What did you buy, Sheila?'

'That with the birds, that, the wall watch.'

Sheila bowed her head so Cora could kiss the top of it. Her lips dallied on the crown. What had always been a sweet gesture – she was five foot eight to her mother's five foot three – now felt like intimidation.

Joan went to catch the Tube and Cora left not long afterwards, promising to come for tea again in a couple of weeks. Cian was watching the second Lord of the Rings film unperturbed by Maeve cleaning around him. Cora liked how her brother, at least, was always the same.

It was after 5 p.m. and the light was grey. Cora mounted her bike and braced herself for the drop from pavement to road. She cycled along the bus lane and tried to picture her mother's funeral. Her father would rear his head, with his current wife, arriving on flights Cora had arranged. There'd be a large contingent from the airport and Cian would refuse to wear a suit. Who would speak? Probably Maeve. And what would happen to the siblings if their mother wasn't around? She was the centre of all their meetings. Cora tried to think of a time she had hung out with Cian alone. But she could not.

She pulled in at a bus stop to consider her options. It was too late to go to a gallery and she was reluctant to go home. Cora thought of going to a cafe to read her book. She checked her phone again. Still no response. Nancy was useless.

TWELVE

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LHR -> UTC 8.40 p.m.

Nancy had watched a Deepak Chopra tutorial on YouTube and was now doing manifestation visualisation at the rear of the plane. She pulled the curtain over, closed her eyes, and thought solely of what she was going to achieve; she would be confident in the interview, she would get the promotion, she would deserve the promotion, and she would one day be wealthy enough to buy an apartment outright . . .

She added the last bit last minute, and it probably didn't qualify as a higher spiritual purpose. But then again, Nancy had also read *The Secret* over the weekend, and that book didn't have such a problem with materialism. *The Secret* said you could visualise anything and it would come. You just had to repeat it to yourself over and over. It had worked with finding a parking space at Westfield shopping centre on Saturday afternoon.

Nancy pulled the curtain open as she heard passengers starting to board. She ran a cloth over her new shoes – two-and-a-half-inch heels; exactly regulation height – and rubbed her tongue across her teeth to check for lipstick. *I*

deserve a promotion, I deserve a promotion, I deserve a promotion. It was Wednesday, six days until interviews. She had spent the last four days in a state of deep preparation. All that procedural information they give out during training but nobody ever reads? Well now Nancy had. She had fine-combed, highlighted, summarised on flashcards, and repeated aloud. It was more work than she had done for her A levels. She had redrafted her CV and written a personal statement about all she had learned and what she could bring to the role. She had outlined her future ambitions and included a copy of her Employee of the Month certificate. It couldn't hurt. She moved down the aisle to meet passengers halfway. She stopped at Row 16, stood tall, and engaged her core. She didn't think Deepak Chopra was a quack; it did all feel connected.



Ingrid Sjöqvist had started going to the gym. It began with a book she'd found sitting on top of the microwave at work. It was a guide to running five kilometres within three weeks. Ingrid had enjoyed buying exercise clothes and picking out the right trainers. She'd walked on a treadmill in a sports shop on Oxford Street as a young sales assistant studied how she moved. The machine could tell that she leaned on the insides of her feet, so the assistant sold her insoles too. She loved Lycra now, and gym gear was very enjoyable to wear around the house. It was like pyjamas, only it caused her to stretch rather than sleep. Ingrid was so enthusiastic

when she started the programme that she skipped a week of it. Within fourteen days she'd run the full amount in thirty minutes. 'Fast as lightning,' she boasted to the doorman when she crossed her lobby finishing line. The problem with London, however, was the weather; it was always cats and dogs. So Ingrid had joined a gym. The twenty-four-hour opening suited her schedule and once she avoided peak hours (which were the same as on the Tube; how were they everywhere at once, all these people who congested London from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.?) she always found a treadmill.

It was this recent discovery that drew Ingrid to her neighbour's wrist. It was a pleasing shade of cinnamon, yes, and the protruding veins suggested a high muscle mass, but her ice-breaker was the device encompassing it.

'Is that an activity tracker?'

The man, with dark eyes and gelled-up hair, held out his arm. 'Fitbit,' he said, offering it to her.

Ingrid touched the bracelet lightly. This man did not seem to register the lowered armrest, and the boarder it implied. Perhaps his age allowed him to ignore invisible boundaries. He was a little younger than her. His face was narrow, his body broader, and he was wearing those expensive trainers, the ones with their own stand at the sports store. Ingrid had gushed to Cora about her gym membership, and now the check-in attendant had found her a practised runner.

'I see them advertised at my gym' – what a thrill to have a gym! Like knowing to stand on the right-hand side of the escalator, it made Ingrid feel like a real Londoner – 'and I wondered if they worked. Do you take more steps when you

know how many you've already taken? Or, having reached your target, do you get the Tube?'

'Nah, see, I don't use it for that. You can, yeah, but I use it for training. Speed and distance? I'm headin' out to Holland for a marathon and I'll be tracking my progress, see if I can't beat my PB.'

'PB, yes: Personal Best.' The term was written on posters all over *her gym*. 'I've just started running. I'm not doing marathons yet but I am up to seven kilometres.'

'Nice,' said the man, nodding his approval. Ingrid had always struggled to identify 'cool' as a personality trait, except to know she was not it. But this man, she thought, would qualify. 'If you can run five k, you can run ten, and so on it goes,' he said. 'You can't beat the feeling, competing with yourself – gettin' faster and stronger.'

'Oh yes. It's a very nice feeling,' she said, trying to match his enthusiasm. 'The best thing since sliced bread.'

'Sliced bread! Yeah, man!' He slapped his thigh and laughed. Ingrid thought about it. Slices of bread *were* a peculiar thing to praise. Why not fresh pasta? Or pasteurised milk? *The best thing since boil-in-the-bag rice*. She, too, started to titter.



Nancy had left her Putney apartment on just three occasions that weekend: pilates, a quick food shop, and a flashcards run to Westfield. She'd cancelled a date that had already been rescheduled after she chose Ray's TV race and some

late-night revision over dinner at the Shard. But Nancy wasn't that bothered; the Italian hadn't used her name once on the phone. She suspected he'd forgotten it. She had meant to reply to text messages – her mam, and a couple from Cora – but she'd left her phone in the bathroom, allowing herself to use it only during toilet breaks. She just needed a few days to herself, to know she'd given it her all.

Nancy had volunteered to restock the trolley and do a quick inventory. They needed more CK One and Touche Éclat, while the tween perfume wasn't selling at all. They should rethink that order. She made a note of it. Ronnie was the senior on board today and her sister-in-law was head of Human Resources. Nancy was treating everything as an audition, a chance to prove herself. She straightened the perfume tray carefully. *I deserve a promotion, I deserve a promotion, I deserve a promotion.*

'But you've gotta take the knocks too, that's just part and parcel.'

'Oh I know,' said Ingrid. 'I got two blisters at the beginning, and I had to wait a day and a half before running again. I told myself, "Ingrid, that's just the way the cookie crumbles."'

'It's all about how quickly you respond. You listen to your body and react. So now, I feel my ligaments strain or my shin twinge? I cut back immediately, reduce intensity, begin treatment. Strength training and foam rolling: this is the truth. I'm telling you: forget running without them.'

Having introduced himself, Rajesh Patel was now giving Ingrid a tour of his various ailments, complete with recovery solutions. Ingrid was learning a lot. Those shins didn't feel like anything that could ever splinter, and she'd never thought of knees as being aligned. He also told her the pain at the base of her left foot was probably an inflamed plantar fascia.

'Interesting,' she said. 'It's all very interesting.'

Nancy had positioned the duty-free trolley in the centre of her alcove at the rear of the plane, so Ronnie could see all the work she was doing from the senior station by the cockpit. Nancy opened compartments with exaggerated arm movements – a little something from her time at Merseyside Community Drama – and slammed them shut with more gusto than required. But when she looked up the aisle, she found George obstructing the line of vision.

'Well she's touching his leg,' he said, bustling into the rear alcove. 'Yep. Inter-gender relations may not be my speciality but where I come from, that's the deal done. She's buying what he's selling.'

'What are you on about, George?'

'Hello? Cora's couple? Row 27.'

'Oh, right. I forgot.' Nancy looked up from where she knelt, three bottles of Barbie Bliss in hand, and tried to peer around George's legs.

'I did notice I've been doing a lot of the legwork on this lately. You finally tired of being Cora's puppet?'

'I'm not her puppet.'

'Mmm-hmm?'

Why did George have to make everything sound like a buggering question? 'I am *not* her puppet,' Nancy repeated, her jaw clenched. She winced with the pain. It had not been a good time to start whitening her teeth. She told herself to relax. 'I help with Row 27 because I like it and if I don't have time, I don't have time. So I don't know what you're banging on about. Nobody's in charge of me except me. Alright?'

Nancy's mother had finally gotten through on Monday and, after rebuking her daughter for not returning missed calls, she told Nancy she was going to be an auntie. Joe's wife was pregnant.

'Oh they'll have beautiful babies, the most beautiful babies, with his height and eyes and fast metabolism . . . Joe was the most beautiful baby – have I ever told you that, Nancy? Everyone said so. Peter was handsome too, like a real little man. You were more of a late bloomer, a lot of puppy fat to get through but, still, you made it in the end. I hope you're still exercising, Nancy? Your hips will always be the first to show. I take responsibility for that, and it only gets harder to shift. Mind you, I'm not quite ready to be a grandmother yet – the women in Sainsbury's would not believe it when I told them, even when I said he was my eldest – but you can't leave it too late. Joe is thirty now and Lorraine must be twenty-eight. How about you, Nancy? What happened to that nice pilot you were seeing? I'm too young to be a nanny but time is running

out for mother of the bride. Much longer and I'll be like Fran Henshaw. I told you about that, didn't I? Her own daughter's wedding and she was wearing the same outfit as the groom's grandmother. Can you imagine? Not that you'd catch me shopping in Wallis, of course . . .'

She'd let her mother in and everything in the apartment was instantly infected. The wall of flashcards looked silly, maybe a little insane. The potential interview lipsticks, lined up on her dresser, seemed moronic. Alison Beagle's memoir was lying open on Nancy's bed. It was about her time with Pan Am in the 1960s, and how Richard Burton hit on her, even though Liz Taylor was on the same flight. Nancy flipped the cover over. The book was called *Take No Passengers*, and it was her favourite. Alison Beagle was a career inspiration. *Take no passengers*. When Gloria Moone finally took a breath, her daughter cut her off. 'I've got to go, Mum, sorry. I'll call you during the week.' She threw in a quick 'ta-rah' and hung up.

Nancy closed the duty-free drawers and mentally ran through the positives. She must remember to think positive. One: She hadn't allowed her mother to undo everything. Two: The rest of her long weekend had been productive. Three: This flight was going well. Ronnie would have to be impressed, everything was running so—

'Wait. She's touching his leg. George? Lower or upper leg? I will have no one joining the mile-high club – not on my flight, and definitely not this week.'



Ingrid had found some paper but she didn't seem to have a pen. She searched her briefcase once more, shoving tomorrow's briefing documents to one side. 'No. Sorry.' 'It's alright. I'll shout for one in a minute.' Rajesh leaned out and looked down the aisle. 'No one about.'

'They'll be along,' said Ingrid. 'They always are.'

'There are three principles I always tell my clients, right? The first is consistency – which doesn't mean doing the same thing over and over, not at all, but whatever you do, identify a time when you can do it regular. I imagine you have a busy life, yeah?'

'Yes, yeah,' said Ingrid, wishing she could take notes.

'So you need to identify the time that works for you. First thing in the morning, last thing at night or maybe, yeah, lunchtime.'

'I travel a lot.'

'I hear that. Interval training, you can attack that anywhere. Twenty minutes of resistance is better than an hour running.'

'No!'

'This is the truth.'

Rajesh turned to look down the aisle again. 'Sorry, mate? Wouldn't have a pen, would you?'

The American steward stopped at their row. He smiled at Ingrid and pulled a Bic biro from his breast pocket. 'Red do?'

'Cheers. I'll be quick as you like.'

'No hurry at all,' he said, peering over Rajesh's shoulder. 'Can I ask what you're drawing?'



'He's a personal trainer and he's making her a workout plan. There wasn't a groin massage in sight.'

The plane had touched down in Utrecht, and George had been sent to the rear for disembarkment. Nancy was admiring the rows of merchandise now locked away in translucent duty-free drawers. 'I'll tell Cora,' she said.

'Not sure it's blatant romance though.'

'Okay.' Nancy had written her name at the top of the stock sheet, but she wondered now if she should have added the date.

'I mean, it could be.'

Usually they just left stock sheets in the folder but Ronnie had that up at the other station.

'Nancy! Hello? She's, like, your friend. I'm just passing it on? I don't even care?'

'Alright, George, I've got it. It's not that important anyway. It's just a stupid game!'

Her colleague looked at her with mock amazement. 'Well that's a first.'

'I'm not a total divvy,' said Nancy, her ears burning. 'I know it's only a game.' She could almost hear her mother laughing at her silliness, and her brother raising an eyebrow: *Come on, Nancy*. She was wound up, she knew, and stressed. Her jaw was in bits. 'I'll text Cora when the plane is cleared. I didn't have time to remind the stupid controller about setting up a call.'

'Well, like I said, I don't know if it's a match or not.'

'Let's call it a match. Alright, George? I'll tell Cora to chalk it down as a success.'

'No need to get touchy.'

'I'm not getting touchy.'

'Right - except that you are?'

'I'll tell her to mark it a success,' Nancy said evenly.

George was somewhat appeased. 'The body language was strong.'

The plane was cleared with time to spare and Nancy volunteered to stay an extra twenty minutes and help with turnaround. She vacuumed the seat covers, probably a little more aggressively than necessary, and remembered to check seat buckles for stains. She even took an ice cube and hand scraper to some long-ignored chewing gum. *I deserve a promotion, I deserve a promotion, I deserve a promotion.*

THIRTEEN

.....

That's the thing though, isn't it?' said Joan, laboriously clicking through a passenger list. 'You go to all that effort and - what was it your flatmate lost? Four stone? Five stone?'

'Four stone.'

'Four stone. And is she skinny now?'

'Not skinny.' Cora considered. 'Just average.'

'Exactly. All that effort and you're still just average. Hardly seems worth it now, does it?'

News of Big Ray's third weigh-in was circulating the airport. He'd lost a full stone, and everyone was saying what an incredible achievement it was. Everyone except Joan. He'd walked past their check-in zone an hour previously, and Joan had watched with scepticism. 'If the plane crashed on a deserted mountain, he'd still be the first one eaten.'

Cora had seen Ray out huffing and puffing on her way home the previous night. Charlie was waving the stopwatch and shouting at him to adapt to the unexpected and set his brain to train. Charlie looked well in his sports gear, even though he wasn't doing any exercise himself, and she'd

thought how she really should find someone for him. He called a 'Safe home' to Cora, and even Ray managed to raise a hand in greeting. She thought he was running faster – or at least at a more consistent pace.

'But what about health? It's not all about being skinny.'

'Health!' Joan hooted. 'That's only a wind-up. Our neighbour, now she's young mind, and her hubby bought her one of those things, what is it now, that you run on and—'

'A treadmill?'

'For Christmas! A bloomin' treadmill for Christmas. She said he was very good, and that it was concern for her health – I'm sure that's what he was concerned about right enough. Her *health*. Didn't want her getting a fat arse, more like. I'm lucky really I've got Jim. There's a man who'd give cause to examine whether two fried eggs and a lump of black pudding might count as an aphrodisiac.'

It was a Friday afternoon and they were both working the late shift. Nancy was on the 7.20 to Dublin – Aiden's flight – which meant Cora had some female passengers to research. Her friend's in-flight reports had been sporadic of late and Cora worried that she was getting distracted by other things. She hadn't heard from her properly in days. And Nancy knew she needed the information for her chart. The computer screen was starting to hurt Cora's eyes so she printed out the passenger list for the Dublin flight.

Her last couple of matches with Aiden had been a disaster. Barely talked, Nancy said. Probably the women didn't find mood swings all that charming. Or maybe he'd regaled them with the story of an award-winning documentary about

the world's most horrific genocide. Cora had watched his movie recommendation – begrudgingly given how their last encounter had ended, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of thinking his attitude had any effect on her; she was a professional after all, dealing with high-flying grumps was her job – and she gave up before the film got to the halfway mark. She went to cinema for escapism. Relentless misery was something you got enough of in real life.

Aiden had potential, but a nice smile will only distract from the other three Ps – pride, pedantry, and pompous taste in films – for so long. Still, Cora thought as she took the warm pages from the printer tray, everyone deserved to find someone.

When Cora got back to her desk, Nancy was there gabbing away to Joan, her hair high in its trademark ponytail, and her emerald gaberdine fitted perfectly across the shoulders. It was as if the mass-produced Aer Lingus uniform had been designed specifically for her.

Before Cora could ask her friend where she'd been lately, Joan cut in.

'Cora Hendricks! You never told me Charlie Barrett asked you to go courting!'

'I didn't – he – how did you know that?'

Joan inclined her head towards Nancy, who was beaming from cheek to cheek.

'He probably used the word "courting" and all.'

'How did *you* know?' asked Cora, addressing the question to Nancy this time. 'I didn't tell you that. And I know word spreads in this place, but I didn't tell anyone.'

'Oh, Cupid! I'd been dying to ask. How was it? I told him not to say anything too old fashioned; it'd make him sound like a dirty old man. But you can never—'

'You told him? Did he tell you he was going to ask me out? Or, wait—' Cora had a flashback to the night of the Fight the Flab race – the unusual sight of Nancy and Charlie huddled together conspiratorially in the corner of the pub afterwards. 'Did you . . . ? No, Nancy, you didn't *tell him* to ask me out . . . Did you?'

Nancy was fit to burst with joy and pride. 'I may have given him a little nudge!'

'Oh God.'

'I could see the two of you talking away during the race – I had a great view from the starting line – and oh, Cupid, I could just tell how well you were getting on. And either he was saying a lot more to you than he would to anyone else, or he just liked breathing into your ear, but either way you two looked so close and—'

But Cora wasn't listening. It was Nancy's fault Charlie had asked her out. Nancy's fault she had one more thing to contend with when her energy was needed elsewhere. There she was, doing her best to keep everything stable, and her friend – who never thinks before doing anything – had come in and shaken everything up. She'd had a frank conversation with Nancy about this only a couple of weeks ago. *Drop it*, she'd said at the idea of her and Charlie. Nancy hadn't listened to a word – or worse she had and she'd disregarded it all. Cora could feel the anger rising from her feet.

' . . . So when we were in the pub, I thought I'd say it to him – just that it mightn't be a bad idea to ask you out. While I couldn't promise anything, you might just say yes. You should have seen his face, Cora. He was—'

But Cora didn't wait to hear the end. She *had* seen his face – and she'd felt nothing but guilt. Nancy hadn't given a second's thought to her actions – how it might affect everyone else, how Charlie hadn't asked for it – setting him up to get rejected. Cora turned from the check-in counters and started to march away. She didn't know where she was going, but—

'Cora! Wait.' She could hear Nancy's heels clattering across the tiles behind her. She waited until she was out of Joan's earshot before rounding on her friend.

'How dare you, Nancy!' She was furious. The heat coursing through her started to flood into her eyeballs. So this was blind rage. 'How absolutely dare you!'

'I don't—'

'I told you not to interfere. I expressly said I did not want you meddling, that I did not like Charlie, and that I did not want to go out with Charlie – or with anyone! We had a verbal, coherent conversation about it and I do believe I actually used the word "no"!'

'But you were just scared, Cupid. Sometimes we all need a helping hand. You know that! You're always giving that helping hand. And I just thought if you were confronted with the possibility, you'd take a leap of faith—'

'I'm not some stranger on a plane! I am your friend, who you know and whose wishes you should respect.' They were

standing in the middle of the floor, passengers and staff zipping around them. Still Cora couldn't manage to lower her voice. 'And I am *not* scared! I have a lot going on right now and going out with some chap isn't my priority. As hard as that might be for you to understand.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Well you're very distracted these days – skipping out early on the race, only reporting back on Row 27 matches when I remind you. And I sent you two text messages last weekend and you never even replied. We had a birthday dinner for Sheila and it was awful and I could have done with someone to talk to.'

'I know you think I divide my free time between the beds of various men—'

'I never said—'

'But I have things to do. For myself. I was studying all weekend and I didn't have time to get back to anyone. If you think you're annoyed you should have heard me mam.'

'You didn't even have time to send a text?'

'I didn't have a minute. The interviews are next week. You might not care about promotion, but—'

'*That's* what you're studying for?' said Cora, catching the derision in her voice a beat too late.

'Yes *that's* what I'm studying for.'

'Sorry, Nancy, I didn't mean – I just, I'd forgotten about them.'

'There are signs all over the staffroom,' said Nancy, sounding exasperated. 'And I told you. But of course you forgot, because you're not the one going for promotion.'

That's why I've been busy. I told you I was up till four one morning, and I left Ray's neon run thing early to get some cramming in – but you just thought I'd copped off with some bloke?'

'No,' said Cora, but she couldn't quite look her in the eye. She was supposed to be the victim here, the irate one. When had the tables turned?

'You did!'

'No . . . although if I did, I'd only be going on previous form. But whatever, so long as it's not one of my matches I don't care who you spend your time with.'

Nancy sighed. 'The check-in embargo isn't for ever, Cora.'

'So?'

'So people won't keep coming to your desk. It's not real, what you're doing. What are you going to do after the summer?'

'Leave it out, Nancy. I don't need—'

'You might not care about this place, or maybe you're too good for it or whatever,' she said, talking over Cora's protestations. 'But I care about my future. I want to be senior cabin crew, and I want it this year. I need it before I'm twenty-eight.'

'You need it before you're twenty-eight? What? Did that number come to you in a dream?'

'I'm more than your puppet, Cora.'

'My puppet!? I know you're not *my* puppet, Nancy. What are you on about?' Cora could feel the invisible hand reaching inside her again, preparing to shake everything loose. She evened her tone and took a breath. One of them

had to be rational. 'You purposely meddled in my life when I specifically told you not to. You brought Charlie into it – you basically brought him in to get rejected – and now I have to clean up the mess and you don't even realise you did anything wrong. We're supposed to be friends.'

'Are we friends, aye? You and me, Cora? Funny sort of friendship, that. Where you don't even know what I've been up to for weeks, when you don't even ask.'

'How could I ask when you don't respond to my messages?'

Nancy was shaking now – anger or upset or both. 'Why would I respond when I know you just want to talk about *your* stuff, *your* bloody matchmaking? That's not friendship. Friends don't use each other. Friends know what's important in the other person's life. Friends give a shit about someone other than themselves.'

'Well I'm glad we're on the same page.'

The two women stared at each other, fury, hurt, and confusion bouncing between them. Passengers whizzed past and Cora clocked Weasel scurrying towards them. As the manager neared, Nancy turned and trundled away, her coat sleeves halfway down her arms and a notebook starting to droop from her bag. For Nancy, this was dishevelled. Before Weasel could reach the battlefield, Cora retreated to her station. She felt like someone had tripped her up and she couldn't remember if she'd banged her head.

Cora knew the self-check-in embargo wouldn't last for ever. Of course she knew that. Did Nancy think she was stupid? Cora was obviously going to do something else. She just hadn't figured out what that would be exactly. But there were still months left. The embargo was in place for at least a year, isn't that what the email had said? So Cora was going to get everything else sorted before she started freaking out about a career. And what? Was creating romance for people not a worthy enough thing to do with her time? And Nancy acting like Cora was the selfish one?

It was typical of Nancy to bring everyone else into her melodrama. Cora should have known she'd said something to Charlie – great fun for Nancy, never mind how it makes everyone else feel. Never mind if Cora was struggling to keep her own emotions in line without having to feel responsible for someone else's. And her puppet? Where had she gotten that? No doubt all tied up in some bloke, or her mother or some other drama that Nancy had decided to take out on Cora. And now who was going to keep an eye on Aiden's flight this evening? And what about the rest of the weekend? Nancy was the one in the wrong and yet Cora – and her loveless passengers – would be the ones to suffer. Well Cora would just have to wait for Nancy to wake up and smell the coffee. Smell the coffee? Jesus. This pep-talk had her sounding like Ingrid.

The Dublin check-ins had started, mixed in with passengers heading to Berlin, and Cora had yet to choose a match for Aiden. Not that she'd have anyone on the plane to report back. What if this was the weekend she found the

love of Aiden's life? She highly fucking doubted it, unless he'd had a lobotomy. But she would never know *for sure*. She thought about asking someone else on board, but Nancy would just take it as proof she was using her. Which she wasn't. She just didn't want all her work to be wasted. She looked through the rest of the cabin crew roster for the 7:20 to Dublin but there was nobody she could ask.

'Anytime, Cora, would be great.'

She looked up to see Aiden standing in front of her. 'Anytime? Well that'll be another few minutes so,' she said, and went back to scanning the list. She was in no mood for his sarcasm today.

To her surprise, he stood there quietly, waiting. When she started to get dizzy from darting her eyes back and forth furiously across the same part of the screen, she raised her head.

'You okay?' he asked, a flash of concern. She was momentarily thrown.

'Yes.'

'You annoyed about the other day?'

'What other day?' she said, sickeningly sweet smile in place.

'I suggested you might have been a little . . . I'm not sure what the word was exactly—'

'Nosy.'

'Nosy. Right. It was a long week and I had a lot on my mind. I'm not always great with words . . .'

Cora studied him carefully. 'Is that – are you apologising, Aiden O'Connor?'

'I'm merely saying I may have, slightly, overreacted. You weren't exactly being polite yourself, you—'

'I'm taking that as an apology. Don't ruin it.'

'Far be it from me to correct your definition of apology.'

'Yes,' said Cora. 'Because you *never* correct *anyone*.'

'You been talking to my ex-girlfriend?'

Cora looked at him – auburn curls recently cut and rugby jersey starting to stain around the collar. Surely he could afford a second sweatshirt? That was the second reference *ever* to him being single.

'If she has the same taste in films as you, I doubt we'd have much in common.'

'You watched it?'

'Yes, I watched the documentary, well most of it. It was excruciating. Depressing and long and relentlessly boring. And it was in black and white. Why? It was made last year!'

'Black and white? I didn't know that.'

'You recommended it!'

'Mmm,' said Aiden, taking his passport and ticket before Cora could hold them hostage. 'But I never watched it. It's meant to be awful. Terrible pretentious shite.'

'What? You never watched it? Why did you recommend it?'

'Payback,' said Aiden, sounding as absolutely chuffed with himself as he looked. 'For all those awful paint-by-numbers rom-coms you had me watching.'

Cora was agog. 'You—'

'Well, this has been fun,' he said, the dimple on his left cheek very much on show.

'You little shit!'

'Ah now, Cora, don't be like that. Here—' He swung his bag around again. 'Charity pins they were selling at the hospital. Thought it'd be perfect for someone who never seems to have her mind on the job. See you next week, daydreamer.'

Aiden strutted away from the counter – oh yes, it was very much a strut – and Cora picked up the badge he had left on her counter. It was light blue with swirly white typeface that read: Head in the Clouds.

And, despite her very best efforts, she laughed.

Cora thought of herself watching that pants documentary, growing steadily more frustrated, pulling strands from her hair and muttering to herself, 'just massacre the lot of them already', and she actually laughed out loud. She was impressed. Maybe Aiden wasn't so – Aiden! She still needed to find Aiden a match. She checked her phone to see if Nancy had grown up between Security and Departures, but there were no messages. She scrolled desperately through the dwindling number of females still to check in on the Dublin flight. And there was a school group to be seated at the rear of the plane. Just perfect.

One of the teachers was single and female. Surely that wasn't her only remaining option. Cora scanned the queue for the school group and their eligible chaperone, Georgia Hancock. But she hadn't gotten past the first few waiting faces when her stomach dropped. Three passengers from the front of the line was Friedrich Turner. And it wasn't in her imagination this time. He was actually there. Flesh, blood, perfect blond curls. And beside him was his wife.

Cora couldn't get her cheeks to relax, or her jaw to move. It was as if her face was playing musical statues. Somehow, she called the next passenger forward.

'Passport and flight number, please.'

The passenger watched her as she typed in his details, and Cora wondered if he too could hear the blood banging against the walls of her veins. She wasn't staring at this elderly customer particularly, he just happened to be in her line of vision and she was afraid to look anywhere else. Her sister used to get angry because Cora couldn't grasp the rules of hide and seek. Maeve would instruct her to hide, and Cora would just stand there with her eyes shut; if she couldn't see them, they couldn't see her. She knew the rules now, but still she squeezed her eyes shut. Get it together, just smile, your life is your own. She thought of that T.S. Eliot poem from school: Prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet. She opened her eyes, slackened her face, and smiled.

'Have a nice flight.'

Friedrich was at the top of the queue. Physical, tangible, and utterly out of place. He had nothing to do with her life here. Nobody had met him and she never discussed him. It had started to feel like she'd made him up. But there he was, clear and relaxed and letting other passengers go ahead of him. His wife's hand rested gently on his arm and she was saying something into his ear, but Friedrich was watching Cora. A family skipped ahead of him. He was letting them pass. Why was he waiting for her? 'Next please!'

Friedrich strode over, the woman who had to be the wife following. His gait was as casual and confident as ever.

He was rake-thin with broad shoulders, and he had razor cheekbones that begged romantic young women to offer up their wrists. Cora had written terrible poems to that effect. His hair was a mass of golden curls she used to say had been woven by fallen angels. Cora used to say that actual line. *To him*. And, god help her, she'd thought it profound. Friedrich used to tell her his mother had sold his hair for expensive wigs when he was a boy and Cora knew it was a lie. She knew it was a lie because everything was a lie, but she could rarely prove it. And so she'd have to sit there, nodding along to these stupid tales, feeling like a fool. The relationship had invoked intense paranoia, and for the longest time she even doubted he was German. He was cut from a different world, a nineteenth-century poet who intended to stay forever young. It was an affectation but it worked.

'A vision appears before me. Cora Hendricks. How long it has been.' He was smiling and he was relaxed and it was all so very easy. 'I'd heard you were working here. Are you well? Cora, this is my wife, Sophia Turner. I'm not sure you ever met. Sophia, this is Cora Hendricks, she used to work for Stefan.'

I used to write copy for Stefan, thought Cora, and I used to live with your husband. Only was he your husband then? Friedrich had said they were separated but they were both so young and she couldn't be sure of anything. Sophia was pale and delicate. So much about her suggested a shadow. She held out her hand, slim and smooth, and Cora took it. 'Nice to meet you.' A hand that had money but rarely handled it. Friedrich had never taken Cora's hand in public. It used to

hurt that he was embarrassed, but now she considered he may still have been married.

'Can I have your passports, please?'

Sophia touched her husband's arm lightly, and from her handbag produced both documents. They were beautiful together. Their hair and their skin seemed to glow. Cora knew that under his soft cotton shirt were surprisingly strong arms. He was much healthier now and the clothes were neater. He dressed his age. Was he thirty yet? For all that ungraspable talk of passion and truth, it seems money was what he needed most. Everything else was already in him, and better a wealthy canvas on which to project it. Cora had given him money. She refused to calculate how much, but she'd paid for flights and food and she'd let him live with her for free. Even though he had tenure and she was freelance. She keyed in the passport information and printed out the tickets.

'But are you well, Cora?' he implored. 'Are you thriving?' His voice was warm and affected. His wife's hand still on his arm. 'Fine, thank you. Working away.'

'At the airport?'

'Yes, here.' Obviously, she wanted to say, *fucking obviously*. Friedrich used to tell her she'd do something pure and worthy and exceptional. Only he never specified what employment, exactly, would tick all those boxes.

'That's really wonderful,' he said. 'You're a picture, Cora, you really are.' And she wanted to scream at him.

'An aisle seat would be great if it is possible.' Sophia's pale speckled eyes danced across Cora's face. She leaned her head on her husband's shoulder.

There were questions, Cora realised, that only Sophia could answer. She wanted to ask if Friedrich liked her best when she was upset? If he told her she has the saddest eyes? If she ever made herself cry during sex? Cora wanted to know if sex was best when they treated each other like strangers, when there was no kissing and Sophia thought of herself as a prostitute? She wanted to know if Sophia had started to get off on that. She wanted to know she was not mad.

Friedrich and Sophia married at university and were on their second separation when Cora met him. This one was meant to lead to divorce. Or so she was told. 'Everything, including love, is only impressive when you are young.' Afterwards, she doubted whether divorce had ever been discussed. Afterwards, she questioned everything. Back in England, Cora had phoned and asked to be patched through at the music college where he worked and was taken aback to find that he existed.

'Were you holidaying in London?' she asked, hoping her words weren't too slow.

'Friedrich had a job interview.'

'Not for a university, not for London,' he said, perhaps sensing Cora's alarm. 'It's an orchestra generally based in Munich but the auditions are international. It's very prestigious and they really want me but I have to decide if I want to be the kind of person who auditions. It's so vulgar to chase fame and glory and so dangerous to let others determine our worth.'

Sophia gazed at her husband, and Cora wondered how she had not learned to spot the lies. He was scared, a little

boy unwilling to lose face. He used integrity as a shield when there was a chance things wouldn't go his way. He never took chances, and he refused to be vulnerable. Life cost Friedrich nothing. Fame and glory were exactly what he wanted. He would never admit that someone, or something, did not want him.

At the end of their relationship the arguments would go on so long that Cora sometimes fell asleep. He'd wake her up in the middle of the night and demand to know how she could sleep through this. But 'this' was never anything. Arguing was too omnipresent to be so specific. It felt like a torture exercise and she couldn't understand how he never needed to sleep. She would sit on the bed, so confused and delirious that she'd start to cry, and he would go bang out some nonsense on the electric piano.

'The 7.40 to Berlin: 16A and 16B.'

'Thank you, Cora.' Friedrich reached for the tickets before she could place them on the counter, sliding his fingers over hers and holding her gaze. 'It is great to see you. You look beautiful.'

Sophia beamed at her husband's kind words and nodded her agreement.

'Great to see you,' Friedrich repeated, and that was it. Cora watched until they disappeared behind a corner, Sophia a fraction behind her husband. He did not turn once. She was gone from his mind. The lesser-known rules of hide and seek.

The rest of check-in passed in a haze. The school teacher was all wrong – nice, down-to-earth, and bound to spend the plane journey preoccupied by her boisterous charges – but Cora couldn't think straight, and she managed to put her beside Aiden just in time. Cora tried to keep Friedrich from her mind until the day's work was done. She would let him in on the Tube journey home. She wanted to text Nancy but didn't. She was probably in Dublin by now. Was she as inconsiderate on the other side of the Irish Sea?

Cora fought to keep the memories at bay, but she couldn't. She remembered getting drunk with Friedrich – the multiple occasions forming one bric-a-brac of memory – and how intimate it had been. She had loved love since she was a child and then she had found it. All-consuming and wounding and maddening, as if someone had painted it. Other nights she was left drinking alone and Friedrich would come home at four in the morning and tell her about the fascinating women he'd met after a gig and she would pretend not to care. He steered her toward tears so he could comfort her. But wasn't that once-in-a-lifetime love? All the emotions in extreme. Cora tore her mind back to the job at hand. A middle-aged couple checked in and the wife pointed to Aiden's badge, still sitting on her counter.

'Remember that song, Gerry?' she said, nudging her husband. '*With your head in the clouds and your heart on hold*. Who was it sang that?'

'Couldn't tell you, Margaret. Sounds like one of your records.'

Friedrich used to say his music was too 'intense' for people to appreciate, but he just wasn't very good. Cora knew this at the time but she would have denied it to the end. He said money didn't matter and she had agreed in a way, but it was always her money he was dismissing. She couldn't call him a charlatan without accepting herself as a fool.

Weasel tapped her on the shoulder. 'I never received your form, Cora.'

Cora considered his face for a moment. She yearned to push him over. Here she was, trying to stay still and keep everything together, and everyone else just kept coming at her. She hadn't even looked at the form. She'd no idea where it was. It was possible she had used it to wrap the stale crusts of a lunchtime sandwich in.

'I've misplaced it.'

'Interviews are next week, Cora. *Next week*.'

'Right. Well I don't need a form because I don't want to change. I'm fine where I am.'

'You don't want to change?'

'No.'

Weasel glanced at his clipboard. 'This won't look good.'

'Okay.'

'You won't be moving forward.'

Cora shrugged. She didn't want to move forward or in any other direction. Why was that so difficult for people to understand?

'I might be able to get you an extension,' he said, flicking through pages. 'I have the ear of a few powerful people. Think about it for a day or two. I can really see you in Boarding.'

Cora slipped down from her stool and threw an eye over the queuing area. Still empty. 'Back in a minute,' she told Weasel, skirting around him and out on to the main floor. She moved quickly toward the escalator, taking it up a floor and then calling the lift. This could not be the only choice she got to make. It had been too long now and something had to happen. She had to make something happen.

She rapped on Charlie's door and waited for him to call her in.

'I didn't think floor staff knew where the offices were. Usually we just wait to be summoned.'

'I'll go out with you.'

The brief silence was enough time to shake Cora's resolve. Her words echoed back; she sounded pretty arrogant. What if he regretted asking? What if that was why he'd been acting like nothing had happened? But no, it didn't matter; nothing ventured, nothing—

'Good.'

'Right. Good,' she echoed, relieved.

'Next Saturday?'

'As in tomorrow week?'

'Yes, if that suits?'

'Right. Good.'

She remembered it now, the feeling. This was how it felt when something happened.

FOURTEEN

.....

LHR - > DUB 7.20 p.m.

There was a schoolboy in Aiden's seat. He was kneeling backwards so he might better converse with the girls in Row 28.

'Sorry, mate, that's my seat.'

The teenager turned to face him, a bottle of Coca-Cola Zero in his hand. 'Is it, blud?' he asked, grinning back at the girls.

'It is, yeah.'

'Alright, blud,' he said, shifting himself out of the seat, and the girls began to laugh.

'Yeah, blud,' one of them murmured as the boy moved to the row across, still grinning.

'Is it, blud?'

'No, blud.'

'Yeah, blud.'

And on it went, each nonsensical statement attracting more laughs than the last. There were approximately twelve second-level students on this flight identifiable by their bottle-green uniforms, and they had him surrounded. Couldn't Cora have put him further up the plane? If it wasn't that she always put him in Row 27, he'd have thought this was *her* payback.

'Ronald Archibald, get your feet off that seat!' Aiden watched a woman descend the aisle, barking orders as she got to the rear. 'And button up that blouse, Matilda Middleton. It was not that low when your parents dropped you off at the airport.' The woman stopped at Row 27 and the ferocity fell from her. She smiled at Aiden.

'Poor you,' she said, lowering herself into 27C. 'Seated beside us. If it comes to it, I think the travel budget could stretch to a medicinal whiskey.'

'It's not a good idea to refer to alcohol as medicinal.' Aiden winced. 'Jesus. Sometimes I hear myself and I know I should be given a good slap.'

'I'd help you out but they banned teachers from slapping a while back. More's the pity with this lot.'

The air hostess, Nancy, descended the aisle – telling each member of the school group to fasten their seatbelt. But she glided past Aiden without a glance, and it was left to him to realise his chair needed to be positioned upright.

'I am a sick woman, right?' said one of the teenage girls behind him. 'I didn't even appreciate it when I got it. Only when it was broken. I didn't even realise how much they spent on it. I thought like, okay three hundred quid, but no.'

'When you're trying to sell it don't say Coke. Say water,' said another.

'Yeah, say water.'

'Yeah, I'll say I spilled water. Because, basically, if I sell it online, I can only sell it for thirty quid. That's how fucked it is.'

'But like, maybe they can tell that it weren't water.'

'If they tell me, I'll just say, "Oh I didn't know." I'll get my

mum to go or something, because if I go myself, they'll be like "this joker". You, like, you can't turn it on. If it's going to take loads to fix it...'. The girl sighed. 'I just want to get a new one.'

Aiden turned his head to see if he could make out who was talking but the teacher caught him looking. He turned back. With teenagers you didn't want there to be any misunderstandings.

'The utter bull that kids talk,' said the teacher, who had obviously been listening to the plotting too. She pulled a ball of wool and a pair of needles from her bag. This woman was his age. Aiden didn't think he'd ever seen anyone under sixty knitting. 'Every day I am struck by the blind confidence of teenagers. They speak so loudly because they have no doubt, not the slightest, about what they are proclaiming,' she continued, unperturbed that she too might be overheard. 'Can you imagine? I marvel that I was ever that young.'

Aiden had enjoyed being a teenager – he was good at school, good at sports, good with women. But his brother was two years older and had been all of those things too. Aiden had always wanted to be as good as Colm. He'd been secretly proving himself to his elder brother all his life, vying for his approval. Colm had studied accountancy after school so Aiden had to get an A1 in maths and accounting in his final exams too, even though he knew he would be doing medicine. Colm had gone into a high-earning profession so Aiden had to do the same. But Colm was still beating him on one front. He had a family: great wife, two kids. Aiden

didn't have that domesticity. That was supposed to be him and Izzy.

'The teenage years were grand,' he said. 'But I wouldn't want to do them over.'

'Nor I,' said the teacher. 'God, when I think of it. I remember sitting upstairs on the 11 bus, preaching to my friends about the importance of wearing matching underwear. "Men like that," I said. Ha! What did I know? I probably read it in some magazine. I was still a couple of cup sizes off discovering men had no interest in underwear, and that it was just another barrier. If I'd heard myself then, shouting my mouth off, what a berk.'

Aiden looked around to see if her charges were listening. But no.

'Don't worry,' she said, watching him out of the corner of her eye as her hands twitched and more stitches appeared across the needle. 'They have zero interest in what anyone over thirty is saying. Did you think old people were humans when you were a teenager? They wouldn't be able to wrap their heads around the fact that I sleep and eat, never mind that I wear underwear.'

'I suppose,' said Aiden.

'No supposing,' she breezed, wrists still contracting. 'Teenage self-involvement is as strong a sound barrier as you'll come across. Everyone on that bus could have heard me running my mouth about matching knickers, and I'd never have registered them.'

The last time Georgia Hancock had been on the 11 bus was coming back from an evening out in some bar near Sloane Square. She had met a couple of old school friends just after Christmas. One of them, also a teacher, was married and working in Saudi Arabia. She was expecting her first child. The other was in a five-year relationship, didn't believe in marriage, had just quit her job in the City, and was off to travel the world with her partner. When it came time to share her own news, Georgia had exaggerated a Tinder date – telling it as if it had occurred the previous week rather than three months beforehand.

'He sounds great,' one of them gushed.

'It's just smashing the different ways you can meet people these days,' said the other. 'A woman I work with met her husband through *The Guardian* Singles site. I think it's fantastic.'

'If I was single I'd totally do it.'

'Absolutely. He seems great, Georgia. It sounds like there might be a second date on the cards.'

'We'll see what comes of it,' said Georgia, knowing the only thing to come of that rendezvous was a trip to the STI Clinic and a few sleepless nights. The rash, thankfully, was thrush, not gonorrhoea. The doctor told her to lay off the alcohol and sweet stuff until it cleared up. The sugar was no problem, but it had worried her a little that she hadn't put the wine bottle down. It was just so difficult to avoid. It was fine for her loved-up friends who could happily sit in with their partner and have cups of tea. But Georgia had to make an effort to be more sociable, she had

to create her own situations in which to meet people, and most of those required alcohol. Even the Stitch 'n' Bitch club, which had started as knitting and tea, had quickly progressed to knitting and wine. Now the needles didn't always make it out of the bag because that left no hand free for the wine glass.

'Freddie Wheatley! Keep your hands where I can see them. And, Hannah Upshall, I don't know what you're giggling about. God knows where his mitts have been.'

'Teachers really do have eyes everywhere,' said the chap beside her. Handsome guy, lovely reddish hair, and oh how Georgia melted for the Irish accent.

'It's the first thing they teach us at training college,' she replied. 'That and how to— Right! That's it, Freddie.' The little bugger, thought Georgia, jumping up from her seat and grabbing the Sex Ed folder as she went.



Aiden watched the row of stitches unravel. He had no idea how to stop them and he was hardly going to interrupt the woman while she poured cold water on hormonal teenagers. Aiden had a young woman in his office that morning enquiring about a jaw reduction. It was a present from her parents for her sixteenth birthday. Even with his clinical hat on, Aiden couldn't find fault with her face bar a few spots on the forehead and a reddening of the cheeks as she explained what she wanted done. He tried to convince her it was unnecessary, told her how her face could still change

and it was worth waiting a few more years, but she wouldn't be deterred. She had a photograph of her ideal face shape ripped from a magazine and the consent form was folded neatly inside her homework journal.

Aiden had never been immune to guilt. He considered himself agnostic but his Catholic upbringing ran deep. When he was leaving the clinic that evening, the charity collectors had been in the foyer. Mental Health Awareness that, in his place of work, had to be some sort of irony. He'd emptied his wallet — £112.50 — and they'd insisted on digging right to the bottom of their bucket until they found him the very last badge. As soon as he saw it, he knew he'd be giving it to Cora. He pictured her as she always was, sitting at the Aer Lingus counter lost in a world of her own. He didn't know what it was about that image, but he'd left the collection stand feeling a little better.

'Nothing like a few pictures of venereal disease to help them keep their hands to themselves,' said the teacher, taking her seat and opening the folder so Aiden could see the first image.

'Jesus.' He closed his eyes. 'Is that what you teach? Sex Education?'

'Lord, no. This is just part of the overnight trip kit. I also have a first-aid box, list of parental contact numbers, and a store of paracetamol. I teach Classics. We're going to Newgrange tomorrow, and the Hill of Tara. Have you been?'

'Years ago,' said Aiden. 'Though, as I recall, the Hill of Tara is more a field than a hill.'

'It doesn't matter. It barely falls under Classics, to be

honest, but the department had money left over for an outing. It's older than Stonehenge, at least.'

'That's a pretty decent outing.'

'Public school. Plenty of money – even if this lot like to act otherwise.'

'I went abroad once during school, to France, and my parents arranged it themselves,' said Aiden. 'Otherwise I don't think we ever strayed more than thirty miles from Dublin.' Aiden listened to the girls shrieking behind him and thought again of the mortified sixteen year old sitting before him that morning. A donation wasn't enough to erase her from his mind. He'd write to the girl's parents, advise against the treatment, and hope they didn't query it with anyone else at the clinic. They weren't in the business of turning away work.

He yawned, the last few patchy nights of sleep catching up.

'Am I boring you?'

'Friday night fatigue.' Flying twice a week every week didn't help and he wasn't even sure if Izzy was working tomorrow. And if she was, what would he say? The last day that they'd been on rounds together things had been normal – so normal that she could have been any physio, comfortably discussing work and the weather as they went from bed to bed. Aiden had momentarily forgotten this was the woman he was coming home for, the woman he was going to win back. He only properly remembered when they went on break and she automatically sat at a table, waiting for him to get the coffees. He remembered how she'd always done this when they were together, and he

remembered how it always annoyed him.

'I've only been to Dublin the once before,' said the teacher. 'For a hen party. I have to say I found it terribly expensive.'

'That's probably because you spent all your time in Temple Bar. Don't.'

'I'll remember that,' said the teacher.

He watched as she tried to flag down the passing air hostess. 'Miss?' But Nancy just keep on pushing her cart.

'Excuse me, miss?'

Georgia flapped her arm, but nothing. Could the air hostess not hear the desperation in her voice? Mr Mortem, the other Classics teacher, was also on supervision duty but Georgia could hear him snoring all the way in the back row. Georgia had arrived at Heathrow a good forty minutes before the students were due, in the hopes of fortifying herself with a snifter. But she had taken one look at the barmaid and been turned off. The woman, probably a couple of years younger than Georgia, had a tattoo down the side of her arm. It read: Stay Forever Young and Invincible. What age had she been when she got that? Probably seemed like a great idea on a beach in Vietnam or wherever but it was one hell of a burden to have burnt into your skin back in dreary, mortal England. How could you wake up to that every morning and not be profoundly disappointed, no matter how life had turned out? 'Have you got kids yourself?' asked the wavy-haired Irish man. She could feel him making an effort to be friendly and

she appreciated it, but she wondered what it was about her that made him think he had to try.

'Not yet,' she said, watching him for signs of sympathy. 'They might not be for me, if I'm honest. I already have enough of them to deal with.' Was that—? It was. She stood swiftly and reached over the seat in front, swiping Giles Stewart's mobile phone from his hand. 'Phones off!' She powered it down and threw it into her bag. 'You?' she asked, thinking the good ones always do.

'No. Too busy with work. One day, maybe.'

'Plenty of time,' she said, relieved not to have to look at any cute photos. She had a dog, whom she loved very much, and nobody ever asked to see him. 'Are you single, then? Apologies if that's forward but I've never been one for tact.'

'No, I . . .' He took a deep breath. 'Sort of.'

'Sort of single?'

'Mmm.'

'Like you're on a break? Whose idea?'

He looked at her, thrown by the bluntness, but she just nodded at him to go on.

'It's complicated.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'It's never that complicated. I am a complete stranger and you will never see me again. You lose nothing by telling me. I may even have a perspective.' Even Georgia herself doubted this was true. She just wanted something to think about over the next forty-eight hours that wasn't hormonal teenagers.

'I'm not really one for discussing these things.'

'What man is?'

He looked at her again but she kept knitting. 'We broke up and . . . If I ever do see you again, I'm going to pretend I have no idea who you are and I never said any of this. Alright?'

'I was never on this plane.'

'We broke up. We were supposed to move to London together, or at least that's what I thought, but she didn't come. So I suppose, ultimately, she did the breaking. But . . . things hadn't been great before that. It's only now I can see it, actually. Almost a year later.' He shook his head in amazement and she watched the curls follow. 'We had both been working a lot. And I suppose we forgot about each other. But that happens when you've been together a while.'

Georgia said nothing, just kept on counting her stitches.

'But I'm going to get her back.'

'Why?'

'What?'

'If it wasn't so great at the end, why would you want her back? Maybe it just ran its course.'

He looked at her in disbelief. 'You don't just give up. We'd been together seven years.'

Dropped stitch. Damn. She offered nothing but the clatter of her needles.

'I thought we'd get married, have kids, everything. You don't just lose all that.'

'Is that all?'

'What? That's not enough of a reason? That you've spent years working towards something?'

'Do you love her?'

He laughed – not a real laugh but Georgia spotted a dimple on his cheek. Cute. His face was tired but good, it had that broad honesty that was hard to fake. ‘That’s a ridiculous question.’

Cast on, cast off, cast on, cast off.

‘It’s hard to feel the same after seven years.’

Another stitch made a leap but she picked it up just in time.

‘I mean, yeah. Of course I love her. Course I do.’



Maybe Izzy had fallen out of love with him, a little. But it could not be the other way around. Aiden had to love her. Otherwise he wouldn’t be coming home every weekend. Aiden could stand in front of hundreds of students and wax lyrical about his sparkling career or explain to a sixty-six-year-old man why there was no point in having a scrotum lift, and none of it fazed him. Yet talking so plainly to this stranger, he felt the unfamiliar twinge of self-doubt.

Aiden remembered the feeling of loving Izzy. Some days it was stronger than others and some Saturdays now, when they were on rounds together, he mainly felt annoyance. But that was okay. Just because you don’t feel something every day doesn’t mean it’s not there. The teacher’s knitting needles seemed to grow louder. It was distracting. Aiden rarely questioned himself. His approach, which had served him well so far, was to pick an end goal and sprint towards it – jump any hurdles placed in his way, keep the finishing

line in sight. It never occurred to him to consider why it was he wanted to win the race in the first place.

Nancy came back up the aisle with the trolley, and the teacher tried to catch her attention again.

‘Pardon me! Miss!’ she called.

‘Sorry. No time. We’re landing shortly.’ And Nancy disappeared. She didn’t even register him.

The girls behind Aiden were putting on accents now. To him, they just sounded like stronger versions of the ones they already had. ‘I’m going to go, right, and I’m gonna snog everyone in the place: gay, straight, lesbian, bi.’

‘Trannies!’

‘Yeah, blud. I, like, I don’t even care.’

Aiden turned to the teacher, who was making serious progress on whatever it was she was knitting. ‘Why do they keep calling each other “blood”?’ he asked. ‘Why is that so funny?’

‘Haven’t a clue,’ said the teacher. ‘Last year everyone was “rudeboy”. I’m never sure if they’re laughing at the street kids or trying to be like them. I doubt if they know either.’

Aiden watched as she dropped her left needle and leaned over the chair once more, grabbing an iPad from the same lad and throwing it into her knitting bag beside his phone. ‘And I’ll take that too, Giles, thank you very much.’

Aiden heard the boy, whose skin was paler than his own, mutter to his friends: ‘Nigga can’t be left alone.’

‘You see?’ sighed the teacher. ‘And his father sits in the House of Lords.’

FIFTEEN

.....

California' was on its third loop when Roisin knocked on Cora's bedroom door.

'Oh good,' she said, sticking her head around the doorframe with a hand in front of her eyes. 'I reckoned if you had the Joni Mitchell on, you must be alone. But you never know. Charlie could be into a bit of Sunday morning melancholy.' Roisin inspected the pile of clothes on Cora's floor, separating out last night's dress with her foot. 'Was that "Sire of Sorrow" I heard earlier?'

'Yep,' said Cora, still listening to the lyrics. *Reading* Rolling Stone, *reading* Vogue. Like any self-respecting romantic, Cora had been turning to Joni Mitchell for guidance since she was a teenager. The matchmaking chart, atlas, and flight plans were spread across her bed. She hadn't been able to sleep, there was too much in her head, and this was the only soothing distraction. She had discovered a correlation between flight duration and likelihood of success, and she was in the middle of confirming a theory that romantic cities didn't associate with romantic journeys.

'Jaysus, Cora. How bad was it?'

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Cora looked down at the pages. It hadn't gotten any worse, because it hadn't changed at all. Without Nancy to provide information, there was nothing to add to it. But, she realised, her friend wasn't asking about the chart.

'The date?'

'Of course the bleedin' date!' said Roisin, suspiciously eyeing the chart, which at this stage was really more of a multicoloured spreadsheet. Thankfully it was also elaborate to the point of encryption. Cora shut the atlas hastily and shoved the multiplying pages back into her bedside table. The drawer was becoming difficult to close.

The date had not been bad. Objectively speaking it had gone quite well, and she told Roisin this. (*Objectively speaking?* Jesus, Cora, you're not writing a military report on the encounter.) Charlie had wanted to cook, but eating together was pressure enough without having his bed a few yards away. Cora suggested a restaurant near her flat and Charlie, being the 1950s gentleman that he is, insisted on collecting her from Seven Sisters Road. And so he had appeared at exactly 7:30 p.m., standing under her window with his mobile phone to his ear, a lone white face among the sea of older North African men who congregated outside the cafe next door to their building.

'I'll be down in a minute,' Cora had shouted, both into the phone and through the open window.

'Rapunzel, Rapunzel, throw down your dark hair,' teased Roisin, who had been sitting out of view at the end of Cora's bed. She was fashion adviser for the evening – vetoing a playsuit because it made Cora look like she was wearing a nappy, and giving the thumbs up to a flattering 'but not

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too hoochy' black body con dress. 'I still think you should have met at the restaurant,' said Roisin. 'Now he knows your address, which also happens to be *my* address. What if he's the clingy type and can't take the rejection and comes back some night holding a stereo above his head or, I dunno, a hatchet?'

But Cora was glad of the walk. Charlie-on-a-date was not Charlie-from-work. He'd even swapped his navy sweater for a navy blazer. If she'd had to go straight into staring at him across a candlelit table, she would have either burst out laughing or vomited from nerves. The twelve-minute journey from her house to Season was an ice-breaker – an interlude in which they didn't have to look at each other. As they fell into pace, they talked more freely, and by the end of the stroll – when they were debating which north London soccer club had the most obnoxious fans – Cora felt almost at ease.

'This is not one of your better stories,' interrupted Roisin.

'I'm setting the scene!'

'Yeah,' said Roisin, unconvinced. 'It's a bit flat . . . Let's do it like *The Guardian's* 'First Dates'. You be the lonely heart and I'll be the journalist. I'll get the magazine.' 'First Dates' was a weekly feature in *The Guardian* newspaper where two strangers were sent on a blind date and answered questions about it afterwards. Cora and Roisin read it every Saturday. They both said the best ones were when one participant thought they were soulmates, and the other person had a terrible time. Secretly though, Cora liked it most when they both gave the other 10 out of 10. There had even been a few 'First Date' weddings.

'Okay, got it,' said Roisin, returning to the bedroom with the previous day's magazine. 'And can we at least move on to the next track?' She bent over Cora's laptop and released the repeat button. 'Right. So. Cora Hendricks, question one: What were you hoping for?'

'That it wouldn't be so awkward I could never go back to work?'

'Cora, come on. Do it properly.'

'I am doing it properly. That is actually what I thought. Alright, alright. What was I hoping for? I hoped it would flow easily, I'd enjoy myself, and I'd prove myself wrong.'

'About what? About Charlie?'

'No, not Charlie. In general, just. About lots of stuff. Go on. Next question.'

'Okay,' said Roisin, glancing back down at the magazine. 'What were your first impressions?'

'My, this blind date looks familiar.'

'Cora!'

'I thought: I'm glad he's tall so I can wear heels. He really does get better-looking the more you know him, but I'm still not sure he's for me. Oh! And he smelled good.'

'Always important. What did you talk about?'

'That side was good. We talked about books. He studied English at uni, which I didn't know. And he loves Raymond Chandler, who I've never read. He reads more than me, which was good because it meant I learned some things. We talked about public libraries and I said you worked in one—'

'What else did you say about me?'

'Funny now, I don't remember that question being on *The Guardian's* list. Must be new.'

Roisin stuck out her tongue.

'We talked about libraries and London's transportation system, but it wasn't boring. He told me about his family – he already has three godchildren. Said he's rejected Satan so many times he's worried he might start taking it personally. I laughed though I didn't really get it. I'm assuming it's a Catholic thing.'

'It is.'

'And he talked about growing up with his grandmother, who literally beat manners into him. Which explains a lot. And, I don't know, all the usual stuff: music, restaurants, people we have in common.'

'This is fun! Any awkward moments?'

'Well this is what I was getting to before you interrupted. Once we got to the restaurant, it was all sort of awkward. Like it was fine and the conversation never stopped but I was always aware of myself – I was sitting like people do when they know they're being watched, and I always knew what time it was.'

'That's normal,' said Roisin. 'That pain in your neck from being on high alert? It's first-date whiplash.'

'Maybe, but it wasn't butterflies. I wasn't wondering what he thought of me or if what I'd said was stupid. I didn't care. It was fine but it just felt like effort.'

Cora pulled the quilt up over her. She wanted to say that the whole thing had made her feel dead inside, but she knew Roisin would have little time for that.

When Charlie walked Cora home she decided that if he tried to kiss her, she'd let him. She didn't have a preference. In the end, he had asked for permission (of course he had) and Cora had morphed her cringe into a smile and nodded her head. As he leaned in and placed his lips over hers, his hand so tentative against her back it was hardly there, her whole body tensed. All she could think of was the last person she'd kissed, and when she compared this sensation to the eviscerating effect of Friedrich's lips and tongue and hold, it didn't even feel like they were doing the same thing.

'When he kissed me, Roisin, I had a terrible fear that maybe romance really is only good when you're young.'

'These answers are a bit heavy for "First Dates".'

Cora kicked her friend through the bed covers.

'Good table manners?'

'Like you've never seen.'

'Best thing about Charlie?'

'Kind, attentive, a good heart.'

'In "First Dates" speak, that's future husband material.'

'It's an objective opinion.'

'Would you introduce him to your friends?'

'If he'd let me set him up with them, yes.'

'Describe Charlie in three words?'

'Very nice man.'

'Did you go on somewhere afterwards?'

'Didn't you hear me coming in last night?'

'Cora!'

'The Dairy pub. For two drinks. I had gin; he had pints. I paid since he insisted on getting dinner. That enough?'

'Did you kiss?' Roisin raised her hand before Cora could object. 'Just answer it.'

'Yes. We kissed. But that was all.'

'A snog, but no ride. Grand. Marks out of ten?'

'Seven and a half. They always say seven and a half.'

'Would you meet again?'

'At work tomorrow.'

Roisin let that one slide. 'If you could change one thing about the evening, what would it be?'

'I'd have sent a woman I really liked in my place.'

Everything Charlie did made Cora think of Friedrich. Even when he held a door open or offered to pay his share – things Friedrich never did – she still found herself missing him. She knew their relationship had been unhealthy, that it had damaged her in ways she was still recovering from, but, even when she had been jilted at the rural home of some friend of Friedrich's with no way of getting back to Berlin and no idea where her boyfriend had gone or with whom, Cora had always wanted him. He was an addiction. But Cora knew that wasn't a good thing. She didn't want to be an all-or-nothing person when it came to investing in someone else. She trusted Charlie, which she could never have said about Friedrich, and it was possible the rest would follow.

Cora leaned over to check her phone. Sheila had had an accident during the week. She'd scalded herself when boiling the kettle on Wednesday evening, and Maeve was sending regular updates to Cora and Cian. The kettle had been too heavy and Sheila had let it slip. Nobody knew why she had filled it to the brim since she was only ever making a single

cup of tea and she'd always been conscious of the wasted electricity that went into boiling more than you needed. But anyway she had, and the water had poured all over her left arm and hand.

The Rowan Centre rang Maeve that night and the three children had rushed in to see her in the emergency room. Second-degree burns. The doctors said the trauma was worse because Sheila's skin was so thin, and intervention had taken so long. Sheila hadn't called out or reached for the alarm. The nurse didn't know how long she'd been sitting there when they found her, but the skin had started to swell around her watch and Claddagh ring and Sheila insisted she could feel no pain.

Her mother sat dazed in the hospital bed. They had her wrapped in some sort of tin-foil coat and kept insisting she drink more liquids. But she just looked from Maeve to Cora, tremors causing water to dribble down her chin as she asked over and over again when someone was going to take her home. Cora didn't know if she meant her room at the institution or the home she'd long sold in Kew. It's the shock, a terrible shock, everyone kept repeating. Cora hadn't seen her mother like that before.

She hadn't been to see Sheila since, but she was going in today. No more excuses. She climbed around Roisin, who was now reading about a new Blur album, and went to make porridge.

In the kitchen Mary was perfecting hot chocolate – her Sunday treat. Mary was never out on Saturday nights so always rose early, constructed an elaborate breakfast, did

her washing, took a bath, and made herself a mug of hot chocolate from one of those treat-wise sachets. She was carefully shaking marshmallows into a cup that sat atop her Weight Watchers scales. Cora stood beside her and observed.

‘What should it be?’

‘Twenty-one grams of marshmallows, so 197 altogether.’

It was at 185 now and Cora watched the numbers rise slowly as Mary dropped no more than two marshmallows in at a time. 189, 192, 195, 198. Mary frowned.

‘Let me help you with that,’ said Cora, skimming one off the top.

‘That’s made it heavier somehow!’ But Mary was laughing.

Cora gave her a look of mock shock and pinched another marshmallow from the pile. ‘You’re very welcome,’ she said as the scale fell to 196. Mary squealed again, and Cora thought how rarely she heard her flatmate laugh.

Roisin was in the hallway searching for her keys. She was off to see Prince Charming. His parents were in town for the weekend but Roisin didn’t want to meet them. This perceived slight had led him to send what Roisin called ‘mixed emoticons’. ‘A winky face followed by parents and their kid: I ask you Cora, what the fuck is that?’ But they’d reached a compromise and she was going to his place while his parents were out sightseeing. ‘A spot of afternoon delight,’ said Roisin, reprising her terrible English accent and disappearing into the darkness of their stairwell. ‘I’ll be back before the Tower of London closes.’

The colour had returned to her face and there was a long gauze bandage wrapped around her left arm. A researcher, who was leaving Sheila’s room as Cora arrived, said she was a little shaky and needed to eat. ‘Energy is crucial during the recovery phase. She needs more calories,’ he said. ‘Seeing her daughter will be a treat.’ The researchers tried, but they could never quite emulate the compassion that came so naturally to the care staff. None of what Cora had wanted to discuss – how to know if you like someone, how to get someone else out of your head – could be described as a treat. She thanked the researcher and revised her conversation plan.

‘Sweetie pie.’ Sheila was sitting in her armchair with a blanket over her knees. Her injured limb was resting on the armrest. She looked a decade older than the last time Cora had been here. In the moment it took to steady herself, Cora scanned every corner of the room that did not contain her mother. She spotted the blue flower pot, empty since the seedling had died, and an extra handrail installed by the sink. Where the kettle had once stood was an empty space. The toaster was gone.

‘Hi, Mum,’ she said, kissing her brightly on the top of her head. ‘I brought cake.’

‘Lovely,’ said Sheila, but she watched nervously as Cora produced the tin containing half a lemon drizzle log. ‘What’s that?’

‘It’s lemon drizzle. It’s great, trust me.’

‘Lemon. Lemon.’ Sheila juggled the word on her tongue. ‘Grand.’

‘So how are you doing?’

'Me. I— Just about to clean the floor, when you came . . .'
Her mother stood abruptly, a little shaky on her feet, and Cora rose from her chair.

'I'll do it.'

But Sheila pulled a mop and bucket from behind the door without any trouble. She rested her hands on the counter. 'Where did they put the kettle? They move all of the things.'

'I'll look for it,' said Cora. The rooms were cleaned regularly by staff but residents on the open-access programme were allowed to keep their own products. Cora inspected the tiles on the kitchen side of the room. 'This floor looks immaculate, Mum. I'd say the cleaners were in already.'

But Sheila was busy opening and closing cupboards with her good hand. 'I need water. Water. Where did they put . . .?'

A care worker came through the door, knocking as she entered. 'Sheila,' she said, her Jamaican accent dividing the name harshly and coaxing an instant look of guilt from her mother. 'Ya can' be cleanin' She-la. I tell ya again. Ya give me that mop. Ya give that mop and ya sit down.' Turning to Cora, she said: 'I clean them this morning. She ask and I clean. The floors are clean. Ya be careful or she have another accident.'

'I will not be treated like a child in my own home,' her mother barked, as the aide carried the bucket and mop out of the room. 'That woman is a witch.'

'I hear ya, She-la,' the Jamaican woman shouted from the corridor.

'I should hope so!' she shouted back. 'I was speaking loud enough!' Sheila looked at her daughter and rolled her eyes.

'Will we have some cake?' said Cora, cheerfully standing to open the cupboard marked PLATES. They told them at the hospital that Sheila was at risk of infection and she needed to eat. Cora wasn't sure cake was exactly what they meant but the hollows of her mother's cheeks told her it was better than nothing.

'What's that?' asked Sheila, as Cora put the thick slice in front of her.

'It's lemon drizzle.'

'Lemon, lemon, le-mon . . .'

Cora placed the slice in front of her.

'I'm not hungry.'

'Come on, Mum, I brought it especially.'

'No.'

'Here,' said Cora, splitting her own portion with a fork and putting a morsel in her mouth even though the last thing she felt like doing was eating. 'Mmm. See? It's delicious. Now you try.' And she put a bite on Sheila's fork. But her mother just pursed her lips.

'How about a biscuit then?' she suggested, jumping back up to search the cupboards. Had Sheila had lunch? Breakfast? 'You have to feel like eating something. Even a digestive. Here, have one.' She was trying too hard, she knew, but she couldn't stop. She didn't know when Sheila had last eaten. Cora thought of finding a nurse to ask but she didn't want to leave her alone. When had she gotten so thin? Her mother had never been thin. 'Just one, Mum. Please.'

Cora remembered the day that Maeve told them she was getting married: the three women had gone shopping and their mother was trying on boots. When she couldn't get the zip to go the whole way up her calf, Sheila had collapsed onto the shoe shop's sofa in hysterics. The daughters knelt either side of her, expressions of concern across their faces, and Sheila wiped the tears from her face. 'Do you feel okay, Mum?' Cora had asked.

With a wide grin she had told them: 'Girls, I suppose I've just got to accept that I've got Irish dancing legs.'

Six years later, and back on her knees: 'Do you feel okay, Mum?' She leaned in, careful to avoid the injured arm. 'Will you have anything? Anything at all. Anything.'

Cora could hear the hysteria in her voice. She remembered what the doctors had said – how their agitation made Sheila more flustered – and she tried to calm herself. But her mother was squirming in the chair, and when Cora held a quarter biscuit up to her, Sheila started to yelp.

'Okay, sorry, it's fine, you don't have to have any.' But Sheila was whimpering, and Cora didn't know what to do. She hadn't seen her mother cry since she was a child and it created an unknowable panic.

'My arm,' said Sheila, a high-pitched note of alarm. 'My arm, my arm . . .'

'Is it sore?' Cora looked around desperately. She thought about hitting the call button but wasn't sure this counted as an emergency.

'Someone hurt my arm.' She looked at Cora as if she were the child and she needed everything made okay

again. When they were children, Sheila would kiss their injuries better. So Cora, holding back her own tears, leaned in and kissed the coarse gauze.

'There now,' she said, her mother's voice as it once was ringing in her ears. 'All better!' Cora did her best to smile but the effort was pulling her heart in two. She held her mother's right hand to stop her scratching at the bandage and hummed some nonsense to distract them both. There were no words and, eventually, the tears dried up.

'I'm sorry,' Sheila whispered, her voice incongruously young. And Cora, not knowing what to say, just squeezed her fingers tighter. Not five minutes later, Sheila nodded off to sleep.

Cora fought the urge to leave. To flee. She'd go home shortly and make coffee and give the matchmaking chart her full attention. There were so many variables to look into: age profiles, professions. She'd give it all her concentration. If she could just get her mind to focus, it would all be fine. Cora was washing the plates when Sheila woke. With her good hand, she started to fish some notes from her pocket. 'Second-degree burns,' she said, reading from a slip of paper.

'I know, Mum.' And Cora put the last fork away.

'You have to talk to your sister.'

'Who does?'

'You.'

'I do. Maeve calls me every week.'

'You have to talk to her. And you'll be grand, I know you will. You will.'

'I know I will too, Mum. I *am* grand. You're just tired. Shush, it'll be alright.'

Sheila blew her nose and when Cora chanced offering her a biscuit, she took it without comment. Her face was still red and puffy, and crumbs were falling over the glasses that hung around her neck. 'Any men?'

A burst of laughter escaped from Cora. 'I had a date last night actually. With Charlie, from the airport.'

'Is he nice?'

'Charlie, Mum! You know from' – but Cora cut herself off. 'You'd like him. He's a very nice man. Very well reared, as you might say.'

'That's good, sweetie pie.'

This was the kind of conversational treat daughters were supposed to bring their poorly mothers. 'I suppose it is good, yes. I'll keep you updated.'

SIXTEEN

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LHR -> BHD 3.20 p.m.

Kevin Daniel Reynolds was disappointed to find himself a row behind the tasty young thing he'd been watching in line. She looked like she might be an aspiring actress – or at least that she might aspire to it if he put the idea in her head. After a couple of minutes meditating on her legs, which spilled out into the aisle, Kevin redirected his attention to his passport. It expired in three months, and he could finally make his name official. He'd initially added the Daniel because there was another Kevin Reynolds working in the film industry. But now he liked how impressive it sounded – Kevin Daniel Reynolds: a triple threat – not to mention how much space it took up on screen. When the credits rolled, his name was always bigger than anyone else's.

The Belfast Film Festival was paying for his flights but a complimentary drink, never mind a meal, was looking unlikely. Nothing put Kevin in a bad mood quite like going home. Kevin had thrown his accent, and everything else that might connect him to Northern Ireland, overboard on the boat from Larne twenty-eight years previously. Tonight was

the festival's grand opening. More 'grand' in the Irish than the British sense, he suspected.

He thought about engaging the leggy youth in conversation but the seatbelt was uncomfortable enough around his middle without having to lean forward. The woman beside him was pretending to read the in-flight magazine but he caught her eyelashes flickering as she stole glances in his direction. With a bit of make-up and some clothes that fit she could be decent. She was old enough to be his wife but for a flight home he wasn't doing too badly.

'Kevin Daniel Reynolds,' he said, making sure the sleeve of his shirt rose as he proffered his hand. She shook it, and his eighteen-carat watch caught the window light.

'Ingrid Sjöqvist,' she said instantly, as if she'd been expecting the introduction.

'Nice guy, Colin Farrell,' said Kevin, pointing towards the cover photograph of the magazine she was holding. 'Such a generous actor. He wasn't in the best of places when I knew him. I'd say, "Colin, amigo, the drugs don't work," but he couldn't hear me. It was his journey. He had to get there on his own.'

They hadn't had that exact conversation but Kevin was a second assistant on one of Colin Farrell's first films and he had fetched the actor from his trailer on three occasions. How far they'd both come since then.

'I don't have much time for the cinema,' said the blonde, flicking back to the article.

'You lucky, lucky thing. I can never get away from the place. Occupational hazard.' Kevin flashed a smile – he'd

gotten his teeth done a few months previously and had to remind himself to use them – and handed her a business card.



Ingrid Sjöqvist inspected the card – Kevin Daniel Reynolds, Movie Producer – and wondered what she was supposed to do with it. This match was unlikely to prove fruitful. Which was disappointing. A couple of weeks ago, Ingrid had met Rajesh Patel who had since become her personal trainer and caused her to reach such new levels of fitness that she could now do seventeen push-ups. Then, last week, she'd gone on a date with a vet she met on a Row 27 flight to Edinburgh. They had nothing in common except a knowledge of farm animals but they had enjoyed a delicious Lebanese dinner in Soho. Third time's a charm. Or so Ingrid had hoped.

She listened as Kevin – sorry, Kevin Daniel – told some story he kept reminding her was 'very funny' and wondered why Cora had chosen this man. His girth suggested he was not particularly interested in improving his PB, Ingrid's only notable hobby, and she doubted he had much concern for the dairy summit where she'd be spending the next three days.

Ingrid could almost see her reflection in his molars. 'What genre of films do you make?'

'At the moment, we're all about showcasing forgotten gems,' he said, pulling at the cuffs of his shirt. 'We reimagine them and re-film them. We architect them for a new generation.'

'Remakes?'

'That's probably the simplest description, when English isn't your first language,' he said, lips stretched back in a version of a smile. Between his teeth and his watch, Ingrid found herself squinting. 'At the moment we're looking at *Blade Runner*. I shouldn't be telling you that – we're still in development – but you've got an honest face. A pretty one too, it's got to be said.'

'That sounds like the dictionary definition of a remake,' said Ingrid who could have confirmed this immediately as she always carried a dictionary in her bag. An item she imagined was missing from the luggage of a man who used 'architect' as a verb.

But Kevin kept grinning. 'We're going to retell the story, but in London. You look at the original film and you think, "What's the difference between that dystopian world and a shitty day in London?" Everything's grey, people fleeing the rain like it might burn their skin off. So let's give the Replicants Cockney accents. Let's have near-naked, impoverished flower sellers on every corner. Let's retell a story for the kids and let's make the death scenes spectacular.'

He looked at Ingrid like he expected her to applaud. He must have been mid-forties but she was convinced the mane he kept fondling was the result of hair plugs.



If George could change anything about his life, it wouldn't be the fact that he'd grown up in a homophobic backwater, or that his African-American parents had chosen to settle

in what was officially the fourth whitest place in America – take a bow, Osage County, Missouri. He wouldn't even change the fact that in a community as tiny and nosy as theirs, his mum and dad, who already stuck out like a dark brown thumb, had an unhealthy and very public obsession with *The Love Boat* TV series, which both alienated them from the rest of the miniscule non-Caucasian community and earned him the nickname of Buoy George. All of that was cool. In fact he *welcomed* a solid high-school experience of ridicule and exclusion compared to what he'd had to put up with for the past however many days. If George Yare could change one thing about his life, he would never, ever have said anything to Nancy about being a frigging puppet.

To be honest, he didn't even realise he *had* said it. He was always complaining about Cora and her blatant prejudices, but it was just talk, and he couldn't figure why Nancy had suddenly started listening. He didn't actually think Nancy was Cora's puppet. Duh. He'd like to see someone *try* to tell Nancy what to do. But then Cora had said something and Nancy had gone and said the puppet thing and Cora was pissed and they were fighting and now Nancy was as much fun to be beside on a flight as a 9/11 conspiracist.

'Am I bothered? I'm not bothered, George, I'm not. I don't even see Row 27 any more. I take the passenger head count and I go "Row 25, Row 26, Row 28" ... That's how I count now, George. I'm not even bothered ...'

George was trying to spend as little time as possible in the rear alcove. He'd volunteered to work up front with Satsuma Sarah but she'd sent him down to get more Touche Éclat.

He grabbed the make-up from the tray and tried to keep his head down.

This was not his week. As well as the painful work environment, the men of London were getting shittier. For the third time in far too short a period, George had turned up for a daytime date with someone he'd met online only to find the dude totally wasted. George had spent forever thinking about what to wear and what they were going to do and discuss, and then the guy could barely string a sentence together. A few nights before that, he'd gone to Rupert Street with friends. He hadn't particularly felt like going out but he wasn't going to meet the love of his life sitting at home watching the sci-fi channel. So he went out and some dude started chatting him up. All muscles, protein shakes, and masculine bullshit. He had this line, where he told George he reminded him of some actor he'd never heard of. George said his favourite show was *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and this guy – this gay fucking guy in a gay fucking bar – called him a puff. Like, hello? Fuck that. He had no time for homonormative bullshit. George would fart rainbows if he could.

Walking the red carpet at home events made Kevin's skin crawl; he couldn't cope with the inane questions that came from the other side of the partition. *Are you glad to be home? Will you have a pint of Guinness while you're here? Will you visit the Giant's Causeway? Is Belfast still your*

favourite place in the whole world? He has shot a film in the Seychelles and they're standing there, under their embattled umbrellas, asking him that with a straight face? Christ.

'Haven't been back to dear old Belfast for a while now,' he said to the Swedish woman in the window seat. He'd forgotten her name. 'Just popping over for the film festival.' 'I'm going to an agricultural conference about milk quotas.'

'It's a privilege to be invited to give something back to my hometown,' he continued, not listening. 'It's such a humbling honour.'

Ever since she'd started this exercise business, Ingrid's libido had come into its own. She wasn't sure she'd had one before but now, when she crossed the threshold of her apartment building, sweat gathering at her hairline, she felt a flutter in her nether regions. The satisfaction she had always derived from sex was in the primal responses she could elicit from the other person. This new sensation was making her think there might be more to it.

These days anything was enough to send her off. She got a thrilling sensation just sitting at the back of a rickety London bus. But she wanted to put it to the test and the only place she was likely to find a human partner was on one of these flights.

Kevin Daniel would not be proving a mate. Even during take-off, as the plane jittered along the runway, she'd felt

nothing. Her brain had already decided. Ingrid would not be sleeping with Kevin Daniel Reynolds. Not for all the tea in China.

There was lots George was willing to put up with. He managed to keep his opinions to himself when guys constantly checked their phones during dinner. He didn't even mind a little artistic licence with profile pictures. And top bunk or bottom wasn't a deal-breaker. He just wanted to get to the point where you might even consider letting some dude into your bed and not have to change the locks the next morning.

'Go back down to the rear station, George, and see if Nancy needs a hand.' Sarah paused. 'Hello, George?'

'Oh you're talking to *me*? Yeah, you see unfortunately that's not going to work for me right now? I'm pretty snowed under.'

'With what?' she said, yanking the cloth from his hand. 'Turning my trolley into a bloomin' shrine?'

George made it as far as Row 27. The heck he was going any further; Nancy was ripe to send a claw flying out of her cage. Despite his best efforts, he could never help having a peak at Cora's couples. Today's was a total plane crash. And yesterday, she'd clearly paired a lesbian with a hetero. Cora would set up the queers by accident, but not on purpose? The whole thing was totally unfair and discriminatory. George didn't *want* to be the guy.

who called homophobia on everything? But, like, hello? Homo-frigging-phobia.

'So what has you travelling, darling? All work, or over for a little play?'

Ingrid hit the button on the side of her Fitbit. Twenty-three minutes for him to ask a question, and it was one to which she had already provided the answer. He didn't even wait for an answer.

'Because if you wanted to attend the festival's gala opening tonight, I could organise a ticket for you.'

'I will be busy this evening.'

Still smiling, he tilted his head. 'Washing your hair?'

Ingrid wondered could he hear her at all. 'Correlating last year's creamery figures.'

Kevin didn't need this. He rang the overhead bell, and waited for the pretty little waitress he had clocked earlier to appear. Another air hostess started descending the aisle: a woman with orange skin who, Kevin noted, would never actually be cast as an air hostess. Thankfully, the tangerine woman stopped a few rows ahead and Kevin rang the bell again. After a couple of minutes, the delectable blonde was at his side.

'Hello, sweetheart,' he said, pushing up his shirt cuffs.

'Can I help you with something?'

'Well, Nancy,' he said, straining his neck to read her name and taking a survey of her décolletage while he was there. 'I was looking to get a whiskey - Jameson, if you have it.' He pulled a twenty from a wad of notes and the money clip snapped back into place.

'The in-flight service is about to begin. It'll be with you in a few minutes.'

'But I have a terrible thirst, and it's so much nicer to get it from a pretty blonde. You can keep the change.'

'I don't currently deal with this row,' said the air hostess curtly, ignoring his money. 'The service tray will be with you shortly.'

Kevin stuffed the note back in his pocket and watched the jumped-up waitress waddle away. He tried to recline his seat but the button didn't work. What sort of airline was this? The leggy girl in the row in front knocked her smartphone onto the floor and it came away from her headphones. Kevin unbuckled his seatbelt quickly and picked it up.

'Thanks,' she said, as he presented it to her. But Kevin kept a hold on the device. 'Have we worked together?' he asked. 'You're very familiar. Are you an actress?'

'No,' said the girl, going a little red.

'Or a model?'

'No!' she giggled, bringing her hand up to cover her mouth and the gleaming braces within.

A burly red-faced man appeared, standing, in 26B - the seat beside the leggy kid. Clearly jealous, he eyeballed Kevin. *Know when you've been beat, my friend.* 'Can I help you?'

'You can leave me daughter alone for one. She's sixteen. What's your name?'

'I was only talking.'

'I've heard talking and that's not fucking it. I ought to report you. What's your name?'

'That's none of your—'

'Kevin Daniel Reynolds,' interrupted the Swede as she handed the beefy man Kevin's business card.

'I've got your number now, mate,' he said, raising two fingers to his bulging eyes before directing them at Kevin Daniel. 'Don't make a fucking move.'

Kevin went to say something smart but when the father threw his bulk back into his seat and all of Row 26 shook, he decided to let it go. The Scandinavian beside him raised the magazine to her face but Kevin could tell, from how Colin Farrell was giggling up and down, that she was having a good laugh behind it.