

Behind closed doors,
everyone has a secret to keep

The
Woman
at 72
Derry
Lane

CARMEL HARRINGTON
Irish Times Bestselling Author

Carmel Harrington

The Woman at 72 Derry Lane

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‘A complete page-turner and an emotional rollercoaster. Tissues will be required’
Sinead Moriarty ‘A wonderfully life-affirming book...Carmel Harrington writes with such honesty’
New York Times bestselling author, Hazel Gaynor
On a leafy suburban street in Dublin, beautiful, poised Stella Greene lives with her successful husband, Matt. The perfect couple in every way, Stella appears to have it all. Next door, at number 72 however, lives Rea Brady. Gruff, bad-tempered and rarely seen besides the twitching of her net curtains, rumour has it she’s lost it all... including her marbles if you believe the neighbourhood gossip. But appearances can be deceiving and when Stella and Rea’s worlds collide they realise they have much in common. Both are trapped in a prison of their own making. Has help been next door without them realising it? With the warmth and wit of Maeve Binchy and the secrets and twists of Liane Moriarty, this is the utterly original and compelling new novel from Irish Times bestseller Carmel Harrington. Praise for The Woman at 72 Derry Lane: ‘I both cried and laughed...one of the best books I have ever read’
Woman’s Way ‘Both heart-wrenching and uplifting. The perfect summer read’
Irish Times bestseller Fionnuala Kearney

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Содержание

Copyright	6
Dedication	7
Chapter 1	9
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	18
Chapter 4	20
Chapter 5	23
Chapter 6	27
Chapter 7	29
Chapter 8	32
Chapter 9	37
Chapter 10	40
Chapter 11	42
Chapter 12	45
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	48

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IRISH TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Dedication

For my godparents, Ann and Nigel Payne.
As a child you held my hand and now,
as an adult, you hold my heart.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Chapter 51](#)

[Chapter 52](#)

[Chapter 53](#)

[Chapter 54](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Book Club Questions](#)

[Keep Reading ...](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Carmel Harrington](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Chapter 1

STELLA

Derry Lane, Dublin, 2014

Stella held her breath as he circled her. He moved slowly, methodically, inspecting every inch of her body. His breath nipped the back of her neck with menace. He combed through her hair with long, cool fingers. She willed herself not to move, not to shudder, not to react.

‘Very nice,’ Matt whispered and, despite herself, she exhaled in relief. The air crackled and shifted with his elation at her reaction. She knew he was getting off on her fear. She would have to work harder not to give him that satisfaction.

Her reprieve was short-lived. No sooner had the word ‘nice’ been uttered, than a long, dissatisfied sigh was exhaled through his perfect white teeth. His face scrunched up in a frown and the vein on his forehead throbbed in protest. Matt stood back and shook his head slowly, disappointment tainting the air around them.

Damn it. What had she missed? In a frenzy Stella went through a quick mental checklist. Hair blow-dried pokerstraight by her hairdresser and friend, Charlie, earlier, exactly as Matt liked it. Her make-up was applied carefully, with neutral shades that accentuated her eyes and complemented her nude lips. Stella thought back to the night a few years ago when she’d paid sorely for experimenting with a new look. Matt had walked into the bedroom, watching her as she stained her lips red. She felt glamorous and sexy. Until he stood behind her, groping her left breast and squeezing it so tight that his fingernails marked her skin.

‘You’re hurting me.’ She protested, trying to wriggle free from his grip.

‘Oh, you don’t like this?’ he asked, placing another hand on her behind and smacking it hard.

‘No!’ She exclaimed. She was stunned, completely immobilised by his tone and actions.

He pulled away from her and said, ‘Well, you surprise me. Because this ...’ He pointed to her face, ‘this trashy make-up will result in a similar response from every man you meet. You look like you belong in a whorehouse.’

Was he joking? No. His face was anything but jovial. She felt annoyance bubble up inside her. How dare he say such nasty things to her?

‘What do *you* know about whorehouses?’ she lifted her chin in defiance.

Looking back, she could see how bloody naïve she’d been back then. That was a time when she still believed in Matt and their marriage. Yes, he had the odd ‘off day’, was prone to mood swings. But she could forgive him those, because he loved her. Because he was all she had. That was then. This is now.

‘What did you say?’ His voice was quiet. Menace laced every word. Stella shuddered as she watched him change in front of her. She tried to locate traces of the kind, charming man she thought she’d married. Then the force of his hand landed hard across her cheek, smearing her blood-red lipstick over her chin.

The impact had been so forceful she reeled backwards against the corner of their dressing table, stabbing her side as she fell. An old injury moaned in response to his sudden assault and she tumbled down to the ground in an undignified, shameful heap. She stayed there in shock and in pain, unable to speak as she watched him come at her again. He was precise, he considered his next move. Then he kicked her hard in her side. Right where her scar was. She found her voice as she cried out in horror and pain and she begged him to stop. But if he heard her, he didn’t show it.

He told her afterwards that he’d lost control, that he was ashamed of his actions, that it wasn’t who he was. His calm, cold face and his precision in where his blow landed made a liar of him. Matt

always knew exactly what he was doing. With stark realisation, Stella knew that he enjoyed every blow.

What had she missed this evening when she'd got ready? Here she was – immaculate, yet still somehow – wrong.

Stella was brought back to the present when Matt circled her once more and her eyes followed him. 'How many times do I have to tell you that it's all in the fine detail? You really are so careless. I swear, I don't know what you would do without me.'

So many lies in their marriage.

'I'm sorry,' she kept her voice steady, light, without a note of whining. He hated it when she had 'histrionics'. She steeled herself to look at him directly. Was it the fading light in their white kitchen playing tricks, or had his eyes changed? How long had it been since she saw love there? Had she imagined that in the first place? Now, it was like looking into the eyes of a monster. Cold and dark, his pupils dilated so much that they dominated his eyes.

He raised an eyebrow, watching her, as if he could read her mind. She looked away first, pulling her gaze from him. He always won, much better at the game than her.

Her mother's face flashed into her mind. She closed her eyes and tried to focus on that. Dark-blue jeans, with a sloppy, long cream cardigan that she always wore around the house. She'd had it years, it was wrapped up in every memory she had of her mam at home.

She used to say, 'Your nan wore a housecoat nearly every day of her adult life. Whenever she got home, she'd put it on, over whatever she was wearing. This cardigan, well, I suppose it's my housecoat. Just snugglier.'

Stella remembered a time when all her troubles could be snuggled away sitting beside her mam, with the cardigan wrapped around them both. A blanket of love and protection in that cardigan. Oh Mam ...

Her mother's voice whispered to her a lot these past few weeks. Repeating words of wisdom she'd given Stella. They had just watched *About a Boy* and Hugh Grant's character was busy making a fool of yet another unsuspecting female. Mam had paused the movie, then turned to her, saying:

'How a man treats you is how they feel about you. Do you understand? You must always believe them when they show you who their true self is.'

Stella wished with all her heart she could be back in that cardigan's embrace, safe and loved.

'I don't think Matt likes me very much, Mam.' As tears pricked, she felt her eyeliner creep its way into her eyeballs, stinging her.

But who else is there, but him?

Her mother's voice was stern now. 'No time for tears. Think! Don't let emotions cloud your next move. Think, my darling girl.'

She played through her options. She could implore him to let her off whatever transgression she had committed, or she could brazen it out, say nothing and hope for the best. Somehow or other, she knew that either would likely result in the same reaction from him. She'd done this dance with him so many times, she knew the drill. This was a game to him, a cruel game of cat and mouse, where the rules changed daily.

Tonight it appeared he wanted to play.

'You think this is acceptable?' He pointed to a small, fine white thread that poked out from the hem of her Louise Kennedy dress and flicked it with his index finger. Her stomach flipped when she saw the offending article, so small, yet with the power of a deadly grenade. She must have snagged it when she removed the tag earlier.

You idiot. You bloody stupid idiot.

'I'll sort it out, I'm so sorry, I don't know how I missed that.' She kept her voice light, calm, even, then moved towards the hallway, to the stairway. His voice halted her.

‘Just *where* do you think you’re going? Come back here now!’ His voice grew louder with every word and her body trembled in response. She moved back into the kitchen, standing beside their large granite island.

She bit hard on the inside of her mouth to stall anguish. Later, while he slept, she could allow herself the luxury of tears.

She glanced at the back door. How far would she get if she ran for it? She could climb the fence into next door’s garden, bang on the woman’s back door and beg for safe refuge. She tried to remember her neighbour’s name. It was a pretty name. Rea. That was it. Despite the fact that their houses were conjoined, semi-detached buddies, she knew little about the woman. She never left the house and gossip on the street was that ‘she wasn’t all there’. No, the tired face of her neighbour, seen peeking through her window every now and then didn’t inspire confidence. Not an option.

Who else was there? The house to their left was empty. On the market for months, ever since the owner died. Linda? She lived opposite with her teenage son. But she was never in. Always out on dates. Matt called her a slut. Stella thought she was lovely, always had a smile and a kind word for her when they bumped into each other.

Was it fair to bring this drama to anyone else’s door? Probably not.

That was that, then. She didn’t really know anyone else on Derry Lane. Matt always said, ‘I like to keep myself to myself.’

He liked to keep *her* to himself, more like it. She was utterly alone. No family. No friends. There was just *him*.

Tonight they were out to impress his boss, she had a role to play: the dutiful corporate wife. Remembering this fact gave her hope. The meeting was important. He’d been talking about it all week, the need for a perfect performance from them. His boss, Adrian, was a family man. Traditional, conservative. She was sure he’d not appreciate a black eye on the wife of one of his team.

‘Thank goodness for your beady eyes. What would Adrian think if he saw me in a right old state?’ she asked evenly.

I’m thinking, Mam. I’m being brave. She felt her mother’s approval.

Matt responded with a small nod and then walked to the kitchen cabinet. She knew not to move nor make another sound. She’d pushed it enough by mentioning Adrian. Now it was time to appear contrite, seek forgiveness for her fine-thread transgression. She looked down at the wisp of cotton and her eyes blurred once more as she realised that her life had been reduced to this. There were many times when she felt like she was clinging onto her sanity and life by a fine thread, but this was ridiculous.

She glanced in the cream, ornate mirror that hung over their dining-room table and, not for the first time in her married life, didn’t recognise the woman standing there, looking terrified.

The sound of cutlery jangled against each other as he searched the drawers’ contents. Each clink rang out into the quiet and only heightened her growing fear. What would his next move be? He looked almost cheerful as he searched. He’d be whistling next. Hatred filled her body once more and she held onto it tight, using it as a shield to protect herself from whatever he had planned.

Every time he did this, she swore it would be the last. That she’d leave.

‘That’s enough.’ This time it was her father’s voice in her head. *Yes, Dad, I think perhaps it is.*

Matt held up a pair of kitchen scissors, long blades with sheared edges and black handles. ‘Here we go,’ he said cheerily.

‘Now, what will we do with these?’ He smiled sweetly when she flinched as the cold steel caressed the side of her cheek. He traced every inch of her face until suddenly he stopped, pressing the tip of the blades to her throat. He continued putting pressure on the tips and she waited for her skin to puncture. Despite using every ounce of her resolve, she couldn’t hide the telltale tremble in her body.

Stella closed her eyes and braced herself for the pain.

This was it.

‘The grim reaper finally caught up with me, Mam’, she thought. You can only dodge his evil snare so many times. And, yes, there were occasions when she lay in her bed, as Matt slept beside her, snoring quietly, that she wished for the sleep of death. But the thing was, she wanted to live.

She wasn’t ready to die. Not today. Not like this.

‘Why are you shaking like a leaf? What am I to do with you?’ Matt asked. She opened her eyes and could see amusement dancing through his own, enjoying her living nightmare. Contempt for this man that she once loved and who she thought loved her, consumed her. There was so much she wanted to say to him. There was so much she wanted to do.

Say something, then. Scream, tell him to fuck off, run, fight, just do something!

Yet she remained silent, trapped in fear. Fear of being alone again. Fear of the darkness inside her. Shame now replaced her anger and she thought, maybe I deserve this. I’m weak.

‘You’re wrong, love,’ her mam whispered to her, reminding Stella that deep down she knew that wasn’t her truth. Somewhere inside of her was a woman who once was strong, who once fought to live over and over again. She needed to find that girl again. She needed to fight back.

Matt trailed the blades of the scissors down over her right breast, hovering over the nipple for a moment and then continued downwards. He hunkered low, the muscles in his thighs rippled taut against the fabric of his grey trousers. For a moment she considered raising a knee hard, sharp into his face.

She did nothing. Because she was a coward. Because she was afraid. Because she wasn’t ready. Because she had nowhere to go. Because she had no one to turn to. Oh, she had a lot of reasons, excuses.

Matt snipped the offending white thread and held it up between his manicured fingers, waving it lightly in front of her nose. It turned blood red in front of her eyes. A little red thread that suddenly became ominous.

Blood would be shed. Hers? Or his?

Stella glanced towards the scissors and wondered if one hard jab, straight into his heart, would kill him. Life in prison would surely be better than these concrete walls that imprisoned her.

‘There. That’s better.’ He looked at her, up and down and declared, ‘Now, you’re perfect.’

But she wasn’t perfect. She was just Stella, a girl who fell for the wrong man and was paying a high price for it. She’d promised her mam that she would always stay strong. Stay true to herself. But her mam wasn’t here any more and it’s a lot harder to stay strong when you’re completely alone. She hated herself for the bright smile she forced herself to flash at him. And she hated even more her voice, timid and weak, as it asked, ‘Do I look okay now?’

‘Simply perfection, my darling. You are my masterpiece and tonight, every man and woman at our table will think so when they look at you. They will be jealous, wishing they were me. Because I’m the one who gets to call you his very own.’ He pulled her into him and, with one hand around her waist and another behind her neck, held it tight. ‘Such a delicate little neck.’ He kissed it as he pinched it hard enough to let her know that he could snap it in two if he so wished.

‘Just two glasses of wine with your dinner, remember. You don’t want to get tipsy. We all know how loose your tongue gets when you’ve had a few. We wouldn’t want you to say the wrong thing, now, would we?’ His reminder was unnecessary. Stella needed all of her wits about her.

‘I’ll just get my coat.’ She walked to the hall closet and her hand hovered on her black Jasper Conran trench. Instinct made her glance at Matt to check if he approved. He shook his head once, nodding to the white wool cashmere full-length he’d bought her for Christmas. Totally unsuitable for the warm evening, but it cost more and, more to the point, looked expensive. He wanted to show off to his cronies.

As he helped her into it, Stella saw her reflection once more in their hall mirror. The perfect couple. How many times had she been told that over the past year? Matt, the stockbroker; handsome, charming, strong. And Stella, his beautiful, elegant and well-spoken wife. Perfection.

There was no such thing.

Her private shame that she had married an abusive man weighed her down so heavily that she thought she would drown.

Chapter 2

REA

Next door, 72 Derry Lane

While Rea slept, the thick putrid stench of rotting food contaminated the air in her house, sneaking its way from the kitchen, up the stairs and into her bedroom. Maybe it was the smell that interrupted her slumber or maybe she sensed that dickhead next door was at it again. Either ways, she was awake. She fumbled towards her phone, knocked the bedside lamp sideways in the process, cursing as she did so, then clicked the home button. The smell was making her gag now, so it took two attempts to speak.

‘Siri, what time is it?’

‘The time is 23:59.’

Almost midnight? If she hadn’t been half asleep she might have enjoyed some banter with her iPhone friend, but instead she opened her eyes to confirm which end of the day she was at. Pitch-black darkness. Damn it. She’d only been asleep for a few hours.

The smell worsened, clogging up her airwaves. ‘There’s a special place in hell for you, Louis Flynn, you extortionate little fecker,’ she muttered. It was her bloody bin in the kitchen stinking the house up. Louis, who did odd jobs for Rea, like taking the bins out, knew he had her over a barrel. Fourteen years old and with a mouth on him that had no business on one so young. He was playing hard ball, staying away, proving a point. Showing her that she needed him more than he needed her. She’d a good mind to phone him, wake him up and see how he liked to be inconvenienced.

Rea got up and went downstairs, opening the windows, then stepped back, wafting her arms manically, trying to disperse the air around her. She positioned herself in front of the slight breeze that ran its way around her and, hopefully, the rest of the house. Such was her relief from the dispersing stench that at first she didn’t hear them. But the welcome caress of the cool breeze faded as the hairs on the back of her arms stood to attention. Her eyes opened wide and her heart began to quicken as she strained to listen. She could hear them. Or rather, she could hear *him*. Because, as normal, the woman was mostly silent.

A loud crash rattled around the room, followed by a dull thud. Had he thrown something? Or was it her falling? Rea closed her eyes as imagined scenes of what was unfolding next door prickled her. Damn it, he was beating her again.

She’d only spoken to her next-door neighbour once before in person. He had a plummy south Dublin accent and within seconds she knew that she didn’t like him. He wore an expensive suit; one of those ones that had the label on the outside, just in case you didn’t realise it cost the price of a regular mortgage. He’d looked her up and down, blatantly, without even bothering to hide his obvious contempt for her. Downright rude. He didn’t need to say out loud what his conclusion of her was. It was written all over his pompous, arrogant face. She was just the fat, greying lady from next door, who meant nothing to him. Inconsequential. Irrelevant.

The funny thing was, when he raged at his wife, his posh, arsey tone slipped and a much coarser accent was left. He cursed like a rabid dog. And tonight he was pissed at his wife again, for some unfathomable reason, and was letting her have it good time. As his temper flared, his shouting grew louder.

‘... you made me do this ...’

‘... only yourself to blame ...’

‘Why can’t you listen to me ...?’

Rea stood close to the window, helpless. With every word uttered, there was the unmistakable sound of an accompanying slap. Sweat trickled down the small of her back as her own body reacted

to the sound of him when he battered the young woman. Damn it, she never asked for this. She didn't want to be a silent witness to their domestic rows, but she couldn't un-hear them either.

Now small, pleading whimpers of the woman began. *What the hell have you done this time, Dickhead?* Rea couldn't listen any more, so she went back upstairs to her bedroom. She slammed the door hard behind her. Enough already. She wanted no part of this.

But even though the door was shut and she could no longer hear the cries, it was not as easy to quieten her conscience. She had to try to help. Again. What if that was her daughter, Elise, in trouble? They'd be much the same age. She'd want someone to rescue her, wouldn't she? As the thought of Elise threatened to undo her, she banished her from her thoughts. She needed to focus on the woman next door. The problem was that she'd rang emergency services several times following other incidents like this one. And to what end? Because the Gardaí would arrive and Mr and Mrs Perfect would give an award-winning performance. He'd smile and tell them that all was okay and she'd agree, standing shoulder to shoulder with him, saying that they'd just had a heated debate. There was nothing to worry about, all a false alarm. Or words to that effect, she assumed, because the Gardaí would walk away, leaving her to his cruel hands once more. Why did she lie for her man like that?

At first, despite herself, the woman made Rea want to scream. She should speak up, stand up for herself. Why did she let him get away with his crap time and time again? She thought of Elise again and her conscience pricked her. That woman next door was someone's daughter too. Who was she to judge, when she knew, better than anyone, that nothing was ever as simple as it appeared?

Terrified, no doubt. Trapped. She looked at the walls, the windows, the door. If anyone knew what it felt like to be trapped, it was her.

She walked down to the hallway, peering through the peephole of her front door. Derry Lane was quiet. Cars parked on either side of their road, under leafy oak trees. The street lights were on, casting shadows. Her house, number 72, was right in the middle of the cul-de-sac. She noticed a light on, across the way, in Louis's house. She wondered if he was still awake. Probably on his iPhone; he was never off that yoke. But then she copped a strange car parked out front. Ha! A sure sign that his mother had a new man visiting. Linda might as well put a red light above the door and be done with it, the amount of traffic that went in and out of there.

Maybe she should call her all the same and tell her about the goings-on next door. Ask her to help. But no sooner had the thought struck her than she discounted it immediately. Linda Flynn was a silly, vacuous woman, who only had one thing on her mind – men. Maybe she was right. But at any rate, she'd be no use nor ornament to the plight of Mrs Dickhead next door. This was going to be on her shoulders, no one else's.

At least the smell of the bins had eased, escaping through her opened windows. There again, she may have just gotten used to its stench. That was the thing with bad smells, eventually you didn't notice them any more. Is that what it was like next door? The woman didn't notice any more?

Rea felt powerless. She fantasised about running out of her home, jumping over the fence between their houses and pounding on his front door, demanding to see the woman. She'd bring a weapon. She looked around her and her eyes settled on the black poker sitting beside her fire. That would sort the boyo out good and proper. She'd land that up his arse and he wouldn't sit down for months afterwards. Ha!

But thinking and doing are two entirely different creatures altogether. And Rea hadn't stepped outside her house now for near on two years.

Her hand hovered over the phone. The last time she'd rang 112 they made her sound like an interfering old busybody. Someone who enjoyed the drama. They couldn't be more wrong. She'd had enough dealings with the Gardaí to last her two lifetimes. She had no want nor will for any of this.

Rea wished her family were here. Luca would be out that door, George right by his side, ready to fight for that young girl.

Suck it up Rea, you're on your own.

Turning to her phone, Rea asked the closest thing to a friend she had these days.

‘Siri, should I call 112?’

‘Calling emergency services in 5 seconds.’

‘Righto Siri, there’s no messing with you, my robot pal.’ In truth she was relieved that she took that decision from her. Rea gave the operator the details quickly and then waited. It was now as quiet as a graveyard next door. The walls of the Victorian semi-detached they lived in were thick, which made it difficult to hear anything unless a racket was being made. But when the windows were open in both houses, sounds would drift over. They snuck their way through the crevices of the houses, telling tales on what went on behind closed doors.

The saying ‘if walls could talk’ had never felt so apt.

Rea had been trying to distract herself by watching one of her favourite programmes, *Suits*, when she finally heard a car pulling up outside. She rushed to look through the peephole. There they were, the boys in blue. Although she didn’t believe in any God, she still found herself praying that the woman was okay. Rea didn’t even know her name. Wasn’t that the craziest thing? They’d moved in next door nearly a year ago and managed to avoid any real interactions with her or anyone else on the road. Okay, she wasn’t that sociable herself these days, but still. It was strange that nobody knew anything about them.

She used the banisters to help pull herself upstairs and peered out of her bedroom window to get a better view of the street below. There were two officers standing side by side in front of number 70. They pounded loudly on the front door and she held her breath, waiting.

The porch light flicked on and someone opened the door. Rea strained her neck, her head pressed close to the window pane. The cold glass was a welcome relief to her hot forehead. Someone moved forward out of the shadows, towards the Gardaí. She held her breath once more and crossed her fingers behind her back. Let the girl be okay.

Dickhead stood there in all his glory, holding his two hands up, gesturing wildly, to match the wild tale he was no doubt spinning. She couldn’t see if anyone was beside him, no matter how far she leaned over the windowsill. Maybe if she opened the window wider, she could see it all.

No big deal, you can do this, she thought. Her heart started to hammer in her chest so fast that her head buzzed. A vision of an exploding head popped into her mind. Only the head looked a bit like a big watermelon. That’s it, she’d officially lost it.

Her hands shook and her stomach began to flip as she pushed the window open wide. The boundaries of her prison were closing in on her day by day. She could open the windows downstairs, but found it difficult to do so up here. There was no rhyme nor reason to it.

She looked around her bedroom in panic and thoughts crashed in on top of her. *I’m getting worse*. Soon, I’ll not be able to leave my bedroom, never mind the house. An image of her lying dead on her floor, becoming cat food for an imaginary pet, made her gasp out loud. ‘I never liked cats,’ she said to the listening walls.

As she backed away from the open window, with every step her breath slackened. Finally she was at a distance that she could manage, that she felt comfortable with. With every foot she moved away, her levels of anxiety dropped tenfold. Calm again, she closed her eyes to concentrate and listened to the voices that were drifting upwards. It was better, she wasn’t noticed hanging out of the window anyhow. She didn’t want the neighbours to see her; a silent witness, rubbernecking their lives.

One of the Gardaí spoke first of all. He sounded like Daniel O’Donnell, with a lovely soft Donegal accent. ‘Good evening, sir, we received a call that there was a disturbance coming from your house. May we come in?’

She couldn’t hear the response. ‘He’ll be feeding you a line of bullshit,’ she whispered to his unhearing ears. ‘Arrest the dickhead, wee Daniel, there’s only one place fit for the likes of him.’

‘Even so, we’d still like to come in, see for ourselves, that everything is in order,’ the guard replied, firmly. Good man, Daniel. You might have a lovely soft voice, but you are no fool. There

was no nonsense with this one. She appreciated that. Then they all disappeared from her sight and it went quiet once more. They must have gone inside. The soft click of the door closing confirmed that. She pointed to her head and said, 'Up there for dancing, Siri, up there.'

'Let me check on that. Okay, I found this on the web, options for dinner and dancing,' Siri replied in an instant.

She was puzzled for a moment. Then she realised that Siri, of course, wasn't privy to the inside joke she and her husband George had shared for decades.

When was it they'd turned the popular phrase, *up there for thinking, down there for dancing*, around for the first time? Before the kids, anyhow. Whenever one of them would get something right, they'd point to their heads and say, 'up there for dancing' and the other would finish it off and say 'down there for thinking'. Comedy gold. Well, it always made them laugh leastways.

Oh George, why aren't you here with me? He'd be snorting with laughter in appreciation right now. He always had done. Now she had nobody to make laugh. Things could be worse, she surmised. She, at least, had an iPhone robot. Albeit with questionable humour.

She looked down at her phone at the lists of websites with details of dinner and dancing events on the screen. Rea smiled to herself at Siri's literal take on her words.

'You're funny, Siri.'

'Yes, sometimes I do feel funny.'

'There's tablets for that.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

'You know what? I'm not sure I do either.' Rea said, suddenly feeling stupid for having a conversation about a forgotten inside joke with a bloody phone. She swiftly turned Siri off.

It had been years since she'd gone out to dinner and even longer since she danced. There was a time when she could jive and twist with the best of them. And many a time George told her that she was as light as a feather on her feet. Those days were over.

She felt anger burn her stomach. You, young lady, whoever you are next door, if Dickhead hasn't done you in, this is the time to be brave. Tell the Gardaí that your husband hits you, that you are scared. Let them help you. Don't let that bastard get away with it one more time. You still have time to have fancy dinners and dance. Get out. Please ...

Twenty minutes passed and when Rea didn't hear sounds of ambulance sirens belting on their way towards Derry Lane, she hoped that meant that the woman was walking and talking.

Alive. Be alive.

At last, she heard noises from the street below and she jumped up to peep outside.

'If you change your mind, Mrs Greene, you just call us. And, Mr Greene, we'd rather not have the need to call by here again. Your wife has been 'clumsy' far too much for our liking. You've been warned.'

Mr and Mrs Greene. So that's what they are called. You know what? Dickhead suits you far better.

As she heard the guard drive away from the house, Rea had a terrible sense of foreboding about it all. A nagging feeling that the only way her neighbour would stop was when he'd killed that young woman.

And there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

Chapter 3

REA

The drama from next door was over, for tonight at least. Rea could lie in bed for hours, letting her mind go to places that it hated. Or she could go back downstairs and watch some mindless TV. Besides which, her stomach grumbled, reminding her that she was ravenous. Always the same for her, whenever she was stressed she ate.

‘Siri, please dial Harry’s Pizza.’

She ordered a large barbecue chicken, thin crust, with extra pineapple on top.

‘Your usual, so.’ Harry said.

‘I’m at least consistent,’ she replied and they laughed together.

She promised herself that she’d just eat a couple of slices. She could save the rest for tomorrow’s lunch. Rea had great skills at telling big fat whopping lies to herself.

She munched on a bag of crisps while she waited. They were smoky bacon, her least-favourite from the Tayto family, but the only ones left in her treat cupboard. She was puzzled by that fact. Because there was a bumper pack of twenty bags only last week. Louis Flynn, you little fecker.

She was halfway through another episode of *Suits* when the doorbell rang. ‘At last,’ she sang out loud in her best Etta voice. Rea grabbed thirty euros from her purse to pay the delivery guy. She hoped it was Dave or Bill; they were the nicest of the regular drivers. They’d have a few words to share with her. Anyone but the earring guy. He was a new addition to the team and not one bit of an asset, in her opinion. Rude and downright unfriendly. Not that the others were particularly friendly, but they, at least, made an effort to pass the time of day when they stuffed their tip into their arse pockets. Manners cost nothing.

Elise and Luca. They were good kids. Her kids. Well-mannered. She and George had insisted on it.

Rea checked through the peephole and a gold circular monstrosity that had no business on anyone’s ear, let alone a middle-aged man’s, mocked her.

Do as you want done, she thought, so she plastered on a smile. ‘Hi, how are you?’ Rea was determined to make a connection with the man. Maybe he’d had a bad day the last time he scowled his way through her delivery. Besides which, aside from the call to 112 and an unsatisfactory row with Louis Flynn earlier in the day, she’d not spoken to a single soul for days. Unless you counted Siri. She longed for a bit of human contact.

Earring man of course couldn’t care less that she was desperate for company. He gave her nothing in response to her cheery hello, save for a disinterested shoving of a large, hot pizza box into her hands. Charming little bastard. What was it with people these days?

‘That’s great, thanks for that. Here, you can keep the change.’ Rea smiled again. Although this time it was through gritted teeth.

Earring man grabbed the notes and turned on his heels, without so much as saying thank you or kiss my skinny flat arse.

‘You’re welcome!’ Rea’s sarcasm fell on unhearing ears to his already retreating back. Was she that invisible to him?

But then she heard him mutter ‘fat cow’ under his breath.

Did he just say that? The little shit, he bloody well did! He was happy enough to take Rea’s tip, fat cow or not. It was too much, insulting her less than five seconds after he took her money. What was wrong with him? Between Dickhead next door and now this gobshite, Rea saw red. Before she had the chance to think about it, she yelled down the path after him, ‘I see your bad manners, asshole, and I raise you a great big FUCK YOU!’

The feeling of satisfaction was immense when he stopped and turned around to face her, his mouth all agog, taking in her single middle finger raised in that age-old gesture of defiance. Rea slammed the door behind her, feeling much better. Not so invisible now, am I, asshole? She giggled. His face! That felt good. Oh George, you would have enjoyed that, wouldn't you? He loved her feistiness, as he called it. Wait until she told ... and then her mirth was gone in an instant as she realised that, of course, he wasn't here to tell.

Rea knew that she only had herself to blame, but she couldn't help how things had panned out. She tried, she really did, but they didn't understand what it was like to be her. How it was for her to feel so scared all the time.

The delicious aroma of sweet barbecue sauce, pineapple and the salty garlic chicken escaped the confines of the pizza box and filled her large hallway. An antidote to her every negative thought. She opened the pizza box as she walked, taking care not to look in the hall mirror as she did.

In doing so, her eyes drifted to a framed photograph of her family taken at Luca's graduation. Smiling, happy faces, full of pride and love. She looked at George and wondered what he would make of his wife right now? Gorging on pizza in the middle of the night, in the same pyjamas that she'd been wearing for two days solid.

'Well, to hell with you, George Brady, because you're not here,' Rea shouted. The sound echoed around the empty house. 'Oh, for goodness sake, I'm turning into a mad woman'

Rea felt a lump in her throat and sadness enveloped her.

She was alone and she could see her future stretched out in front of her. Day after day, she was destined to get crazier and crankier as she lived in her private hell.

Alone.

Chapter 4

SKYE

2004

Just before it happened, before we lost everything, our family had a perfect moment. Together, standing shoulder to shoulder in the idyllic, calm, clear waters, with blue skies above us, we looked at each other and laughed. The sound rang out, like bells ringing in perfect harmony, drifting up to the blue skies. It was one of those times, rare for our family, where no words were needed. As we stood waist high in the warm water, in a circle facing each other, we knew exactly how each of us felt. Euphoric and giddy with delicious delight that we had finally made it to paradise.

For years, we'd all been talking about our dream holiday. It all started the summer I was twelve and Eli was thirteen. It was 1999 and the Irish weather had once again lived up to its reputation of being precarious and was raining cats and dogs. Our two-month school holidays stretched out in front of us. Eli and I were sitting indoors, noses to patio glass, watching the puddles get bigger in our back garden.

'How come we never get to go anywhere nice?' I moaned.

'Jimmy is off to France next week. Again. That's six times he's been. And I've not even been once.' Eli joined in. We were united with the sheer injustice of it all.

'You think that's bad? Faye Larkin is going to Florida for one whole month. Her family has a villa over there. With a pool!' I replied. Faye Larkin was a pain in my backside. If she wasn't banging on about her new camera she got for Christmas, she was flicking her newly highlighted hair in all our faces.

'To make matters even worse, the pool and Florida sunshine are wasted on her, because a) she can't even swim and b) one blast of sun and she fries like bacon on a pan!'

'That's an image I won't forget easily,' Dad said. 'Thanks, love.'

'It's not fair,' Eli and I said at the same time.

'Life isn't fair,' Dad quipped, not looking up from his newspaper. 'When I was a lad there was no such thing as holidays in the sun ... A day trip to Bray or Tramore, if we were lucky.'

Eli threw me a look. We had to cut Dad off before he started on one of his trips down memory lane. Once he got going about the good-old-bad-old-times he could bang on for hours.

'Yeah, we know, you walked to school in your bare feet and got coal for Christmas from Santa. Blah, blah, blah Dad,' I said.

'Get the violins out, Skye,' Eli chipped in, then pretended to play an imaginary one on his shoulder.

'You cheeky little monkeys!' Dad replied, but he was laughing at us. He loved our cheek. That's how our family rolled. We slagged each other off relentlessly. Mam would never let it go beyond fun banter, though, always stepping in if she thought for a second that we were going too far.

'Don't forget we've a week in Sneem again with your Aunt Paula next month. You guys love it down there,' Mam said.

'Do we?' I was genuinely puzzled. Eli groaned beside me.

'Go away out of that, you both adore it in Sneem.'

'Someone shoot me now,' Eli joked and even Mam laughed.

Dad looked up from his paper and said, 'Do you know there's some mad yoke here, from Donegal, who swears she can forecast the weather from her asparagus.'

'Go away!' Mam exclaimed, peering over his shoulder to take a look.

‘Yep, she just throws a bunch of them down and, Bob’s your uncle, she can tell the future. Just like that. There’s a scorcher of a summer coming our way, it seems.’ Dad was laughing as he recounted the story to us.

‘What is this strange word you say, a scorcher?’ I said, in mock seriousness. ‘I’ve heard tell of such a thing in years gone by, but none in my young life.’

Mam responded by throwing her tea towel at me. ‘The whinging from you two, you’d put years on me. Do you know something? There’s plenty out there right now that would be happy with half of what you both have. Tell them, John.’

‘Listen to your mother. What she said,’ Dad replied, sticking his head back in the paper again.

‘But I’m twelve now, I’m practically a woman and I’ve never been on an aeroplane. Not even once!’ I flung myself dramatically across the kitchen table.

‘I’m not able for all your dramatics, Skye Madden, do you hear me?’ Mam complained. She paced the floor for a moment, then crouched down low, rooting around the larder press behind me. I edged closer to Eli in case she was getting ready to peg something else our way. He’d be handy as a shield.

‘Aha! There it is.’ She triumphantly placed a large cylindrical glass jar, with a screw-on lid, on top of the table. It landed with a loud clatter, making Dad look up from the *Irish Independent*.

‘I knew I’d find a use for this one day. It’s been sitting at the back of this cupboard for donkey’s years.’

Dad put his paper down and said, ‘Why do I get a bad feeling about this? Brace yourselves, kids, your mother has that look on her face she gets when she’s got a new brainwave! Go on, Mary, I’m ready, hit us with it’

‘Would you give over, John, and you’ll be thanking me when you hear what my “brainwave” is! I’m sick of listening to our two hard-done-by children harping on about sun and holidays. And I’ll be honest with you, I could do with a break myself. So, I was thinking, why don’t we start a dream holiday fund?’

That got us all interested. Dad stood up and put his arm around Mam. ‘You work ever so hard, love. If anyone deserves a holiday, it’s you.’

‘We both work hard. And most of the time, these two are good kids . . .’

‘If you could only put them on mute every now and then,’ Dad cut in.

‘Hey!’ Eli and I shouted at the same time, followed quickly by, ‘Jinx!’

Mam laughed and said, ‘Two peas in a pod, you two. If I had a pound for every time you both came out with the same thing . . . So what do you all think? Good or bad idea? Shall we start a saving jar?’

Dad picked up the jar’s lid and threw it at Eli, who caught it with ease in his right hand. ‘Cut a slot in that lid for me, will you, son? This here is one of your mother’s better ideas.’

Eli was our resident DIY king. His tool belt was never far from him. Within seconds he had a Stanley knife out and was working a slot into the metal lid, concentration making his forehead furrow.

‘My mother always said, if we start to take care of the pennies, the pounds will take care of themselves,’ Mam told us, her voice gone all preacher-like. We’d heard that one before, once or a thousand times. But this time, Eli and I didn’t even raise our eyebrows at her pious tone. We let her have that one, seeing as those pennies might bring us to Florida.

‘We’ll be no length getting the money together if we all work hard,’ Dad agreed. ‘I’ll do some extra shifts in work, get in some overtime.’

Maybe I would even get to go on an aeroplane before I turned thirteen. My head felt dizzy for a moment, just thinking about it. Faye Larkin would be sick with envy!

‘I’ll make a label for it!’ I said, feeling a tremor of excitement run down my spine. A holiday. We were going to go on a holiday. I knew exactly where I wanted to go.

Mam and Dad smiled at me indulgently, while I spent hours designing and colouring a rectangular piece of paper I cut out. Then with the help of some glue stick, our *Dream Holiday Fund* became official.

‘Let’s see if I can help speed things up and get you two on an aeroplane sooner rather than later,’ Dad said. ‘Look at this, straight from the central bank!’ He took out his wallet and waved a ten-euro note out.

‘I can’t get used to this euro malarkey,’ Mam complained. ‘I keep saying pound!’

But she clapped and cheered with the rest of us when he placed it into the slot.

I’ll never forget that moment. It’s locked in my head and my heart forever.

‘The first instalment,’ Dad said solemnly and then he placed the jar in the centre of the kitchen dresser on the top shelf. We all stood for ages, just looking at it, like it was the Holy Grail. I don’t know about the others, but I was dreaming about the places we’d visit. My head was full of ideas, all of which included white sands and blue water. I wanted to swing in a hammock so badly it almost hurt.

‘Where will we go, Mam?’ I asked, clasping my mother’s hand.

‘Paradise, love, that’s where.’

Chapter 5

SKYE

From that day on, we all diligently threw any spare cash we had into our jar. If Eli or I saw any change on the ground we'd rush to pick it up. I started to babysit for the Whelan family, who were good payers. When a lot of my friends just got a fiver an hour, they always paid eight euro. I babysat for them at least one night a week, and as Mam often sniffed, they were never in. I cheered their hectic social life, long might it continue. As a rule, I donated one-third of my wages to the fund, except when it was someone's birthday and I had to buy them presents. Eli started to work in the local hardware store at weekends and on school holidays. Like me, he donated a third of his wages to the fund too. Every now and then this went a bit pear-shaped, because he'd blow all his cash on materials for some new DIY project he had on the go.

Saturday had always been takeaway night in the Madden house. Dad thought that Mam deserved one night off each week from cooking for us lot. I loved those nights. We'd all collapse onto the couches in the sitting room, with the long glass coffee table laid, waiting for Dad to come home with our supper. In front of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, we'd gorge ourselves silly. Yep, Saturday nights were my favourite of all days in the week. But then one morning, Mam said, 'You know, I was thinking, I can make homemade chips myself. If I did that, we could stick an extra twenty euro in the jar each week.'

'I've always said that your chips are twice as nice as the chipper ones anyway,' Dad declared. 'And I'll even peel the spuds for you. Can't say fairer than that.'

'My hero,' Mam said, laughing, then pointed to the dishwasher, 'while you're at it, you might empty that too.'

'Give an inch and take a mile,' but he still jumped to his feet to do as asked, as he always did.

So, with all of us working hard, every few months the jar reached cramming point. Eli and I would sit down around our kitchen table and count out the money saved into neat piles. Dad would scribble down the total amount in a little red notebook. Then with Eli and me doing a drum roll, he'd add up the grand total accumulated so far. The excitement rose as hundreds became a thousand and then, when we reached two thousand pounds, our dream became a tangible reality. We were going to do this.

'I'm so proud of this family. Together we are fecking unbeatable!' Dad said, delighted with us all.

Dad lodged the money in his savings account so we'd not be tempted to spend any of it. Now and then, after dinner, we would lose hours around that kitchen table talking about where we'd go and what we'd do when we got there. Paradise was different for each of us and it was likely to change a lot. We were a fickle bunch, us Maddens. I don't think Eli and I really gave any credence to Mam and Dad's choices, though. We were selfish, as children often are, and I suppose we got so caught up in the excitement; it became all about us and what we wanted. And Mam and Dad, of course, let us have our own way.

America was top of our wish list; we'd always wanted to visit Disneyland and Universal Studios. And even though we never actually took a vote, soon all we talked about was visiting the Sunshine State. I borrowed a book from the library all about Florida and a friend of Dad's, who worked in the travel agency on O'Connell Street, gave us dozens of brochures, which soon became worn and dog-eared because we would all thumb through them so often.

Then, on my fourteenth birthday, two years after we started the fund, I got the best present ever. It took me completely by surprise. Aren't they the best gifts, the ones when you truly have no clue that something wonderful is about to happen?

I had received some money from Aunty Paula and my godfather Jim too, who usually forgot, so that in itself was worthy of note. Mam often remarked that it was ‘a pure waste of a godparent that fella. We don’t see him from one end of the year to the next and God help Skye if she’s reliant on him one day.’ All was forgiven as far as I was concerned, because when I bumped into him last week and casually threw in that I had a birthday coming up, he gave me forty euro. Forty! Anyhow, me being magnanimous, I had twenty euro of that to put in the jar. I glanced over at Eli, who had his headphones on and was mouthing along to Eminem’s ‘Stan’. State of him. I kicked him under the table to get his attention. If I was going to part with all this money, I at least wanted an appreciative audience.

‘So Mam, Dad, Eli,’ I said loudly, ‘I’m going to put €20.00 into our fund.’ I paused to admire their shocked faces. ‘That’s right, I said, €20.00.’ I took a second to acknowledge the compliments from Mam and Dad, smiling with delight as they told me how good I was.

Eli, the fecker, just ignored me and started mumbling lyrics from ‘Stan’ again.

‘My girlfriend’s pregnant, too, I’m ’bout to be a father, If I have a daughter, guess what I’m a call her? I’m a name her Bonnie’

And with that all hell broke loose. Mam went a funny shade of red and clasped Dad’s arm, ‘Did he just say he’s gotten a girl pregnant?’

‘He did,’ Dad replied. His eyes were locked on Eli’s, who was blind to the comedy gold unfolding in front of me.

‘That Faye Larkin, she’s been sniffing around ...’ Mam said.

‘Fine-looking girl, in fairness,’ Dad replied and yelped when Mam hit him.

‘He wouldn’t go near her!’ I said, horrified at the thought.

‘You hope and pray this doesn’t come to your door,’ Mam continued and I had to hide a snigger. She’d be knitting baby booties in a second.

I’d normally have let something as delicious as this play out its natural course, but I wanted all eyes on me right now. It was *my* birthday after all!

‘Would you all cop on! He’s singing a song!’ I said to them and Mam blessed herself and threw some thanks up to Saint Anthony.

I sighed loudly and rattled the jar for good measure until I got their attention again. My hand began to shake. I mean, a girl could do a lot of damage in Penny’s with twenty euro.

‘Anyhow, before Stan the Man over there interrupted me, I was about to donate HALF of my birthday money.’

‘We’re very proud of you. Your generosity knows no bounds,’ Mam said. I looked at her closely, trying to work out if she was being serious or taking the ...

Just before the money left my clammy fingers, Dad grabbed my arm. ‘Hold onto that cash, love. You’ll be needing some spending money soon.’

I didn’t catch on straight away. ‘For what?’

‘We wanted to wait to tell you today. A Happy Birthday surprise!’ Mam continued and then she started to cry. Big fat tears splashed out of her eyes. I jumped up, worried.

‘Mam!’ I cried, and threw myself into her arms. ‘Oh Mam, what’s wrong with you?’

Eli pulled his headphones off. ‘Mam?’

‘What are you blathering on about?’ she replied. ‘These are tears of happiness, you eejits. Your dad and I have a surprise for you both. You tell them, John. I’m an old fool, can’t stop crying, I’m that happy.’

‘No you tell them, Mary,’ Dad replied, looking a bit emotional too and they grabbed a hold of each other, half laughing, half crying.

‘What are we like?’ Mam said to Dad and they laughed some more.

‘Oh for goodness sake, will one of you tell us?’ I screamed and Eli shouted, ‘Yeah!’

‘There’s no need to shout,’ Mam said, sniffing. Then her face broke into the biggest smile. ‘We’re all going to Florida.’ And she and Dad started to bounce up and down on the spot like demented kangaroos.

‘You mean, we’ve saved enough?’ I looked at each of them and Dad’s eyes glistened with tears or excitement, or maybe it was both. Mam moved backwards and Dad moved forwards in a way I’ve seen them do ever since I can remember. In one fluid moment, her back was nestled against his chest, his two arms were wrapped around her. And even though Eli and I were now dancing around the table like eejits, even though it had been years since we’d done that together, I kept looking back at them, and their eyes never left us. It was perfect. Another of those moments locked in my head and heart forever.

For hours, we all tripped up on our words, babbling on about our holiday in paradise, that it was finally becoming a reality.

But the very next day, the first of what would be several holiday curve balls were thrown our way. Now, looking back, I wonder, was the universe telling us, as loudly as it could, that our family shouldn’t travel. That we should be content with our lot in Ireland, where it was safe and fun and full of loving banter.

I wish we’d listened to the universe. But I’ll get to that in a bit.

It was a blustery and cold evening. Home from school, we’d done our homework and now Mam had us out in the garden picking up rubbish. Our recycle bin had tipped over in the wind and my mood was as sour as the stench of milk in the carton I had just retrieved from a ditch. The garden was scattered with bread wrappers, empty tins and newspapers that were turning to mulch from the damp. My main concern was that someone I knew might go by and see me picking up said litter.

‘It would be just my luck that Faye Larkin will go by.’ I moaned, chasing a Cadbury’s Time Out wrapper up the garden.

‘Never mind Faye Larkin, grab that wrapper before it flies in next door. We’ll be the talk of the parish! Someone might even report us!’

‘It’s not fair. And look at him!’ I pointed to Eli, indignation making me furious. ‘Eli is doing NOTHING!’ I finally caught the wrapper and flung it into my black sack, before it could escape again. I bet Faye Larkin had a servant who does stuff like this.

I looked back at Eli and once again he was faffing about, doing feck all. Making sure Mam wasn’t looking, I flung an empty tin of baked beans at my brother, my aim perfect. It clipped his head.

‘Ow!’ he yelped and I feigned surprise. He threw daggers at me and complained, ‘Mam, she did that on purpose.’

‘As if. Gosh Mam, that wind is really picking up,’ I said, poker-faced. I had to suppress a giggle when I noticed a trickle of tomato sauce sneak its way down the side of his face. Serve him right for being as much use as a chocolate teapot.

He had this stupid tool he’d created, which he insisted on using to pick up the rubbish. He’d fashioned it out of a broom handle and some tongs. Not one of his better creations. Wiping the sauce from his face, he mouthed at me, ‘You’re dead.’

Ha! As if I’m worried about him. Bring it on brother, bring it on.

‘A tortoise, blindfolded with one leg, would be quicker at picking up rubbish than you,’ I moaned.

But Mam shushed me, ‘Don’t stifle his creativity. He’s a dreamer, our Eli. Leave him be.’ She smiled at him, as he unsuccessfully tried to pick up the beans can with the tongs.

Gobshite.

So Mam and I picked up the rubbish that Milo’s scooper left behind and soon the garden was clear, thus saving our blushes from the neighbours.

‘You know what, your dad is fierce late,’ Mam said as we sat on the porch step, drinking a glass of water. ‘I didn’t notice the time. He should be home by now.’

And then, as if she'd summoned him, he walked around the corner of the house, into the back garden, sweat staining his shirt and dripping down his face. It was rare we ever saw him looking that dishevelled.

'The car only blew up. About a mile down the road.'

Mam rushed to him and he continued, 'I swear it started to rattle, then smoke appeared out of the bonnet. It exploded like a fecking fire cracker, gave me a right start, I can tell you.'

The next day, confirmation came that the car was not repairable. The engine was, as Dad said, 'only fecked.' Mam and Dad spent a lot of time whispering in their bedroom. Then they asked us to sit down in the good sitting room for a chat. That never bode well, in our experience.

Eli cottoned on to the subtext first of all, 'there's not going to be a holiday, is there?' He might be a dreamer, but he was clever.

Mam looked at Dad and they both sagged. It was as if someone had pricked them both with a pin and the air was leaking out of them, making them crumpled and worn.

Maybe I didn't want to believe what was unfolding, or maybe I just wasn't as quick as Eli, but I clung to hope and cried, 'don't be silly. We're going to Florida this summer. Aren't we, Dad?'

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, realisation came crushing down and I knew that we were going nowhere.

Chapter 6

STELLA

Derry Lane, Dublin, 2014

'Here you go.' Matt placed a tray on the bedside table. Stella glanced at its contents: a pot of filter coffee, her favourite mug, and toast, buttered liberally with a small pot of orange marmalade beside it. Guilt food.

Her abdomen ached as she tried to ease herself up to a sitting position.

'Are you in pain, my darling?' he asked, reaching out to caress her cheek.

She pulled away, his touch added insult to her injuries.

'Don't be like that,' he pouted, pouring coffee for her. His defiant stare challenged her, but she remained silent.

Matt forced a smile, 'I've told you I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to fall.'

Fall? He shoved her so hard her body actually lifted into the air, falling hard against the living-room cream-leather sofa.

'You pushed me.'

He looked at her, shocked by her tone. 'Now now, don't be a drama queen. It doesn't suit you, Stella. It was an accident.' His eyes dared her to go along with the lie. The pain in her side, his favourite place to kick, her weak spot, protested loud. Liar, liar, you cruel, nasty liar.

He tried to pull her into his arms, as if his embrace could shush the accusations. She grimaced in pain.

'If I could take your pain away and carry it myself, I would.' His face twisted in false concern. Liar!

'Here, have some toast before it gets cold. A special treat for my darling.'

His darling.

When she was six years old, her mam read *Lady and the Tramp* to her. Elizabeth Darling, the mother of the story, was beautiful and loving and Stella had been charmed by her name.

'I wish I was called darling,' she'd said.

Her mam took her hands between her own and replied, 'Oh but you are already! The first moment you were born and I held you, I called you my darling and that's what you will always be.'

My darling.

The first time Matt called her that, she felt her heart and head swell in love for him. A sign that he was the one. A sign that she could allow herself to fall in love. A sign that she could trust and hope for a future with a new family.

She couldn't have been more wrong.

'I'll get some pain-killers for you.' He walked out of their bedroom, stopping at the door to look at her, frowning, his face a picture of contrition. 'I really am sorry. I didn't mean for any of this to happen. It's just, well, you have no idea of the pressure I'm under at work.'

'I'm not sure you are sorry,' Stella said impulsively. Months of trying to placate him, change him, counsel him, all flashed by. 'We've been on this merry-go-round dozens of times. You have regret, *that* I well believe.' She started to feel braver now as she continued, on a roll. 'Regret that the Gardaí were called. Regret that a neighbour or passerby heard your abuse and knows a little of the truth of you. But sorry? No. You're not sorry. It won't happen again? Let's not pretend that to be true.'

He walked back into the room, looking at her with an eyebrow raised. He stared at her, puzzled at her audacity to question him. She was puzzled herself. Her mother always said, don't poke the bear. But she couldn't stop herself.

‘I said I was sorry,’ he repeated, his tone sharper this time. ‘What do you want from me ... blood?’

‘Blood?’ She asked. ‘There’s been too much of that spilled in this house. No I don’t want blood. But I would like to live a life where I’m not in constant danger.’

‘Don’t exaggerate, Stella. There you go again with your drama. It doesn’t suit you. Nobody likes a whiner.’ He smiled, flashing his new white veneers at her and his eyes darkened. ‘I hold my hands up. I lost my temper and I’ll go to my grave regretting that. But let’s not pretend that there’s more to this than there is.’

He walked closer to her, a challenge in every step he took. Stella weighed up her options. What would her mam say?

‘Choose your battles, Stella’.

‘I’m not hungry, I’m tired, Matt.’ She pushed the toast away from her.

‘Of course, you must be exhausted. It was a big night. You looked wonderful. I couldn’t have asked for more from you. Adrian was very impressed with you.’

Sorry Mam, I’ve got to ask him. ‘Then why did you hit me?’

‘You know why,’ he replied. ‘You disobeyed me. I can’t allow that.’

‘Because I accepted a drink from your boss’s wife?’

‘I told you before we left, you were allowed two glasses of wine. At no stage did I say to you that a cocktail was allowed. Apart from anything else, do you know how much sugar is in a mojito?’

‘No idea. And I couldn’t care less. Would you have preferred for me to be rude to your boss?’

Matt thought about this and then smiled again, ‘No. But you should have checked with me first.’

There was lots that Stella should have done. ‘I shouldn’t have to ask your permission. I’m not a child,’ Stella replied.

‘Really?’ Matt answered. ‘Well, sometimes you sure act like one. Have you forgotten how much of a mess you were when I met you? Drinking too much, lonely, so desperate for love you’d do anything to get it. I dread to think what would have become of you had I not come along. You’d be nothing without me. You need me.’

Stella eased herself back down into her bed, feeling exhaustion seep from her every pore. She lay her head on the pillow and closed her eyes, praying that he’d go. But then the warmth of his breath on her cheek made her shiver and he whispered to her. ‘Nobody loves you more than me. Don’t you worry, darling. Everything will be just fine. I’ll be more careful in future. I don’t know my own strength. You’re such a delicate little thing. It won’t happen again. Say you’ll forgive me. Say you love me.’

Stella opened her eyes. She knew that like the previous times, her bruises would heal. But she was trapped in this house, in his power, in his control.

Where could she go? She had nothing. No one. Her old life was a distant memory.

She felt the fight go out of her. So she replied, ‘Yes. I love you.’

Over the past year, she’d tried so hard to understand why he behaved as he did. She’d suggested counselling, which he would not entertain for a moment. At first she wanted to believe him when he told her that he would change. She wanted to believe that the act of violence was a one-off. A mistake. She would fix this problem. Together they could overcome anything. Because they loved each other. That’s all that mattered.

So she stayed in a Jekyll and Hyde marriage that was all kinds of wrong. Full of contradictions, as love and tenderness were swapped for humiliation and pain in a fleeting moment.

Mam had been right all those years ago. When someone shows you who they really are, believe them.

Chapter 7

REA

Rea awoke with a start as the faces in her dreams blurred, drifting away from her conscious mind.

‘Come back,’ she whispered, reaching out to nothing, as they flickered into oblivion. In her dreams she was young again. Dreams were kind like that. Last night she was with George and the children. She closed her eyes for a moment and in the silence of her head she could hear Luca and Elise laughing. They both ran as she chased after them, round and round the kitchen table downstairs, in a make-up game of big bad wolf and babies.

‘I’m going to catch you!’ She roared as she ran after them, her heart racing as they all snorted with laughter.

‘Mama, you’re too slow! You can’t catch me!’ Luca said, then squealed with delight when Rea snared him between her arms.

‘Catch me, catch me too!’ Elise shouted. ‘My turn now!’

Elise always wanted all that Luca had. Whatever he did, she would copy, that’s just the way it was in their house. It was like that for most younger kids, she reckoned.

Every part of Rea craved for the chance to see her children again. She knew that if the devil himself came down this minute and asked for her soul in exchange for the chance to go back to that time, she’d happily agree. She’d live a lifetime in the depths of hell to be back again, with her family complete. Even just for five minutes. Because that would do her. They were the happiest moments of her life, when the children were young. George and her, united, in love, making a home in number 72.

She glanced in her dressing-room mirror and for a moment she was shocked by what she saw. She was no longer the young woman of her dreams. Every line on her face a roadmap to the life she once lived. Her once vibrant auburn hair frizzy with coarse grey hairs.

Unshed tears glistened in her tired eyes, which were windows to both the joy and sorrow she had witnessed in her sixty years. She walked downstairs slowly, the late-night drama making her bones weary. She was getting old, feeling every day of her age. She also knew that the extra weight she was carrying wasn’t helping her joints. She sat down gratefully on a stool by the kitchen window. When she glanced out at her unruly back garden, now a shadow of its former glorious self, she was despondent. Her father would be so cross with her, allowing it to get like that. So would George, who had carried on her father’s dedicated care of it for decades. Shame pricked her conscience, because its demise was another thing that was on her shoulders alone.

She thought of her new pal, the robin, and wondered if he would come by today. A few days ago she’d noticed him for the first time. The window opened, she’d heard a cheep cheep and looked out to see him flapping around. She could have sworn he looked right out at her, but then he swooped away. Now, he seemed to dip in and out of her garden every few hours. She left out titbits for him on the windowsill or on the garden table. The robin liked cheddar cheese in particular. I wonder, Rea thought, looking at some crusts left over from last night’s midnight feast. She ripped it up into small robin-sized chunks. Then she opened the back door, throwing them onto the garden table a few feet away. Her aim was good. All those years of playing catch with the kids not wasted.

The smell of flowers hit her. She could see her hydrangeas, hardy and strong, fighting their way through the weeds. The rose bush wasn’t faring so well. Her grandmother had planted that. She needed to find someone to come and sort out the garden. Louis? No. Maybe. All she knew was she couldn’t neglect it any longer.

There was a time she loved being out in the garden. It was her favourite place to sit, to read, to just have some quiet time to herself. She missed the sun on her face. The smell of freshly cut grass,

the scent of the roses. Now, she had to make do with standing at her back door, using her eyes to take it all in. The ridiculousness of the situation she found herself in angered her. What on earth was there to fear in her own safe back garden? She had no answer to that, but somehow or other the thought of putting one foot in front of the other, to find out, caused her to slam the door hard in front of her. If you would have told her twenty years ago that this is what her life would end up reduced to, she would have been incredulous.

She stood at her window, waiting to see if the robin returned. When a black crow swooped down and confiscated the crust, she thought, well there you go, the big bad guy wins once more.

She looked around her old kitchen. Oak cupboards with brass handles, with a tiny rose-bud flower engraved on the front, lined the walls. There were glass panels in the upper cabinets, filled with tea sets that were collected by generations of her family. The double Belfast sink that washed dishes, soaked stained clothes and had bathed her babies and herself too, once upon another time.

The kitchen was the heart of her family home. Her childhood home. She knew that she was lucky. Not many got to live somewhere that held so much personal history. She closed her eyes for a moment as she pulled from her memory bank the voices of her past: her parents, her sisters, laughing, teasing, living.

She didn't have to try hard to see her Mama kneading bread as her Papa shared his wisdom with his children around the large round kitchen table, recounting tales of the olden days. Oh how she loved her parents so. She had no fear back then.

She opened her eyes, sighing, and ran her arthritic hands along the weathered surface of her kitchen table. Arthritis, another recent gift from age, that old bugger. Her fingers traced a long groove in the wood that Luca had made one day with a knife. He was in a temper because she wouldn't let him go out to play. She had good reasons too, but when you're twelve it's hard to understand a parent's point of view. It was late and rumours had been rife that a white van was out and about with a faceless predator ready to snatch children.

Luca was fiery and, as far as he was concerned, he was untouchable. But the thing with Luca was, his temper always disappeared as quickly as it flared. He was a good boy really, always had been.

'I'm so sorry, Luca,' she whispered. 'I should never had said all those things to you. I don't blame you for anything. You did nothing wrong. Forgive your mother. She's a silly old fool.'

She'd write to him. Tell him that. Back then, when she was full of grief, consumed by it, she couldn't see straight. He was the first to leave, to start a new life and because of him, they all left too. She was angry, but of course it wasn't him she was angry with at all.

'We have to let him live his life,' George said when Luca announced he was emigrating.

'I can't bear to lose him.'

'If we don't let him go, we'll lose him anyhow,' George replied. He was right, of course. So they wept tears privately, but smiled brightly when they waved Luca goodbye through the departures lounge. She couldn't be selfish, she couldn't keep him by her side forever. And he thrived over in Perth, Western Australia. Soon his weekly letters reduced to monthly ones and the phone calls became more sporadic.

'It's a good sign,' George declared when she fretted. 'He's having fun.'

Too much fun, because as was always the way with Elise, within twelve months she declared that she was going out to visit Luca.

'She won't come back,' Rea ranted to George.

'Elise is our little home bird. She'll come home to her mama,' George said, but his face looked doubtful.

'See you in a few weeks. Don't miss me too much!' Elise said, hugging them both tight.

Rea clung to those words. It was only for a few weeks; she'd be back.

She did come back, but it was only to say goodbye. She loved it downunder and was going to stay with Luca. Rea took no joy in being right. But this time, when they went to the airport, neither of them could hold back their tears as she walked out of their lives.

Both her children went to the other side of the world to live new lives. They had dreams, new loves and passions that didn't include her any more, or their father. Not that they didn't care. Of course they did; they were good children. They loved her and George and begged them both to come out to visit. They promised they would and planned a long holiday after Christmas.

But that was then and this was now. George went to Australia alone. She might as well accept it. Her family were all gone. She was the lone keeper of memories and secrets that seemed to matter years ago, but were meaningless now.

Elise. Luca. George. How she missed them all with every fibre in her body. Rea longed to return to that sweet sleep of dreams, but this time she didn't want to wake up. She was of no use nor ornament to anyone any more. Her body felt alien to her and she had become a prisoner in her own home.

Enough was enough. She was ready to die. If she just willed it, maybe her body would just give up. She moved to the couch in her living room and lay down, closing her eyes.

The shrill ring of the doorbell startled her. It was eleven am, maybe it was the postman. He'd be doing his round by now. 'I'm in no humour for company,' she thought. Her curtains were still drawn, so whoever it was could feck right off. Hopefully they would assume she was still in bed.

The smell of her overfull, rancid bins reminded her that it might be bold Louis Flynn, the Scarlet Pimpernel himself. She seeks him here, she seeks him there and if she finds him, she'd seek his arse and give it a good kick. She skipped along the hall, kicking the air as she went. It cheered her up a little.

She made a cup of tea and wondered if you could order online a potion that would kill you. You could get most things delivered door to door in under forty-eight hours. It was a sin to even think such a thing. Ah, but look where being good all her life had gotten her.

Rea pulled open her curtains, thinking that if she let some light into the house it might help her mood. The girl from next door was walking by. God, she was as pale as a ghost. Moving slowly, like she was in pain. Her eyes followed her until she stopped and leaned against a tree. Then she turned back towards her house again.

A few minutes later she saw her heading up her drive. She'd never come to her door before and for the life of her, she couldn't work out why she was walking her way now. Was she cross that she called the Gardaí? She straightened her back up, ready to do battle if she needed to. Someone had to fight for this girl if she had no want to do so for herself. She watched the young woman, waiting for her to make her move. She kept looking over her shoulder every few seconds. Her face was pinched with fear. A kid on a skateboard whizzed by, the wheels rattling on the path. The poor woman near jumped out of her skin.

The poor pet. What a way to live. Taking a deep breath to steel herself, Rea opened the door. She stood back as a blast of warm June air hit her in the face.

Well, she'd best see what she wanted. Maybe dying could wait.

Chapter 8

STELLA

Her side had turned purple. Still tender to touch, but at least she was up and walking again. The pain kept at bay with the help of paracetamol. Matt had spent the past couple of evenings working late, electing to eat out. She knew he was keeping out of her way until things smoothed over. He'd work late for a few weeks or so, then he'd arrive home with gifts. Flowers, jewellery, clothes, vouchers for spa trips. Words would drip from his mouth, lies, telling her that he'd never lay a hand on her again. And as the bruising disappeared, the ugly reminder of a brutal marriage, they'd start to move forward, pretending that it never happened.

Three days had passed since his last attack and today she'd managed to get dressed. But Stella was restless. She wasn't physically able to do much, but days spent lying in bed or on the couch had tormented her. She liked to be active.

When the doorbell rang, she jumped, yelping at the sound. She peeked through the front window and saw the An Post van parked outside. Pulling her mother's comforting cardigan around herself, she forced a smile on her face, opening the door to Richie. He was a terrible gossip, loved passing on news about all of the neighbours.

'Howya missus?'

'Hello.'

'Would you take a parcel in for number 72? No answer. She's in there alright, but the curtains are closed. She must be still asleep. All she ever does, if you ask me.'

'Happy to take it,' Stella tried to interrupt, but he was on a flow.

'Could be weeks before it gets back to her again, if it goes to the depot. You know how she never leaves the house. An awful situation to be in, the poor old thing. Ain't natural.'

'It must be terrible,' Stella concurred.

'And George, her aul' fella, well he was the salt of the earth. Never missed giving me a bottle of Powers every Christmas. He was sound as a pound. But sure, how could he stay, with her as mad as a bag of cats?'

Stella was torn between cutting the postman off from gossip and her natural nosiness to hear more.

'I'm sure she's not mad. Who knows what goes on behind closed doors?' Stella wasn't sure why she felt the need to stick up for her neighbour, but she did.

'Right you are there. Sure, what with the business with her childer and all, near ten years ago, I'd say now. Some families have it rough. Would drive anyone crazy.'

Now Stella felt uncomfortable. She wanted to know what happened to the 'childer', but the conversation had gone into gossipy territory. Time to end it. 'Presume I need to sign for this?' She reached over and used the stylo to sign the digital screen. 'There you go, I'll make sure she gets it.'

'Cheerio missus.'

She waved goodbye and closed the door, looking at the name on the parcel. Mrs Rea Brady. She recognised the labelling; it was from Amazon. It certainly felt like books. She'd drop it over later on. Her phone beeped. A text from Matt.

Working late. Will eat out. Love you. Matt x

She wasn't sorry or surprised to receive the text. She was finding it increasingly difficult to be in the same room as him. In fact, she was finding it hard to be here, in this house. She needed to get out, feel fresh air on her skin. A walk to clear the cobwebs, her mam would say. She grabbed her keys and phone, shoving them in her bag and stepped out onto Derry Lane, grabbing Rea's package as she went.

Right or left? She turned right and headed inland, passing the gardens of her many neighbours. Each with pristine cobble lock drives, with rose bushes and cherry blossom trees. Most of the drives were empty, cars scattered all over the county, while their owners did the nine-to-five ritual of old. Stella heard the dull roar of an aeroplane and looked up at the blue skies. She scanned the clouds till she saw their white trail criss crosses as they made their final descent to Dublin airport.

Where had they been? Was *that* the answer? Book a flight and disappear into the big wide world. She'd done it before, backpacking anonymously for years on her own. At first she enjoyed it. She made temporary friends wherever she went, but was careful never to get too close to any. She preferred to rely on herself; a loner. But loneliness began to creep in and the more she travelled the more isolated she felt.

She should never have come back. She could be single, out there, exploring the world. Yes, with a dull ache and a wound that would never heal. But free.

But she did come back.

To be fair, things had started to unravel the previous year. She'd been tearing around the world for so long, she'd simply run out of steam. When the agent who looked after her house called and said that the tenants were moving out, she was grateful for the excuse to come home and rest. Just for a few weeks.

But being back in Rathmines, in her parents' house, was her undoing. Memories, too painful to examine and work her way through, came pounding back to her, demanding attention. She looked up friends from years ago and drank too much with them, trying to blot out the pain of her past. But so much had happened, she found she couldn't connect with anyone again.

And on the very day that she decided that it was all too much for her, she met Matt. Had he walked into the bar five minutes later, she'd have missed him altogether and wouldn't be in this situation.

She felt tired. Her head and her body hurt. A short walk to the end of Derry Lane had her drained, her side roaring in pain. She leaned against one of the oak trees, the rough bark prickling her hand and arm. Walking slower this time, she made her way back home. When she passed number 72, she noticed the curtains were now drawn. So Rea was up. She headed up next door's path.

Holding her finger on the bell, she rang it once, then stepped back. Stella felt shy suddenly. Should she just leave the parcel on the ground and run? She had no idea what to say to her neighbour. Had it been her who called the Gardaí the other night? What rows and arguments had she overheard this past year? Maybe she was as batty as the postman and Matt had said. All she'd need right now.

Before she could come up with any conclusion to these questions, the door creaked opened.

'Hello,' Stella said.

'Hello to you.'

'I'm sorry to bother you. I wasn't sure if you were in or not.'

'Well, now you know.' The woman's face was impassive, but there was something a bit wild about her. And something else. Something she recognised in herself. Stella was a little afraid of her. She looked like she could start shouting any second.

They looked at each other, each sizing the other up. Stella pulled her mother's cardigan around her again, inching the sleeves down to hide the bruises on her arm. Rea watched every move and her eyes missed nothing. Stella felt her face flush with embarrassment as she felt judged by the woman before her.

But then she watched Rea tug at her pyjama top, pulling it down over a pair of mismatched bottoms. She wasn't as confident as Stella thought at first glance. Nothing was ever as clean cut as you thought.

'How old are you?' Rea barked abruptly.

'I'm twenty-seven,' Stella replied, a little thrown by the question.

'You look younger,' Rea's voice softened.

‘So I’m told. I live next door,’ she continued, pointing towards the house over the garden fence. ‘That you do.’

‘I’m Stella. Stella Greene.’

‘And I’m Rea Brady.’ Rea offered her hand out and when Stella took it, the warmth of it made her own hand shake. Rea looked down at her and gently touched the dark bruise that peeked its way from the inside of her wrist. Neither of them moved and Stella held her breath. The air around them stilled and then the bang of a door behind them made them both jump, breaking the silence.

Rea looked up at her, and nodded, just once. ‘Looks like more to-do across the way. I can’t keep up with Linda and her goings on.’

‘She’s just looking for love. I keep hoping that the next guy she hooks up with might be the one.’

‘Not so sure that she’s hit the jackpot with that gobshite.’ Rea craned her neck towards a man running down the path with his jacket in his hand. ‘Anyhow, what can I do for you?’

Stella pulled her eyes away from the running man and said, ‘Oh, sorry, of course, I have a parcel for you.’ She held up the package. ‘The postman dropped it in to me earlier.’ When Rea didn’t move towards her to take the parcel, Stella flushed. The woman hadn’t moved from inside the front door frame. It must be true, all the gossip. She never left the house. Stella moved forward, closer to her.

‘Much obliged.’ Rea took it and smiled when she saw what it was. ‘I’ve been waiting for these. It’s the new Claudia Carroll. I love her in *Fair City*, she’s a right one. But her books are pure heaven!’

‘I’ll look her up,’ Stella said, smiling.

Stella didn’t know if she should just leave, but Rea wasn’t moving from the doorstep either. Then before the silence became awkward, a further commotion began.

‘Go on run, you dirty little fecker,’ Linda’s voice boomed down the street.

‘You’re a fucking nut-job!’ replied the man.

‘Not crazy enough to piss on you, you pervert!’ Linda retorted.

‘What on earth!’ Rea said. ‘Did she just say *piss on him*?’

‘She did!’ Stella answered, a shocked giggle escaping.

‘It’s called a golden shower!’ he said defiantly. ‘And lots of people do it.’

‘A shower, you say? I’ll give you a shower alright, I’ll put the garden hose on you!’ Linda picked it up and held it towards him.

‘I’d feck off if I were you,’ Rea shouted across to the man. ‘She means business.’

‘Alright ladies,’ Linda shouted over to them, waving as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

Stella didn’t wave back and noted that neither did Rea. Linda was a force of nature and she wasn’t sure she could cope with her right now. She often went days without really talking to anyone and she’d forgotten how to do it. She noticed Rea take a step backwards into her house. She started to close the door. But then she changed her mind. Maybe it was nosiness to see what happened next with Linda, or maybe she wanted to chat some more with her. But she was uncomfortable too.

Linda continued to threaten her hose, until her male guest jumped in his car and screeched down Derry Lane, leaving a trail of dust behind him. She lowered the hose with a laugh and walked over to them, shaking her head in dismay. ‘A golden shower he wanted. Bloody pervert. Men! We’ve all been there, ladies, am I right?’

‘No!’ Rea and Stella said at the same time, looking at each other in horror.

‘Does that lovely looking fella of yours not want you to do anything kinky?’ Linda asked Stella, nudging her playfully.

Stella felt awkward as Linda moved in closer to her. She’d forgotten the art of good banter; there was a time when she was a master at it and would have had several good retorts for her.

‘Where did you meet him?’ Rea asked, nodding towards the direction the man had taken off in, saving Stella from answering. She smiled gratefully at the woman.

‘At the bingo.’

For some reason, that made them all laugh.

‘He had a full house and I said to him, sure, you’d better buy me a drink so, out of your winnings. Was delighted when he said yes. And he was throwing drink into me too, but sure now I know why!’

They looked at her in puzzlement.

Linda pretended to crouch and pee, ‘He wanted me to have a full bladder!’

When they stopped laughing again, she continued, ‘He seemed so normal. After last week’s disaster, I wanted normal.’

‘I’m nearly afraid to ask. What happened last week?’ Stella pried.

‘Oh ladies, I’m worn out from all this dating malarkey. I’ve tried it all. Online dating, Tinder, even been down to Nolan’s Supermarket for their singles night. Load of shite that was. Place was crawling with women on the pull. Not a single man in sight. All I want is to meet a nice man. Someone to settle down with. A role model for my Louis. Not too much to ask for, is it?’

Rea and Stella both made suitable sounds of agreement.

‘Anyhow, last week, I swear to God, I met this guy, lovely looking fella. A ride, if ever you saw one. He was wearing a suit and all. Thought that was a good sign. Well, home we went, after having a fish-and-chip supper in Beshoffs. I had high hopes for him, I don’t mind telling you.’

‘What happened?’ Rea asked.

‘Well, we were having a bit of fun on the couch. He says, “Strip”. Well, he didn’t need to ask me twice. “Have you red stilettos?” he asked. I have, says I.’ She leaned in confidentially and they leaned into her too. ‘I got them in Penny’s, were only a fiver, but they cut the feet off me. I stuck them on, thinking it was all a bit kinky.’

Stella stole a glance at Rea. Amusement was all over her face. She was enjoying this as much as Stella.

‘I was delighted to be getting some wear out of the shoes, to be honest. Never a more perfect shoe for a good old ride than them beauties,’ Linda said.

Stella and Rea were both laughing out loud now, but that only seemed to encourage Linda. She was on a roll.

‘There he was, lying starkers on the floor, when I wobbled back in. “Oh yeah, baby,” he says. “Up you go!” He pointed to his chest.’

‘Go away,’ Rea said.

‘Yep. “Walk over my chest in those babies,” he says. “Go on, do it.”’

‘That’s a new one on me,’ Stella said.

‘Well, me too,’ Linda said. ‘But I’m a great woman for saying try anything once. So up I get, and I do my living best to walk across his chest. But lord above, have you ever tried it?’

‘No!’ Rea and Stella said again, both helpless with laughter.

‘Well, ladies, take my word for it, don’t! Arse over tits I fell, hit the floor with such a bang, I’ve still the bruise to show for it.’

‘Ouch,’ Stella said.

Linda leaned in close to them both. ‘I hated showing him the door. But as I told him when he left, next time, pick a date that has better balancing skills than me. I’ve always been a bit of a martyr to my vertigo.’

‘Oh Linda, that’s the best story I’ve ever heard. Thank you. You’ve no idea how much I needed a laugh today,’ Stella said.

‘Ah sure, life without laughter is not worth living at all. Anyhow ladies, better love you and leave you for now. Louis will be home and wanting his tea. Have a goo on me for pizza tonight.’

‘Harry’s is good. I use them a lot,’ Rea said.

‘Right so. By the way, Rea, is my Louis behaving himself doing those odd jobs for you? No cheek I hope.’

Rea paused for a moment, unsure what to say in response. ‘He’s a good boy. But tell him to come over today, would you, the bins need to go out.’

‘Right you are. He’s a pure divil at home, but I wouldn’t switch him for the world. Ladies, I’m off.’ Then she walked back across the street, giving a little wiggle as she went.

‘She’s a real tonic,’ Stella said.

‘Once in a while, she’s gas. But you wouldn’t want to be sitting next to her for hours. She talks about nothing else but sex. It would put years on you,’ Rea said.

‘Was better than the sex education we ever got in school. I’ve learnt more in those ten minutes ...’ Stella replied. She noticed that Rea had taken another step back and was clasping the side of her hall table. She had paled and sweat glistened on her upper lip. She was scared! ‘It was nice talking to you, but you go on in now. But you know, if you ever need anything from the shops, I’d happily go for you.’

Rea looked at her in surprise, ‘That’s kind of you.’

Stella was surprised herself that she’d offered. But she liked the woman. ‘It’s no trouble.’

‘Well, I’ll remember that. It’s good for us both to remember that we’ve a neighbour to go to, should we need a helping hand.’ Rea moved closer to the front door again and reached over. She grabbed Stella’s hands between her own. ‘I make a nice cup of tea, if you ever need a chat.’

‘My husband isn’t much of a mixer. He likes to keep himself to himself,’ Stella said, in an even voice, unnerved once more by the gentle touch of this woman. Other than Matt, how long had it been since she experienced a kind, warm touch?

‘I wasn’t asking *him*, it was *you* I invited. And he doesn’t need to know what you do when he’s at work, does he?’ Rea smiled.

‘No, I don’t suppose he does.’ Stella looked at Rea, still feeling the soft warmth of the woman’s hands on hers. She felt an urge to throw herself into the older woman’s arms. But before she got the chance to make a fool of herself by doing that, Louis kicked a stone up the drive.

‘Ma said you wanted me.’

Chapter 9

SKYE

Rathmines, Dublin, 2000

'I hate you both. It's not fair!'

My attitude to our dream holiday fund going on replacing Dad's car was not my finest hour.

I'm ashamed to say that I was reacting with true teenage belligerence and I did nothing to ease the guilt of my parents, who hated to disappoint us.

It wasn't their fault our car had decided to give up on life and we had to cancel the holiday, and I knew it, but even so, I just couldn't stop myself. I wanted to make them feel pain like I was feeling. I was crippled with disappointment. And if I was honest, I felt mortification knowing that all my boasts in school about the holiday would now be jeered at. When would I learn to keep my big mouth shut?

My selfish wish was granted when they both winced in pain at my words. But the thing was, it didn't help in the slightest. I still felt crap, and knowing that they did too didn't change that. Now, not only was I miserable but guilt flooded me. Even so, I didn't do anything to make them feel better, though. I stormed out, slamming the door behind me for good measure.

And so ended our first Dream Holiday Fund. We used the savings to buy a new family car, or at least a new car to us. It took me a while to stop doing a big dramatic sigh every time I squeezed my legs into the back seat. I hated that car and now I only have to see a green Ford focus to bring me down.

'We went for a 1.2L engine,' Dad told us. 'That way the tax is half what it used to be for the old car. And the savings from that will go straight into our new holiday fund, I promise.'

It was hard staying annoyed when you heard statements like that. Dad looked so earnest and Eli gave me a look that spoke volumes, along the lines of 'Cop on Skye, give the folks a break.'

'We'll be no length filling that jar again. As I always say, watch the pennies ...' Mam said.

And so, I chimed in, along with Eli and Dad, saying, 'and the pounds will take care of themselves.'

'We'll get to paradise yet, love, I promise,' Mam said, giving my arm a squeeze, and I believed her. This was just a little hiccup.

We fell into our familiar rhythm of saving. Dad got a promotion and Mam started to work in the local Supervalu. Eli and I continued doing our part-time jobs and we were back to being a family of thriftiness.

It was around this time that Mam decided she wanted to write a book. She went to see one of her favourite authors, Maeve Binchy, give a talk in our local library and came home all fired up.

Dad said, 'Sure, everyone has at least one book inside of them.'

Things got a bit weird after that at home. Mam took to saying things like 'plot twist!' whenever something went wrong. She thought she was hilarious and, in fairness, we usually did laugh in response. Dad bought her a journal and she was never without it. Eli and I couldn't open our mouths without her scribbling something into it.

'That's gold, pure gold,' she'd mutter, scribbling away, her glasses perched on the end of her nose.

'What did we say?' Eli would ask.

'That book better not be about me,' I declared and she'd just look enigmatic. 'You'll just have to wait and see.'

One day, when she wasn't looking, I stole a glance inside her journal. I couldn't take any chances. I mean, I didn't really think she had a cat's hell in chance of ever getting published, but imagine if she did and the main character was called Skye and she wasn't very nice.

I simply had to see what she was writing, why she was being so secretive? And if there was one thing about me that I didn't like, well, she'd better watch out, because ... hang on! What on earth was all this? I couldn't see any semblance of a novel in her journal. It was full of shopping lists, the latest entry being *Buy soap for John!* And reminders to do things like, *ring Paula*. And the cheek of Mam, one even said, *Skye's hair is looking scraggy, book hair appointment*.

As I said to Dad and Eli later that night, 'That book that you kept saying was inside of Mam, well it's sure doing a bad job of showing itself!'

'Say nothing,' Dad replied, when we'd all calmed down from laughing. 'Your mother is enjoying exploring her creative side. You never know, maybe she'll surprise us all one day.'

'Plot twist, Mam gets a book deal!' Eli said and we were off again. I swear I thought Dad was going to have a heart attack, he was laughing so much.

Another rainy summer in Ireland passed by and then, a quite warm Christmas, as it happens. And fourteen months after our second attempt at the Dream Holiday Fund began, Dad declared we had saved enough. We attempted to do another mad dance around the table, but it didn't feel the same as the last time. But we did debate long and hard as to where Paradise would be for the Maddens this time.

I don't know why, but all of a sudden, Florida no longer held a lure for us. You see, Mam's manager in Supervalu was forever boasting about all the cruising she and her husband had done. And over dinner most evenings, Mam would recount the stories to us and we would all hang onto her every word about midnight chocolate buffets and swimming pools with outdoor cinemas. It sounded lush.

'So are we saying now that we should go for a cruise?' Mam asked, her face alight with excitement. I liked seeing her look so happy.

'You had me at the chocolate buffet,' Dad said and Eli and I nodded in agreement. A cruise sounded exotic and grown up. And at almost sixteen, I wanted to be both of those. Plus, nobody in school had ever been on a cruise. Take that, Faye Larkin!

The day I finished my last junior cert exam, as we all gorged on big bowls of ice-cream sundaes that Mam made in celebration, she said, 'I wonder how many of these boys we could put away in that free buffet they have?'

'I'd eat ten of these without even thinking,' Eli retorted. At eighteen, he was lean, tall and had an appetite that never was satisfied. Yep, he wasn't lying. With ease he'd do that.

'Well, let's put that boast to the test. Get me the laptop there, Skye, and we'll book ourselves a cruise.'

'For real?' I said, completely floored.

'For real,' Mam replied gently.

Eli and I didn't celebrate until the moment that Dad actually paid the deposit. When he hit send on the words, *Confirm Payment*, we both held our breath. And then, all of sudden, it felt absolute. Dad started to sing 'We Are Sailing' by Rod Stewart and even though Eli and I didn't know the words, we all joined in as best we could. I prefer to make my own words up anyhow. Mam started to wear scarves jauntily tied around her neck, or over her head, with big dark sunglasses. She told us she was perfecting her 'cruise lounge wear' and we took delight in jeering at her. But in my bedroom, when nobody was around, I tried on every single outfit I owned, planning my own cruise wardrobe.

I'd never had a boyfriend and I daydreamed that maybe my first one would be someone foreign and exotic. Maybe the son of a rich tycoon. With his own helicopter or private jet. That would be so cool. He'd be called Brad and he'd fall in love with me instantly. Yes, someone like Brad would certainly cruise a lot. Faye Larkin would die, she'd be so jealous.

Dad came home the next day from work with a bag full of sailors' caps he'd bought in the euro store. When we all put ours on Mam giggled so much that she told us a little bit of pee came out. Sometimes my parents had no filter. She couldn't be saying stuff like that on a cruise. What if Brad heard?

I got out my pencils again and made a countdown chart. We had forty-eight days until our departure date. I stuck the chart under a pineapple magnet on our fridge door.

Now I can't even look at a pineapple without wanting to throw it hard against the wall, smashing it into smithereens.

Because before we got any wear out of the sailor caps our second curve ball was propelled at us, at great speed. Another clue from the universe telling us to stay home. Paradise is not meant for the Maddens, it screamed. Stop dreaming of foreign shores. Go on down to Sneem and do the Ring of Kerry for the twentieth time. It's safer. But the universe's warnings fell on deaf ears.

It was forty-six days until departure day when a phone call changed everything.

Chapter 10

SKYE

Eli burst in from the hall, whispering to me and Dad that something was wrong with Mam. We walked out and she was ashen, silent, nodding over and over again, as she listened to the call.

‘What is it, love?’ Dad asked and she ignored us, or maybe just didn’t hear him, I don’t know. Minutes felt like hours as we waited for her to hang up and tell us what was wrong. Whatever it was, it had trouble written all over it. She walked slowly into the kitchen, shaking and tearful as she sank into one of the chairs.

‘Give your mother some space. Put the kettle on, Skye,’ Dad said and Mam reached her hands out to clasp his.

‘It’s Aunty Paula. She’s got cancer. Breast cancer. They have to do a full mastectomy next week.’

Dad sank into a chair beside Mam and he kept shaking his head, as if that would make the words go away and not be true. It was the first time that anyone in our family had ever been sick and we were all thrown by it. I felt panic and terror battle their way into my head. And looking at my family, we were all feeling the same.

The next week went by in a blur. Mam went down to Sneem and daily phone calls came with more damning updates. Aunty Paula’s cancer had spread to her lymph nodes. It was aggressive. More surgery. Mastectomies. Long talks with doctors were had, discussing treatment options. Paula would need chemotherapy and then radiotherapy.

‘A long hard road ahead of her,’ Mam told us.

When Mam came home two weeks later, her shoulders sagging, she looked older. Lines seemed to have sprung up on her face and there was a sprinkling of grey in her hair that hadn’t been there two weeks ago. The whispering in corners began again. When they called Eli and me into the good sitting room we stood close together, shoulder to shoulder, bracing ourselves for the bad news.

I whispered to Eli, ‘I think she’s dead.’ And he nodded in response and reached out to hold my hand.

I can remember looking down at our fingers clasped together and thinking that it was years since we’d done that. We used to play outside as kids, hand in hand, skipping around our garden as we came up with new adventures. I’d forgotten how much comfort I took from that hand. I felt the welts on his fingers, earned from his many woodwork projects. And when he squeezed my hand tight, I wished we were kids again and could skip our way to another land. Lose ourselves in our imaginations, far away from the damning imminent news.

But we were wrong. Thank goodness we were wrong, because Aunty Paula was kind and we loved her dearly.

‘Things are tough for Paula right now,’ Mam said tearfully. ‘She has a big mortgage and money is tight ...’ she stopped and looked to Dad for help. But he was silent too and just looked at us, twisting his hands.

Eli got it before me, as he always did. ‘We are going to give our holiday money to Aunty Paula, aren’t we?’

They nodded silently.

Paradise lost once more.

Like the last time, my immediate reaction wasn’t very nice. I wish I was the kind of person who jumped right in on occasions like these and said with grace, ‘it doesn’t matter.’ But all I could think about in that moment was the big cinema screen that overlooked the outdoor swimming pool on the mahoosive cruise liner and the first kiss that Brad would steal under the stars. All I could feel was bitter disappointment.

I remained silent, selfish as I was, and made my parents feel worse than they already did.

‘We’ve only paid a deposit, so we’d just lose that. I don’t think in any conscience I could head off on a cruise, spend thousands, knowing that ...’ Mam started to cry.

Dad looked at Eli and me, imploring us with his eyes to be generous and kind and not give Mam a hard time. ‘That money from the cruise would pay her mortgage for six months. Give her time to catch her breath after the surgery. She’s chemo to face, not to mention the radiotherapy.’

Eli squeezed my hand again and I sneaked a glance at him, trying to work out where he was with the news.

‘It has to be a decision that we all agree on. Everyone in this family has contributed to that saving fund. And if one of you says no, we’ll leave it at that.’

I felt elated for a moment. *I can say no.* And who could blame me. I mean, we gave up our money the last time for Dad’s car. Auntie Paula wouldn’t want us to miss our holiday. She’s lovely.

Lovely. Auntie Paula *is* lovely.

Memories of all those times she’d come to stay. Arms loaded down with all the gifts she had spoiled us with over the years. Arms open wide for all the warm hugs and cuddles she doled out with that same generosity. Only last month she’d sent down a new top for me that she’d noticed in a shop near her. Her note said, ‘It’s just your colour and will look gorgeous on you.’ And it did too. I wore it out the other night to the cinema with the girls and they all raved about it.

Oh Auntie Paula. Of course we had to give her the money.

I felt eyes upon me and realised that my family were waiting for me to speak. ‘It’s just another plot twist,’ I said and walked over to hug Mam, who was crying again. ‘We’ll start saving and, sure, what do they say? Third time lucky. Auntie Paula is more important.’

Everyone nodded in agreement at my words. But we didn’t put the jar back on the dresser for a long time. We lost our saving mojo, I suppose, and although none of us said it, we kind of thought, what’s the point?

Mam’s potato parer was relegated to the back of the cutlery drawer and Saturdays became takeaway nights again. Actually, we ate a lot of takeaways that year, because Mam was away from home a lot and Dad was at work. Days became weeks and then months as chemo treatments rolled by. Then came the radiotherapy. It all took its toll on Auntie Paula and on all of us. Mam in particular. It was a horrible year, all in all. I don’t think we smiled much, at least not that often.

Then one evening Dad came home with a scratch card for Mam ‘Might give her a lift,’ he whispered to Eli and I. She wasn’t herself, worn down with tiredness and worry about her baby sister.

The gods were looking down kindly, because Mam suddenly shouted, ‘I won €50!’

We all whooped in pleasure for her.

‘You should book yourself a facial, you love having a pamper day,’ Dad told her.

‘Or get yourself that nice top you mentioned you saw in Carrig Donn,’ I added.

‘Here, Mam, you should do both,’ Eli slid something across the table towards her. ‘Here’s another twenty to add to the fifty. I sold one of my garden benches today.’

All of Eli’s practice was beginning to pay off and his joinery was widely acclaimed as exceptional. Mam looked at us all and smiled through watery eyes. Then it was like Groundhog Day because she stood up and walked over to the dresser and crouched down low, looking through the over-stuffed press.

‘Where is it? I know I left it here somewhere ...’ she mumbled and then, ‘Ha! Got you!’

She looked at each of us. We couldn’t take our eyes off her and then she placed the holiday jar back in its rightful place on top of the dresser. She held up her lottery ticket and Eli’s twenty euro, saying, ‘Third time lucky, that’s what you said, Skye.’ She placed them into the slot and I felt excitement shiver down my spine.

This time we will get to paradise. I just know it.

Chapter 11

REA

Derry Lane, Dublin, 2014

‘You took your time,’ Rea grumbled, letting Louis in.

‘I told you I’d be back. Had to get something to eat first.’ He wrinkled his nose and laughed, ‘I see what you mean. There’s a powerful twang off that bin alright.’

The smirk on Louis’ face should have irritated Rea, but it didn’t. The little shit knew that she was at his mercy, but even so, his sheer audacity amused her. He had spunk, get up and go. He wasn’t afraid to hustle and at least he was honest about it. But despite the fact that Louis Flynn was her only contact with the big wide world outside, he was enjoying himself far too much for her liking. So she scowled at him, her mind ticking over ways to bring him back down a few notches.

‘That cheap aftershave of yours sure is nasty, gives a shocking twang alright.’ Rea tried hard to mimic the boy’s smirk and it must have worked because his face fell. Then he gathered himself together and said with an exaggerated wink, ‘I wouldn’t waste the good stuff coming in here to see an aul wan’ like you.’

She snorted in response to cover the laugh that was trying to escape and turned away so he couldn’t see her face.

He carried on channelling his inner Del Boy, ‘I’m a busy man. People to see, things to do. So let’s cut to the chase. I’ve given you my new terms, take it or leave it.’

‘A busy man, you say?’ She looked him up and down once more and sneered, ‘A busy *boy*, you mean! And what has you so overloaded?’

Rea took out two glasses from the press and poured Fanta orange into them both. Then she grabbed her treat jar and opened the lid, pushing it towards him. He dived in, rooting around till he found his favourite at the bottom – the Twix bars. Rea noted to herself that she’d better add them to her Tesco online shopping list, she’d nearly ran out.

He gulped back the fizz in seconds, then burped loudly, delighted with himself, winking at her. ‘Both.’

‘You’re a pig, Louis Flynn.’

‘Maybe, but I’m a pig who right now is the only one willing to empty your bins. So either you agree to twenty euros a week for that Class A service or I’m out of here.’

‘You only have to bring the bins a few hundred feet down the path, all in all, which takes you less than five minutes each time!’

‘You do it, then, if it’s so easy,’ he replied, sly as a fox. He had Rea over a barrel and he knew it.

‘What would your mother say, if she knew you were trying to quadruple our agreed rates?’

‘She wouldn’t care less. She’s too busy with her latest fella.’

‘A new fella? Sure, she’s only just set the last one packing!’ Rea threw her eyes up to the ceiling.

‘It’s some gobshite who delivers pizzas for Harry’s. They fell for each other over a Hawaiian deep crust.’

Rea had a bad feeling about this. ‘Don’t tell me he has an earring ...’

‘Yeah, he does. Size of it, a big round hoopy yoke that girls usually wear. Why?’

‘I know, I’ve never seen anything so ridiculous in my life,’ Rea said. ‘He delivered a pizza here the other night and I told him to go ... well, never mind, let’s just say I had words with him.’

‘You can’t leave it like that, Mrs B. What did you say to him?’ Louis was up off his seat, face lit up with excitement.

Buoyed by his enthusiasm, Rea said, ‘I may or may not have given him the finger.’

He roared laughing, delighted with the news. 'I'd have loved to see that. We were his last call and apparently Mam and him were giving each other the eye last week in Tomangos. So she invites him in. He's already strutting around like he owns the gaff, bleedin' tool. And he ruffled my hair, calling me kiddo. Eejit!'

Rea pushed the tin towards Louis, saying, 'Go on, have another one,' and he smiled, reaching in for a second bar.

Rea leaned forward and said, 'Tell you what, ten euro and that's my final offer, that's double what you get right now.' Then she threw in a lie, just to rattle him. 'That new family who moved into number 65, well, they've a lovely young girl, twelve years old and her mam was up here last week saying to me that she would love to help me out.'

He looked at Rea, doubt all over his young, spotty face.

'Ten euro, take it or leave it. Or I'll take my business elsewhere.'

'Fifteen euro, take *that* or leave *that*, Rea Brady,' he threw back at her. He'd some neck on him, she thought. She walked over to her phone and picked it up, making a big deal of scrolling through her contacts for a number.

'Where is that number again? I'll just give that lovely woman in number 65 a quick bell and ask her to send her daughter over. I'd say she'd jump at the chance to earn a tenner a week. Hell, the way her mam was talking, she'd probably do it for nothing. Sweet little thing. Well brought up. And, when I think of it, I'd be saving on all the treats too. Because she'd probably not eat me out of house and home every time she called.'

To illustrate the point, Rea picked up the tin and put the lid back on it.

'Alright, ten euro it is,' Louis said, the loss of treats tipping the negotiations in Rea's favour. 'Only because you gave yer man the finger. Respect for that, Mrs B.'

Rea bowed her head, 'I do my best.'

'I want cash up front. No argument,' Louis said.

'You'll get paid on a Saturday morning, at the end of the week, you chancer,' Rea answered back, then added, 'No argument.'

He was still laughing when he picked up the two black sacks Rea had tied up ready for him. He hauled them over his shoulder. For a skinny lad, he was strong. 'I'll grab the ones out back in a minute,' he said.

'You eating enough, Louis?' Rea asked, worried. His mother wasn't a bad person, she realised. Just a bit flaky and far too preoccupied with her love life. But, there again, she was a single mum, so who was she to judge? She'd had George to help raise her two.

'Yeah, yeah,' Louis replied.

'And are you doing your homework? You know it's important you do well in your exams.'

'Quit your nagging, you're worse than me ma.' But he was grinning. The truth was, he loved coming to Rea's and loved her worrying about him. He didn't get to see his grandma any more because his ma and her had fallen out.

'Alright! I'll shut up, for now. I'll text you when they're full again. And this time, I don't care how busy you are, don't leave me waiting.'

'Mam say's you're weird, you know.' He looked back over his shoulder as he opened the back door.

'A lot do,' Rea replied.

'She doesn't get why you never go out. You don't, do you? Go out any more?'

What was there to say in response to that?

'None of your beeswax. See you in a few days.' And she slammed the back door shut as she shooed him out.

Explaining why she didn't go out any more was difficult. She didn't really understand it herself and, in her experience, when she tried to explain it to family and friends, they understood it less.

The fear, the panic at being outside, well, it sort of crept up on her. She hadn't been herself for a long time. Not since Elise had left, really. George had thought she was depressed. She went to see her doctor and he told her it was normal. Empty-nest syndrome. Most went through it. Then, of course, came the grief. It took over everything. Then one day, while she was out doing the weekly shopping in Clare Hall, her first big panic attack happened. The shopping mall began to vibrate. One minute she was standing in Tesco trying to decide whether she fancied real butter or low-low, when something shifted. Inside of her. And around her. The lights that lined the cool fridge grew too bright and jarred her eyes. She remembered stepping back from it, dropping the butter onto the floor, a dull thud resounded as it made impact. Her vision then blurred and floaties danced around her eyes, making her head spin. It was like being sea-sick and hungover all at once.

She had to get out of the store. She walked, no, she ran out, leaving her full trolley behind her. She could feel the eyes of passersby staring at her. Just another mad woman on the loose. She tried not to stumble as she felt the world spin and turn on its axis, shoving her from one side of the shopping centre to the other. Her stomach then cramped up and she searched around her for a bin. And, like a drunk in the street, she threw up into a grey plastic bin, much to the disgust of the rest of the shoppers. She could hear them judging, pointing.

'She's off her head!'

'Disgraceful at this hour.'

'The shame of it. I'm scarlet for her.'

And then, with those endorsements ringing in her ears, for the first time in her life, Rea passed out.

That was her first panic attack.

And the beginning of the end.

Chapter 12

STELLA

Matt walked into the kitchen and held up Stella's contraceptive pill sheet in his hand. 'I think it's time we threw these in the bin, my darling.'

She watched him in horror as he put his foot on the pedal bin and chucked them inside.

'What are you doing?' she asked, appalled and completely thrown by his actions. The subject of children had never been discussed by either of them. He'd made it clear that he didn't care for them. He often commented on friends' wives who had succumbed to the dreaded 'mummy tummy.'

Years ago, Stella had assumed children were part of her distant future. She wanted what her parents had created at home for their family; aspired to give the same to children of her own one day.

But that was a long time ago. Now, she thanked the heavens that children were not part of the madness of life with Matt.

She had to find a way to leave him. But she also knew that if she had children that would never happen. She would be trapped forever. And what if he hit their child too? She felt her body shake in response to that thought.

'You can't do that!' She found her voice, moving towards the bin. 'It's a big decision. We need to talk about it. Together.'

He walked towards her and put her face in his hands. 'Oh my darling, don't you see? This is the answer to all our problems. A baby will bring us closer together. I was having lunch with Adrian and a couple of the lads today. And all they were banging on about were children. Adrian told me that children had been the making of him.'

'Just because your boss has kids doesn't mean that we have to!' Stella said.

'Of course it doesn't. But I see how he is with the other fathers at work. He's bringing Padriac out to golf on Saturday morning and don't tell me that's nothing to do with the fact that they are both bonded over the night feeds! We just need to be careful that you don't follow in Padriac's wife's footsteps. She gained four stone when she had those twins and she's not lost a pound since.' He shuddered as he said this. 'But I'll keep an eye on your diet. I'm sure we can do this, with minimal damage to your waistline.'

He picked up his iPad and started to Google *healthy diets for pregnant women*.

The abuse that Matt inflicted on her, mental and physical, that was all on him. But if she allowed a child to come into the equation, that was on *her*. Pure and simple. Stella knew for a long time that she could not perpetuate the 'happily-ever-after' myth. Her staying, on her own, was one thing. Just the thought of a baby made her survival instincts jump up and grab her by her throat.

'Matt, I can't just stop taking the pill. I need to go see a doctor first.' She walked over and retrieved the package from the bin.

'Why?'

'Just to be safe. Let me make an appointment to discuss this. Make sure I'm healthy. That my body is ready to have a baby.'

He watched her for a moment. Then shook his head. 'There's no need to get doctors involved until you're pregnant. It might take a few months for it to happen anyhow, but think of the fun we'll have trying.'

When he touched Stella, when he ran his hand over her breasts and leaned in to kiss her, it took every inch of control not to shudder.

'We'll have beautiful babies. Two. A boy, then a girl. One year in between them.' He said.

'You have it all worked out.'

'The perfect family,' he replied.

And what happens if two girls come along, or two boys, Stella wanted to ask him. What then? Life isn't perfect. There had been many times in her life that she wished for a do-over. How she wished she'd not fallen for him. A mere 386 days ago. Doesn't sound like a long time, but it had become endless for her. Marry in haste, repent at leisure.

The night she met him, she'd been at her lowest. Weeks of being at home again had unleashed ghosts of her past. She found no peace, no matter how much she tried to block out the memories that haunted her. Everywhere she turned she saw reminders of a happier time and it paralysed her with fear.

So when Matt walked over to her that night, his head cocked to one side, with a big smile on his face, charm personified, he disarmed her. He said, 'Will you give me ten minutes?'

'For what?' Stella was puzzled.

'To find a way to make you smile. You look so sad. That's not right.'

She saw compassion and kindness in his eyes. And she needed someone to care about her. She found herself nodding to the chair beside her, and he ordered two drinks for them.

And soon, over that first gin and slimline tonic together, he made her smile, then laugh and eventually her ghosts disappeared for a while.

Ten minutes turned into hours and when he begged her not to leave Dublin the following day, to give him a chance, telling her that life was too precious, that it could be snatched from you at a moment's notice, she found herself nodding in agreement.

So she stayed, and within weeks they were in love. This charming, sophisticated man, who only wanted to take care of her. Whether it was choosing what she should eat or surprising her with a beautiful new dress, quite unlike anything else she owned in her wardrobe, he just wanted to look after her every need. And at first it felt good. Okay, the dress he bought her was slightly too tight, a size too small. But with a few adjustments to her diet, he told her she'd fit into it, in weeks.

He painted a fairytale life for them, which she now knew was built on lies and half-truths, but sometimes people only see what they want to. Stella allowed herself to believe in the possibility of a happy-ever-after. She blossomed under his loving care.

She winced as Matt touched her side, bringing her back to her crushing reality. 'Oh, my darling, that still hurts you?'

She nodded, tears stinging her eyes.

'Rest up, my darling. When you are back to your full health, we'll start trying for that little baby boy.'

That was her lifeline. 'Matt. I want a baby too. But my body has to be back to full health.' She lifted her top and let his eyes rest on her bruised abdomen.

He looked away. He hated to see reminders of his temper, physical evidence of a side to his nature that he preferred to pretend didn't exist.

'Just give me another month, then we'll start trying,' she said.

He nodded, retrieving her contraceptive pill sheet and giving it back to her. 'You're right. Of course you are. Everything will be alright. You'll see.' He kissed her lightly and then left.

She waited until she heard his car pull out of the drive. She ran upstairs and hid her pill in one of her rolled-up socks, in case he decided to take matters into his own hands again. She had averted trouble for now, but it was also only a temporary solution. There was no way she could bring a child into a world like this. A world of pain and fear and sadness. Stella looked out her bedroom window, out towards the horizon, where the blue sky touched the ocean in the distance.

Was she strong enough to leave him?

Yes. For the sake of her unborn child, yes.

She'd need some help. There was only one person she could think of. Matt had been thorough over the past twelve months, taking care to isolate Stella from everyone in her life. He'd made her

doubt her own sanity and her own voice. As a child, she'd been the outspoken one at home and now the only opinion that mattered in their lives was his. How had she let this happen?

No matter what she did, how hard she tried to please him, she would always do something that made him angry. No combination of words or actions on her part could ever placate the monster that lay within him.

She pulled her mother's cardigan out of her wardrobe once more and pulled it around her, falling to the ground. She rocked back and forth, crying with shame for the mess she'd gotten herself into.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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