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the
wedding
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Cathy Kelly



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*For Angela Cowzer, beloved wife, mother,
grandmother, sister and friend.
And for Matt Murray, beloved brother,
uncle, godfather and friend.
You are both missed so much.*

Prologue

The Invitation

The wedding invitation was a card fronted by that first photo of the Robicheaux girls, a picture as vibrant as it had ever been: four young women sitting on a back porch of the sprawling Sorrento Hotel, the girls lined up in age, smiling at the camera with the clear gazes of youth.

Even though it had been taken in black and white, colour seemed to leap from the photo, particularly from those young faces.

The twins were in the middle: just seventeen, lean and athletic, almost identical with what people knew was long strawberry-red hair, faintly curling around their faces. But they weren't identical, if you looked closely enough.

One had a dreamy gaze and fewer freckles, as if she stayed inside with her head in a book, lost in her imagination. She was twirling a strand of strawberry hair in one hand. Fey, you might say. Savannah.

Her name suited her, made her sound like a sweet-natured girl who'd lie on the grass with her friends and discuss what shapes the clouds made.

Her twin, Eden, looked altogether more knowing, as if books were the last thing on her mind. Eden Robicheaux was anything but fey. She wore very tight jeans and her shirt – the photographer had apparently insisted they all wore shirts and jeans – was opened just down to her breast bone

from where perky, Wonderbra'd breasts pushed up.

Eden had nearly been expelled twice from the local school. She was on her last chance, by all accounts, but the arrogant look in her curious sea-green eyes made it obvious that she didn't give two hoots.

At the other ends, were the youngest and oldest of the girls.

The youngest was an altogether stockier girl of perhaps fifteen, who was staring at the camera with ill-disguised irritation: Aurora, who never answered to this fairy-tale name. She was Rory, she insisted.

You could easily imagine her snapping, 'Can you get a move on, Steve?'

She had a clear gaze, dark straight hair, wasn't yet as lovely as the others, if you wanted to be pedantic.

Steve Randall, the photographer, had taken a photo of the sisters every year since then: same positions, same simple outfits.

Steve had exhibited his photos – they were mildly famous in photographic circles, those Robicheaux girls, famous in a quiet sort of way for the twenty-something portraits of them as they grew up. Age, life, sisterhood in elegant black and white. The people who lived near the Sorrento Hotel who knew Stu and Meg, sometimes laughed that the Robicheaux clan were infamous.

At the time of the very first Four Sisters portrait, the photographer, Steve, was dating the eldest sister, the one on the far right: Lucinda or Indy Robicheaux, the one who looked like a model but wasn't one. Very tall, twenty-one, fair-haired, annoyingly exquisite in the eyes of any woman who wasn't born with limbs like a ballerina and the huge eyes of a startled deer in the forest. They were incredible eyes: a sea-green colour like her sisters' but with an explosion of amber around the pupils.

Kaleidoscope eyes, someone said. Or central heterochromia, as Wikipedia called it.

The photographer had married the stunning Indy.

Of course he had, the men thought. You'd marry that just to stamp your name on it: 'She's mine. Hands off.'

Now Indy was a midwife; she had two children, and yet she still looked as if she might slip onto a Milan catwalk at a moment's notice. No early-forties' weight gain there. Steve was a carpenter these days. The photography hadn't worked out but they seemed like a couple who'd found that elusive happiness in marriage, which annoyed everyone who hadn't found it.

One of the twins, Savannah, was married to somebody very rich, some clever advisor person – whatever that meant.

Money, the husbands said enviously. Money is what it meant. They lived in a big house with a guest bungalow and an indoor pool, and he drove a classic Jaguar. She had a business too – something to do with perfumes and candles, but he was obviously the real brains behind it all, people said knowingly.

Savannah was still fey and other-worldly – and thin, very thin. As if she might float away like dandelion fluff.

It was probably all the stuff for magazines – she was in papers and in articles a lot, so she'd have to be thin, wouldn't she?

The other twin, Eden, despite the up-for-anything look in her eyes in that first photo, had changed beyond all recognition in that she was now in local government, of all things, wore long, ladylike skirts and was to be seen on the television talking about green issues. She was a stalwart of kindly liberal politics, having married into a political family who owned half the pharmacies on the east coast. Her husband, who ran the pharmacies, was a hunky, smiling sort of guy, dependable and decent, not the wayward boy people imagined Eden would have hooked up with.

His father was the famous Diarmuid Tallisker, one of the elder statesmen of politics. She'd fallen on her feet marrying into that family, people said.

Luckily for Eden's political career, old boyfriends had never come out of the woodwork to talk about wild deeds, although there were certainly wild deeds in there somewhere, according

to anyone who'd been to school with her. Mention her wild youth at your peril.

Eden Tallisker had never had her twin's dreamy eyes – she'd always looked like she had a taser on her person and knew how to use it.

As for the youngest one, still insisting on being called Rory, which was a boy's name, she worked in advertising but she said she was a writer first and foremost and that being a copywriter was just her day job.

What was the difference between the two types of writer, people wondered? Rory looked contrary, they decided. Her girlfriend, a petite girl who worked in a chichi boutique, was a sweetheart. Nobody could ever have called Rory a sweetheart. Plus, who wouldn't want to be called Aurora?

People who'd had unimaginative parents almost wept at the Robicheaux girls and their beautiful, memorable names.

The Marys and Janes felt stony-hearted. A smattering of Conceptas and Attractas were just enraged. The Sadhbhs were enchanted with their exotic Irish name but worried that if they had to go abroad, nobody would be able to *pronounce* it. Anyone could say Eden, Savannah, Rory or Indy.

But Sadhbh . . . it was tricky.

The Four Sisters' twenty-plus years of black-and-white pictures just added to their magic. The parents slipped in and out of the photos. For a few years, Stu and Meg together, holding hands, then, after the divorce, just Meg.

Surrounding the photo on the invitation was a hand-drawn golden line, unbroken writing endlessly repeating the words *Stu & Meg*. Getting married again after all these years.

Married at twenty-one, divorced at fifty.

And now, when other people were discussing having hips replaced, the Robicheaux parents were declaring their love again with a full court press. A wedding weekend in the place where so many weddings, so many parties, had taken place.

Having the first ever photo of their daughters on the invitation was pure genius: it was like saying: ‘Yes, we know we split up for years, but look – look what we made. These beautiful women. Our remarriage is a testimony to them and to us as parents.’

Meg and Stu Robicheaux invite you to The Sorrento Hotel on Saturday, 29 of June at 3 p.m. to celebrate their marriage. Come as yourselves.

Everyone remembered that house – a big old Victorian pile close to the beach in Killiney. Killiney was a glorious slice of high-priced Dublin set on perilous roads that all led down to a panorama of rocky sea, expensive houses moulded into the cliffs so that the sheltered curve looked like a piece of the Amalfi coast, hence the Italian names running through the area. The family had run The Sorrento Hotel as a two-/three-star establishment for years, ignoring worn carpets because they were antique, damp on the wallpaper because it was *hand-painted Victorian*, for goodness’ sake, and letting the army of delinquent peacocks grow more and more wild till they’d had to be cordoned off for fear of them mounting an attack on unwary guests or their pets. Legend had it that one small dog had had to be Xanaxed back to calm after the peacocks had cornered him. Who knew peacocks could get so inflamed? Or that dogs could take Xanax?

Life was curious.

Many weddings had been held there – Indy’s, for a start – in the huge, mostly manicured gardens where there were Venus de Milos galore, a male nude with his willy long since knocked off, a pond with a giant leaping stone unicorn at its centre, and plenty of bowers in the flower meadow (easy to manage, no grass cutting, as Stu said every year when he threw another handful of seeds into it). There was a box-ball herb garden, also easy to manage as long as you went at it with the secateurs once a month.

The Robicheaux family had held many parties when the hotel was closed in the off season and everyone had at least one story of when the party went wild and when Stu – before he got sober – would get out his electric guitar, coax a song out of it and make everyone dance, even the kids, because what child could sleep with that noise going on?

The trees would be strewn with fairy lights, never taken down. It had all looked like an arty fashion magazine shoot but natural as opposed to contrived. The burned-down candles; throws flung half on, half off chairs; glasses of every stripe on tables along with the remains of the feast; bits of cheese and grape stems stripped of fruit; bowls of Mediterranean dips made by Meg and whatever jobbing chef they'd managed to hold on to at the time. It had been the stuff of magic.

People looked at their diaries when they got the wedding invitation. The 29th of June? They'd be there. *Come as yourselves?* That was so Meg and Stu. They used to be famous for the fancy-dress parties, Sixties nights, Charleston nights when Stu served all the drink from a bathtub. Were there fire eaters once . . .? The fire brigade, certainly.

The invited guests put their invitations where they'd be seen – on mantelpieces at the very front, on a large bare bit of fridge held up with the prettiest magnet – and began to think about what 'coming as yourself' meant? It was hard to know who you were, sometimes, wasn't it? The Robicheaux family had always known – that was what drew people to them.

'They'll think we're mad,' Stu had said the night he'd proposed – again – to Meg.

He'd gone the whole hog this time: a picnic on the beach in the evening, sparkling elderflower pressé, grapes, pears and cheese with real napkins. Rugs for them to lie on, a cushion for Meg's lower back which could be dodgy on hard surfaces.

And the ring . . .

The ring had caught Meg somewhere inside her heart,

holding it in a tender embrace. They hadn't managed the straightforward proposal route the first time. She'd been pregnant with Lucinda. The delicate rituals of courtship had been flattened by the pregnancy test with its two blue lines. The urgency and immediacy of it all.

'We'll get married,' Stu had said then, holding her close. 'We were always going to: it's just happening sooner, that's all.'

Stu, whom she'd never really stopped loving even if she hadn't always liked him, had known how she'd missed being wooed. She'd never told him. Never thrown it back in his face as they were divorcing.

In the last year, when they'd been spending time together, going on dates, letting people guess without actually saying anything, Meg had wondered what it would be like if they were together again properly. Man and wife. Thirteen years after the divorce.

Then he'd taken out the box with the ring in it: no perfect diamond in a loud princess cut announcing both a wedding and a surfeit of cash. This ring was a piece of the goldsmith's art, with a glittering green amethyst looped into whorls of curved gold, like a ring dug from an archaeological site in Brazil.

'Will you marry me, Meg?' he asked hoarsely.

Still, she stared at the ring.

'It's a rare stone, connects the heart chakras and is about love,' said Stu, holding it to her and Meg, who knew that Stu had never been in the slightest bit interested in crystals or stones or anything he couldn't pawn (his mother's pearls) for a bet, felt that this was indeed the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. He had changed after all.

'Yes,' she said, leaning forward and kissing him.

He slid the ring onto her finger, the one that had been bare for many years.

Then he kissed her fingers, one by one.

'Yes,' she said again.

PART ONE

I

Monday

Not many people can say they've been at their parents' second wedding – Eden Tallisker twirled her pen, stared out of the window and wondered if this sounded funny or sarcastic as the start to a speech. There was such a fine line between the two.

As a politician and the daughter most-likely-to-love-making-speeches, Eden had been picked as the Robicheaux daughter to speak at the wedding on Saturday.

'Please,' her mother had begged, holding on to Eden with her elegant, soft hands into which she'd obviously rubbed copious amounts of hand cream. Eden never had time for hand cream.

The *please* had two meanings – please speak at the wedding, darling, and please accept the notion of your father and I marrying again and at such speed. For Stu and Meg were only back together a year.

A year! Eden's father had proposed – was re-proposing a word? Eden wondered – in April and, suddenly, at the start of June, they'd set the date. For the end of June.

It was like a shotgun wedding without the weaponry.

'You want to get married in three weeks' time?' Eden had asked, aghast.

'Three weeks?' Indy had repeated.

Meg had brought her four daughters out for lunch to tell them. It was the first Saturday in June and the wedding would be on the last Saturday of the month.

Rory had been late.

Indy would have to leave early to take her daughters swimming.

Savannah said she wasn't hungry and Eden had a meeting at two-thirty.

'You're joking, right?' said Rory, the colour having leached from her face.

Meg had shaken her head mutely. It was as if she'd steeled herself to tell her daughters the news, that she was remarrying their father, whom they all loved but whose wildness had created chaos all their lives and ultimately had lost them their home.

'I know it seems sudden and it's hard for you all because of—' Meg paused; Stu's gambling and drinking had broken up their family many years ago – 'because of what Dad did but he's changed, he's different. He loves you all so much. And me, he loves me.' Her eyes were wet.

Indy noticed and felt a huge pull of love for her mother, who'd been so broken by their father's gambling and the loss of their home and yet had carried on taking care of them. Putting herself last.

Dad was great, Eden thought. They all loved him, for all his flaws. He adored his girls. But still – Dad and Mum remarrying . . .

Then she'd seen the tears brimming from their mother's eyes, the same sea-green as her own and the twins'. Meg never cried. She was a lioness, stoic and strong. Had taken care of them all when their home had gone, worked two jobs, been there for them emotionally and physically. Seeing her crying was like a blow to the solar plexus.

Indy stepped in. She'd risen and hugged their mother.

'We all want you and Dad to be happy,' she said, looking at her three sisters over their mother's silvery blond head. 'We hate thinking that you're lonely.' This, she said more sternly. None of them had the right to stop their mother finding love with their father again if it was what she wanted.

Indy was the peacemaker, gentle and fluid, Eden reflected. She was the voice of reason and expertly defused rows.

Rory caused rows. She was like their father: mercurial, although she'd be very annoyed if anyone said as much.

Savannah reached out to their mother.

'Happiness is everything, darling Mum,' she'd said hoarsely.

Savannah was so thin, Eden thought. Once, she and Savannah had looked the same, had the same body shape. They were very different in other ways but how they looked and how they laughed – a deep throaty laugh – were identical. Both had been ambitious, determined. When Savannah had been setting up her company, she'd been fierce in her way. Focussed. Still gentle with that belief that all people were good. But she'd been going places. Now Savannah had an air of transparency around her. Her drive, even her laugh, were muted. As if she had put up an invisible wall and was hiding behind it.

'Eden,' hissed Indy.

Eden stopped contemplating her twin. She worried about Savannah but then she always had. It was a mission for another time.

'Yeah, sorry, Ma. Course we want you guys to be happy. But three weeks . . . it's a bit sudden. You'll never get a venue,' she added, hopefully.

She had an election coming up in the autumn. And the letters. Oh hell, the anonymous letters. She thought of how the scandal could rip her career apart, so she needed to focus. Her parents' wedding would be distracting and it felt . . . she searched for what was niggling at her. For the correct word about the wedding. Nothing came. Nothing but a strange feeling in her gut that said her mother was rushing into this.

Now, the Robicheaux remarriage was only six days away.

Six days!

Eden had a speech to write, had endless work to do and still had to throw herself into the merry-go-round of a wedding week or else her mother would think she didn't approve of the wedding itself.

She would not be the daughter who was happily married and

begrudged her parents happiness. There was too much of that around. No, she would be smiling, waving and encouraging. A grown-up.

However, her schedule was manic. She also had to fit in a meeting with other councillors on the local drugs task force, visit a lady who'd just turned one hundred, and meet up with a local shop owner about dodgy street lighting outside her shop and how it was a security risk. That wasn't even taking into account her normal political surgery which she'd originally slotted in for Friday evening and which she'd had to cancel because of the rehearsal dinner.

No doubt about it: your parents remarrying was a pain but that wouldn't make a very good speech opening.

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, it's annoying to have to be here at the wedding of two people who are possibly better off not marrying each other again . . .

Er, nope. The tone was all off. Who was she to say they were wrong for each other? Pops – she was the only one who called him that and he loved it – did all that Gambling Anonymous stuff, didn't he? He even meditated.

Indy, Eden's eldest sister, was giving their mother away, seeing as there were no male relatives left to do this.

Indy was the beautiful and utterly perfect one of the Robicheaux sisters. Indy never put a foot wrong.

'That's not true,' Indy always said, showing a rare hint of irritation whenever this was said.

'It is,' said Eden, who prided herself on being the one who said it like it was. 'If you weren't my darling sis, I'd hate you,' she added.

Indy was genuinely beautiful: a tall, willowy blonde with a flawless face, a woman who could have been on the cover of any magazine if she'd wanted to and had chosen midwifery over a life of champagne, couture clothes and pots of money. She was happily married to Steve – also annoyingly perfect – with two exquisite little daughters, Minnie and Daisy, and a job where

she brought actual human life into the world, coaxing tiny babies out of wombs, the ultimate in frontline nursing. She was like someone who'd get on the cover of *TIME* magazine – in an issue entitled 'Heroines of our decade' or something like that.

'Nobody's perfect, and you can't hate people for being nice,' their mother said, mildly shocked at the notion of one sister hating another.

Mum never got really shocked. It was being young in the seventies, she said, by way of explanation: nothing shocked you after seeing lots of people tripping on drugs and behaving with wild abandon. Aliens could land in Delgany, the village in Wicklow further down the east coast where her mother now lived in a pretty white bungalow, and Meg Robicheaux would wave them inside with a tanned, braceleted arm, gesturing to her all-white couches and asking which variety of green tea they wanted.

'You can hate people for being nice,' Eden sighed.

Actually, she hated loads of people – OK, not total hate, really, but certainly fierce annoyance, enough to make her grind her teeth.

It was a constantly evolving list: random people who rang her council office asking for ludicrous things, like permission to mimic Pamplona's bull run in a small village in a bid to up tourism; anyone who did their grocery shopping wearing full make-up; people who could eat what they wanted and not put on weight; journalists who asked her if marrying into a political dynasty gave her an unfair advantage in the upcoming election; people who automatically knew the right things to wear.

Savannah, her twin, might have fitted into the not-putting-on-weight category except for the fact that Savannah was thin because she didn't appear to eat, which was different.

And Savannah was always perfectly dressed too but that was for work and the fact that Calum, her husband and a man who

never let any part of their lives go to chance, had hired a stylist for her. Said stylist bought a whole wardrobe for Savannah every summer and winter.

Calum was spookily involved in Savannah's life, unlike most men, Eden thought.

'Wish I had a stylist,' Eden had moaned once to Ralphie, her husband.

'You don't need a stylist,' he'd said loyally. 'You look perfect the way you are.'

Ralphie wouldn't have noticed if she'd gone to work in her dressing gown but then that was because he utterly loved her. He didn't see clothes or hairstyles.

'You're a total pet,' said Eden, kissing him on his chin. She was tall but he was taller.

Calum might be good at hiring stylists but Calum was actually shorter than Ralphie and Eden had never seen him pull her sister into a bear hug, the way Ralphie routinely did with her.

'Ralphie, when you replace your glasses, don't get rid of the rose-coloured ones, will you?'

'Don't get rid of yours,' he'd replied.

Ralphie had insecurity issues as a result of having been brought up in a house that contained Diarmuid Tallisker. Diarmuid was the sort of competitive man who had to piss on every lamp post he ever saw. No young buck would ever take over his deer, so to speak.

Hence Ralphie never believed he was as wonderful as Eden knew him to be. She wondered how she'd got out of her family with her self-esteem intact: living with a sister as stunning as Indy would have flattened the self-esteem of most people but then Mum had been brilliant at making them all proud of their individuality.

Although – Eden grinned at the memory – Rory had hated it when their mother proudly championed Rory's lesbianism.

'Stop it!' Rory used to hiss when their mother sailed past wearing gay pride T-shirts and discussed, in all sincerity,

getting one wall of the ballroom painted in the LGBTQ+ rainbow. ‘I’m a person, not a bloody cause!’

Eden turned back to her speech.

‘Nobody who was ever in the Sorrento Hotel forgot it—’ she began and then stopped typing again because *that* was a total lie. A fair whack of the hotel’s guests would have been in a stupor courtesy of her father’s signature Martinis half an hour after they arrived. It would have taken a skilled hypnotherapist and photographic evidence to get them to remember anything.

The Sorrento had certainly enjoyed a ten-year-sojourn as the cool hotel for visiting movie stars and rock stars and such was the welcome they received from her parents that nobody ever remembered a thing about it.

Newspapers and magazines had lurked in the bushes trying to get photos of the great and the good, and, for a while, fashion shoots had been held there. Because Steve’s photos of the four sisters had hit the papers with the first one, subsequent recreations of photos of the four sisters, wearing their individual necklaces, had been wildly famous in editorial shoots.

‘You’re famous,’ one of the bullying girls at school had said to Eden once, unable to stop herself forgetting her role as bitch and currying favour. Eden had stared thoughtfully at the girl who picked on everyone, although never the Robicheaux girls or their allies. Nobody had ever had the temerity to bully Eden.

‘Yeah, and when you’re asking “fries with that?” when you leave school, loser, I’ll still be famous,’ Eden had replied sweetly.

In truth, she’d never felt famous, despite the papers publishing Steve’s photos of her and her sisters for a few years running.

Savannah had been anxious about the anti-bullying exchange; Indy had been annoyed: ‘there’s no need to sink to their level’, and Rory had been indifferent.

Even as a lowly first year, nobody had bullied Rory or her crew, which was all Rory’s doing. The gang of just-coming-out kids, like fledglings all fluffed up and confused, leaving

the hetero nest and finding their place in an LGBTQ+ world, they would easily have been picked on but Rory, lesbian and proud since she was eleven, when she'd cut her own hair short and thrown out all her girl's clothes, protected her people fiercely.

One bitchy comment involving the word 'so gay' and the commenter would find their head in one of the girls' toilets with the flush going. Male or female: Rory, physically strong and determined, took no prisoners.

Eden had never felt famous as a teenager chambermaiding for free. Plus, if she'd been a movie star, she'd have gone somewhere with more reliable heating. But then the Sorrento had easy access to nearby Dalkey's rock and movie stars, her father had been in charge of the drinks and he had a heavy hand with the vodka and tequila. Also, his pal, Redzer, who'd drive up in a pimped-up yellow Volkswagen beetle – wire tyres and zebra furry seats – brought drugs with him.

Eden wasn't sure how Mum tolerated it, but then she'd stopped tolerating it, hadn't she? When Dad's gambling and love of smoking joints and doling out ginormous drinks had got out of hand, Mum had pulled the plug. The hotel had been sold because the bank insisted, the family had broken up and . . .

Eden deleted all she'd written.

At thirty-seven, she didn't find her parents' break-up and divorce painful anymore but this remarrying – it was strange. It brought up the old feelings of fear of having to leave the hotel.

Yes, it was a nightmare looking after it, endlessly glueing down bits of wallpaper, scrubbing windows that really needed painting in order to hide the dark, creeping damp.

But it had been home.

Then the divorce – fierce, angry, horrible. Dad had been so desperate for it not to end but Mum had been angry. She'd loved the hotel, the security, and she could not forgive their

father for losing it. It was the first time Eden had ever seen her mother really, really upset.

Eden knew that of the four siblings, she and Indy had clambered out of it best. Indy, because she'd had lovely, kind Steve with her. Steve was like a Dutch sea wall: he kept the ocean at bay and protected his beloved. Eden herself – well, she'd been made of tough stuff.

Also, anyone with a brain could have seen that Mum and Dad would implode at some time. But it had been hard. And they'd been so cripplingly poor afterwards.

Eden had been determined never to be poor again if she could help it.

Savannah and Rory, they'd definitely found the divorce very hard. And possibly the wedding too . . . Not my problem, Eden thought and felt a hint of guilt. But she wasn't responsible for her siblings, not anymore.

Eden thought of the wedding countdown. Today the four sisters were meeting Mum and Vonnie, her best friend, at The Beach Hut to iron out who was responsible for what.

As it was a wedding on a budget, they'd each agreed to take on a few jobs. Rory was in charge of getting the wine and Eden wasn't sure if this was wise: Rory with access to free wine was unpredictable. Though she was the youngest sister, Rory drank with the brio and hollow-legged ability of a much older person. Alarmingly like their father, in fact.

Savannah, Eden's twin, was involved in making the hotel beautiful as she had so much artistic talent. She and Indy were going to do the flowers on Friday because Eden had a meeting and couldn't get out of it. Eden was going to make sure the kitchens were clean and was going to, if necessary, organise dehumidifiers if the hotel was damp.

If the hotel was damp – Eden wanted to laugh. Of course it was damp. When was it ever not damp? Nobody had ever revamped it so dampness was a given.

Eden and Indy were also supposed to help with the silk

flowers Vonnie was making and which were to be draped everywhere in garlands.

As Eden hadn't been in the Sorrento for years, she wasn't sure what she was letting herself in for. First up, though, was her speech.

Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking, Eden thought and laughed out loud.

How many speeches had she given since being voted onto the local council five years ago? She couldn't count.

Her father-in-law, a politician who couldn't pass by a microphone or a camera, had told her that she needed to practise speaking at all times.

'Talk so that, eventually, your brain and your mouth get connected,' Diarmuid Tallisker had intoned, in that rich, grave voice of his that called to mind intense news reports on great matters. 'So many of our colleagues open their mouths, let hot air out and then spend the rest of their career being known for that one, car crash of a moment. Don't be that person, Eden, please.'

Eden looked down at her laptop and the embryonic speech for Saturday.

Diarmuid would probably delete what she'd written so far – then again, Diarmuid only liked speeches he gave himself.

She closed the file and looked at her watch. Half six. She'd been up with the lark, having showered quietly so as not to wake Ralph, dressed, eaten a small bowl of porridge, made a pot of coffee and gone into her small home office. She wanted to get a start on work before meeting her mother, sisters and Vonnie for the start of the wedding week.

Or, as Vonnie – her mother's oldest friend, a dizzy, skinny vision with white-blond hair – put it, 'The Wedding Party!'

Nine in The Beach Hut! Don't be late, Vonnie had texted them all on the group WhatsApp. Each of Vonnie's messages was surrounded by hearts, wedding flutes and emoji brides in vaguely Scandi headdresses.

Eden was not going to be late but she had much to do first. Nobody had any idea how many emails were involved in politics. Forty-seven new emails since nine the night before.

What she needed, Eden thought grimly, was a clone of herself to really manage all the admin, even though she had alleged help from her father-in-law's office. Diarmuid was always too busy feathering his own nest to let anyone help Eden.

He was like the iceberg that had broken the poor *Titanic*, she often thought: majestic but dangerous on the surface and bloody lethal on the seven-eighths hidden beneath it.

Diarmuid never had a moment for anyone in between all the dodgy property deals he was always doing, even though his public persona was that of much-beloved, white-bearded elder statesman.

If she'd known that politics was so dodgy, would she have got involved?

Yes, she thought with a smile. Politics was said to be show-biz for ugly people but you didn't have to be ugly, did you?

Eden's eye was drawn to the photo on her study wall – entirely beloved of the newspapers – of herself in the failed girl band, Allegra, back when she was twenty. She'd been the quiet, leggy one of the three.

'The quiet but hidden-depths one,' said Aidan, band manager, a chancer like her father-in-law, who'd failed to make Allegra famous but had managed with his next girl band.

Eden, with her wild red hair teased for the cameras, wearing jeans and tops that only hinted at serious boobage, was never to smile. Janie, who was just as wild but was allowed to be so, was the band's crazy chick.

'Why does she get to wear Lycra hotpants and I don't?' Eden had whined at the time.

'You're the quiet one,' Aidan had said again. 'Quiet one, sexy one, posh one.'

'Eden's posher than me!' said Gigi.

'You went to a private boarding school,' Aidan pointed out.

‘Only for six months,’ Gigi said, ‘only cos Mum was house-keeping there.’

‘It’s the optics, innit?’ said Aidan, who was from Cork but felt a London accent gave him an edge.

Optics worked just as well for politics, Eden thought, clicking into her emails, and, these days, she was glad she’d been the shy, quiet one which had never been her natural state. Out of the three of the Allegra girls, she’d been the wildest in reality but Aidan had had a plan and now, as a would-be national politician, Eden was glad of it.

Now she could play up the ‘quiet and serious’ version of herself.

She was running for a seat in parliament in September when Fergal Maguire (so rough he was nicknamed Feral) finally shuffled off into retirement. It was a safe seat for the party but still, it would require a lot of canvassing.

Creeping silently so as not to wake Ralphie, who was still asleep, she went into the kitchen to make more coffee.

Politics ran on caffeine. Local politics certainly did.

As she waited for the kettle to boil, next door’s cat, a sleek Siamese with an Egyptian face and a howl that could wake the dead, appeared at the kitchen window.

Eden and Ralphie did not have children or pets. Eden didn’t want kids and Ralphie, who adored her so much that he went along with everything she said, agreed that neither did he.

‘I love children,’ she’d told him. ‘I just don’t think I’m mother material. Is that OK? A deal breaker?’

Ralphie loved her honesty. ‘You say it like it is,’ he said. ‘I’ve never thought about children.’

‘If you do, later, then tell me.’ Eden was adamant on this. ‘If you want to go off and find a mother-earth person, give me a warning.’

‘Deal,’ he agreed.

Pets were out because they were messy and needed much taking care of.

‘We’re out all the time,’ Eden had said.

But this cat, with her in-your-face screeching, had adopted them.

‘I am not feeding you,’ Eden said to it through the window.

The cat ignored her and kept up the waking-the-dead howl.

‘Is this how you became revered in Egypt?’ she asked it. ‘For actually waking the dead?’ For the sake of peace, she opened the window. ‘I don’t have anything for you,’ she told the cat as it stepped elegantly in like a supermodel on a catwalk. It sprang onto the floor, then indolently rubbed herself along Eden’s jeans. Next, it headed for the kitchen table, hopping up via a chair. It then positioned itself facing the larder cupboard and began grooming its back leg in a feat of hyper flexibility that made Eden stare.

‘You don’t listen to a word I say, do you?’ she said to the cat, en route to the cupboard where she kept the cat treats she’d bought. Not that she’d told Ralphie this. ‘This is a secret, cat,’ she told the cat, who deigned to eat all the duck and raspberry treats, her raspy pink tongue licking them off the table. ‘I suppose this is your natural, in-the-wild food? Duck and raspberry. Like duck à l’orange?’

The cat gazed inscrutably at her. She – it was a she: Eden had seen enough cats to know this – was very beautiful with that pale creamy fur and the dark Egyptian face, like a cat on an ancient tomb painting. ‘I wonder what your name is? Raspberry?’

Nobody would call this cat Raspberry. She’d be named after a goddess.

But then Eden had always been quirky.

Raspberry began grooming herself again, then stopped and made a plaintive, one-note miaow.

‘Raspberry,’ agreed Eden, thinking that she wouldn’t mention the cat to Ralphie just yet. His family home had contained a family dog and she wasn’t sure if she was ready for the commitment of any pet.

Another secret. She thought of the letters in her desk.

I know your secret, Mrs Tallisker.

I know what you did.

There had been three letters so far, both dropped in her home letterbox, written on an actual typewriter. Eden had mentioned them to nobody.

Because she had a secret – didn't everyone? Except that secrets didn't go down too well for elected representatives. Secrets could ruin careers.

Of all the weeks for this to happen. She absently rubbed the cat's silky fur.

'What am I going to do, Raspberry?' she said.