

Are you
missing
*Maev
Binchy?*

Esther Campion

A Week
to
Remember

Prologue

‘Katie Daly!’ Miss Dorgan, their English teacher, swayed at the top of the steps of the West Cork Hotel. ‘You’re like a swan,’ she slurred before Mr Cashel, the head, took her by the arm, probably saving the woman from a tumble that would have brought the graduation dance to a standstill before it even got going.

‘She’s half-cut already,’ said Conor, who Katie had hardly been able to look at since he’d arrived at her home to collect her, armed with a beautiful rose to pin on her dress and a box of chocolates for her mother. In his brother’s car, the poor boy had tried his best to make conversation as they sat apart in the back seat. Transformed as he was with that snazzy haircut and the mandatory tuxedo he’d complained at having to wear, he’d gone from simple gangly country boy to James Bond understudy. Other girls had insisted their partners wear coloured bow ties and matching triangles of handkerchiefs, but Katie made no such demands. After months of agonising over how she would ever find a partner who wasn’t one of the

male cousins suggested by her mother, not to mind listening to the conversations at school of the girls who had it all sewn up and thought they knew who every one of the boys would end up with, Conor Fox had done two miraculous things in one night – he'd asked her to dance at the hurling club disco and he'd asked her to the ball. Not that he was a hurler. Although happy to support his brother and the local team from the sidelines, the game held no great interest for him. The clash of the ash, they called it. A fierce fast-moving game, the ash sticks held aloft, belting a leather ball at lightning speed, not a helmet between them. No, Conor was refined, happier with a book in his hand. The only boy in her year to bring coffee to school. She would watch him at lunchtimes in the canteen as he queued at the urn, dispensing measures of coffee, milk and sugar from tablet containers and a little medicine bottle. He told them he was recycling. To her, at least, it was cool.

'Sure ye're only gorgeous,' Martin had sneered from where she'd wished he would stop looking at her in the rear-view mirror and keep his eyes on the winding road. She'd never been so delighted to get out of a car. To say the brothers were like chalk and cheese would have been an understatement.

Fizzing with excitement, she thought she might burst out of the full-length white taffeta number she and her mother had found in a dress hire shop in Cork City. What an excursion that had been, trawling the shops for dresses and the glamorous white high heels in which she was now desperately trying to stay upright. And the white nylons; she'd already laddered the right thigh of them, but there was a spare pair in her bag

along with money, lip gloss, a small palette of eyeshadow and tissues her mother never let her leave home without.

Conor took her hand and gave it a squeeze. When she looked at him, his eyes travelled over her face and down that dress that had to be back in the hire shop next week. She knew he was taking it all in: the light makeup Bernadette had helped her apply, the upstyled hairdo where her sister had tamed her cow's lick and weaved it all into a pair of French plaits that met at the nape of her neck, the drop diamante earrings her mother had surprised her with the week before.

He gave her a wink and bent his tall frame so their faces were level.

'Don't be nervous,' he told her. 'You're the belle of the ball.'

Chapter One

‘**W**e could have gone to Bali!’ Aisling was on one of her moaning rolls as the two friends strode along Freers Beach under a milky blue sky that promised another hot day in Tasmania. ‘Why did I let Mick’s family decide how we’d spend our anniversary?’

Heather was already well versed in the circumstances that had led to the latest drama in the Fitzgeralds’ lives, but Aisling went over it again just to blow off steam.

‘The indignity of it! Spending a week in the bogs of Ireland when we could be in some idyllic resort, drinking cocktails at one of those swim-up bars.’ But as Aisling knew only too well, the gift from her in-laws, or outlaws as she liked to call them, was as much a present for Mick’s forthcoming fortieth as it was for their anniversary. If it had been left to her, there’d have been a big party. But no, Lilian Fitzgerald had other ideas. She’d give her son a holiday in West Cork and she’d have a few weeks with the grandchildren all to herself in Tasmania. Aisling had all manner of fantastic ideas for

surprise parties, but although she was loath to admit it, Mick would have hated that. So in the end, Lily Fitz got her way.

‘It’s not as if I could have said no,’ she said, snatching a good breath as they kept up a steady pace along the shore. ‘I don’t know why I ever agreed to marrying him on his birthday.’

It had felt like the most romantic thing at the time when he’d told her he wanted to wake up beside her on every milestone, celebrate each passing year of his life with her. And for a fella who wasn’t prone to gush or go overboard with romantic gestures, she’d known he’d meant it.

‘It’s bloody winter over there,’ she huffed. ‘Why did I have to get married in winter?’

Heather would outstrip anyone in a competition for Listener of the Year. There was no doubting the neighbour who had become her best Australian friend was a great support. She’d been bearing witness to the highs and lows of Aisling’s life for the best part of five years. God knows, Heather had heard it all as Aisling had regularly let rip about everything from her stressful job, to her relationship with Mick Fitzgerald and their kids, to gripes about all manner of her multitude of relations. That was the problem with their trips home to Ireland – she always came back feeling in need of a holiday. There were Mick’s three brothers and their families with a rake of kids that ensured there was always a christening or a communion depending on when they travelled home. Then there was the One Foot in the Grave Brigade – the older relatives who absolutely had to be visited in case it might be the last time. And her own siblings of course: the younger sister who had their

father in her pocket, and the brother she loved but who had married the sister-in-law she couldn't stand. Heather had met every one of those who had made it to Tasmania and witnessed the fallout of every visit. But wasn't that what friends were for? Helping pick up the pieces when things went pear-shaped?

'It will be lovely to have Lilian nearby,' Heather was saying as they tramped along, their trainers making oversized footprints in the soft sinky sand near the boat ramp. 'You're so lucky to have a mother-in-law to keep the show on the road.'

That was Heather. Ever since she'd moved into the beach-front house two doors up from the Fitzgeralds, she'd been the voice of reason in their private conversations. While Aisling might have preferred to vent without judgement, Heather would consider the fairness of her arguments and gently weigh in when she went too far, defending Mick and anyone else in the firing line. She had that knack of reminding her that the Fitzgeralds really were decent people. It was probably why Aisling had made no mention of Brett Goodstone. Heather had a quality about her that made Aisling wish she could live up to her standards.

'You'll have a ball, Ash,' Heather told her now. 'Remember all the times you've gone home and been, to use your words, "demented going from pillar to post"?''

'Exactly.' Aisling was defiant. 'It won't be much different this time. I'll still have to see all the rellies . . .'

'At least you can see them and then have a whole week to yourselves in a beautiful part of the world.'

'I suppose,' she conceded. 'Although knowing my luck, it'll lash rain the entire time and we'll be blown into the Atlantic.'

‘Bloody oath, you’d think you were going to Kabul,’ said Heather.

A wry smile spread across Aisling’s face. ‘I’d take a week in Kabul with George Clooney, and Amal could have Mick in West Cork.’

They laughed over the sound of seagulls and the small waves that swallowed up their footprints as they headed towards home.



‘Who put that black pants in the wash with a tissue still inside the pocket?’

Aisling didn’t care if the neighbours could hear her. The walls of the weatherboard beach house were that thin, they probably knew when she farted, at least when Mick farted. His grandfather hadn’t nicknamed him Rear Gunner Fitzgerald for nothing.

‘I’m fed up of telling you all. Check your flipping pockets.’

Unsure if any of the three of them were even listening, she pummelled the trousers with a lint roller. Why did this kind of stupidity always happen at the eleventh hour, when you were just about to go out the door?

‘Mick!’

No answer from her husband, who was down in the bedroom, no doubt dressed and ready with only his toilet bag to fling into the suitcase.

‘Mick, where did you put that hard clothes brush?’

Aisling looked out the laundry window and caught sight of a couple with an all-terrain pram and a dog heading down

to the beach. Another perfect summer's evening with locals and visitors soaking up the weather. *Typical*, she thought as she wrestled with the tissue bits that may as well have been superglued to the fabric, *I'm missing out on half the summer here and heading into cold, dreary winter in Ireland.*

'Give it to me here.' Mick came in armed with the brush. Taking the pants from her, he set to work. She hesitated for a moment, but his face was stern. 'Ash, get moving. I think I can be trusted with this job.' He eyed her from where he was bent over the garment. 'We're going on holiday, you know.'

She hesitated for a second, considering a last rant about why in the name of God she'd let himself and his family railroad her into this trip in the first place, but remembering the time, turned on her heel and sprinted to the bedroom. For the hundredth time, she ran through the three weeks she'd organised to the letter. The CEO was fine about her taking leave; Brett in Melbourne would cover both states in her absence. She'd hoped it would be someone else, but it was done now. At least she could go away confident at having steered the Tasmanian stores through another successful Christmas. Her house was in order, clean and tidy with a fridge and freezer full to bursting, though God only knew what her mother-in-law would feed her children. She'd stopped short of leaving the meal planner she'd prepared on the fridge. *Too prescriptive*, Mick had said in that firm tone he used when she crossed the line between care and control.



At the small regional airport, Aisling felt the buzz she always got when leaving the island. Too bad she was about to bypass

the bright lights of Melbourne and connect with the late-night long haul to halfway across the world. But the bright lights of Melbourne were the problem. She couldn't turn back the clock. Somehow, she'd have to get through this with Mick. She may have joked about Bali with her friend, but after what she'd done in Melbourne, romantic holidays in exotic destinations were simply unthinkable. Ireland would be bad enough. The time with their families would go quickly. It was the week in West Cork she was dreading.

'No doing donuts around Hawley now.' Mick winked as he handed the car keys to Evan.

The comment snapped Aisling back to the moment. They'd never gone on holiday without the children. Surely they wouldn't go mad in her absence. They'd only be alone for the one night, then they'd motor down to Launceston tomorrow to collect their grandmother. Evan had his Ps. He was a responsible boy, wasn't he? And Natalie would behave herself when her grandmother was around and not throw any hissy fits, wouldn't she? Aisling had them well warned. They'd be messaging her every hour of the day and night anyway to tell on each other. She'd be demented, but they were booked and going now. She couldn't turn back.

'Don't worry about us, Mum.' Natalie slipped an arm around her waist and let her head rest against Aisling's chest. 'We'll be fine with Gran.'

Stroking the soft lengths of her daughter's fair hair, Aisling bristled inwardly. Why should Lily Fitz get all the quality time? These moments with Natalie had become rare. Okay, so it wasn't just because she was twelve and becoming a bit

hormonal, but her own crazy work schedule took its toll. The warmth of her baby girl made her want to stay. But in her heart, Aisling knew she'd have worked all summer anyway and only begrudgingly taken her foot off the pedal for a week before the two went back to school. She'd worked her backside off to rise up the ranks in that company. It occurred to her now as she kissed her kids goodbye that maybe all that going the extra mile might be her undoing.



‘The eagle has landed,’ Mick announced, smiling at his phone as they sat in Dubai Airport, Aisling beside him rifling in her new travel bag for a painkiller.

‘I still don’t know why your mother insisted on going all the way to Tasmania to mind our two,’ she huffed.

‘Ah sure, ’tis a holiday for her,’ Mick replied, ‘and won’t we get a couple of weeks with her when we get back into the bargain?’

He didn’t need a response to sense her seething into the bowels of that overpriced handbag he hoped she’d got free through her work. Aisling had never been his mother’s biggest fan. His dad, God rest him, had loved Aisling’s spirit, but warned him early on she mightn’t be the easiest woman to live with. Jack Fitzgerald could be laughing somewhere now at the irony of the pair of them heading off to West Cork and his mother having landed Down Under. By rights, his dad should have been enjoying the trip with her. There wasn’t a day went by in the two years since he’d passed when Mick didn’t think of him and wish he were still around. ‘Apple of

your mother's eye' Jack used to call him. As the youngest of their four boys, maybe he was a bit spoilt, but he wouldn't swap his mother for worlds.

'She's a great bit of stuff,' he said, mostly to himself as Aisling closed her eyes. 'Are you all right, Ash?' he asked.

'Just tired, Mick,' she said, turning her head away.

She'd been saying that a lot of late. Being promoted to state manager of one of Australia's biggest retail chains had been a huge boon for them financially. But it had come at a price. He'd always been happy to keep the household running while Aisling travelled or put in the long hours, but as a paramedic, he had his own share of stresses. He'd just come out of a crazy Christmas and had been flat out with the influx of tourists. They could both do with a break. He'd been blown away by his family's kindness when they'd clubbed together for this holiday. Although he didn't labour the point, he'd mentioned to his parents a few years back that he'd always wished they could spend longer in Ireland when they came home and explore places they'd never had time to visit. It wasn't without a twinge of sadness that he acknowledged they were travelling in part on his dad's life insurance policy.

It mightn't be the kind of dream holiday Aisling talked about, but they'd have a decent break together. He nodded off himself, imagining the guesthouse in West Cork his mother had booked, the smell of the sea, the cooked Irish breakfasts and the time alone with his cranky, overworked, overtired but amazing wife.

Chapter Two

Lilian Fitzgerald drove the small Toyota into the service station at Shearwater. She'd been given instructions to use Mick's runabout and had just managed to drop her granddaughter off at a friend's when the orange fuel light turned red. Mick had apologised for not having filled up in the rushed handwritten note that had lain beside the keys on the otherwise clear kitchen bench. Lilian wasn't sure which surprised her more, the fact that there was something on the bench or that her super-organised daughter-in-law had overlooked the task of refuelling the car.

Which pump was it now? The blue or the yellow? Natalie would have known. But it wasn't as if she could leave it until she collected the child from her friend's. There was no way she'd risk getting stranded. Jack would have known, of course. He'd been the driver on previous visits. But she had been learning to cope, changing light bulbs, unplugging drains. How hard could it be to fill a car with fuel in Australia? She glanced over her shoulder. A man towing a boat was filling

up at the pumps opposite. *The dumbest question is the one you don't ask*, she reminded herself.

'Excuse me,' she called out.

The man looked up. Lilian caught the smouldering expression and hoped it was more ageing good looks than annoyance. *I'll never see him again*, she reasoned.

'I'm just at a loss as to which colour I need.' She smiled hopefully.

He gave the car a critical look-over. 'Blue's cheaper.'

'Thanks,' she said, but he'd already returned his attention to the meter on his own side.

Could have been a bit more friendly, Lilian mused as she filled the tank.

Inside, the attendant didn't look too cheery either.

'Having a busy day?' she ventured, handing over the card Mick had left on the bench.

The young man grumbled something incomprehensible through a handsome black beard, but the weariness in his face said yes, a very busy day. God love him. He didn't look like he was from here either. Indian, Pakistani? How would you know? If she mentioned the wrong one, he might get offended. Aussies were funny about being called Kiwis, she remembered Mick telling her. And didn't Canadians go mad if you thought they were American? Let's face it, if anyone called her English, she'd be a bit peeved.

'Where are you from?' The safest option.

'I'm from India,' he said, his shoulders squaring as he handed back Mick's card.

‘Oh, that’s one place I’d love to go.’ Did every customer who’d never been to India tell him this? ‘The festivals . . .’ It was the only thing she could think of apart from Lady Di outside the Taj Mahal on her thirtieth birthday.

The shoulders slumped again. ‘Today is a big festival. You know the harvest one?’ She smiled to encourage him despite not having the first clue. His hands circled above the counter. ‘Whole family come together, eating . . .’

What a beautiful smile, Lilian thought, from the pearly white teeth framed by the thick beard to the dark shining eyes. If she looked closely, she fancied she might see India in them.

‘Oh God love you and you here working while they’re all partying at home.’

He shrugged.

‘My son and his family live here,’ she went on. ‘They hate working on St Patrick’s Day. I’ve heard –’

The bell tinkled as the door opened behind her. ‘I’d better go. We’ll talk again . . .’ She looked at his badge. ‘Sanjeev.’

As she went out, the boatman shuffled past, without as much as a nod.



Declan Byrne sat in his surgery typing up the last of his notes on a difficult root canal where the patient had wasted ten minutes of his precious consultation time needing to be reassured that the procedure was necessary. Ungrateful bastard, he thought, hovering the mouse over the Other Comments section before leaving it blank. There was a time when a patient said ‘Hello’, ‘Goodbye’ and let you get on with the

job you were highly trained to do. But in this age of equality and entitlement, they all thought they were experts. Half of them probably googled their procedure before they came in. No wonder they were terrified.

Declan had seen firsthand a rise in what he viewed as a misplaced empowerment in patients. In his mid-fifties, and in some ways at the height of his career given his experience, he wasn't sure he could face another ten years before retirement. Glancing over at the framed degree and diplomas on his office wall, the class of '87 popped into his head as it had done so frequently in recent months. He'd discovered the graduation photo in his latest house move, his classmates smiling in their gowns, throwing mortarboards in the air. Heady days, he remembered, before the grind of life descended and they all became cogs in the wheel. Should probably be grateful, he thought. Some of them were no longer around.

'Declan.' Siobhan, the dental nurse whose job was as much to maintain a sense of calm as give technical support in the treatment room, came in holding out a brochure. 'Colette from downstairs dropped in a few of these. Mags thinks you could do with a break.'

'Does she now?' He eyed her over his glasses.

Margaret Logan had been trying to run his life for twenty years. He'd inherited her from old George Powell when he'd retired and sold up. George had assured him he wouldn't find a better dental assistant and insisted Mags be kept on in the practice as part of the handover. God knows, there'd been times he could have happily reneged on his promise, like when she'd got the promotion to practice manager, wheedling

away at him while trying to make him think it was all his own idea. But she'd been loyal. You couldn't buy that nowadays no matter what you offered. He just wouldn't share the belief with Mags.

Taking the brochure from Siobhan, he saw the stone farmhouse with its brightly painted green front door and white-sash windows, a garden path sweeping down towards the sea.

'Escape to West Cork,' he read aloud, but Siobhan and her ever-expanding bump had already left him to it. Maternity leave: that was another item on the never-ending to-do list. Why did people have to have babies? As his heart began to race in his chest, he reached down to the bottom desk drawer for something to calm the anxiety, but the brochure held his attention. Whether it was the lure of the rugged coastline or the comforting image of the house, he wasn't sure, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd taken a holiday.



At The Elysian, Declan parked the Lexus in the iconic building's underground car park and took the lift to his tenth floor apartment. Nestled between neighbours whose faces he never saw long enough to recognise, he tapped one of his regular orders into his Uber Eats app. Finding the last clean glass in the cupboard, he poured himself a red wine. It was a week-night; he'd keep it to the one bottle. Throwing himself on the sofa, he flicked through Netflix for the latest series of Scandi noir he could binge-watch. When the door buzzed, he hauled himself up to collect his dinner, but as he went to resume his position, the guesthouse brochure caught his

eye from where it had spilled out of his laptop bag on the coffee table. Distracted, he hardly tasted the meal and lost the thread of the episode. Despite the cold, he took his wine and ventured out onto the balcony. Ignoring the seldom-used furniture where leaves decayed in rain pools, he took in the vista he was paying through the nose for.

On the crisp dry night, he could see all the way to the North Side to where the red-lit cross on the Gurrabraher church glowed amid the city's silhouette. So, Mags reckoned he needed a holiday? He'd caught them, Mags and Siobhan, on more than one occasion, exchanging meaningful looks, talking about him in hushed tones. Idle talk, office bitching, he'd told himself, but Mags was above that and Siobhan, to be fair, was his longest-serving nurse. So many young, enthusiastic girls hadn't stuck around. One hadn't even served her notice. Shelly, that was her name. A tall leggy girl with a head of ebony hair he used to imagine brushed out over that olive skin instead of constantly tied back in a work bun. Not that he ever mentioned such a fantasy directly, but he remembered now how she'd flounced into his office, accusing him of being the most arrogant, chauvinistic man she'd ever met and declaring she quit. If he wasn't nit-picking about small errors in her work, she'd told him, he was hitting on her or one of the other girls.

It wasn't his fault if he liked to have a couple of pretty women to brighten up his practice. He was only human. But technicians, other dentists, had all moved on too. Even Malouf, the easygoing Syrian their patients loved, had recently mentioned the possibility of moving to Dublin. Things were

starting to slip. Patient numbers were down. Only last week one had asked how to go about making a complaint.

He'd always prided himself on the impeccable standards and excellent reputation of Declan Byrne & Associates. Leaning on the balcony, he looked down over the lights and lines of cars passing back and forth and wondered how things had got so bad. Even his sons didn't want much to do with him anymore. As much as he hated to admit it, he should have seen it all coming the day Karen Byrne walked out.



In his shop in West Cork, Conor Fox undid the top and bottom bolts and pulled open the old narrow doors to let in his first customer of the day.

'Morning, Orla. You're in early,' he greeted the woman he'd known since childhood. Like himself, she was one of those residents who'd received every sacrament that punctuated their lives in the local church, save marriage of course. At fifty-five, he'd accepted that to be a most unlikely prospect.

'Tis nearly a day's work I have done, Conor,' she said, lifting the plastic cover of the buggy to reveal a sleeping Ava, the youngest of her growing squad of grandchildren. 'Between the farm, the house, her nibs here, not to mind helping out with the bit of housekeeping down at the neighbours . . . I'm run ragged.'

She parked Ava to one side of the shop and helped herself to a shopping basket.

'Aren't you very good to be giving Ellen O'Shea a hand on top of it all?'

‘Ah d’you know it gets me out of the house,’ she said, digging her list out of the pocket of her jacket. ‘Sure isn’t it the most exciting thing to happen around these parts in a winter in years?’

‘Can’t argue with you there, Orla.’

The imminent opening of the new guesthouse was indeed a great source of interest in the small community. Summers could always be relied upon to bring in the tourists, guaranteeing a much-needed cash injection for local businesses, but Conor had spent enough lonesome winters here to appreciate what Ellen O’Shea and her partner Gerry were trying to do. They were his new best customers, sharing much of their patronage between himself and the food producers around the area. Lizzie O’Shea would be proud. Long dead now, she’d raised her four children in that farmhouse. Ellen’s father and an aunt in America were the only ones left. He remembered Ellen standing here in his shop only a year before and she on a rare visit from Australia. Always a lovely girl, he’d known she was genuine when she’d told him how she loved that house. Hard to believe how much she’d done in a year, enlisting her builder brother and an interior designer friend to transform the place.

‘So how is it going down there?’ he asked, taking the heavy basket Orla had filled to the gunnels and lifting it onto the conveyor.

‘Oh, ’tis fabulous,’ she said. ‘Ellen is like a hen with an egg getting ready for opening on Saturday, but she has nothing to fear. She’s after buying beautiful ware and the linen . . . you wouldn’t get it in the Waldorf Hotel.’

Conor had to smile. Between Netflix and a recent first holiday abroad, Orla was full of references to people and places far beyond the old O'Shea farm.

'And how is Eamon coping with the prospect of so many neighbours?'

'Don't talk to me about him,' she began. 'You'd swear 'twas Downton Abbey they were running.'

Leaning her considerable weight on the other end of the counter, she launched into one of the stories Conor dreaded when the shop was full of customers but welcomed on a wintry day in January like this when only a handful of souls would come over the door.

'You should've heard him up at home last night,' she was saying. 'Gave them all a good talk about keeping up the standards of the place . . . "There's to be no drama, no screaming and bawling from any of ye," he said.' She shook her head and deepened her voice as she continued to quote her husband. "'Our house and farm will be non-intrusive elements in this idyllic landscape, not a sideshow.'" She gave a drawn-out roll of her eyes. 'A sideshow! Can you believe it?'

Her tale was interrupted by Matt from the kennels, almost a local himself if it wasn't for that funny accent of his.

'G'day,' he said, breezing in with the jacket open and the sleeves of it pushed up like it was a fine spring day.

'Do you not feel the cold at all, Matt?' Orla asked.

He smiled and shrugged the shoulders of his lean frame. 'Too busy, I reckon.'

Conor imagined the comment might be enough of a spur

to get Orla moving, but she stayed where she was, watching as Matt handed over an A4 sheet.

‘Another mutt in need of a home?’

Matt sucked in a breath. ‘Afraid so. But they’re not always this handsome.’

Orla peered over the page where a chunky basset hound looked into the camera with a pair of the most doleful eyes Conor had ever seen on a hound.

‘A real heartbreaker, that one.’

‘Don’t fall for it, Conor,’ Orla warned. ‘You have enough to be doing without taking in a stray.’

‘I’ll put him in the window for you,’ he told Matt. Orla was probably right.

‘Lovely boy,’ Orla remarked as soon as Matt left the shop. ‘Funny how he ended up here.’

‘He is indeed.’ Conor made himself look busy, hunting in a drawer for Blu Tack and going to the window to display the poster. Taking the hint at last, Orla assembled her shopping bags on the handles of the buggy and tucked in the knitted blanket around her granddaughter.

‘I’d better get home and make his lordship his Starbucks,’ she said.

Conor laughed and shook his head as he saw her out. Orla was gas, always up for a chat and a laugh. The polar opposite to the shy, retiring Eamon O’Shea but the perfect foil, he had no doubt. Those two had been together since high school. Sometimes he envied them their long and happy relationship. There’d been a time when he’d have imagined having the same.



In her basement apartment in Brooklyn, Katie Daly undid all seven locks on her front door and picked her way up the icy steps where the sun wouldn't make an impact until later that morning. She let herself in to the hardware store at ground level and waited for Chad Verebeau to finish his casual conversation with a customer she didn't recognise. He could have been a client of her own, one of the many people whose money worked its way into her bank account in that contactless, impersonal way that suited her just fine.

Chad's youngest raced out from the back of the shop, which, along with the upstairs, made up the Verebeau family home. Spotting Katie, he slowed down, hooked an arm around his father's leg and gave her a shy smile. She looked at him from under her trilby but didn't smile back. She paid her rent, gave them no trouble and avoided any unnecessary overtures that might make her appear as a convenient babysitter.

'Just dropping in the key in case you need to get in,' she told Chad, setting the key on the counter and ignoring the nod from the departing customer.

'Sure,' he said. He picked up the child and beamed at her. 'You have a safe trip now, Miss Kate.'

He wasn't the worst of them, she had to admit. His parents had run the store for all of their married lives before retiring and moving into a small house out of town. The younger Verebeaus had been kind enough to let their arrangement with Katie stand.

‘I’ll be back in under two weeks,’ she said. ‘Keep an eye on the pipes.’

He shook his head and smiled. ‘I sure will, Miss Kate.’

A couple of years before, she’d gone to her friend’s for Christmas and had had to extend her stay while the fallout of a burst pipe in the basement was sorted out. A terrible inconvenience. Just as well her computer had been up high enough so as not to lose all her files. Sometimes she thought the hours spent at her desk in that basement running her business were the only thing keeping her sane.

As she walked along the streets of what had been her long-time home, the smart black suitcase snagged on lumps of ice and snow that was turning into a dirty mush. With her breath making hazy clouds in the freezing air, she kept her head down, avoiding eye contact with passers-by. At the station, she pulled her thick wool cape around her and stamped her feet, willing the bus to hurry up. She’d take the long way to the airport. It was cheap and besides, she was already investing enough in this trip to Ireland where she would spend the week she was dreading in West Cork. It would be enough to honour the debt to her sister it had only taken thirty-five years to repay.