

The touch of his hand, lightly circling my belly button, woke me. Still half-asleep, I enjoyed the feel of his fingers tracing lower.

But before we could go any further, I needed to know the time.

'Ten past seven.' His voice was thick.

The relief of sleeping through a whole night! I smiled straight into his face. 'Now you have my full attention.'

Afterwards, we lay together in a rosy glow. But time was passing. 'I've to go, sweetie.'

'Already?'

'Have to drop in home, feed Crunchie, pick up a couple of things before work.'

'Uh.' There was that meaningful little pause. 'Okay.'

We weren't going there, not now. 'Have a great trip.'

He kissed me. 'I'll call when I can. But it's unpredictable.'

'Don't worry.' I slid from the bed. 'I hope it goes well. See you Sunday.'

He held my wrist. 'I'll miss you.'

'I'll miss you too.'

In the kitchen, I gulped a quick glass of water.

Finley wandered in, scratching his head. 'Hey, Rachel.'

'Hey. I'm o. now. See you Sunday?'

'Nah, I'll be with Mum.'

'Say hi from me. And if you felt like doing an act of kindness, I'm guessing your dad' – I pointed a finger to the ceiling – 'would kill for a coffee.'

Finley looked doubtful and I had to laugh. 'Go on, you lazy brat.'

'Okaaay.'

I gave him a quick hug, then darted away into the bright spring morning.

As soon as I pushed my front door open, Crunchie hurled herself at me in ecstatic welcome. I dropped to my knees, rubbed her ears and spoke in my special Crunchie voice. 'Hello, you good girl, hello!'

'That you, Rachel?' Kate stuck her head over the banister, streaks of wet hair tumbling down. A round brush and a hairdryer were in her hands.

I dashed up the stairs and into the bathroom. 'I ran out of contact lenses.' I rooted around in the drawer.

'How's Quin?' she asked.

'Grand. O. to New Mexico until Sunday.'

'Lucky him!'

Kate was my niece, the daughter of my eldest sister Claire. She'd been living with me for the past few months because the brutal commute from Claire's house in West Dublin to her job in a care home in Wicklow was breaking her. These days, she spent a scant twelve minutes travelling to work instead of the two-and-a-half-hour round trip which had been the norm.

I was mad about her. She was serious, sweet, she walked Crunchie when I couldn't and she was (very much *not* a Walsh family trait) a clean freak. Obviously that came from her dad's side and while I was no fan of his, only a churl would complain about a housemate who was forever pulling a mop from the utility room and saying, 'I'll just give the floor a quick wash.'

Her 'real' job was acting. But the universe drip-dripped work for her, in exquisitely calibrated amounts, keeping her forever on a knife-edge of uncertainty. Every time she was on the verge of giving up, she got thrown a small part, just enough to resuscitate her hope.

'Why are you up?' I'd just remembered she wasn't rostered to work today. (Every week, she messaged me her schedule so I'd know if I needed to commandeer my neighbours Benigno and Jasline to walk Crunchie.) With a burst of hope, I gasped, 'You've an audition?'

'Today? No. Bit of work for Helen.'

My youngest sister, Helen, ran a small private detective agency. Recently, she'd been inveigling Kate to help out, especially on the unpleasant jobs, which usually involved lying in a muddy ditch for long spells of time, stealthily taking photos. It was the kind of work Helen herself used to take great pride in but lately she'd been saying, with increasing frequency, 'Rural surveillance is a young woman's game.'

Her stated opinion was that, aged twenty-three, Kate was the perfect person for such hardship. 'Twenty-somethings don't get cold, don't get wet and have no sense of smell.' Helen *insisted* that this was scientific fact. She was a defiantly contrary person with the strongest will I had ever bumped up against.

'Let me guess,' I asked Kate. 'She has you spying on some trickster who runs the smelliest pig farm in County Cavan?'

'Haha. Nothing so bad. Townie surveillance, an insurance claim. A man who says he can't walk because of his bad back.'

'God, it's twenty past eight!' I gave her a quick squeeze and jumped under the shower. No time to blow-dry my hair, I'd just have to let it dry naturally and accept the accompanying wayward misery.

To counteract the bad hair, I put on my denim jumpsuit, which made me look like I worked at a carwash. I wore it so often that my colleagues 'joked' that I had no other clothes. But something about the stride-y freedom it gave me, especially when paired with trainers, made me feel mildly powerful.

Meanwhile, Crunchie was watching, her expression sorrowful.

'I *have* to work,' I told her woebegone face. 'But I'll be back this evening. It's a lovely day out there. Run around the back garden and bark at birds, you'll be fine!'

Despite my little house being only fifteen minutes' drive from work, I was still late for the morning meeting.

I hurried up the steps of the Cloisters and through the hallway, almost tripping over Harlie Clarke, one of my charges, who was hoovering the carpet with furious resentment. A .29-year-old alcoholic, with a devotion to her appearance that almost counted as a second addiction, she looked great – up at six thirty every morning to do the full works – intricate contouring, lustrous lashes and long blonde hair, Airwrapped into sleek obedience.

Like nearly everyone, she'd come to the Cloisters convinced she was fine. But I'd chipped away until her shell of denial had shattered. Now she couldn't not see that she was an alcoholic and she was *raging*.

‘Morning, Harlie,’ I said.

With a bile-filled glance, she drove the hoover towards my ankle. You know, she really had the most *amazing* eyebrows. Microbladed, of course, but very natural-looking. Undoubtedly done by an expert and not some chancer who’d learnt from YouTube. There were times when I *itched* for us to discuss beauty stuff.

But maybe not now. I skipped away before she maimed me.

In the meeting room, five of the seven therapists were at the table, plus three facilitators, Nurse Moze and Ted, our big boss – who glanced at his phone, shook his head and muttered, ‘Tut-tut.’

I mouthed, *Sorry*, slid into a chair and twisted my damp hair into a messy bun to get it o. my face.

Moze was reading her report on the previous night. ‘Busy shift. Trassa Higgins – one of yours, Rachel? Didn’t sleep. Came down to the desk at about three a.m. We chatted, did a crossword, she went back to bed around five, but when I looked in at six, she was still awake.’

This told me that Trassa would be vulnerable today. Which was both good and bad. Bad because vulnerable meant, like, *vulnerable*. Not great in a 68-year-old grandmother addicted to gambling. But good in that she might be too exhausted to maintain her shield of denial. She’d been here for well over a week and was proving to be a tough nut to crack. Today might be the day.

‘Simon and Prissie,’ Moze said to a chorus of sighs around the table. ‘Yep. At it again. Waldemar caught them on his one a.m. check. Behind the sofa in the rec room, this time.’

‘So?’ Ted looked at me, then Carey-Jane, who were respectively Simon and Prissie’s assigned therapists. ‘What now?’

Full of regret, I shook my head. ‘Simon has to leave. He’s already had one warning. He’s not ready for recovery. He doesn’t care.’

‘I want Prissie to stay.’ Carey-Jane was just as resolute. ‘But we add sex and love to her list of addictions. All part of the bigger picture.’

‘But if Simon leaves and Prissie stays, what message does that send?’ Yasmine asked.

Ted shrugged. ‘Who cares? We make the rules.’

Ted could be a worry. A competent administrator and a (periodically) inspiring boss, a gleaming streak of ‘Unopposed Despot’ ran through him.

‘Two newbies already arriving this morning,’ Ted said. ‘And with Simon going, we can take another one tomorrow or Friday.’

Addiction was big business. There was a waiting list – *always* – for the Cloisters.

Next, each therapist gave a round-table update on their various charges, so that we all knew precisely how every single patient was doing – who was extra-vulnerable right now, who was pushing back hard – then it was time to leave for group.

Ted caught me at the door. ‘Not like you to be late.’

‘Aaaahhh . . .’ I could hardly say, ‘My boyfriend is off to Taos for four days and we needed some together time.’

‘. . . Rachel?’

‘Traffic,’ I said. ‘Sorry. Won’t happen again.’

Then I left to hoick Simon out of breakfast and tell him to pack his bags.