

FLAME

A novel by Tara Heavey

Prologue

As suburbia receded, the countryside expanded, up, down and all around them. From the blueness as it tilted upwards to the ground beneath the road they traveled, teeming with countless creatures and manifold life.

The boy looked out the window, trees and hills and rivers, the surrounding landscape reflected in his enormous, liquid eyes.

The woman never looked back.

Chapter One

It was midday by the time they arrived, mud spattered fenders and weary limbs. She examined the house as she stretched out the kinks in her back. Smaller looking than in the picture. Darker too. She found she was okay with this. The more anonymous the better. A cloud passed over the shivery, February sun and she hastily pulled on her jacket, then assisted her son out of the car.

The two stood staring, motionless, at this their new home. A lodge house. Almost Greek in its palatial style, pillars upstanding. And a massive, copper beech, commanding over it all, just inside the gates, which had been left obligingly open. They wouldn't stay that way - once she had checked everything out. Mother looked down at son, her arm around his shoulder, a perfect height to do so.

'Well. What do you think?'

He looked up at her with noisy eyes, each question interpreted correctly by her. What is this place you're taking me to? How long for this time? Do we have to? Do we have to? But underpinning each question, his perfect trust for her and his absolute willingness to go wherever she went.

'Come on. Let's check out the inside.'

She squeezed his shoulder and felt the rigidity beneath his clothing as she urged him along. And she? In spite of herself felt a long forgotten tingle. Excitement. Could it be? And something else ... hope. A feathered thing. It landed on her right shoulder and whispered into her ear and the corners of her mouth curved their unfamiliar way

upwards.

An envelope was stuck to the door, rudely with duct tape, it was mint green and bulky, with her name scrawled on the front. She ripped it off. Inside was a note in the same scrawl as her name:

Dear MsDoyle

Please find enclosed the key to The Lodge House. You'll find bread and milk in the fridge. Don't be afraid to give the Aga a kick!

Kindest regards

Dolores Byrne

The Aga? One of those old fashioned cookers? She had barely mastered the fan oven in the last place they had rented. She stuffed the note back in the envelope, removing the key at the same time with her little-next-to-finger. It was large, heavy and old fashioned looking and possessive of a metallic tang. The casual and public way in which it was displayed on the face of the front door, for anyone to discover, made her somewhat uneasy. Still. She supposed that was the country for you.

So turn the key she did, with a feeling of ceremony, her little son behind her, more constant than her shadow. He peered through the gap between his mothers' arm and the remainder of her body. What he saw was quite thrilling, yet at the same time, daunting: A single, large room with a high ceiling and small, latticed windows. A lone beam fell at a slant from a great height, causing the dust motes to dance. Every wall except for one was lined with massive book cases. Ember gazed open-mouthed - how to reach the

topper- most? In the centre and lower down was a living area: two squishy, saggy couches and a couple of bean bags. Bean bags? He grinned to himself and had a go, landing a full body flop, arms outstretched, Superman style. The sound of his body on the bean bag was like a sudden exhale. His mother smiled and her shoulders relaxed. 'Do you like it Ember?'

His delighted, slightly distracted smile was all the reply she needed. She turned and continued her survey - the upper floor balcony, the rough, wooden beams. If it wasn't for the constant, dirty sheen of anxiety that coated everything she did, she would have felt nothing but joy. As it was

She flopped down on one of the sofas, thus creating a cloud of dust. She coughed somewhat. The whole place was crying out for a dust - a proper one with a wet cloth. It looked as if someone had carried out one quarter of a job. She imagined a French maid with a frilly apron, one hand on her hip, the other flicking a feather duster whimsically and desultorily along the surfaces, like Angelina Ballerina, the odd pirouette thrown in. Struggling up from the sofa - it was one of those types that swallowed you whole - Rachel walked slowly to the nearest window, above the sink in the kitchen area. It had been left ajar, just a smidge. Impulsively she threw it open and was inundated by a buzzing sound as two dozen bluebottles or more, whirred their way to freedom. Yuck. Dirty. She opened the window beside it and the same, winged phenomenon occurred. She had the urge to throw open every window she could find. The air had a musty quality, the smell as she first entered, reminiscent of a caravan of her youth - unlocked for the first time after a long winter. And she wanted fresh air, very definitely, fresh air. A fresh, new start. Let the cooling breath of nature work its magic.

As they snuggled that night in her double bed, ensconced in the centre of her new bedroom floor, patchwork quilt drawn up to their chins, mother and son felt a new contentment. There were lots of nooks and crannies - lots of places to check at night time - but they were so far away now. No one would ever think to look for them here. And this thought allowed both sets of eyelids to grow heavy.

Chapter Two

The bearer of the feather duster arrived the next morning, an unlikely Angelina Ballerina. Rather, a farmer's-wife type, all bustle and ample, matronly hips. Her maternal air gave Rachel a pang as the older woman stood to regard her, face smiling, belly smiling, two mounds of breasts pointing at Rachel.

'Well.' Said the woman. (She was later to discover that "well" passed for "hello" in these parts). She proffered her soft, pink hand. 'I'm Dolores. Pleased to meet you.'

'Rachel.'

'Hello Rachel. You're fierce young, aren't you?'

Rachel blinked involuntarily, somewhat taken aback. She knew intellectually that she looked younger than her thirty six years. But - by Jesus - did she feel old.

'And who's this fine fella?'

She had spotted Ember for the first time, sat on a beanbag, cross-legged and watchful.

‘My, you’re a handsome lad! What’s your name?’ She took a few pigeon steps closer.

Ember drew back, an imperceptible amount.

‘This is Ember.’ Said Rachel.

‘Enda?’ Said Dolores.

‘No, Ember.’

‘Ember.’ She frowned and looked confused for a moment. Then her face cleared.

‘You’ll be going to the local school then. What year are you in?’

Ember continued to stare, taking in every nuance.

‘He’s in second class.’

‘Second!’ She drew a mock, impressed breath. ‘A big boy.’

She turned to Rachel.

‘Is he shy?’

‘He is.’

Dolores nodded indulgently.

‘You’re not from around here.’

‘No. We’re Dublin.’

‘Are you people from these parts?’

‘No.’ Rachel felt she should apologize.

‘Oh.’ Dolores’s expression mingled disappointment with roused curiosity.

‘Is that for me?’ Rachel gestured at a piece of paper in the woman’s hand.

‘Oh yes, I was nearly forgetting. Your list of duties.’

She handed it to Rachel - the reason her rent was so reasonable. Rachel nodded her

thanks and glanced briefly at the list. She knew what was on it already. (Open and close gates. Report any funny goings-on).

‘So I wonder what teacher you’ll have.’ Dolores had turned her smiling attention back to the boy.

‘Um, thanks for the bread and milk.’ Said Rachel.

She didn’t mention the ancient piece of cheese, green and practically putrefied, she’d found, wrapped in plastic and lurking in the nether regions of the fridge. It smelt like a dead animal.

‘Don’t mention it.’ This was accompanied by an eye roll and a flap of the hand. ‘Least I could do. Now, I’d better be off.’

The woman sensed that no more information would be forthcoming. She stood for a moment in front of the door, lit from behind, her hands clasped across her middle.

‘I hope you get on well here. The last tenant didn’t really work out ...’

She let the inference hang in the air, dangling like a piece of string she expected Rachel to grasp. But the younger woman didn’t bite.

‘Thank you Dolores. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other from time to time.’

Dolores glanced from one to the other, the same two sets of dark, delicate features, willing her to let them be. She hesitated a moment then was gone, leaving a light, floral fragrance and an air of unsatisfied curiosity behind her.

There was a small garden at the back of the property, a square patch of lawn, a few stray snowdrops and a rotary line. Rachel hung out their first wash and looked all around her.

The garden had no walls but it backed onto woodland, acres and acres, she had read, of

native, deciduous trees - part of the old estate. She looked up into their branches, now skeletal in their winter nudity, outlined starkly against the ice blue sky. She imagined what was going on under the surface of all that wood, the leaf buds waiting to burst forth, and pictured the root system under the earth, mirroring the upper branches and drawing their daily nourishment. This was a place that could nourish her, she suddenly thought. And with that happy revelation, she tucked the wash basket under her arm and went back into the house.

It was morning time and Ember's first day in his new school. She didn't want to send him but she had kept him out long enough. And the psychologist said it would do him good to be around other children. She wasn't so sure. Some of them could be right little shits. As she pulled into the school yard, she observed her son's face in the rear-view mirror. It was impassive looking - all the features still - but she could sense the turmoil going on under the surface.

'Alright Ember?'

He turned his expressive eyes onto his mother and nodded solemnly, for all the world an elder statesman and not an eight year old boy. She steered him inside the building, only encountering slight resistance. He knew refusal was futile and he wanted to please his mother besides. They stood outside his classroom.

'Ready?'

He looked up at her. Of course he wasn't ready. She knew this. She knocked on the door anyway. A lovely young woman answered, flowing chestnut hair and freshly applied make up. Rachel suddenly felt keenly the lack of her own. She quelled the urge to run back to the car and put on her foundation.

‘Hello. You must be Ember. And you must be Mrs Doyle.’

‘Miss. And you can call me Rachel.’

‘Pleased to meet you Rachel. I’m Roisin Duffy.’

The woman’s smile, her voice, her face, her very demeanour radiated kindness. And Rachel felt muscles she didn’t know she’d been tensing relax. She could trust this woman with her child - that he wouldn’t experience further hurt in her care. She was speaking now.

‘So I’ve heard a little about Ember. That he’s mute.’

‘Yes.’

‘Does he have a hearing problem?’

‘No.’

‘So he’s not deaf then?’

‘No. He’s an elective mute which means that he can speak but chooses not to.’

‘Oh. And why ...’

‘It’s often caused by a traumatic event.’

‘I see.’ The teacher nodded and looked at Rachel searchingly for a few moments before moving on. She turned her attention and smile back to Ember, crouching down effortlessly, bringing herself to his level.

‘Hi Ember. You’re so welcome. Come in and see your new classroom. Everyone’s dying to meet you.’

Rachel loosed her grip on her son’s hand. He didn’t loosen his grip on hers. Rather it was gradually prised away as Miss Duffy led him in the opposite direction. He gave his mother one last, enormous look and then the link was broken as he entered his new

classroom and the door was closed gently but firmly behind him. Rachel felt it like a blow to her solar plexus and she knew that he did too. She stood staring for some time, through the small, glass square at the top of the door. Then she forced her feet to move, all the way back to her car where she squashed the urge to sit and wait until her son's return to her.

What to do. She was bereft. Adrift. Driving around like she had no home to go to. Without Ember she had no home. He lived in her heart and made her feel she belonged. She circled the village several times, like a dog looking for a space to settle, not really aware of what she was doing, at last pulling in to an empty parking space. Her tinny Micra barely filled it. In the same way she barely inhabited her own space. After sitting for some time, she got out like an automaton and started to wander, her arms wrapped unconsciously around herself in a one woman hug. There were pinpricks of rain on the wind, causing her to shiver. More than anything else, she found she desired warmth. On impulse she pushed open the door to a cafe she happened to be passing. The door uttered a welcome ping. As it swung closed behind her, she stood for a few moments to absorb the scene before her. The room was painted in delectable purples and creams, the furniture predominantly wooden and rustic and on each table, a small, white vase containing a single daffodil - the first she'd seen this season. Some of the tables were occupied but others still beckoned to her. She selected a table for two further into the cafe and sat down opposite her invisible companion. She was just the right distance from the window - she could see out but nobody could see her. On impulse she buried her nose in the daffodil, inhaling its raw, green scent and found herself transported back to countless childhood Springs.

‘What can I get you Love?’

She jumped slightly. A woman stood to her upper left, pen poised over a notebook.

Rachel glanced up at her. She felt towered over. Everything about the woman was generous, her hips, her breasts, her smile.

‘Can I have a few minutes to decide.’

‘Certainly, here’s the menu.’

She placed a green booklet on the table in front of Rachel and departed. Rachel opened it and duly perused. She could have devised it herself, the contents distinctly feminine.

Toblerone cheesecake! What was that? Her mouth filled up and she realized she’d forgotten to have breakfast. The woman returned.

‘Well, have you decided?’

Her eyes were full of inquiries.

‘I’ll have a latte and a toberone cheesecake please. I mean - not a whole one.’

The woman smiled and nodded as she took down the order.

‘There are times when I could eat a whole one myself.’

It was such a nice smile, extending upwards to her eyes. Rachel envied the woman’s air of openness and warmth.

‘Great choice, though I say so myself. The toberone cheesecake is our best selling desert. I took it off the menu once and they practically rioted in the street. Had to put it straight back on.’

She was gone with a final flourish and a smile.

So she was having desert for breakfast. So what.

Rachel was left to people watch. The day was cold, the village quiet, so pickings

were slim on the road outside. Not that many tables were frequented. A middle aged woman with dark, greasy hair and a vacant expression nursed a mug of tea. A young mother tried to coax her baby to imbibe some gloopy concoction. And two older men discussed what appeared to be farming business. Her attention drifted to the young boy lurking behind the counter. Late teens, no more than twenty, with one of those extraordinary buns in his hair. What an odd fashion it seemed to her. She must be getting old. From the style of the boy's interaction with the woman, she adjudged them to be mother and son - that blend of ease and tension. The she saw the sign :

Help wanted. Please apply within.

Her system started to tingle, as if something of great import was about to occur.

The woman returned with the coffee and cheesecake and a gigantic blob of cream that Rachel hadn't requested. She lingered a moment at the table.

'I think I know who you are.'

Rachel felt her body freeze. She looked up with wild eyes. She saw the woman noticing her over reaction and tried to reign it in.

'What I mean to say is,' the woman's voice was more hesitant, 'aren't you the lady who's moved into the lodge house?'

'How did you know ...'

'Listen, you can't so much as fart around here without everyone knowing about it.

Enjoy.'

She should have stayed in the city. Why didn't she stay in Dublin? So they could be anonymous. This had all been a big mistake. She tortured herself with such thoughts as she distractedly stirred her tall, milky coffee, unaware that she was being observed at

all times. Luckily, the toblerone cheesecake brought her back to the present.

She should go. The empty house beckoned yet repelled her. There was still unpacking to do, a home to be made for her son, no matter how temporary. She looked at the sign once more. Did she dare? She lifted herself out of her chair, willing the air to support her and walked on unsure legs to the counter to pay.

‘How was everything?’

‘Lovely, thank you.’

‘Look, I didn’t mean to pry earlier. I just put two and two together and guessed who you were.’

‘Oh that’s okay. I’m just not used to ... I’ve always lived in cities.’

‘Well I hope you’ll be very happy here.’

‘Thank you. How much ...?’

‘That’ll be five euro even.’

Rachel handed over the note and stood there feeling stupid. Go on, speak, she urged herself.

‘Um. I saw your sign.’

The woman frowned.

‘Staff wanted.’

‘Oh. Oh! Are you looking for a job?’

Rachel nodded.

‘Do you have any experience?’

Well I’ve made coffee before. Done plenty of serving.

‘I’ve waitressed a couple of times.’

‘Okay. Why don’t we arrange a trial.’

‘Oh. I have to be finished by three every day to collect my son from school.’

‘That’s alright. I’m looking for someone to cover mornings and lunchtimes. Why don’t you come in tomorrow at nine and we’ll give you a go?’

‘That would be great. Thanks. See you tomorrow.’

She backed out of the shop, smiling nervously, managing not to trip over her own two feet. Outside she took a gulp of air as the late February sun attempted to struggle out from behind the gloom.

From inside the cafe, Cynthia watched the other woman exit. Although they seemed diametrically opposed, in appearance and character, she felt as if she were watching her younger self.

After an increasingly forlorn afternoon, Rachel waited outside the school gates. She stood apart from the other mothers, not wishing to invite conversation and more specifically, nosy inquiries. She was aware of their curious glances, but managed to deflect them all with her practiced, imaginary force-field.

She saw him before he saw her and she felt her heart seized. His anxious little face, looking all around. He seemed so much smaller than the other children, but maybe that was just her. Their eyes met, the connection made and she saw him trying to stop himself from running. He managed until a few feet away, at which time he launched himself at his mother, clamping his arms around her waist, his cheek pressed against her belly. They each felt a missing piece of themselves re-found. When they both felt safe

again, Rachel looked up to see Miss Duffy craning her neck at the front of the school. She and Ember walked hand in hand to the entrance, the bulk of the crowd having dissipated by now. The teacher's expression was warm and sweet, like brown sugar simmering. Rachel's eyes were full of questions. The other woman answered them all. 'He had a *really* good first day, Miss ... Rachel. He played with the other children, followed instruction well. He's very bright I think?'

Rachel nodded, massively relieved.

'Thank you so much. We'll see you tomorrow.'

And mother and son walked away, the bodily connection between them unbroken, until the little boy was safely strapped into the back seat of the car.

Later on that night, Rachel reflected on their first few days in their new abode. Ember was deeply in slumber. She was seated on the rough, wooden bench at the far side of the lodge house, having the one cigarette she allowed herself each day. As the night came tumbling down, the glowing tip was the only light visible, save for a few turquoise streaks in the sky. The woods lay out before her and why they did not appear threatening, she had no idea. Instead they whispered to her. Whispered to her soul. And she had the strangest feeling, alien and surprising: she realized she was happy.

The Woodsman walked among the trees, heading back to his home in the clearing. His stride was broken by the sight of the lit cigarette. He correctly identified it for what it was and assumed the lodge house occupied once more. He continued on his way and thought no more about it for the night.

Chapter Three

Rachel's nerves the next morning temporarily obliterated her happiness. It had been so long since she'd been in the public eye. She'd almost forgotten how to act "normal".

She presented herself to Cynthia, wearing her tidiest clothes and Cynthia, in turn, presented her with a berry-coloured pinny. Rachel put it on, feeling like an impostor. Who was she kidding? Acting like she could do this. Her self-doubt almost became a self-fulfilling prophecy. She was awkward with the customers and fluffed up many orders. The piece de resistance occurred when she spilled a glass of iced water on an elderly man's leg. He was very nice about it and accepted all her abject apologies. But still. By the end of her shift she was close to tears. She handed Cynthia back the pinny, too ashamed to look her in the eye, feeling she knew for certain what was coming next. But the other woman astounded her.

'Right then. When can you start for real?'

Rachel stared hard and disbelievingly at her.

'You mean ...?'

'You've got the job.'

'Really?'

'Really.'

'But I was crap.'

Cynthia threw back her head, soft, white throat exposed, and laughed a full and delicious laugh.

‘You know how to sell yourself, don’t you?’

Rachel grinned.

‘Now. That’s what I like to see. It wouldn’t kill you to smile at the customers once in a while too.’

‘Right. Sorry.’

‘That’s alright love. There’s nothing can’t be solved once your nerves have settled down.’

Rachel nodded earnestly. ‘Thank you so much, for giving me this opportunity. I’ll do my very best for you, I promise.’

‘I know you will. We all deserve a second chance.’

And as they looked deeply into each others eyes, Rachel felt that Cynthia had a different kind of second chance in mind.

Chapter

March had come roaring in, the wind from all four quarters. Sometimes it calmed down and clement weather shone out from behind the moving clouds. Tiny signs of Spring began to show. The celandine like little, yellow stars, fallen on the forest floor. The horse chestnut was replete with sticky buds, each one full of promise, a reminder of abundance to come. And in the hedgerows, the first primroses revealed themselves. Rachel loved them especially, for their shyness and their modesty and soft, special prettiness.

They began to use the garden much more often. Ember indicated his desire for a

trampoline. He did this by tugging at Rachel's sleeve and pointing at one such contraption in a nearby garden.

'You want one of those.'

He nodded vociferously and gave her his most earnest eyes.

'Okay sweetheart.'

But it was easier said than done. The damn thing had to be assembled and she'd only gone and lost the hook provided. She set about purchasing a replacement at the hardware store the next day. Yes, she confirmed to the curious local behind the counter. She was the new inhabitant of the lodge house. Now how much was the hook please? The woodsman couldn't help but overhear. He had just dropped in a consignment of beech and awaited his turn at the back of the shop, unseen and unnoticed as was his intention. He was taken aback, having assumed the new occupant - the smoker of the nightly cigarette - to be a man. Not this fragile looking female. He saw there was something in her that a man would want to protect. He did not want to fall into that trap.

Had he waited another week, he would have seen her for himself, on the weekend the clocks went forward. Sitting on the bench in the half-light. When she herself first saw the vixen, moving through the trees like wildfire.

April announced herself in a cacophony of colour, the hedgerows in the lanes around the lodge house a veritable Aladdin's cave to these two uninitiated city dwellers. The celandine, the gorse, the primrose remained in their number, but now made space for numerous other blooms. Humble daisies raised their heads gamely to the spaces between the clouds, while dog violets crowded at the base. A short length above, blue

speedwell mingled with scarlet pimpernel, herb robert thrived throughout, tangled up with the white, starry stitchwort, among which offered the promise of bluebells. Some of these flowers were so tiny, they took time and effort to see. Really see. But how infinitely worth it. Rachel and Ember collected handfuls, pocketfuls and brought them home to be deposited in shallow, transparent pools in old jam jars. What Rachel loved most about these flowers was their tenacity. So tiny, so fragile, yet able to withstand the gales of March and the slanting April showers. They somehow made her feel strong.

The trampoline was a great success, Ember spent many happy hours. Rachel too. For he had no other play mate. Play dates were few and far between in Ember's world. He had been invited to a party - a girl in his class - but try as she might, Rachel could not convince him to go. Nor soccer. Nor cubs, Nor hurling. Nor anything else she suggested. He just wanted to be with her. And so they bounced. He would close his eyes and lift his head skyward as if he'd entered another world. Rachel was afraid to close her eyes.

Then one day Ember was knocked out of his reverie. They both were. They clasped hands tightly. It was Saturday morning - promise of summer to come. The two had been dwelling in the silence of the nature all around them, when all at once a horn, resounded through the forest. And then a noise like thunder. They looked up to the skies, a mottled blue and white, no sign of anything untoward. And then the source revealed itself, a thousand horses, or so it seemed, galloping through the far field, astride

them riders bedecked in blood red coats. And to their fore, a pack of hounds, clearly in hot pursuit. Rachel realized she was witnessing her first hunt. So such things *did* occur in the countryside. Ember looked at her expectantly, so she explained it the best she could. He blanched towards the end and made his wordless way inside the house. His mother followed him sadly. She no longer felt bouncy either.

The next day, a Sunday, dawned high and clear - such a feeling of expansion. Rachel no longer went to church, but she found a sense of sacredness in days such as these. She was randomly perusing the titles on the bookshelves, an odd and eclectic collection, when Ember came clattering in, his eyes ablaze and twice their normal size. He ran right up to her and tugged urgently at her sleeve.

‘What is it?’

He was pulling her towards the door. She went with him, her heart contracting. She felt for the Swiss army knife she always carried about her person. They plunged out into the sunlight and onto the back lawn. She hadn’t mowed since they’d moved in and the grass was thick and voluminous, especially at the edges, where it resembled an early summer meadow. And all at once she saw what had been causing her son such consternation. Her eyes widened until they were almost as large as his. She looked down at him and he looked up at her and the two exchanged an excited smile. Peering at them, out from the long grasses, ten feet or so away was - not a pup as Rachel had fleetingly thought - but a tiny, lone fox cub. The three stared at one another with mounting fascination. Rachel laughed gently and lowly.

‘He must have smelt the bacon.’ She said.

She chanced a step closer, but the cub skittered away. It disappeared for seconds, and they feared it had gone for good, but he re-appeared just feet away in a different part of the garden. His curiosity fought with his wariness, as did theirs. His ears, swiveling greatly, looked far too big for his head and his paws looked way too large for his body. Like school shoes at the start of the year designed to be grown into. His tail flickered intermittently revealing a tender, white tip. His white and russet face resembled a kind of mask. And all the while he fixed them with his amber gaze.

‘I bet you’re hungry.’ She murmured.

The animal continued to stare.

‘Wait here a second.’ She tipped Ember on his arm, then walked back quickly into the house. She gathered up all the rinds from their breakfast onto a greasy plate then brought it outside. A gust of wind went with her and moments later the cub was sniffing the air, his nose held aloft in concentration. Rachel chanced a few paces forward. The fox didn’t budge. She flicked the plate skyward and the rinds went flying across the lawn, towards the area where the fox was sitting. His little, black nose immediately went into overdrive and he started to move forward, his body lowered, almost in a crawling position. Ember grabbed Rachel’s sleeve as the fox came closer. Yes. He found the first rind and swallowed it with gusto. Then the second, then the third, until every morsel was gone. He looked up expectantly, sniffing the air eagerly. Rachel looked down at Ember, who was beaming delightedly.

‘I wonder where his Mammy is?’ She said.

Then all at once she thought of the hunt and her heart fell. Was it possible ...? She was no expert but if she had to guess from her previous experience of dogs, she’d say the cub

was about five weeks old. No chance would it have surviving in the wild on its own. Still, maybe the worst hadn't occurred.

'Let's come away and leave him for a while.'

She put pressure on Ember's shoulder. He shook his head vigorously and made of himself a rock.

'Well I'm going inside to watch from the window.'

Ember may have nodded slightly, other than that he didn't move. Rachel left him to it and found a new position on a window seat, bathed in morning sunlight and affording her a view of both human and canine cubs. She sat thus hugging her legs, left cheek pressed against her knees observing this magical landscape, both creatures crouched in the grass, neither one taking their eyes off the other. After a time she took up her phone and began to look up certain things. Such as what to do if you found an orphaned fox cub. Her first discovery was that her hunch might be right: that it might not be orphaned at all. The vixen might well be watching from afar, waiting for them to disperse. So she went back out to Ember, attempting to entice him in.

'Come on darling. His mother might be waiting for a chance to come and get him. We could be scaring her off. Let's give her a little space, just in case.'

She was offered only a view of the top of Ember's head as he shook it resolutely. The fresh, Spring sunlight poured down on his crown, rendering his dark hair the colour of burnished chestnut, as a conker released for the first time from its shell, only twice as shiny. And as she observed him, sitting soundly on the earth, she formed the impression that he was rooted down and sprouting up like a green shoot, full of endless potential, determined to grow no matter what.

He was still there at sunset. Still. They both were. She finally coaxed Ember in, exhausted and ravenous. He ate robotically, before allowing himself to be tucked into bed, his face peeping out from under the patchwork quilt.

‘Goodnight sweetheart. Try and get some rest.’

But she could see the anxiety etched into his features, his worry of what would become of the cub without his watchful presence.

‘I’ll keep an eye on him until I go to bed.’

Ember nodded briefly, some concern falling away and sleep overcame him almost instantaneously.

Sneaking away so as not to wake him and tip toeing to her look out point at the window seat, Rachel indeed looked out for the fox. It was twilight now and the bats were starting to whirl. At first she thought he’d disappeared but then she spotted a dark shadow where he had been. Letting herself out of the back door discreetly, she chanced several paces forward, then stopped as soon as she could see. He was there alright but lying down now, curled up in a ball like a cat. He looked so appealing, so very small and vulnerable, that she had to physically stop herself from scooping him up and bringing him back to the house. This was against all advice. She knew she shouldn’t touch him - leave her scent. So instead she repaired to her bench and lit up her one, delicious cigarette, the slumbering fox and the swooping bats the only company she needed.

And the woodsman passed on his way home, closer now to the lodge house, afforded cover by the newly forming leaves. And through the trees he saw the woman glow.

Rachel's night sleep was scant and troubled by devious and insidious dreams. When she awoke she could only remember fragments at best, impressions mainly, but the main feeling was fear - a profound sense of unease. After one such dream she got up, disorientated and sweating and staggered into the bathroom. She splashed her face with cold water, attempting a feeling of safety and normality. But when she looked at herself in the mirror, she failed to recognize the woman she had become. Such wild eyes that had seen much more than they'd ever wanted to see. She tilted her head upward. A heaving wave of panic overtook her, as she thought she saw livid marks on either side of her throat. But it was just a trick of shadow and light. She shivered through her sweat and splashed her face again, rubbing it dry vigorously, and realizing it was the best she could do, turned off the light and headed back to bed.

She glanced across at Ember and her breath caught in her throat as her heart stopped beating and took up residence in her ears. Thud. Thud. Thud. His head was no longer on the pillow where she had left it. The covers were tossed back and a blank space remained where her son's body used to be.

'Ember!' The scream only half came out, scratchy and impossibly high-pitched. She ran hither and thither about the room, looking for him in ridiculous and illogical places. When her search yielded nothing, she scuttled down the stairs, her legs barely supporting her, calling his name in desperation, knowing he wouldn't answer her anyway. She turned on every light in the place, examining all four corners, as if she was on some wild, scavenger hunt. When her frantic investigations yielded nothing, she flung open the back door, the night air hitting her like a slap.

'Ember!' She howled.

She saw nothing at first. Then the wind blew the clouds cross ways and the full moon was revealed, lighting up the garden, the forest, all - a pale imitation of day. And sitting in the same spot he'd occupied all day was her son.

'Ember!' She flew to him and crushed him in an embrace. He allowed himself to be hugged.

'What do you think you're doing?' Her face was angry and fearful. 'You frightened the life out of me. I thought ...'

She couldn't articulate what she'd thought. But they both knew. Her son looked at her impassively, then pointed to the end of the garden. The fox was sitting upright, his head inclined to one side, his ears twitching readily. What was all the fuss about?

Chapter Four

No mother came to claim him. Twenty-four hours had passed now. Decisions had to be made. Rachel looked out worriedly at the tiny cub. Then even more worriedly at her son. She had purchased a tin of dog food and placed some a short distance away from the animal, along with a bowl of water. Before she'd even backed away he descended on it ravenously, devouring it in under a minute, as if it were his last supper. Rachel was able to look at him closely, the back of his ears surprisingly black and the tip of his tail so pure. He backed away slightly and sat about a foot off, enchanting her with his fiery gaze. She scooped more food out of the tin and lowered it onto the plate. This time he was on it before she had even moved her hand away. She heard a noise behind her, a sound so unfamiliar it added to the unreality of the situation: Ember was

giggling, out loud and in delight. She couldn't remember the last time ...

Then before she had the presence of mind to react, Ember was upon the fox, stroking him and petting him. The cub looked up momentarily, before focussing its attention back down on the food.

'No Ember, don't touch him! We're not supposed to touch. We'll bring him to the vet this afternoon, find out what to do. Maybe they can put him in a wildlife sanctuary or something.

'No!'

Rachel stared at her child in astonishment. He hadn't spoken in close to a year. It mattered not one iota to her that his first word was one of defiance. Ember spoke again. Quieter this time. Almost calm.

'I'm keeping him.'

Chapter Five

Rachel went into work the next day - and Ember into school - secure in the knowledge that the fox would be there when they came home, on the basis that he had nowhere else to go. They had left him napping in a golden pool of sunlight.

Rachel reported Ember's breakthrough in excited tones to his teacher, although he hadn't spoken since, in spite of repeated attempts by his mother to draw him out. It was almost as if he had shocked himself back into silence by his very own voice. So she let him be.

It was with a renewed sense of optimism - an anything-could-happen-ness - that she tied on her apron at the beginning of her shift in "Madame Cyn's". Cynthia noticed it straight away and was glad for her.

'Now there's a beautiful smile.' She murmured, half to herself.

Rachel's morning flowed wonderfully, everything came easily, the tips mounted up, she had energy to spare, no dragging herself through her daily tasks. She even managed to raise a smile from the laconic Robert - he of the man-bun. Cynthia engaged her in conversation during the mid-morning lull.

'You're in great form this morning Rachel. It's lovely to see.'

Rachel smiled up into Cynthia's face, finding only sincerity and warmth.

'Yes I am. I am. I feel like things are looking up at last.'

'That's wonderful love, I'm happy for you.'

The woman didn't pry or press for information, which only strengthened Rachel's urge to confide in her.

'You see, my son ...'

They were interrupted by the friendly ping of the door. Rachel, who had her back to it, saw Cynthia's eyes light up in recognition.

'Hello stranger. Where have you been hiding lately?'

'You know me Cynthia. I keep myself busy.'

Rachel turned to see a tow-haired man, evidently in his working clothes.

'Rachel have you met Ben? He's a neighbour of yours.'

Rachel frowned. As far as she was aware, she had no neighbours. Although she was coming to learn that in the country, someone over a mile away could be considered a

neighbour, especially if there was no house in between.

‘No. We haven’t met.’

She would have remembered.

‘Ben manages the woodland beyond your house - lives there too.’

Rachel nodded vaguely.

‘Rachel’s the new occupant of the lodge house.’

Ben gave Rachel a bare nod and managed to look her briefly in the eye.

Cynthia suppressed the urge to roll her own eyes.

‘What can I get you Ben? I take it you’re after a loaf of my world famous soda bread as usual.’

‘Yes please, Cyn. And a jar of pesto.’

Cyn. They were on familiar terms.

‘Right you are. And a coffee to take away?’

‘Um. I think I’ll have it here for a change.’

‘Oh! We *are* honoured! Okay so, park your bum over there and Rachel will bring your coffee over anon.’

Cynthia rapidly prepared the beverage, with milk jug and sugar on the tray.

‘You’d think he’d be sweet enough.’ She winked at Rachel and handed her the tray.

Rachel felt her old uncertainty return. She approached the table for two where Ben sat alone. She placed the mug and accoutrements on the table without mishap.

‘Would you like anything to eat with that?’

‘No thanks.’

He looked up at her, with a slow sideways glance, his hazel eyes startling, his face tanned

and weathered, as befitted a man who spent a lot of his time outdoors. Feeling a little flustered, and not a little annoyed with herself, Rachel returned to the work station.

Cynthia grinned as she removed the tray from her employee's hands.

'He's quite something isn't he?'

Rachel shrugged. 'He's alright.'

'And a good man too.'

'I'm not looking for anyone Cyn.'

'I thought that at one time too, but then ...'

'No, I'm *really* not looking for anyone.' Rachel barely managed not to snap.

Cynthia knew when to back off.

Chapter Six

She would have mowed the lawn, but she didn't have the heart to decapitate the daisies. They were so trusting, looking up at her, their delicate white heads, their single, yellow eyes. So she hung out the washing and drank in the birdsong. Lord, those birds could make a racket. But it made a pleasant change, being woken by the dawn chorus instead of an articulated truck, hissing below her window and belching out its noxious fumes. She'd even heard a cuckoo for the first time in her life, like something straight out of a nursery rhyme.

Ember and the fox cub played a few feet away, Ember digging up earthworms for the

animal to eat, the fox sucking them up like animated spaghetti. As long as he didn't try enacting that scene from *Lady and the Tramp* ...

Lost in a reverie of birdsong and wildflower and the sun caressing her face, Rachel failed to notice at first that everything had gone quiet. She looked around for Ember, but he and the fox were nowhere to be seen. She tried to hold back the usual rising tide of panic, but like King Canute, her efforts were futile. She ran around the entire perimeter of the house, calling out his name and up to the edge of the forest. Then a thought struck her. She had warned him not to ... She ran back inside and sure enough, there they were, boy and fox, right in the centre of the sitting room.

'Ember!' I told you not to bring that animal in here.'

Ember didn't turn. He was kneeling on the floor in front of the couch. As she drew closer, she saw that he had made a bed for the fox out of two cushions and his new navy sweatshirt.

'Ah Ember. Your new jumper! And I *told* you not to bring him inside. You know you're not supposed to and I'm sure he has fleas.

Ember turned to his mother and smiled.

'His name is Flame.' He said.

This time it was Rachel who was silenced.

Chapter Seven

She walked into the woods to find out what it was that was awakened in her. She had

glimpsed the blue the day before and was no longer able to resist. For the first time in a long time, her fear was overridden. She felt her own power as she conquered it and moved through the trees, keeping well away from the public walkways. For a long while now the trees had been beckoning rather than threatening. And now that she had done it, she felt at home. She located the source of blue and moved towards it: bluebells. In their hundreds. More. Floating out as far as the eye could see. She wandered through them as if in a dream. Or a painting. “The Little Goose Girl”. A picture she’d seen as a child in The National Gallery. She inhabited it now, such was her sense of unreality. Such unimaginable beauty and the sense of nature’s bounty, of infinite abundance stretching out around her in every direction. She didn’t walk, she wafted, through the streams of sunlight that were flowing through the trees and trickling through her hair and dappling on her skin. She was part of this landscape and it was part of her. Literally. She felt the sap rising through the trees as the blood coursing through her body, the grass sprouting out of the forest floor as the hair growing from her follicles. She felt as a tree uprooted and walking through the land, she lifted her arms as branches, each finger a tiny twig for a bird of the air to land on. Each whisper of the wind, each fragment of birdsong traversed through her body while the scent of forest flowers seemed to permeate her very essence. She couldn’t tell how long this feeling lasted, whether seconds or eternity. But she wouldn’t come out of it unchanged. The forest was part of her now.

Ben saw her before she saw him. He was having his solitary coffee break, chipped mug in hand, when she wandered into the clearing, looking somewhat shell shocked and dazed

and clutching a handful of bluebells. She blinked in the full sunlight, staggered a little like a drunk then put up a hand to shield her eyes. It was at this point that she saw him. He saw her trying to compose herself, straightening out her top and tucking unruly strands behind her ears. She approached him tentatively.

‘Hello.’ She said, her voice small and hardly carrying.

He nodded at her. She was standing a few feet away now.

‘We met in the coffee shop.’ She said, uncertainty clouding her features.

‘I remember.’ He said. ‘Would you like a coffee now? I’ve just made a pot?’

He was amused at her confused expression. Not only was there no kitchen in evidence. There wasn’t even a house.

‘I have my own makeshift kitchen.’ He gestured behind him to a camping stove with a kettle on top.

‘Oh. Yes. That would be lovely. Thank you. If it’s not too much trouble.’ She finished quickly.

‘No trouble.’

In a series of deft movements, Ben made Rachel’s coffee and handed it to her.

‘Sorry bout the mug.’

It had a crack running through it that would one day be its undoing. But it was clean.

‘Please. Take a seat.’

He gestured to a neighbouring tree stump.

‘Yours even has a cushion on it.’

She laughed, seeing he referred to the moss that grew on the top. They sat in silence for a few seconds, absorbing it all. She took her first sip. He watched her as her eyebrows

traveled upward.

‘Mmm. This is good coffee. It’s not ...?’

‘From the cafe, yes. I always buy it from Cynthia.’

‘Only the best.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Do you and Cynthia go back a long way then?’

He knew that studied casual look. The subtle inference.

‘A good few years, yes.’

He saw her changing tack. She looked out into the trees.

‘These woods are ... amazing.’ She exhaled deeply as she said it.

‘Not bad.’ He said, nodding.

She looked at him in that coy, feminine way she had.

‘You actually live here?’

‘Yep.’ He knocked back the last of his coffee.

‘Where exactly?’ She scanned all around her.

‘Here.’ He said, putting down his mug.

She frowned, as if she thought she was missing something.

‘But there’s no ...?’

‘House?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve just got planning permission to build one.’

‘Oh. So where ...?’

‘Under canvas most of the time. Although my mate’s going to lend me his caravan.’

‘You live in a tent.’

‘Mostly, yes.’

‘For how long?’

‘Oh ... About six years.’

‘Six years! But how do you ...?’

‘I pee in the forest and wash in the river.’ He grinned at her.

‘I didn’t mean ...’

She *had* meant. He enjoyed watching her blush.

‘I like to be close to nature.’ He said, getting up. ‘And I need to be here for my work.’

Rachel drained her mug and got up also, unwilling to overstay her welcome.

‘I’d better go.’ She said. ‘Thanks for the coffee.’

‘You’re welcome.’ He didn’t try to detain her.

She began to walk off, in the direction she had come from.

‘You like the bluebells?’ He called after her.

She turned, as he’d hoped she would and he saw the full expanse of her smile.

‘Yes.’ She held up the bunch she was still clutching. Then her expression darkened.

‘It’s not illegal, is it?’

‘To pick them? No. They’re for everyone.’

She looked relieved. Her shoulders relaxed and her smile came out again.

‘Goodbye Ben.’

So she did remember his name.

‘Bye.’ He remembered hers too.

He watched her retreating form, until it was swallowed up by the trees. Then he

turned back to his work, attempting to concentrate on what it was that he was supposed to be doing.

Rachel shook her head repeatedly and muttered to herself - like a madwoman - she thought, in a moment of self-awareness. How could such an ordinary morning suddenly become so extraordinary? Her first walk in the forest, reveal such unexpected bounty? Firstly the bluebells and her magical experience therein. She was almost afraid to walk through them again - anticipation tinged with trepidation - in case she had a Wizard of Oz experience - like Dorothy in the poppy field - she might never wake up again. To her real life. Then stepping out into the clearing. *That* man waiting for her, with an excellent mug of coffee! She wished she'd worn some make up. And a different top, without a massive jam stain front and centre. She took to muttering again, shaking her head in wonder, until she was back in the bluebells. No magical experience accompanied them this time, but, she reasoned, their beauty was magic enough. She picked another handful then when she got back, put them in a honey jar and placed them on the window sill. Then watched Flame the fox as he cavorted wildly about the lawn.

Chapter Eight

That afternoon, as she collected Ember from school, her mood was still elevated. No, his teacher said, he still hadn't spoken in class. But she didn't let this bother her. She felt it only to be a matter of time. As they walked the short distance to the car, he began to tug at her sleeve.

‘What is it?’

She realized he was pulling her into the library.

‘Alright then.’ She allowed herself to be led.

Once inside, Ember appeared to be a boy on a mission. Rachel watched him scurrying around all the shelves, peering at the titles then moving on.

The librarian smiled indulgently at her over her chunky lenses.

‘Would you like a membership form?’ She said.

‘No thanks. Oh yes. Just a child’s please.’

She had her own library back at the lodge house. She’d never get through all those books, not if she lived there for ten years - which she considered extremely unlikely.

She was only half way through her first book. Then she had a change of heart.

‘Actually, I will take a form for myself please.’

‘Children are free.’ The woman handed the documents to Rachel, smiling at her inquisitively. Rachel could feel a flurry of questions coming on and retreated to a table to quietly fill in the forms. She was just finishing up when Ember drew up beside her. His breathing was noisy, a sure sign of excitement or agitation. She looked at his face: the former. He handed her the books and she turned them over in her hand.

‘”The Life of the Fox”.’ She read out loud. Fair enough.

‘”Dog training for Beginners”. Really?’ He nodded with much enthusiasm. She stared at him hard then smiled at her son and shrugged her shoulders.

‘Alright so. What the hell?’

This place was revealing so much that she hadn’t expected, she was learning to go with the flow. And besides. Didn’t dog training require spoken commands?

She started to meander around the shelves herself, until she found the local history section. She eased out the book she wanted, cumbersome and well-worn looking.

They brought the books up to the counter. The librarian beamed at Ember.

‘Did you get a new dog?’

Ember nodded and smiled at her delightedly.

Chapter Eight

‘Sit!’

The unfamiliar, high-pitched and altogether wonderful sound of her son’s voice, as he tried to bend the animal’s will to his own. Flame stared at Ember blankly, head to one side, then began to nibble delicately at a blade of grass.

Rachel found the scene at once hilarious and joyful. Her son had been at it for hours, employing the correct hand gestures and proffering numerous treats and so far - nada. But did it matter? Did it matter really? Not to her.

‘Mammy! Mammy!’

She looked up from the sink in alarm.

‘He did it Mammy! He did it!’

She was just in time to see the fox sitting in front of her boy, before her boy descended on the fox and the two wrestled in the long grass together. She wiped away a tear. Mammy. She was Mammy again. There were times she thought she’d never hear him say that word again. And all because of this wild creature, who’d done more for Ember

than a year with a top child psychologist in Dublin.

She felt hope. Real solid hope that their future would be good, that their future would be here. Things were finally turning around for both of them.

The guard's nod was easily missed as he released the man, onto the empty, grey pavement, the Dublin traffic crawling by, coughing out acrid smoke. The man breathed it in, as if it was oxygen to him, as the gates of Mountjoy Prison slammed and clanged behind him. His mouth shaped into a firm line of satisfaction and he started to walk. Newly shaven and wearing the suit he'd been arrested in, he soon blended seamlessly with the rush hour crowd. A good looking man on his way to the office. Except that wasn't where he was going. He was on his way to find her. And when he did, he was going to make her pay.

Rachel found it hard at times not to be intimidated by Cynthia's flawless well-groom-ed-ness. She was someone who'd always felt dragged together herself, even on those rare occasions in life where she's attended black tie events. It was impossible for her not to feel lacking. The shoes didn't quite go. Or the hair was up when it should have been down, down when it should have been up. She could never get it quite right. And those around her failed to disagree. That's why she played it safe in her t-shirts, jeans and hoodies, the countryside making it easier for her to do this.

Cynthia on the other hand ... her lipstick never wore off, although Rachel never caught her reapplying. Her plump, inviting lips were perpetually candy pink and slick with gloss. Her skin only ever shone in the right places and her hair was an immaculately

coiffed masterpiece which frequently defied gravity. She never had stains on her apron or spatters across her clothes. She had an easy poise and elegance one didn't always associate with a woman of her size. Yet her curves never let her down, beginning and ending exactly where they should, everything cinched in by an impressively efficient belt.

It was the townspeople who had christened her Madame Cyn. In part because of her sensuous appearance, but also because of her relationship with Canice Costigan, the local publican, who was fifteen years her junior. Cynthia laughingly told her about it one day:

'They didn't know *I* knew what they called me. So I beat them at their own game and changed the name of the place and bingo! Doubled me profits overnight!' This accompanied by a raucous laugh.

Cynthia got away with it all, due to her natural warmth, a portion of which she served with every cup of coffee. Rachel could attest to this warmth, knew it to be no cheap marketing ploy, had benefited hugely from it, along with her boy. On the Saturdays she worked, Rachel was allowed to bring Ember along. Either he sat in Cynthia's apartment above the cafe, or when it wasn't busy, one of the tables in the corner, colouring to his heart's content and keeping an eye on his mother. Cynthia kept him topped up with endless treats ('he can take it, the skinny little thing'), and she elicited, if not words out of him, plenty of smiles. So yes, overall, Cynthia was pretty cool, and a woman of many layers, that Rachel was only beginning to unravel. Rachel didn't ask too many questions, lest they be asked of her in return, but Cynthia had such an air of welcome, a pillowy armchair to her own wooden stool, that Rachel almost felt ready to open up to her. To confide at long last. To this other single mother of a single son, who's story, she felt on

a gut level, eerily mirrored her own.

Because she was lonely. So very lonely at times. The pressure of keeping it in so immense. Never more so then when she had the day off and Ember was still in school. She wandered around the lodge house in a distracted manner, carrying out random tasks and staring at the walls. Literally. That could barely be discerned behind the many photos and paintings which bedecked them. One photo in particular beckoned to her, of the big house in its hey day, before it was blown up during the civil war. The lodge house was revealed to be a smaller version of the big house - literally a chip off the old block. The family stood outside, in all their sepia glory, in the days when people stared solemnly at the camera. She pictured one of those old box contraptions, the photographer's head emerging from under the black cloth, the subjects finally allowed to drop their pose. Although it was hard to imagine them animated - real people with real emotions - children that ran and jumped and played. They looked so stiff in their capes and bonnets. Yet they were people just like her. Hopes, dreams, fears, disappointments. Loneliness.

For the first time since she had taken it out, she remembered the library book. Now where had she put it ... it was still on the hall table where she's initially left it down, half hidden under a random pile of papers and post. Her two wrists nearly bent the wrong way, with the effort of picking it up and carrying it over to the couch. She sank down into the dusky cushions and folded one leg under her. The tome was a slightly amateurish looking jumble of photos of mismatched proportions and variagated typefaces. As if someone had taken every piece ever written about the town and patched it together with every old photo they could find. The effect was eclectic. She liked it. She

leafed through unhuridly, past the visions of Market Street while it still boasted a market and the famous old Ash tree, before it got struck by lightening and which people still referred to as a marker. She found what she was looking for - the section on the big house - and settled on that page.

She was slightly disappointed. The text was quite sparse and contained turgid fact, rather than the personal colour she had hoped for. Most of the photos she had already seen - smaller versions of the ones that adorned the lodge house walls. But there was one that was unfamiliar. She peered closely at the depiction of the last lady of the manor, captured alone with her children, a pint sized boy and girl, in fussy outfits that looked like miniature versions of grown ups clothes. She supposed them to be in their Sunday best. Hoped they were permitted to run around like normal children in looser garb, at times when they weren't posing for posterity. She thought of the family photos of her own youth. The enforced falsity. Smile for the camera - cement the illusion. Yet the expressions on the faces of the mother and her children seemed more relaxed in this one. As if their natural delight, at just being together, couldn't be suppressed by social conformity. She glanced at the text underneath. "The last mistress of the house, Lady Clara Winterbourne, with her children Master William and Miss Katerina, taken several months before the tragedy occurred. The tragedy? She presumed the writer must be referring to the burning of the house by the old I.R.A. But didn't that happen ...?"

A shiver ran through Rachel. And all of a sudden, the uncanny uncertainty that she was being watched. She looked up from the page and remained stock still. The fox sat in the open doorway observing her keenly. He looked like a photo himself, framed perfectly by the doorway, the sunlight seeping in all around him. It caught his fur on

fire, reminding her of the copper leaves unfurling on the beech beside the gate, that shook on the breeze like newly minted pennies. He officially wasn't allowed inside. He appeared to know this, and looked at Rachel quizzically, his head to one side, in that particular, doggy way he had. She arose and moved cautiously towards him, expecting him to bolt. But he didn't. Just continued to regard, never removing his eyes from hers. She concluded that she was more fearful than he. She knelt in front of him, half a foot away. She had never touched him before, not wishing to encourage Ember any more than was necessary. But she reached out now and touched The Flame.

The animal allowed her, bowing his head to her caress then, after a time, letting her fondle the white softness under his chin. He even lifted his head slightly, causing her to laugh gently, her large, brown eyes meeting his slanted amber. Then finally, along the length of his auburn back. The fox inched towards her and she easily took in his black socks and tipped white tail. That was presuming he was male. He looked like a boy - she realized the assumption was groundless. But he explored her now, sniffing and snuffling and it was her turn to allow him. She couldn't believe that this wild animal ... She slowly adjusted her position, sitting on her behind and leaning her back against the open door, her legs stretched out before her. The fox stepped delicately up on her leg with his two front paws. When she didn't dislodge him, he advanced further, until he was fully on her lap, at which point he curled into a ball and promptly fell asleep, all the while Rachel stroking him rhythmically. She felt that he would have purred if he was able. They remained this way until it was time to pick Ember up from school, the clement, May sunshine warming them both as they warmed each other.

Later that evening, there came a knock at the door. Rachel and Ember's eyes met each others instantly. Nobody called at this time of night. Although it wasn't completely dark - it was bat time. Betwixt the two lights. Rachel stood close to the entrance and called out in her most stern and authoritative tone.

'Who is it?'

'It's me, Ben.'

Ben? The woodsman?

'Remember? I live in the far woods. We've met a few times ...'

She opened the door a crack, to see if he was who he said he was. Although the timbre of his voice was becoming richly familiar to her.

It was him. His arms fully cradling rough looking logs that were held in place by his chin, his battered jeep parked a short distance away.

'I was just passing and the thought occurred that you could maybe use a few logs. The nights can still be chilly. Is that old wood stove still working?'

'It is.'

She opened the door fully and he took this to be the invitation that it was. He wiped his feet perfunctorily, stepped inside and walked the short distance to the wood stove, clearly familiar with the layout of the place. It gave her an odd feeling. He opened the door of the stove, prepared to start rooting about with the poker. He stopped and turned to her.

'It's already set.' He said.

She nodded.

He turned back to the stove, arranged some logs strategically and lit it without asking. She wasn't sure what she thought of this. She liked it and she didn't. Could have done

with him back in February or March.

‘Just seeing if it works alright.’ He said.

‘It works.’ She wrinkled her brow.

Ben stood up and surveyed the room, seeing Ember and Flame for the first time. Ember was staring hard at Ben, his dark eyes liquid and enormous.

‘Oh hello.’ Said Ben. ‘I didn’t see you there.’ Then his face registered disbelief.

‘Is that a fox?’

‘This is Flame.’ Said Rachel, feeling kind of proud.

‘What are you doing with him?’

There was no mistaking the disapproval in his tone. Ember had the fox cub on a cushion, fondling him between the ears.

‘Ember made a new friend.’ She said, not realizing she was raising her chin in defiance.

‘You’re not keeping it indoors?’

‘He comes in sometimes, yes.’

Ben shook his head and placed his hands on his hips.

‘That’s not right. A wild animal should be in the wild.’

‘But he doesn’t have a mother. We think The Hunt got her.’

Ben looked upward, as if trying to recall.

‘They did get a vixen some time back.’ He said. ‘But there are places you can bring orphaned cubs. They bring them on then release them again - back where they belong.

They don’t make *pets* out of them.’ He spat out the word.

Rachel drew herself up from her core.

‘Ember’s done *nothing* wrong. All he’s done is help the animal. He might have died

otherwise.'

'I'm not blaming the boy.'

Which only left one person.

Rachel's cheeks blazed. She had been about to offer him tea. Now he could forget it.

'Thank you for the logs.' She said, her eyes like hot coals, her arms folded defensively across her chest.

Her meaning was clear to Ben. He nodded and rubbed his hands on the back of his thighs, then made his way out of the cottage.

'I'll be seeing you.' He said.

'Goodbye.' She said, following his form and closing the door behind him in quite a resounding way.

Why did men always think they knew best? Then try and tell her what to do? She knew just where that led and she was never going down that road again. She found herself oddly shaken by the encounter. She sat on the edge of the couch and watched her son and the fox. And she realized that the orphaned part of the animal spoke to the orphaned part of her soul.

The next day was Saturday and the cafe was fairly hopping. Rachel, Robert and Cynthia closed up late that afternoon, tired yet exhilarated.

'Weather's meant to be lovely tomorrow.' Cynthia commented casually. 'Do you have any plans?'

'Hadn't thought about it?' Said Rachel, wiping off the last table.

'Would you and Ember like to come on a picnic with me?'

Rachel looked up surprised, attempting to hide at least some of her eagerness.

‘We’d love to.’ She said.

Cynthia looked pleased.

‘I’d ask this one to come.’ She threw a glance back at her son. ‘But he’s too cool for school these days. Fancy coming Robbie?’

‘No thanks.’

‘No thanks.’ She mimicked his subterranean tone. ‘See what I mean? Doesn’t want to be seen with his owl any more. Never mind. We’ll have more fun without you, you old misery guts.’ She turned back to Rachel. ‘How about I drop by your place around one? We can walk down to the ruins of the old house, if you like - if you still haven’t been there.’

‘No, I haven’t. Yes. I’d love that. Thanks.’

‘It’s a date so.’

The forecast was right for once, the day downright delicious, the air heavy with the scent of May blossom, its pure whiteness rendering the hedgerows all the more glorious. And cabbage white butterflies flitted back and forth, as if they had lifted from the flowers themselves.

Rachel couldn’t imagine a setting more idyllic, as the three of them followed an animal track down through the fields, the picnic basket heavy and promising between the two women. It was bound to contain all manner of enticing goodies, if she knew anything about Cynthia, who had insisted on being in charge of all the food. Ember hopped along beside them, fox-less for a change, after having been “convinced” quite firmly not to bring Flame along.

The tumble-down dwelling lay before them, situated on a grassy knoll, magnificent, exotic trees planted strategically throughout, dating from an era when it was fashionable to collect plants from abroad. They passed under the boughs of a giant sequoia, before settling on what they ordained to be the perfect picnic spot. Rachel and Cynthia spread out the blanket between them, whipping it through the air like a wave, until it came to settle on the ground, Ember scampering busily, straightening up the edges.

Rachel adjudged they would all be as heavy as the basket itself, by the time they'd consumed the contents. Cynthia had surpassed herself.

'Quail's egg salad. It's far from that you were reared!'

Cynthia laughed. 'I wanted to try something a bit different. The customers just want the same old, same old. And as for Robert.' She rolled her eyes extravagantly. 'All he eats these days is spag bol and beans and toast.'

Rachel shrugged. 'Well I'm more than happy to be experimented on.'

There were crusty rolls in abundance and numerous types of cheese. Individual bakewell tarts for the ladies. Chocolate biscuit cake for the boy. Early strawberries and ready whipped cream.

'Pimms and lemonade.' Rachel laughed. 'What's this in aid of?'

'To celebrate of course.'

'What are we celebrating?'

'Oh. The weather Summer on its way ... Life....'

'I can go along with that.'

And so they descended on the food with gusto. It was several minutes before

Rachel paid any heed to the ruined mansion before her. It was held together by many pieces of scaffold. These must have been for safety, as there were no plans to restore the stately home. Rachel thought of the photos on the lodge house wall and in the book, of how it once had looked, before the IRA blew it up, the family being considered part of the British Establishment. A thought struck Rachel for the first time and she blurted it out to Cynthia between mouthfuls of brie.

‘Was anybody in the house when it was bombed?’

‘No. The family were away in England and the servants were given the heads up.’

That was a relief. Such grisly thoughts might interfere with her bakewell tart.

‘And the last remaining descendants passed the house and the lands onto the State about thirty years ago.’

‘So Ben works for the State then.’

Cynthia didn’t look up from buttering her roll.

‘He does. That he does.’

‘You know he called around the other night?’

‘Really?’

‘With a stack of logs. In May.’

‘That was thoughtful of him.’

‘Mmmm. I suppose. Only then he started giving it loads about Flame. How his place was in the wild and that we never should have taken him in. We saved his life, for pity’s sake.’

‘I know you did, Love. But you have to understand something about Ben. He has very strong views about protecting wildlife - especially in his own piece of woodland. He

sees himself as its - guardian, I suppose.'

'Well its not as if we chopped down one of his precious trees or something.'

'I know.'

'And *I* wasn't the one who killed Flame's mother.'

'I know you weren't. Just give Ben another chance. He's a good man - really he is.'

'Hmmm.' Rachel looked unconvinced.

So Cynthia took it upon herself to convince her.

'You know. When I first came here from Dublin, it took a long while for the locals to accept me. You know how some of them can be.'

Rachel nodded.

'So I was very lonely at first. But Ben wasn't like that. He helped me out.'

'And did you feel obliged to help him out - in return?'

Cynthia bestowed upon Rachel her throaty and delicious laugh.

'Indeed I did not! There was never anything like that between us.'

'So you reckon his motives were pure.'

'I do.'

'Alright so. I'll give him another chance.'

'You do that Love. Now. Time for strawberries and pimms.'

'I feel like I'm at Wimbledon.'

Rachel leaned back on her elbows, stretched out her body like a cat and tilted her head to the sun. She relished the sound of the alcohol, tinkling and fizzing into the glass. She rarely drank around Ember, but one wouldn't hurt. The boy was running around on the grass a little distance away, playing imaginary games with himself. Rachel felt

supremely content. She sat up straight when Cynthia handed her the glass. The house took up her view again.

‘Do you know much about the family who used to live there?’

‘Not way back when. But I do know a bit about the family who lived there at the time of the fire.’

Rachel closed her eyes as she bit into the first strawberry of the season and prepared to be entertained.

Cynthia sighed.

‘It’s not a very nice story I’m afraid. The husband actually murdered the wife.’

Rachel looked across at her, convinced a cloud had just passed over the face of the sun. She wished she hadn’t asked now.

‘There’s no interesting tale behind it either. It was just plain, old, boring domestic abuse. Although they likely didn’t call it that in those days. They probably called it keeping the wife in her place, or some such thing.’

Rachel thought of the photo back home - the family standing before the magnificent building - the picture of a life of privilege. She of all people should know not to make such judgments. She hadn’t looked closely at the woman’s face - she would when she went back. Or would she just turn her to face the wall?

‘What happened to him?’

‘He went to England at first. Then ended up in India or one of the colonies, living a life of luxury. Managed to evade justice. Her death was deemed to be accidental.’

‘Any chance that it was?’

‘Only in the sense that he accidentally went too far one day and beat her to death.’

The words were stark. Bare. Brutal in their delivery.

Rachel felt kind of sick. Knew she wouldn't be eating anything else. She looked down at her forearms and found they were covered in goose bumps, although the sun was still high in the sky.

'What happened to the children?'

'They were brought up by relatives in England. Don't know much after that. So you see. It happened in those days too.'

The two women looked at each other frankly. No social expressions to hide behind. Rachel's voice was soft and low.

'Did it happen to you?'

'Yes it did.' Said Cynthia, a quality to her voice that Rachel hadn't heard before.

'That's why I moved down here. To start a new life. I wanted to get out of Dublin.'

'And what about ... Him?'

'Oh, he moved on to a new woman quick enough. I lost track after that.'

Cynthia looked across at Rachel. At her stricken face.

'You too?'

Ember chose that moment to sit down heavily on his mother's lap. Rachel gave a bare nod and hugged her son tightly to her.

Chapter

Ben came into the cafe the following week. Rachel didn't see him at first - he entered silently as another customer exited - but she was vaguely aware of a presence, loitering

around the door. She turned from the table she was clearing.

‘Oh.’ She forgot to hide her expression at first, then remembered she was meant to be annoyed with him. She composed her features and stiffened up her body language.

‘What can I do for you?’ She purposefully didn’t address him by name, then went to stand behind the counter, to create a barrier between them.

‘I’ll have a coffee please.’

‘Here or take away?’

‘That depends.’

‘On what?’

‘On whether or not you accept my apology.’

She looked at him properly for the first time. He had his hands behind his back, his head slightly bowed. Aside from the diffident smile that played about his lips, he looked suitably humble.

‘For what?’

She folded her arms across her bosom, in time-honoured fish wife pose.

‘I was a bit harsh with you the other evening. About the fox. I mean. I’m sure you were just trying to help the animal. And you probably did save his life.’

‘No probably about it.’ She lifted her chin.

It was a game now. He saw the humour return to her eyes and chose the moment to smile fully at her. Rachel was unprepared for the effect.

‘Yes, I’m sure you’re right. You definitely saved his life. I’m sorry anyway.’ He said.

‘Did Cynthia put you up to this?’

His perplexed expression instantly told her that this was not the case. She could have kicked herself.

‘No. Why would she ...?’

‘Oh, no reason.’ She cut him off, then started fiddling around with the milk jugs, in order to conceal her lack of composure.

‘Where is Cynthia anyway?’

‘She’s taking her break upstairs. So have you decided? Here or takeaway?’

‘You tell me. Am I forgiven?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘You don’t sound too sure.’ He peered at her, as if trying to puzzle her out.

She looked away, uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

‘Yes, you’re forgiven.’

‘Well in that case I’ll take it over by the window please.’

She watched him as he sat, the chair appearing too small. Had he really come in especially to say sorry to her? And was he really sitting here now purely because she had accepted his apology? Or was it just an elaborate game? Was he playing with her?

Taking several breaths to calm herself, she carried the tray over.

‘I forgot to ask you if you wanted anything with that.’

‘What do you recommend?’

‘The carrot cake is freshly made.’

‘I thought all your cakes were always freshly made?’

She blushed. He laughed.

‘I was only teasing.’

Only teasing. He was only teasing her.

‘I’ll have a slice of carrot cake please.’

When she brought the cake over, he detained her again.

‘How old is your boy?’

‘He’s eight.’

‘Why don’t you bring him over some time. I’ve started work on the house. He might be interested. Does he like that kind of thing? Building?’

Rachel shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I never really thought about it. He likes lego.’

‘Well. Why don’t you bring him along then. This weekend. I’m almost always there and when I’m not, I haven’t gone far. Just call out for me.’

Rachel didn’t know what to say. She just stood there feeling awkward. But then she chanced looking him in the eye and saw the vulnerability there. His own fear of rejection.

‘Alright then. I mean, thank you. We’d love to. We’ll probably call over on Saturday if that’s okay.’

‘Great.’ She saw his shoulders drop as he silently released his breath. Then gave him a smile that was genuine and radiant, before returning to the safety of the counter.

The man knocked on the door of the house where they used to live. It was slightly different now. Neater. More sterile. An elderly woman answered, her face open and full of trust. Easy pickings.

He smiled a smile that was calculated to dazzle - natural charm so easy for him to manufacture.

‘I wonder if you could help me.’ He gave her his best puppy eyes. ‘I’m looking for the woman who lived here before you.’

The woman’s brows knitted.

‘What did you want her for?’

None of your fucking business you doddering old cow.

‘I was silly enough not to get her number before she left. I always had a soft spot for her, you see.’ A strategic show of dimple.

The woman responded in kind.

‘I’m afraid I don’t have a number dear.’

‘A forwarding address?’

‘She didn’t leave one. Though I did hear on the grapevine that she’d moved down to Kilkenny.’

‘Kilkenny. Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.’

He twinkled at her before turning to go, leaving her to her wrapped mints and incontinence pants. At which point his smile morphed from dazzling to grim.

Chapter

Saturday was warm enough for Rachel to chance wearing a dress. It had been a long time. And equally long since she had shaved her legs. After much frantic searching, she located a disposable razor in the bottom of a toiletry bag. Unfortunately, she had lacked the foresight to purchase fake tan, but with her naturally olive complexion, she hoped to get away with it. The dress was floral, blues and greens. She even wore a

necklace - a silver, heart-shaped locket - she hoped it wasn't overkill. She caught Ember staring solemnly at her.

'What do you think Ember?'

She held the flouncy skirt material out from her body then executed a twirl. Ember grinned in that way he used to grin before. And if her heart had wings, it would have flapped out of the open window there and then and up into the great blue yonder. Ember himself was wearing shorts for the first time that year and his skinny little arms protruded from his sleeves like sticks.

'Ready?'

He nodded.

'I think we'll leave Flame in - so he doesn't follow us.'

But Flame had other plans and skittered around the lawn evading capture.

'Oh just leave him.' Said Rachel at last. 'He can mind the house for us.'

She saw Ember liking this idea. But the fox was set on doing his own thing that day.

He had designs on being brought for his first walk. So the three set off. Flame shadowing them, none too discreetly, from a distance. He was getting big, his legs now long and lanky, like those of an adolescent. But this sense of playfulness had not diminished.

The bluebells had disappeared - absorbed back into the forest floor from whence they'd come. But the woods were no less beautiful, the new born leaves on the trees, now tender, green and full. Rachel and Ember had to jump over a series of sweet little streams in order to get to the clearing, at which time they emerged breathless, with exertion and anticipation. The first thing they saw was the frame of a wooden house,

rough and erect like the rib-cage of a dinosaur. The next thing they saw was Ben, well worn jeans and a white t-shirt, a saw slung over his shoulder. Rachel couldn't stop the thought - would he have been working topless if he hadn't been expecting them? Ben eventually spotted them. His body language spoke welcome. She noticed him taking her in, in her unfamiliar dress, his eyes raking involuntarily and rapidly over her. She felt pleased. She tried to propel Ember forward, but his body remained rigidly in situ. Flame lingered, half hidden, at the edge of the trees. Ben walked over to them, his movements slow and controlled.

'You came.' He said.

'Didn't I say we would.'

'You surely did. I'm Ben.' He held out his hand to Ember.

The boy stared at him for the longest time. Rachel was just about to explain that Ember didn't do shaking hands, when Ember did just that, quickly clasping Ben's hand then letting go again. She held her son by the shoulders and smiled happily.

'This is Ember.' She said.

'Amber?'

'Ember.'

'Oh. Hello Ember. Want to come see my house?'

The three moved together as one, the fox remaining in the forest, chasing ever-changing dapples of sunlight.

Rachel attempted to concentrate, as Ben explained the ancient method he was using to build his wooden house. But mostly she couldn't take her eyes off her son. She tried to recall the last time she had seen him in the company of an adult male. There

was Robert, in the cafe, but he was not much more than an overgrown boy. But this was a proper, grown up man and Rachel watched Ember respond, loosing his initial fear and standing a little taller, hanging on to Ben's every word. That feeling came over Rachel she'd been having a lot of late - that of having come to the right place.

She had volunteered to make the coffee. She lay out the scones and jam while the 'men' inspected the building. This made her feel all feminine and she hated herself for it, remonstrated with herself, with her tendency towards this. When she turned with the battered tray, laden down with her offerings, she couldn't see them at first. So she followed the sound of a hand-held saw around the corner of the structure. She pictured Ben wielding it, his biceps tanned and tensed. But she nearly dropped the tray when she discovered that the source of the noise was Ember.

'What are you doing?' Her voice was strangled.

The two turned and stared at her in surprise.

'He could chop his fingers off. Ember. Stop that at once.'

Ember dropped the saw with a clatter and drew back fearfully. He hated it when she shouted. She knew this of course, but she appeared powerless to stop herself. Ben stood and faced her, his body language defensive.

'What's your problem?'

'Are you insane? That is *so* dangerous!'

'No it isn't. I was watching him the whole time.'

'It only takes a split second for an accident to happen.'

'It was perfectly safe.'

'It was irresponsible.'

And through her haze, she could see that he was starting to get angry.

‘He was just being a boy, for God’s sake. You have to let him be a boy.’

‘I *do* let him be a boy.’

Ben shook his head and mumbled something, half turning away.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing.’

‘No. I want to know what you said.’

‘I said no wonder he’s so quiet. With such an over protective mother.’

‘Right. That’s it. Ember!’ She held out a stiff hand. ‘We’re going home.’

Ember scurried over. But she could see the disappointment on his face. She tuned it out.

‘At least stay for your coffee.’

‘No thank you.’

Rachel marched herself and her son to the border of the forest. And as they were swallowed up by the trees, her eyes filled with tears.

Chapter

Dolores Byrne had dropped by unexpectedly. She of the Angelina pirouettes and forgotten cheese at the back of the fridge. (Although to associate her with this piece of cheese was probably unfair, as surely it belonged to the previous tenants).

She was just checking to see how they were getting on. Checking up on them, more like, ran Rachel’s more private thought. Her other more frantic thought, was that she

hoped Flame didn't decide to pay them an up close and personal visit. Although there was not a no pets clause in the lease, she doubted that he would qualify as a pet.

Dolores seemed reasonably satisfied with the current state of the place. Rachel might have described her air as relieved. She herself was grateful she had given the place a lick and a promise on this her morning off. The kettle steamed and hissed, a backdrop to the women's conversation.

'How's Enda getting on in school?'

'It's ... he's getting on fine thank you. He has a lovely teacher. A Miss Duffy.'

'Oh.' Dolores's face became more animated. 'She's my husband's niece. And a lovelier girl you couldn't find. She'll bring him on, don't you worry. No better woman.'

She seemed satisfied and delighted, as she eased herself delicately onto the edge of the armchair, wisely avoiding the sofa, no doubt aware of its tendency to swallow. She took a first sip of her tea, from a cup that was having its first outing since Rachel's arrival. She offered Dolores a plate of crumbling chocolate digestives. The woman took one and balanced it on the edge of her saucer, much as she balanced her own posterior on the edge of the chair.

'I haven't seen this set in a long time.' She said, gesturing to the crockery in her hand.

'The previous tenants weren't the type you'd have a cup of tea with.' She looked expectantly at Rachel, clearly open for questioning. Rachel duly obliged, out of politeness more than curiosity.

'Why was that?' She settled herself opposite, also balancing delicately.

'They turned out to be *very* unsavoury types.'

‘Oh really?’

‘They were only,’ here her voice became urgent and conspiratorial, ‘growing cannabis on the premises. And selling it!’

‘Really?’ Rachel’s eyes widened. Her instinctive response was to laugh, but she correctly deemed this as inappropriate and managed to stop herself.

‘The Gards raided the place. And you never would have suspected, not in a million years. They seemed like such a quiet couple. And you’ll never guess how they caught them.’

‘How?’

Dolores leaned forward, as if divulging the most scandalous piece of information.

‘No frost on the roof.’

Rachel was bemused. She shook her head. ‘I don’t get it.’

‘No frost on the roof.’ Dolores repeated. ‘They were growing the plants in the attic, with the aid of sun lamps and the like. So. No frost. All the other houses had frost.’

‘Oh, I see.’ Rachel nodded her head.

Dolores shook her own head and bit into a digestive. Rachel glowered at the thought - she was living in a former crack house, not just a lodge house. She reluctantly moved the conversation along. The laugh risk was too great.

‘So how did you come to be the key holder of this place?’

‘Oh.’ Dolores said, clearly gladly receptive. ‘My family have been involved with this lodge house for generations. Sure, I lived here for a short time as a child.’

‘Really?’ This *was* a revelation. No wonder she was protective.

‘Oh yes. Sure, my grandfather was the gardener on the old estate. He and my granny

were gatekeepers too. They were in charge of opening and closing the gates - just like you are now. And in those days, it would have been their duty to monitor any visitors. Keep out “undesirables” - that kind of thing.’

Rachel was genuinely fascinated now.

‘So you must know a lot about the history of the house.’

‘Ah, sure, my own family history is bound up with it. My earliest memories are of visiting my grandparents in this lodge house as a child. They both lived on into their nineties. They were permitted to stay here for the duration of their lives, long after the big house was burnt down. Then when they died, we moved in for a while. My father used to manage the woodlands. Much like Ben McCarthy does now. Have you met Ben?’

‘I have.’ Rachel lowered her eyes and took a measured sip.

‘More decent a man you’d struggle to find.’ She announced this solemnly, taking another deep sup and pronouncing decent as “dacent”.

‘So. Do you know much about Clara Winterbourne? The last lady of the manor.’

‘Ah, sure, weren’t she and my grandmother the best of friends.’

‘Seriously?’

Rachel was so glad she had invited this woman in for tea. Quite chronically introverted, Rachel’s natural trait being layered on by life’s events, caused her to habitually avoid conversations with strangers. And the thought struck her now, and not for the first time, that by doing so she was missing out. Who knew what individual treasure trove awaited discovery within each and every person. And Dolores was no exception, gold veins of knowledge, just waiting to be mined, barely under the surface.

‘Did your grandmother ever tell you anything about her?’

‘Oh yes. She spoke about her a lot. They were pals, you see. And her death hit my Granny very hard. Sure, Clara spent many the hour in this here lodge house, probably sitting just inches away from where you’re sitting now.’

Rachel was struck with such a weird feeling as Dolores uttered these words. Like a shock wave passing through her, elevating all the tiny hairs on her body.

‘But would that not have been very unusual in those days? The lady of the house fraternizing with the servants.’

‘Ah yes, it would. But you see, she and my Granny were rearing their children at the same time. Little William and Katerina had no other playmates. And Clara herself hadn’t that many friends - her family were all in England you see. She was fierce isolated here. And, of course, himself took advantage of that. Have you heard ...?’

‘A little bit about him, yes.’

‘He was an awful man by all accounts. Not a bit well liked around here. And he gave that poor woman a terrible time.’

‘So I believe.’

‘Dreadful business. Dreadful business altogether.’ Dolores shook her head dolefully and consulted her cup once more.

So Clara had actually been in the space that she, Rachel, now inhabited.

‘She was fierce good to my grandparents just the same.’ Dolores interjected on her thoughts.

‘Oh yes?’

‘Yes. There was a lot of poverty in the County at the time. But thanks to her, my

Granny always kept a good table.'

Rachel smiled inwardly, at both Dolores's obvious pride and her quaint turn of phrase.

'Well.' The older woman was saying now. 'I won't be keeping you. I've taken enough out of your morning already.'

'You're fine. I enjoyed it.'

Dolores chuckled, recognizing the truth in Rachel's words. 'Well I'll be getting on just the same. The house won't clean itself. Delighted you're settling in so well.'

And not growing any cannabis, Rachel added silently.

Dolores set down her cup and saucer and hauled her form up off the chair.

'Be seeing you. Let me know if there's anything you need.'

She was nice, Rachel decided. And felt guilty for any uncharitable thoughts she might have had beforehand.

'She's buried in the family plot, did you know that?' Dolores stood halfway in and halfway out.

'Who? Clara?'

'Yes. You know the little grave yard on the far side of the Estate, with the ruined church and the round tower?'

'I've seen it from a distance.'

She had thought about visiting, but it had seemed a little spooky. Too lonesome - even for her.

Upon Dolores's departure, Rachel took the tepid remains of her own cup of tea and walked it over to one of Clara's photos. She was mysterious in this one, her eyes mostly hidden by her hat.

‘Well Clara.’ Rachel said out loud, almost startling herself with her own voice. ‘So you spent some time in this house.’

She wandered what she was like. Tried to imagine the conversations she had had with Dolores’s grandmother. (She’d forgotten to ask her name). Were they similar to those that she herself shared with Cynthia? Most probably not so many swear words. And then with an impulsiveness that was mostly rare in her, Rachel set down her tea cup and grabbed up in its place the clutch of wild orchids that had been resting in a shallow pool in a jam jar on the windowsill. She didn’t stop to ponder the drip marks on the floor. Trailing sap and well water, she firmly closed the front door, without a backward glance, trapping her fears in the building behind her, hurrying lest they seeped out some crack and caught up with her rapid footfall. She deliberately did not let her thoughts catch up with her either, to trip her up in the resolution, her destination.

The graveyard lay gray before her, yet not too desolate due to the brightness of the morning. As she unhinged the gate, causing it to creak, she recalled a phrase from her childhood, most likely delivered by her own grandmother: it’s not the dead you need to fear, its the living. And didn’t she know the truth of this down to her very core, as vivid as the orchids she was clutching in her hand, as yet unwilted by her body heat. She had managed to outrun that effect also.

She circled the graves in a reverent fashion, not wishing to trespass on the remains of the departed. She did shiver then, in spite of herself, at the vision of what lay beneath. Then she found it as if stumbling across, the headstone looming up to meet her. Clara Winterbourne. The dates corresponding. Rachel made an automatic calculation, one she did for each grave she ever saw. As if to guess her own likely allotment of time on

this earth.

The brevity of Clara's life hit her like a body blow. She was only thirty-one when she died. A whole five years younger than Rachel herself. And with a start she realized she had thought of Clara as older than her. Merely because she had lived so long ago. How stupid was that? And she thought of herself at Clara's age of death. What she herself was thinking and doing at the time. It was before she had met him. She was blooming with enthusiasm in those days. Dreaming of an architectural future. She mourned for those lost dreams also, as she placed her bedraggled bouquet on the bed of earth that now blanketed Clara's remains.

The grave was well tended. Cared for. She wondered who was responsible for its upkeep. Dolores? In an act loyal to the memory of her grandmother? Ben? In his duty to the grounds? Or some visiting descendant from the British branch of the family. She favoured the latter explanation, even though and perhaps because it was the most far fetched. On impulse, she sat on the ground at the side of the grave. She was surprised at the level of peace she found at this unusual location. At the rich quality of silence. At the almost welcome feeling. The ground beneath was lush, the quiet accentuated now and again by birdsong. Rachel's breathing deepened without her even knowing, as she examined the various lichens which clung collectively to the oblivious tombstone. The lichen did not make it seem neglected. Rather, it caressed it, causing it to merge more softly and more comfortably into its surroundings. She spoke then, comfortable too.

'I know you're not really here.' Was the first thing she said. 'But I wanted to come and talk to you.'

As these words were uttered out of her, the thought appeared in her head, she could talk to Clara anywhere she wanted. The lodge house, she realized, being as good a location as any. She wondered idly if Clara missed having another woman to talk to. Then she chided herself for her own foolishness.

‘I mainly came to say that I’m sorry for what happened to you. And I wanted you to know that its not quite as bad for women today. I mean, it still happens, of course it does. The bastards are still out there. But we have better protection now. And I got away. Mostly that’s what I wanted you to know. That I got away.’

Yet even as she said these words, Rachel felt herself a fraud. As if she was trying to hoodwink poor Clara. And then a second thought, hot on its heels: how could you possibly deceive the dead. Because she hadn’t really gotten away, had she? She was still running, still hiding, still thought of herself as prey. Was not free of the fear - it still ran her life. Ran *her*.

He still ran her.

Still controlled her.

And the realization filled her with a kind of fury. An anger which she welcomed, because it energized her, filled her veins with a kind of fuel, lifted her bodily off the ground and propelled her to her new home, teeming with a determination to make her life better than it had ever been before. She would do it for her own sake. She would do it for her son. And now she would do it for Clara too and the countless, nameless other women all throughout history who were just like them.

Chapter

‘We haven’t seen Ben in here this long time.’

They were in the cafe a few weeks later. Rachel wasn’t looking at Cynthia, but she could feel the weight of meaning behind the comment, the voice a little over-loud.

‘I hope there’s nothing wrong.’ She continued, this time looking Rachel deliberately in the eye.

‘Well. We might have had a bit of a row.’ Rachel couldn’t hold out any longer. ‘He could be avoiding me.’

‘What kind of a row?’

‘He was letting Ember use his saw and I thought it was too dangerous and ... I may have over-reacted.’

‘Hmmm.’

She waited for further commentary, Cynthia not normally being one to hold back. When none was forthcoming, she turned to the other woman. She saw that her face was serene and impossible to read.

‘So.’

‘Hmmm?’

‘What do you think?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘About ... you know ... Ben.’

‘I don’t know what to think. I thought there might be a spark there but you seem to keep

rubbing each other up the wrong way. Maybe you're better off leaving it.'

'Leaving it? But ... maybe we just had a couple of false starts.,

'Maybe.' Cynthia's expression was doubtful.

Rachel started to talk quickly.

'I could invite him over for lunch or tea or something. Try and make up for it.'

Cynthia shrugged. 'If you think it's worth the bother.' She clearly looked as though she didn't think it was.

'That's what I'm going to do. Cook something really nice.'

'It's entirely up to you, Love.'

Cynthia turned her face away so Rachel couldn't see her smile.

So how to invite him? She couldn't wait for him to come into the cafe. That might never happen. And it might look too casual on her part. She could send him a text - get his number from Cynthia. But she wanted to see his face when she asked him - she was a glutton for punishment like that. (And she didn't know he walked by The Lodge House every night. Just to check). So she felt she had no option but to go to him.

So off she set through the forest, like Little Red Riding Hood, wearing her least dirty jeans and a floaty little summer top, which showed off her tanned, toned arms, of which she was secretly proud. She wore a pair of sandals for the first time that year and on her feet, she'd performed the best approximation of a pedicure she could muster. Her hair was freshly washed and her make up incredibly subtle, she hoped non-existent to the unpracticed male eye. Because she certainly didn't want to look as if she'd made an effort. She wanted to create the impression that she'd just been struck with the idea of

inviting him over, whilst pottering in the garden, perhaps cutting roses, which she would later bring indoors and arrange elegantly in a vase. At which point she just wafted through the forest and hey presto, found herself at his place.

The reality was quite different. Although logic - and her mirror - told her that she was looking well - she couldn't convince her core self that this was true. She felt sadly lacking as always. And those voices came back to haunt her: who did she think she was? What could *she* have to offer any man? Who would ever be interested in the likes of her? She was just fooling herself. She actually turned back twice, then forced herself on with a mental whip. Come on Rachel, don't be pathetic, you know that you can do this. And so she stumbled out into the clearing, crossing her fingers he wouldn't have anyone working with him today.

All was quiet. So much so that she thought that she had missed him. She wandered over to the half-built house. He really was making progress and it was a thing of beauty - all natural materials - springing out of the very forest itself - almost as if it had grown out of the earth spontaneously. She heard heavy footsteps and whipped around. Ben emerged like a vision from out of the trees. He didn't see her at first, his head bowed from the exertion of carrying what looked like several tree trunks across his right shoulder. She watched him as he came to a halt and eased them off his shoulder, then wiped his forehead with his palm.

'Hello there.' She approached slowly, uncertain of the reception she'd receive.

He startled at first, then his body relaxed. As she drew closer, she saw that he'd been sweating profusely. Little bits of bark were stuck all over his face and neck. She restrained the urge to pick them off, one by one. He made an attempt to brush himself

off, apparently self-conscious of his appearance. He needn't have been.

'What brings you out this way?'

You.

He didn't sound angry. That was good.

'We haven't seen you in the cafe for a long time.' She smiled cautiously. 'Checking to see if you were still alive.'

'I've been busy.' He inclined his head towards the timber dwelling.

'So I see. It's really coming on.'

'I hope to be in by the Autumn. Winter at least.'

'That soon.'

'Well I don't need to wait around for suppliers. When I need some more material, I just go into the forest to get it.'

'Yes.' She laughed in relief. He seemed pleased to see her. 'Is that what you're doing now?' She gestured to the logs he'd just arrived with.

'Yeah. I'll show you if you like.'

And he showed her where these new pieces would fit, which necessitated them standing close together. She absorbed the heat from his body. His words fascinated her also, as he told her of the methods he was using. When he'd finished explaining, he looked at her expectantly. It was time. She took a breath and a step backwards.

'Um. I think I owe you an apology.'

He regarded her silently so she pressed on.

'The last time I was here. I may have over-reacted. Ember with the saw. I know you were trying to help him and I'm sure it was perfectly safe, it's just that ...'

‘I’d never do anything to hurt your lad.’

His words strongly spoken, yet gentle, silenced Rachel.

‘Or you.’ He added.

And she realized that she believed with a certainty she didn’t fully understand, that she was safe with this man. That this was what allowed her to walk through the forest to be with him. Alone. Something that at one time she never would have imagined herself doing. They looked searchingly at each other, until they heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. A jeep bumped its way into the clearing.

‘Um. I was thinking.’ Rachel was suddenly in a rush. ‘Would you like to come over for Sunday lunch. Allow me to make it up to you.’

‘This Sunday?’

She nodded and held her breath. The driver was getting out of the jeep now. He slammed the door.

‘Okay. I can make that work. What time?’

‘About half one.’

‘I’ll see you then.’

She retreated to the curious glances of the other workman. Then, when she was out of sight, ran through the trees, fueled on pure elation, looking like a deer that was being pursued.

What to cook? She fretted non-stop, jiggling her feet and nibbling her nails and gnawing at her bottom lip. In the end she settled on a traditional roast. Something she considered a ‘man’s dinner’. Roast beef with plenty of gravy. She got over her

aversion to handling the raw meat and followed the recipe assiduously. She popped it into the oven, congratulating herself for not dropping it. The fox was certainly interested in the beef. He sat in the centre of the kitchen, the entire time she prepared it, head tilted backwards, nose aloft and nostrils twitching continuously. At the end when she bent down to pet him, he went mad licking her hand.

‘Okay, okay.’ She laughed. ‘You can have some when it’s cooked.’ Although probably he would have preferred it raw.

‘Flame!’ Ember’s voice, clear, sweet and beautiful, called him out to the long grass. The fox responded immediately - the promise of meat having evaporated. He skidded somewhat on the kitchen tiles before skittering out the open door. Rachel followed at a slower pace, wiping her hands in a t-towel as she went. She stood and watched in wonderment. Not because her son was playing with a fox but because he was talking to him. They seemed to have their own secret language, which involved more than words, much of which she didn’t understand. But she did understand sit and lie down and stay and roll over. Her son had spent hours attempting to get these commands to stick. She’d explained to Ember that Ben was coming to lunch. He’d taken it in his stride - as he did most things nowadays. Rachel sighed with contentment. If she wasn’t so damned nervous right now she’d be so damned happy.

Ben was five minutes late. Which was just as well as she was running at least ten minutes behind. She’d just managed to apply her make-up, which to her was the most important thing. To Rachel, make up was all about hiding flaws. She never considered enhancing features. She never considered she had features to enhance. Yet here she

was, looking decent, opening the front door. To a gentleman caller, no less.

Ben looked different. He stood awkwardly holding a bottle of wine.

‘Hello.’ He nearly smiled, then made a clumsy movement, as if he was thinking of kissing her on the cheek, then changed his mind at the last minute. Instead, he proffered the bottle.

‘This is for you.’

‘Thank you. Come in.’ She hoped she came across as the gracious hostess.

He stepped inside after thoroughly wiping his feet. She now saw what was different about him. Apart from being clean - she had seen him clean before - he was also clean shaven. This she hadn’t seen. And it hadn’t gone all that well by the looks of things. He had several nicks on his neck, as if his razor was blunt, or as if he was out of practice. It made him seem more vulnerable and her shoulders went down.

‘Would you like a glass now?’ She held up the bottle on her way to the kitchen.

‘God no. Never touch the stuff.’

‘You don’t drink?’

‘Oh, I do. More of a beer man.’

She laughed. ‘Why did you bring wine then?’

He shrugged then relaxed at her laughter. ‘Don’t know. Just seemed the thing to do.’

In truth he had struggled with what to bring. He first thought of a cake - but then she worked in a cafe and was surrounded by the things. Then he’d considered flowers, but that seemed too So he’d gone for the safe bet with a bottle of wine.

‘Well.’ She was at the fridge now. ‘It’s lucky I have a couple of bottles chilling.’

She held up a Carlsberg.

‘Perfect.’

‘Do you want a glass?’

‘No thanks.’ Or maybe he should take one ...’If that’s alright with you.’

‘Of course. Saves on the washing up.’

She handed it to him, cap removed. He wished he could stop himself being so goddammed stiff and polite. It wasn’t as if the environment was alien to him. He’d spent many hours in this house, helping to restore it. Maybe the beer would help. He took his first mouthful and looked around.

‘Where’s Ember?’

‘He’s out the back with Flame.’

‘Who?’

‘The fox.’

‘Oh. I forgot about him.’

Rachel looked out the kitchen window then squealed suddenly. The tea towel she’d been carrying fell to the floor as her hands flew up to her mouth.

‘What is it?’

She didn’t reply, just ran to the back door and burst out of it. Ben followed in controlled alarm. He stood in the frame of the open doorway, filling it completely. Rachel stood midway down the overgrown garden, her hands still clamped over her mouth, her body still as a statue. And on the trampoline were the boy and the fox, bouncing in unison, a vision of such joy he had seldom seen: the sky indigo blue, the sun rising high, the boy laughing with abandon.

‘Mammy look!’ He cried out.

It was the first time Ben had heard his voice, young and tender.

‘I see you sweetheart.’ His mother called out, waving above her head.

The fox was jumping impossibly high, each bounce a practice pounce, clearly enjoying, clearly playing, like two wild things together. Unbounded. Perfect freedom.

Ben advanced and stood directly behind Rachel.

‘Now I’ve seen everything.’ He said.

He peered down at the side of her face and saw that she was crying. He put his hand on her shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. She leaned back into his strength.

Dinner was a success. She managed not to burn anything. He managed to swallow everything. Afterwards he helped her wash up then made a lego fire station with Ember. Rachel watched them from the couch in drowsy contentment, her legs curled up under her, her second glass of wine nestling comfortably in her palm. Every now and then, boy or man would look up at her and smile. What was unspoken between them was growing ever louder. Rachel couldn’t remember the last time she felt so happy.

It wasn’t much to go on - an entire county. But he could be fastidious and he could be relentless. He was confident he would find them.

He purchased a second hand car, unremarkable and non-descript. He had bought it privately, passing a For Sale sign on the side of the road, and giving a false name when he did so. He took the gamble that he wouldn’t be stopped, the registration plate mud-spattered and difficult to read. And he drove down one of those days, easily

following the instructions on the sat nav, having always been comfortable with technology of any kind. He liked the woman's voice on the GPS system, found it calm and soothing. She was the only woman he'd ever allowed to tell him what to do.

He reached Kilkenny City, the capital of the County, his plan to hole up there for a while, keep his eyes peeled, explore the lesser towns at his leisure. He was in no rush. He knew that he would find them.

Ben and Rachel's courtship proceeded at a possum's pace. Much to Madame Cyn's frustration.

'Has he kissed you yet?'

'No.'

'Well why don't *you* kiss *him*?'

Rachel smiled in an enigmatic way. 'Ember's always around.'

'Oh Jesus, Joseph and Mary! The child goes to bed, doesn't he? And school. Have you never heard of afternoon delight?' She started to sing. "Sky rockets in flight, afternoon delight! ...'

'Ah, stop it Cynthia!'

'Sure, I'll babysit for you if you like.'

'I don't think Ember would let me leave him with anyone.'

'Not even his Auntie Cyn? Sure he would. He's well used to me, he'd be grand.'

'Well I wouldn't feel right leaving him....'

'That's just an excuse. What are you afraid of woman?'

Rachel looked uncomfortable.

Cynthia reined herself in.

‘Ah, lookit. Don’t be minding me. What do I know? It’s just that you’re both young and gorgeous and if it was me I’d be on him like a fly on shite.’

‘That’s so romantic.’

Cynthia laughed. ‘You know what I mean. It’s just that - you don’t want to leave it too long and risk it turning into a friendship. Unless that’s what you want.’ She looked at Rachel speculatively.

‘No. That’s not what I want.’

‘Well then. Bear that in mind.’

In the end, it was Ember who took the matter in hand. Ben had called around that evening - just to see how they were. The two adults sat chatting on the couch, while the boy arranged his jigsaw on the rug. After a time he stood up and stared at them thoughtfully. Rachel stopped mid-sentence.

‘What is it Ember?’

The boy walked over to where the two were sitting. In silence he took up Ben’s hand and uncurled it gently, straightening out his fingers. Then, without missing a beat, he gently picked up Rachel’s hand and placed it into Ben’s. The only sounds the adults heard were that of their own heartbeats, pounding in their ears. Then ever so slowly, not taking his eyes off the boy, Ben curled his fingers around Rachel’s. Ember smiled and nodded, a look of satisfaction, as if he’d found a missing jigsaw piece.

Cynthia had invited them all to karaoke night in the pub. It wasn’t her pub as such, but

owned by her long-term boyfriend, so she claimed certain proprietorial rights. In other words, she acted like she owned the place.

‘It’s not really my kind of thing Cynthia.’

‘Bullshit. It’ll be great craic. Anyway. It’s for the kids in Chernobyl so you have to go.’

‘Can’t I just make a donation?’

‘No you can not.’

‘But what about ...?’

‘It starts early evening so you can bring Ember. Don’t worry about that anyway. The Gards will turn a blind eye for the night. The kids usually end up running around the beer garden anyway, if past experience is anything to go by, draining pint glasses, that kind of malarkey, you know the sorts of thing that we used to get up to when we were young.’

‘No.’

‘Ah, would you get away out of that, Snow White.’

Rachel grinned.

‘You could bring Ben. Your first public outing together.’

‘Oh, I don’t know ...’

Cynthia faced her full on, her hands on her hips.

‘What is it Rachel? You’ve been here months now and you’ve never even set foot in the local pub.’

Rachel lowered her lashes.

‘I just ... I feel... like it’s better to keep a low profile. Safer.’

Cynthia mildly alarmed Rachel by putting her hands on her shoulders and bringing her face up close.

‘You’re not trying to tell me Rachel Doyle, that you’re still letting that bastard run your life?’

‘I’m not. I’m just ...’

‘You are so! It’s - how many years on - and you’re still letting him dictate your actions. You should go where you want to go. Do what you want to do. Otherwise you’ll never be free of him.’

Rachel stood there blinking, for a good thirty seconds after Cynthia had released her shoulders.

‘Okay.’ She said finally. ‘You’re right. I’ll go.’

‘Good woman!’ Cynthia beamed at her.

Rachel texted Ben. He would go too.

‘Great stuff. It’s a date.’ Cynthia nudged Rachel with her cushion of a hip, sending her into near collision with a customer.

Rachel needn’t have worried. The place was crawling with off-duty Gardai. You could tell them by their jumpers. Rachel, Ben and Ember arrived together, an unprecedented act, which excited and terrified her in equal measure. The pub said “Costigans” above the door, but everyone called it Shems, after the long deceased landlord and his father before him. She imagined all eyes upon her as she walked through the door, urging Ember along in front of her by the shoulders, his body as stiff and reluctant as hers.

‘Rachel! Ben! Howaya! Over here!’

Cynthia yelled over at them from her strategic position behind the bar. If anyone hadn’t been looking at them, they were looking at them now. Rachel made her way over, her head down, her cheeks flushed, aware of Ben behind her at all times.

‘You came!’ Cynthia lifted her arms above her head in jubilation.

‘Didn’t I say I would.’

‘Sure, I thought you were going to back out at the last minute. You know Canice.’

‘Well Rachel. Good to see you Ben. And who’s this young lad?’

Canice looked down at Ember, who was studying the crushed peanuts on the floor.

‘Here. I’m sure he’d love a package of tayto.’

Ember looked up eagerly and was just in time to catch the crisps that were tossed his way.

He gave the barman the ghost of a smile.

‘What are ye having lads?’

The drinks were purchased and seats procured. Rachel was starting to feel more comfortable now that everyone had stopped staring. She observed Cynthia behind the bar, the woman bang on centre in her comfort zone, pulling pints and exchanging banter with all the locals.

‘When are you going to put poor Canice out of his misery and let him make an honest woman out of you?’

‘Sure don’t you know I’m saving myself for George Clooney.’

‘Isn’t he after marrying some young one?’

‘He hasn’t met *me* yet?’

Cynthia was so at home in her own skin. So at home in this town that had opened up its

arms to her. She appeared to have completely transcended her past. And if Cynthia could do it, maybe she, Rachel, could do it too. The thought caused something to soar inside her.

The karaoke session was the standard blend of mild talent and drunken car crashes. One of the main highlights was Cynthia's rendition of "Big Spender", particularly the well timed hip thrust, as she promised she didn't pop her cork for every guy she saw. Rachel glanced at Cynthia's partner Canice mid song. The adoration on his face was unmistakable. Would anyone ever look at her that way? Would Ben? She glanced quickly back at him. He was already looking at her. He smiled at her in such a warm way that her insides melted like butter on hot toast.

Ember had been sitting solemnly on a stool between his mother's legs the entire time, delicately nibbling his crisps and sipping from his 7up at intervals. Several children had been running around, playing tag among the tables and bar stools. One boy suddenly noticed him.

'Oh hi Ember. Want to play tag?'

Rachel braced herself for her son's refusal and her subsequent futile attempts to convince him. But Ember shrugged and nodded his head and followed the boy without a backward glance. Rachel turned to Ben in astonishment.

'Did you see that?' She said.

'I did.' He smiled. He was leaning his chin on his hand in a wholly relaxed fashion.

'What do you think I should do?'

'How do you mean?'

‘Should I go after him? Check on him?’ She craned her head anxiously. ‘I can’t see him anymore.’

‘I think you should sit right here and have another drink.’

‘Really? But ...’

‘But nothing. What’ll you have?’

She forced her shoulders down.

‘A white wine please.’

She continued to try her best to forget about Ember. She was helped considerably by the next distracting event. Cynthia had possession of the mike again.

‘Ladies and gentlemen. Please put your hands together for the lovely, the sensationalMiss Sally Hogan.’

Rachel’s head whipped around. She recognized the name. A pretty blonde woman with a come hither smile. She knew her to be Ben’s ex-girlfriend - Cynthia had pointed her out before. The woman had greeted Ben on their way into the bar. Rachel chanced a glance at him, took in his studied disinterest, the sudden fascination with the creamy head of his pint. Sally began to sing. “I want to be loved by you”. Oh puke. If her shimmying was anything to go by, she had been inspired by Cynthia’s extravagant hip gyrations. Sally started to move among the crowd, putting her arm around the necks of random men and brushing their faces with the end of the feather boa that she wore around her neck. As the woman approached their table, Rachel felt Ben shift around in his seat. Sally was staring directly at him, coming directly towards him. Next she was on his lap, legs crossed coquettishly, breasts thrusting towards his face. Rachel scrutinized Ben, her own smile fixed and fake. He was stiff as one of his own planks of wood, his hands

held awkwardly out from his body lest he accidentally touch the woman nestling in his lap. After what seemed like an age to Rachel, Sally removed her posterior and wiggled back up to the stage. Rachel looked at Ben's face to check he wasn't checking her out. But he was looking down at the table and scratching his head in distracted fashion. He looked up at her for a second, all too aware of her scrutiny and gave her a rueful smile. When a decent interval of time had elapsed and attention was no longer on them, Rachel got up from her seat.

'I'm going to the loo.'

'Rachel ...'

'I won't be long.' She didn't look at him.

She fought her way to the ladies, hoping she wouldn't be obliged to make small talk with anyone. Two men addressed her, just as she came to the door.

'Are you going to the dance after?' Said one.

The other one guffawed. Gobshites!

She entered the miraculously empty space of the women's toilets. Unlikely to last long. She didn't really have to go. She just needed to compose herself. She leaned her hands heavily against the counter and sighed. She started fussing with her slightly smudged eye liner. She knew these feelings weren't caused by what had just occurred. That it was merely a trigger. She had been through enough therapy to work this much out for herself. But, by God, the feelings were there. Rising up strongly within her like so much bile. She could feel the bitter taste of her inadequacy, the dry mouth of her insecurity. All rushing back in on her, God how she hated it, would she ever be rid of it? She considered Ben's reaction - he had done nothing wrong - and yet ...She should be

pleased that he had acted so differently from ... She couldn't even bear to think of his name, to pollute her mind in that way. *He* would have had his hands all over the girl, in spite of Rachel's discomfort. No. Scrap that. He would have considered her discomfort a bonus. She took a few deep breaths then talked herself out of the toilets and went to look for her son.

She followed the sound of childish shouts and giggles out the back to the beer garden. Though the only things that appeared to be growing were empty cans and crisp packets. She scanned the outside space which was almost exclusively populated by a couple of dozen children, delighted to be up so late on a school night. She didn't see him at first, then took a few paces ... there he was. Right in the centre of a group of six or seven boys and girls. Her Ember. Right in the centre! He wasn't talking, of course, but he was giggling with abandon. Joining in. Included. And in that instant, nothing else mattered.

The drive home that night was a quiet affair. Ben made several attempts at conversation but they all died to ash in his mouth, as Rachel was almost as silent as her son. By the time he'd pulled up The Lodge House, he was feeling a little hard done by. He turned to her, his voice and manner terse.

'Look. It's not my fault she chose to rub herself all over me.'

'I never said it was.'

'You didn't have to.'

'I'm just tired.'

'That's all it is?'

‘Yes.’

But he didn’t believe her.

He went to peck her on the lips, as had become their custom, but she proffered her cheek instead.

‘Goodnight Ben.’ She got out of the car. ‘Thanks for dropping us home.’ Before shutting the door, just a little too hard, and helping Ember out of the back. Ben sat watching the two retreating figures, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time. But then again. It was getting hard to take. He reversed the jeep noisily and skidded off in the direction of home.

He’d been hanging around the local supermarket for a number of days now. He considered it his best shot. Where else would you go in this shit hole? To stock up on the essentials of life. If she was living in this locality, she’d have to turn up sooner or later. And he - Dermot - would be waiting for her.

But patience had never been a strength of his. So he got out of his vehicle, bored and cramped in this crappy, second-hand car. He shook back the life to his limbs, as he approached the sliding doors and the area where the trolleys stood, lined up at the ready.

He watched a woman for half a minute, as she coaxed her toddler into the seat at the front of the trolley, immediately placating her with a bar hastily procured from her over-sized handbag. Dermot approached his target.

‘Excuse me.’ He said, drawing on his most pleasing smile.

The woman turned to face him, slightly out of breath and harassed looking. Then she saw how good looking the inquirer was and her hand went up automatically to

smooth down her hair. She smiled involuntarily, her teeth being one of her best features, but then the thought occurred, he was probably trying to sell her something. He had that slickness about him and a new wariness entered her eyes. None of this was wasted on Dermot.

‘I wonder if you can help me?’ He said. ‘I’m looking for this woman and her son.’ He held up a photo to show her. It was one of Rachel and Ember, taken in happier times, smiling on the lawn in his Foxrock home, a few weeks after they’d moved in. The woman’s eyes examined the photo assiduously, then up into his face again, clearly seeking explanation.

‘It’s my sister and my nephew. The family haven’t heard from them in ages. My mother is beside herself with worry.’ He drew closer, his breath hot, his whisper conspiratorial. ‘She has mental health issues.’

The young mother scrutinized Dermot’s face, for indication of truth and family resemblance. She found neither.

‘Why don’t you go to the police?’

‘Ah. I didn’t want to worry my parents any more than was necessary. They’re getting on now and they’re already pretty distraught. They’d dearly love to see their grandson. My sister heard a rumour that she might be living in these parts now. So I thought I’d check it out - for my parent’s sake.’

The woman looked at him for quite a long second.

‘I’m sorry. I’ve never seen them before.’

‘Okay. Thanks for your time.’

Dermot returned the photo to his wallet and took his leave.

The woman began her shop, knowing all the while on her bottom lip. She could have sworn she recognized the woman in the photo. Only vaguely. She couldn't quite place her. Maybe she lived in a nearby town and she'd passed her on the street. It was a distinct possibility, she herself possessing quite a good memory for faces. But something had stopped her from revealing this information to the man. She wasn't quite sure what. Maybe the thought that perhaps the woman didn't want to be found. It had come to her unbidden.

He was very attractive, all the same. Maybe she would think of him, all to herself tonight, after her husband had fallen asleep, fingers still on his keyboard. Then her daughter started to bawl, and that was the end of that.

Rachel strode into work and flung her handbag onto the counter.

'What's the story with yer one.' She secured her apron with great purpose.

'Jesus! Who rattled your cage?'

'Come on. Spill.'

Cynthia chuckled gleefully. 'I've never seen you like this before. I think I like it!'

'When did they go out and does she want him back?'

'Well now. To answer your first question are you sure you don't want a coffee first?'

'No thanks.'

'As far as I know,' Cynthia knew everything, 'They started going together in school when they were teenagers and it continued for a few years after that. Then Sally wanted to get married and Ben didn't so they split up. So she was broken-hearted and married Leppy O'Brien on the rebound.'

‘Who?’

‘You know Leppy. Great big, lanky fella. His parents own the Londis - you do often see him driving ‘round in the van.’

Rachel nodded vaguely.

‘So they’re after separating this last year and now Sally’s on the market again.’

Rachel snorted. ‘On the market is right. Did you see the goods spilling out of her top?!’

Cynthia smirked. ‘I never had you down as the jealous type.’

‘I’m not jealous!’ She regretted the volume of her words.

‘Fair enough.’

‘I’m sorry Cynthia. I didn’t mean to snap.’

‘You’re alright Love.’

‘It’s just. I don’t know. Maybe I’m not ready to handle a new relationship.’

Cynthia leaned inwards and clasped Rachel’s two hands in her own. She spoke earnestly to the younger woman. Fortunately the cafe was empty at the time.

‘Now you listen to me. I don’t want to be hearing any more of that bullshit. You are so ready for a new relationship. You’re doing it again - letting him hold you back.

Hasn’t that bollox stolen enough of your life? You have a real chance of happiness here. Don’t blow it. Ben is an amazing guy. When I came here first ...’

She shook her head and stared off into the middle distance, as if reviewing her own past.

‘It was bloody hard to get acceptance from the locals.’

Rachel examined her face. ‘But you’re practically part of the furniture now.’

‘Well it took time and it took effort.’ Her expression was rueful. ‘You know Joe Mack,

the landlord here?’

Rachel nodded.

‘Well he didn’t want to rent me this place on account of me not being from around these parts, don’t you know.’

‘Does he play the banjo?’

‘It wouldn’t surprise me. Anyway. It was Ben who convinced him to give me a chance - on account of them being in school together. And he brought me to the pub - introduced me to all the local business owners - didn’t care if people gossiped about us.’

‘And you never ...’

‘For the last time, *no*. Besides, he’s only eight years younger than me. That’s way too old.’

Rachel laughed.

‘So get in there girl. If you really want him, stop shilly-shallying around and stake your claim.’

‘You mean like plant a flag in his belly button?’

‘You can make fun all you like but if you don’t do it, there are plenty around that will.’

Rachel rolled her eyes and got on with her work.

But the words resounded.

She had the next day off. She also had a plan. She dropped Ember off and doubled back to the house. There she ran her most luxurious bath yet, with fragrant bubble bath that someone had given her several birthdays ago. She hoped it hadn’t gone off.

She soaked herself for a while, shaved the black furze from her legs and washed out

her hair using copious amounts of conditioner. When she got out she slathered herself in the body lotion that had come in a matching set with the bubble bath. She sniffed it dubiously. It would have to do. It was either that or olive oil from the kitchen press. When the lotion had half sunk in, she put on her only matching set of underwear - black lace with pink bows - then set about dressing as inconspicuously as possible. Her jeans were faded and well worn but well fitted also and her red t-shirt was unfussy yet flattering. She blow-dried her hair the best she could, hanging her head upside down in order to add volume, in a way that used to make the old Ember laugh.

‘Your hair’s gone all crazy Mammy.’ She smiled in remembrance of his childish giggles. Lastly she applied her artfully barely there make up. There. She sighed. She was ready. Or at least as ready as she’d ever be.

The forest was her friend that day. The trees in their blousy, green summer costumes whispered sweet nothings above her head and glorious clumps of foxgloves bowed their purple bells at her approach. Please let him be on his own. Please let him be on his own. Her whispers joined that of the trees. Today’s personal mantra. An incantation.

The clearing appeared to be in a state of abandonment at first. But she was knocked out by the progress made on the house. It was a proper house now, albeit still a shell, but you could clearly see now the home it was to become. Ben’s vision made manifest at last. She stood a little bit away, hands on hips, neck craned, admiring it.

‘What do you think?’ His voice, echoing slightly, startled her.

She looked up to see his head and forearms jutting out of the glass-less window above.

‘I think ...’ She waved her hands expansively, ‘amazing.’

He nodded and smiled, if somewhat guardedly.

‘You must be so pleased. After all your battling to get permission and after all your hard work ...’

‘There’s a lot of work left to do still.’ He said. ‘Would you like to come inside and have a look?’

‘I’d love to.’

‘Come in through that gap on your right. Can’t really call it a door yet.’

So far so good.

Rachel entered the dwelling, feeling like Hansel or Gretel, but no wicked witch in sight. The interior was choc-a-block with straw bales.

‘You’re using it as insulation?’

‘I am. Come on, let me show you around.’

She loved his animation. Was relieved he didn’t appear to be holding her moodiness of the other night against her.

He gave her a guided tour of the house, which as yet didn’t include windows, doors or inner walls. But it did include a functioning kitchen and bathroom and a stunning mezzanine level, which ran most of the length of the property.

‘Can I see up there?’

‘Go ahead. The staircase isn’t in yet, you’ll need to use that ladder.’

Rachel started to climb, Ben a few rungs behind her. She was acutely aware of the dimensions of her arse.

‘Oh.’ Her head was now level with the upper floor. ‘I didn’t realize you were sleeping up here. I didn’t mean ...’ She trailed off, embarrassed.

‘It’s fine. Go on up. You’ll have to ignore the mess though. I wasn’t expecting company.’

Rachel continued to climb, followed nimbly by Ben. They both stood and regarded the makeshift bed, sheets and quilt twisted into a heap. A half full and bubbly glass of water rested on a wooden block and his wallet and phone, together with various other personal belongings, lay scattered about on the floor.

‘So you’ve moved in then?’

She felt hurt not to have known this.

‘Not really. Last night was the first night I slept here.’

‘And how was it?’

‘Better than that crappy, old caravan.’

She turned to him. ‘Good for you Ben. This is really happening.’

He didn’t reply. Just stared at her in a soft, over-long way. She looked down at her toes then up again, into his frank hazel eyes, green in a certain light. This was really happening.

It wasn’t clear who kissed whom first. It just seemed like a spontaneous coming together. Of lips, of hands, of bodies, of desire. Somehow they were on the bed tasting each other decadently, each savouring the other like a long-forbidden fruit. Ready to sink themselves into each others flesh. Rachel felt herself devoured, but not ravenously.

It was more of a savouring. As if she was a really good, hand-made chocolate.

Explored, tasted, worshiped. Ben found himself lost in her flavours, her textures, her scent. They both lost themselves in each other. Then found themselves on the other side.

When it was over they both lay stunned. The long-wished-for had finally occurred and it had exceeded both of their expectations. They didn't speak for a long time, neither wanting to break the spell or puncture the sacred silence with a wrongly chosen word. Rachel was the first to do so. She lay with her head and upper torso on Ben's chest, his arm delicious and warm and strong around her, her dark hair fanned out like some mad spider's web. Her fingers mingled with the fur at the centre of his chest, lingering at times on his nipples, causing him to tense.

'I've been wondering for a while what this looked like.' She said.

'What?' His voice was heavy, thick.

'This.' She ran her hand over his upper torso. 'Every time I come to visit you here, I'm always hoping to catch you with your t-shirt off, but it never happens. Is there not some clause that says builders have to take their shirts off on hot summer days?'

He laughed deeply and she felt the sensation resonate through her body.

'Is that what this is all about? You wanted to see my chest?'

'It was about a lot more than that.'

They both felt this. The long silence that followed acknowledged it. Nothing but Ben stroking the silky skin on Rachel's upper arms, with hushed fingers. Eventually, he spoke.

'So what brought this on? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining. But ... why now?'

She struggled for a while to find the right words.

'I suppose it was the other night in the pub. When that ... floozy with the runaway

boobs sat on your lap. I realized, I, well, I had a very strong feeling that you were *my* man. I'm sorry. It's not a very good reason, is it?'

They looked at each other then both burst into foolish giggles which lasted a long time.

Rachel loved Ben's laughter rippling underneath her and tickling at her ear.

'So.' Said Ben, when he had recovered himself. 'Should I send Sally a thank you note?'

She thumped him on the arm.

'Don't you dare.'

'I'm only joking.'

'You'd better be.'

'Why would I even *think* of her when I have everything I need right here?'

Rachel melted into the words, snuggling deeper into his chest. He wrapped his limbs around her even tighter.

'I like you after sex.' She said. 'And before. And during.'

He rolled on top of her again and once more her body pulsed up to him.

Afterwards, a kind of blissful, golden slumber overcame them both. Moments before they both fell asleep, Ben whispered into Rachel's ear.

'Are you ever going to tell me about your past?'

'Some day.'

Then they were both gone. But together.

Rachel was the first to wake. Her initial movements were slow and cat-like - luxuriant.

Then she jerked into full wakefulness.

‘What is it?’ Ben murmured.

‘What’s the time?’

Ben rubbed his face and groped about for his phone. He lifted it into his field of vision.

‘Eleven minutes to two.’

‘Jesus Christ.’ Rachel sprang to her feet. ‘I have to collect Ember at two.’

She started rummaging wildly around on the bed.

‘Where are my pants?’

‘Could be anywhere.’

‘That’s not helping.’

‘Sorry. What *is* that on your back?’

‘It’s nothing. Here they are.’

She nearly tripped in her haste to put on her knickers. Then she put them on back to front. She peeled them off then put them back on inside out. It would have to do.

‘Here. I’ll give you a lift.’

‘It’s okay.’

‘You won’t make it otherwise.’

‘You’re right. That would be great, thank you.’

They both dressed in record time, Rachel nearly breaking her neck getting down the ladder. Ben fired up the jeep and they zoomed off in a dramatic arc and pulled up outside the school gates at one minute to two.

‘Do you think anyone can tell?’ Said Rachel, rearranging and checking her hair in the mirror.

‘Tell what?’

‘That we’ve been having sex.’

‘Definitely.’

‘Really?’

‘Of course not. How could they?’

Rachel didn’t know. The look of guilty satisfaction on her face perhaps? Her mussed up hair, crumpled clothes? The scent of Ben’s sweat all over her? He looked surprisingly normal, if a little smug. Maybe she looked the same.

She walked over to collect Ember. Her heart caught at his sweet, open smile. He’d amazed her by wanting to do summer camp. Evidently lots of the kids in the school were doing it. The boy accepted Ben’s presence as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He smiled at him as he climbed into the back of the jeep and the three rode home companionably. They drew up outside The Lodge House, Rachel clambering out while the engine was still running.

‘Is Ben coming for lunch?’

The two adults turned and gaped at Ember. He was the picture of innocence. As if nothing remarkable had just occurred.

‘He is now.’ Said Rachel.

Chapter

He was growing frustrated. It was getting harder and harder to maintain a pleasant facade when he was questioning these local yokels. Ignorant fuckers. He’d thought it

would be more simple. He only had two towns left to explore and still he had zilch. Not a trace. They could have left the country for all he knew. Or that old trout back at the house could have been deluded. Or confused Kilkenny with Kildare or something.

He pulled into Castleborris early on a morning in July. He found a space on Main Street and considered his options. He had given up showing their picture to people or asking directly about them. It only served to draw attention to himself and arouse people's suspicions. His latest strategy was to maintain a low profile and observe. But first, coffee. He'd had a bad night and was struggling to stay alert. There was a cafe across the road. He got out the car, slammed the door and straightened out the gremlins in his back. The morning was bright and breezy. He'd be okay once he got an infusion of caffeine into his system. He looked up at the sign. 'Madame Cyn's'. He shoved open the purple door and it rang out annoyingly, exacerbating his distant headache. The place was mostly full. He took a discreet table at the back. There was one woman serving. She approached him now, flipping back her notebook with a practiced flourish. 'What can I get you Love?'

She smiled at him, her luscious lips a candy pink, a dimple showing.

'Double espresso please.'

'One of those mornings, is it?' Her dimple deepened and her eyes crinkled at the corners. 'Can I tempt you with anything else?'

'No thank you.'

'Right you are Love.' She snapped her notebook shut and sashayed away from the table.

He watched her retreating form. Looked like she ate too many of her own cream buns.

Attractive woman though. Bet she'd appreciate a good seeing to. He adjusted in his

seat. It had been a while. She returned with the espresso.

‘Haven’t seen you around here before. Are you new to the neighbourhood?’

He matched her smile, full wattage. It was so easy for him to turn it on.

‘Just passing though.’

‘Well I hope you enjoy your time here.’

She turned away with a smile and a nod.

He drank his coffee in silence, keeping an eye on the passers by on the street outside. Just in case. Although he hardly saw the point anymore. He was sick of this search, revealing nothing. He had to go back to Dublin soon anyway. Harry couldn’t hold his job open for ever. He was already under pressure from the other partners. Just this shit hole today then one more village tomorrow, then home. He dug at his forehead with his fingers. The coffee wasn’t working its usual magic. He still felt crap. Maybe he was coming down with something. He might have to go back to the hotel and lie down. Ordinarily, he’d stay for a while - pump that nosy bitch for information. She was just the type that would know all the local gossip. He could always come back. He paid for the coffee and left, bestowing on Cynthia his most rakish grin as he did so.

Cynthia put the money into the till and shivered slightly. She wondered why a man so good looking, so charming, had given her such a strong case of the icks. Two minutes later, the door rang out once again. She looked up to see Rachel, flushed and harassed looking.

‘So Sorry to be late Cynthia. Bloody car wouldn’t start.’

Chapter

The boy and fox continued to grow and so did their bond. Flame was more in proportion now, his body having grown into his feet and his head into his ears.

Although he still had the rangy look of a youngster. Ember was altogether sturdier.

The boy who had moved to Castleborris a scant six months beforehand was but a pale shadow. On the last day of camp, Rachel fished around in Ember's bag on their way back to the car. She was checking to see if he'd eaten any of the healthy components of his lunch.

'Did you have your apple?'

He looked up at her and nodded.

'You didn't swap it?'

He shook his head definitively.

'Good boy.'

She fished further until she pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

'What's this?' She smoothed it out with her fingers

Ember stopped walking and looked up at her enthusiastically.

'It's an invitation to a party.' She said.

She looked down at her son. His hopeful face.

'Do you want to go?'

He nodded until she feared he might loosen his brain.

'Of course you can go. Who's it from? Michael. Is he in your class in school?'

Again the nod, the happy smile, he took her hand and began to skip along.

‘Are all the boys in the class going?’

Ember slowed down momentarily.

‘No. Just friends.’ He said.

His mother battled back the tears. It was as if all her birthdays had come at once.

Ember’s animal friend still remained a constant. But it wasn’t all plain sailing for his mother.

They hadn’t been gone for long. A quick trip to the shops was all it took. Rachel always instructed Ember to make sure Flame was out before they left the house. They both by now secure in the knowledge that he would still be there upon their return. But this day Rachel stifled a yelp as she opened the door and Flame shot out past her legs, a hurtling ball of fire, her only clue that they hadn’t in fact been burgled. She walked gingerly into the lodge house, each arm weighted down by a shopping bag. She mouthed the words before she said them. Then she shouted them.

‘Jesus Christ!’ The shopping bags thudded heavily onto the floor, as Rachel’s hands flew up to her head, where they remained pressed on either side of her skull, as if trying to press out the knowledge of what had just occurred.

‘Oh Jesus Christ.’ She said again, as she slowly began to move forward, Ember nervously tracking her, his eyes round like dinner plates. The kitchen was the first area they entered, the bin upended dramatically, the contents spilled across the entire length of the tiled floor. Everything chewed and torn apart - for remnants, for flavour.

‘It’s not as if we don’t feed you, you little fucker.’ She said to no one in particular,

forgetting Ember's stealthy presence behind her. Then her hand flew up to her nose and her fingers clamped her nostrils shut as the scent that had seemed vague from the front doorway, hit in all its pungency as they came upon the first puddle of urine. Which was nothing compared to the tightly coiled turd which awaited discovery on the sitting room rug.

'Oh for f! And look what he's done to the couch! We'll never get the deposit back now!'

The saggier of the two couches looked to have exploded open, a big tear in the fabric of the centre cushion, white stuffing spilling out like a billowing cloud, as if someone had been on a rampage. Somebody clearly had. It was Rachel's turn next.

'I don't believe it.' She said. 'I don't bloody believe it!' Her hands kept flying up into the air and back down to land on her hips.

'I mean, I thought the coffee table was bad enough.'

Flame had previously gnawed at the leg of the coffee table, but Rachel had been confident that she could fix this up. The table was a piece of crap anyway. But this! No manner of crafty stitching was going to fix this.

'Ember!' She released her anger in his direction, wheeling around to find him cowering behind her. 'Why didn't you put him out like I told you to. I'm *always* telling you. Now you can see why.'

She didn't linger to see the effect of her words, but immediately began in her attempts to stuff the stuffing back into the couch. Although she may as well have been trying to shove a baby back inside its mother's womb. It was never going to work. It did help, however, to work out some of her frustration, as she pummeled away at the hapless piece

of furniture.

‘I’m going to kill that bloody animal.’

She muttered to the rhythm of her pummeling.

The worst part of the clean up operation was now complete. Everything that had been upended was now the right way up. She didn’t understand how Flame had managed to ransack to such an extent. He’d even managed to knock the portrait of the Winterbourne family off the wall. Must have been some mighty leap. It lay face down, the back blank and dark, failing to reveal the inner workings of the family. Rachel picked it up and turned it the right way around. Clara peered out from under her bonnet, enigmatic as ever.

‘Did you see what this little shit did?’ Rachel’s tone was conversational. ‘You think you might have stopped him. Warned me at least.’

She returned the frame to its rightful place, straightening it with care, feeling the good humour flowing back into her. Final job: each reachable window was flung wide open, the house in dire need of a good airing.

In her anger and her busyness, Rachel had barely given Ember a second look. She had a vague awareness that he was sitting on the back doorstep and that was where she eventually located him, elbows on knees, chin cupped in hands as he surveyed the forest before him with keen eyes. Her voice was finally gentle.

‘Shift your bum.’ She said.

She sat down heavily beside him as he obligingly scooted across the step - had no choice lest he be sat on. He didn’t look at her though. Just continued to stare. But

she looked at him and saw his upset, the tension holding his little body in place.

‘What is it Ember?’

She saw the words entering his body and although he took them in, he didn’t reply to her.

‘You know I’m not angry ...’

‘Don’t send him away!’ He removed his hands from his face and placed them on her leg.

They felt small, hot and urgent.

‘Don’t send who you mean Flame?’

He nodded in short, jerky movements, his eyes burningly earnest.

‘Sure, where would I send him, he lives here, doesn’t he? And the little bugger would only keep coming back.’

Ember seemed unaware of the tear that had leaked from the outer edge of his left eye and which was wending its path down his cheek. His eyes were moving all over her face, testing the veracity of her words, then they smiled into hers as his whole form relaxed and she saw that he believed her.

‘You didn’t think, did you ...? Oh Ember.’ She hugged him to her. ‘I wouldn’t do that to you sweetheart.’ Then she half disentangled herself so her face was close to his and she could look him in the eye.

‘But that doesn’t mean you don’t have to be more careful - about leaving him in the house on his own.’

He nodded in abject seriousness.

‘And it doesn’t mean that Flame isn’t a big, fecking eejit.’

Ember laughed and the sound traveled through her, so sweet.

When the day was done and Rachel's body was just about ready to falter, she retrieved her hidden box of cigarettes from the upper kitchen press and headed out towards the bench. She had tucked an anxious Ember into bed, Flame having failed to make an appearance since the debacle. She was all used up from the repeated assurances she'd had to give her son.

She lit the lone cigarette and as she made her first exhale, all the worries of the day went out with it. She really must give up. Not yet.

She wasn't entirely sure how she first became conscious of his presence. It may have been a whisper of musky, doggy scent on the night breeze. Or just an awareness that she was no longer alone. She looked down to her left and there he was, sitting in all his primal, animal, innocence. And as Rachel looked down, Flame looked up and the two stared each other out for what seemed like eternity. Nothing hidden. It wasn't like looking at a human. Two wild things regarding one another. Both ever alert. Both hunted. How had she failed to notice before, the upright ovals of his pupils? And then the fox took his gaze away from her. He lifted his nose aloft and sniffed precisely at the air - her cigarette smoke. Then he commenced looking out to the forest, in the same way that Rachel always did. She wondered if he still looked for his mother, or remembered her even. Either way, he sat with her now, apparently on sentry duty. She had always thought of herself as a cat person. She'd had a little black cat called Sootica as a child.

She stubbed out her cigarette and rose up off the bench. She looked down one last time at the fox's impervious head.

'You're still a little shit.' She said.

He was getting seriously big now. Flame. Ben had recently commented that he had scarce seen a larger specimen.

‘Must be all the roast beef.’

He had smiled at her in that way he had, one side of his mouth uplifted, outer eyes crinkling. She had smiled back happily. In amazement. At this man. At her happiness.

Ember and Flame romped their way through the summer days in what had once been the back garden, but what was now a summer meadow, with flattened areas where they played and tracks which she would once have called animal tracks which now could be equally called boy tracks. It wasn't clear, which was which, just as it wasn't clear whether Flame thought he was a human or Ember thought he was a fox. The two were interchangeable, she thought. Sometimes they would play in exactly the same way she had discovered foxes played together. Flame would rise on his hind legs, ears erect and alert looking. Ember would kneel before him and raise his front paws also and the two would have what looked like a mock boxing match, Ember laughing raucously with delight, the fox emitting one of a range of his extraordinary sounds, each creature starting to find his voice.

One morning Ember ran excitedly into the house, past his mother's post at the kitchen sink and thundered up stairs to the upper rooms. She heard his footsteps running overhead, then down the stairs again at full speed, clearing the last few steps with an impressive leap and out again to the garden, his arms full of teddies.

Flame, who had been grooming himself assiduously during Ember's absence, now

sat erect upon his return, his head cocked to one side, his ears rotating busily, as Ember spoke rapidly and gesticulated wildly. They were talking boy/fox again. Fox/boy. Rachel watched in mounting fascination, as Ember placed one of the teddies a few feet away, then crouched down facing towards it. Next he took a dramatic jump, lifting off his knees and landing in the direction of the teddy, at which point he took it up in his mouth and shook his head vigorously, as Rachel had seen various canines do over the years. He repeated this action two more times before turning to Flame and giving him what seemed like an urgent explanation. The animal gave the boy his rapt attention throughout, interrupting only once to scratch himself. Then to Rachel's amazement and joy, Ember flung the teddy for the fox and the fox immediately pounced on it, leaping through the air in an impossible looking, gravity defying manner, as if there was an invisible trampoline beneath him. And he too landed bang on the teddy who seemed indifferent to whether or not his throat would be ripped out. And thus they repeated ad nauseum.

What Rachel came to understand as a training process, continued on through the morning, until the unbelievable inevitably turned into the commonplace.

A few evenings later, Rachel stood in the exact same spot. It was more of a look-out point than a wash-up point, the large, well-appointed window offering her excellent views of the back of the house. She had been aware of Flame for a while now, wondered if he'd join her for her nightly smoke. He'd been curled up for much of the afternoon, on the roof of the little water-pump house, his nose buried deep in his now impressive and voluminous tail. Brush. She corrected herself. As Ember had done countless times.

She watched him jump down effortlessly. It was almost a sliding. As if sliding through the air, as if it were an element he had dominion over. Then he stretched comprehensively, then shook the remnants of sleep from his body. He was ready for the night shift. Flame the fox reporting for duty. He sat to attention and peered into the long grasses. Then all at once he stood, his body ramrod straight and stiff, his ears facing forward. With no further warning, he sailed into the air, impossibly high, impossibly far, as if he had springs attached to his feet, his tail fanning out behind him propeller-like. And then, he pounced. For a few seconds only the lower part of his body was visible, backside in air, almost comical. But then he lifted his head. Flame had caught a mouse. Was it his first? She could not tell.

The rodent was still alive, wriggling between the animal's fangs. Rachel looked away nauseated. And something else. Disgusted. For the first time with Flame. A different feeling to when he'd wrecked her house. This time there was a fearful tinge. As if newly perceived as a threat to her and her son. Those sharp, powerful teeth, tearing into the flesh of the mouse. And there was more. Up until this, Rachel had always thought of Flame as the hunted. For the first time she saw him as the hunter also. The predator as well as the prey. The matter of fact way he disposed of the corpse in his possession. The eyes, the feet, the skull, the tail - indistinguishable to him. It was all just ... food. Fuel. Life. A fox, an animal, didn't kill for malice or for pleasure, she realized. Not as certain humans might. It killed for survival, pure and simple. And she found that she was okay with him again.

Chapter

There was a golden feel to it all. Slightly unreal. This gilt-edged happiness of hers. She felt it most keenly as she wandered through the forest that day. She no longer stumbled, sure of her footing, familiar now with the layout of the tree stumps and fallen casualties of former storms. The undergrowth no longer tricked her as she navigated each tangle like a pro.

She was going to surprise Ben with a fancy, doorstep sandwich for lunch. He deserved it, he'd been working so hard, plastering the interior. Besides - she missed him - had barely seen him of late, due to all the building going-ons.

Her longing had grown into the space of his absence.

Her sense of anticipation grew as she neared the edge of the forest, the light filtering through the sparser growth. Until finally, she emerged. Much as she loved the woodland, she loved that feeling just as much, especially when stepping out into the sunlight. And the quality of the light that day was hard and bright.

Ben was there alright. But he wasn't alone. It didn't take her long to work out who his company was. No hirsute, sweaty co-worker today. It was Sally Hogan. The two were as yet unaware of her presence and deep in conversation. They had their backs to her, leaning across some fencing and facing towards the house. As she stepped nearer, she saw that their heads were close together, their bodies practically touching. She stopped taking steps. She may have even stopped taking breaths. Yet somehow they became aware of her. Ben first or Sally first turned to

find her standing there. Blinking stupidly. At least that's how she felt. Like the most stupid woman on earth. Completely vulnerable and exposed. She couldn't believe that this was happening to her again. She continued to stand like an idiot, as Sally moved away from Rachel's boyfriend.

'I'd best be off Ben. Thanks for that.'

And the woman had the balls to kiss him on the cheek. Ben had the grace at least to look uncomfortable. Rachel felt she'd taken root as Sally approached her, hand outstretched.

'Hello. We haven't been properly introduced. I'm Sally.'

Rachel gave the briefest of nods and took the woman's hand. Her own handshake was limp and pathetic, the type that would lose you points in a job interview.

Sally's smile was knowing - arch - superior. And Rachel felt her own inferiority. It ran in a line from the top of her crown and down through to her bare toes.

'Be seeing you Ben.'

Her final call, thrown casually over her shoulder, as she got into the driver's seat of the Ford Mondeo that Rachel had only just noticed. It was silver. Like Sally's tongue.

Sally sped off, leaving Rachel and Ben in the cloud of dust that she and her car left behind. Rachel stood there in silence. She took in Ben properly for the first time. He looked happy to see her, yet guarded. He advanced slowly, his hands in his pockets.

'Is that for me?' He gestured to the tin foil package in her hands. The one he had just made a mockery of. She looked down as if surprised to see it there, nodded, and handed it over to him.

'Thanks. I'm starved. I'll put the kettle on.'

‘What ...?’ Her voice came out as a croak so she tried again. ‘What was she doing here?’

‘Sally?’

‘Who else?’

‘She just needed a shoulder to cry on. She’s going through a horrible divorce.’

Rachel felt she’d rather Sally had stayed in her horrible marriage.

‘She has no other friend to confide in?’

Ben eyed her carefully, sensing imminent attack.

‘Sally and I go back a long way. Sometimes it’s good to get the opinion of someone who knows you well.’

‘That’s what you think she was here for. Your opinion?’

‘What else would she be here for?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. You looked very cosy standing there together.’

His sigh had more than an edge of weariness to it.

‘We were just talking.’

‘You virtually had your arm around her.’

‘I did not. That’s horseshit Rachel, and you know it.’

‘I know no such thing.’

‘Oh, Jesus Christ. I don’t have time for this crap.’

‘I don’t have time for this crap either.’

‘What crap? I’m not giving you any crap.’

‘Can’t you see she’s angling to get you back?’

‘She is not. She’s ...’

‘Oh, she is. Make no mistake.’

‘You’re the one that’s making a mistake Rachel, a big one.’

He was angry now. And she was fearful. She did her best not to show it, raising her chin in defiant air.

‘I can’t believe you’re so blind.’

‘I can’t believe you’re so fucking paranoid.’

That one struck home, not least for the anger with which it was expressed. His eyes were cold and somehow grey looking, as if a shield had come down. Not the usual warm, hazel that caressed her.

‘Honest to God Rachel, this is becoming a pattern. It’s like every time things are going well between us, you do something to sabotage it.’

‘Me? How is this my fault? I wasn’t the one cosying up to my ex.’

‘I wasn’t cosying up to anyone.’

His voice was loud and furious.

‘And I don’t like being accused of doing something I haven’t done. Jesus, you’re so insecure. Are you ever going to trust me?’

Was she ever going to trust him? Was she ever going to trust any man? Was she just spoiled for all relationships for life? She didn’t know, but she strongly suspected this to be the case.

Before the tears could betray her and weaken her further, Rachel turned away from Ben and back to the forest. He didn’t try to stop her. Didn’t call out to her even. Her eyes flooded and her feet found their way. And she lost all hope on that journey home, so different to her journey there. She passed an empty fox’s den and wished that she

could crawl inside, curl up into a ball and die. But she was just too big, in spite of feeling so tiny and insignificant.

She somehow lost her way in the woods. This had never happened to her before. But she stumbled over unfamiliar paths, the trees leading her in another direction. She found a discarded antler, half-hidden by a fern and cushioned by a generous mound of moss. She lifted it up and examined it with her fingers, experiencing a fleeting moment of delight. She decided to bring it home for Ember. By the time she had made this decision, despair had overtaken her again.

It had started to rain. She was protected from the worst of it by the canopy of trees. Until she came out into the open once more. Blinking and disorientated, she couldn't work out where she was at first. Then she saw the ruin of the house, partly obscured by the vastly falling sheets of rain. Bowing her head and wrapping herself in her own arms, she blindly walked in the general direction of the house. It was all so bleak in the rain. The grey skies, the grey stones, tumbling down on one another. She was close now and the feeling was eerie, as if the eyes of the past stared at her from the sullen windows. She shivered and turned to leave. As she did, she tripped awkwardly over a jagged rock that lay concealed in the long grasses. And as she stopped to consider whether or not she'd twisted her ankle, there was a sound overhead like a vicious dog growling proceeded seconds earlier by a dramatic sheet of lightening which electrified the sky and the ruined house below it. And for a fraction of a second, Rachel felt she couldn't trust her eyes any more because the house seemed no longer a ruin. Illuminated by the lightening, she saw it as it once had been, transformed to former glory, a stately home in its heyday. And then she blinked and it was a ruin once more. And she was just a

drenched woman with a sore ankle and an over active imagination. She limped her way back to the shelter of the trees, part of her knowing this to be folly in a storm. But the lightening and thunder appeared to be passing faster than the speed of light and sound, a longer distance between the two, the angry dog was calming down. And she felt safe again amongst the trees. As if she was with family.

But that had been strange.

When she got home she lay down on the sofa, as if all the energy had drained out of her body. Her sleep was hot and clammy as she twisted and turned together with the convoluted structures of her dreams. A voice kept calling out to her, but she couldn't work out what it was saying, or its origin. All she recognized was the urgency. The underlying panic.

She appeared to be running through the old house, as she imagined it once had been. Although sometimes this morphed into the house she used to share with Dermot. Or sometimes it was The Lodge House. But somehow not the lodge house, in that strange way that dreams often had. She dreamed that she was being pursued, hotly and resentfully, by an unseen form, through unfamiliar corridors, trying to find the way out, and then she was running through a tunnel of trees, a dark, natural passage way, closing in on her, brambles tugging at her ankle, trying to pull her down and all the while this nameless creature rapidly gaining ground on her. Almost catching up with her ...

And then she woke up, her body slick with sweat and splashed her face with water, until a vague sense of reality returned.

Rachel had an overwhelming urge to hole up under her duvet, but they were out of milk and Ember would go nuts if he couldn't have his rice crispies for supper.

She skulked around the corner shop, lurking beside the dairy section, picking up essentials, still damp and bedraggled after her foray in the storm. The woman behind the counter spoke in what seemed like an unnecessarily loud voice to the woman she was serving. Both locals, both in their sixties.

'You'll never guess what I heard?'

'What Mary?'

'Ben McCarthy and Sally Hogan are after getting back together.'

'No!'

'That's what I heard.'

'After all this time? Well, I can't say I'm surprised, after how they were carrying on at the karaoke.'

'Well. There you have it.'

'I'm delighted for them both. I always thought they made a lovely couple.'

Rachel looked down at her fingers, gripping white the carton in her hand. She noticed they were trembling. She put the carton down, fearful she might drop it. She would have to buy her milk elsewhere.

Upon Rachel's departure, Mary who ran the corner shop winked at her lifelong friend.

Who also happened to be Sally Hogan's aunt.

The following day in the cafe, the words that were burgeoning to get out of Rachel's mouth - and most of all, out of the obsessive compulsive section of her mind - kept getting stuck in her throat. She felt like she'd swallowed a bumble bee. Or rather it was trapped behind her teeth, stinging her soft and tender inner cheeks.

'What's eating you?' Cynthia eventually asked her.

Rachel relayed what she had heard.

'Load of shite.' Cynthia pronounced.

'How do you know?'

'Because I know fake gossip when I hear it. Amn't I an expert? All the tripe I have to listen to in this place.'

'You love every bit of it.'

'Sure, I know I do.'

'But how do you ...?'

'Lookit. You were in d'Arcy's when you heard it.'

'So.'

'So the d'Arcys are first cousins to the Hogans. Mary - God bless the oul' trout - was only trying to mess with your head. Did I right good job of it too.'

Rachel looked incredulous.

'But why would she do that?'

Cynthia threw back her head and laughed in such an exaggerated manner that she reminded Rachel of a cartoon baddie.

'Because you're a blow in, of course.'

Rachel scanned Cynthia's jovial face, processing this piece of information.

‘And is that such a terrible thing to be?’

Cynthia laughed again although this time it came out like a sharp bark as she flicked a tea towel across the surface of the table she was passing, thereby dislodging several cake crumbs.

‘Whether it’s good or bad doesn’t matter. It’s what you are to them. And you’ll be a blow in until the day you die. And when you’re six feet under in the local cemetery, you’ll still be a blow in. It’ll say so on your tomb stone: “Here lies Rachel the Blow In. She wasn’t from around these parts you know”.’

Rachel began to giggle in spite of herself. Until the two women were doubled up with mirth. Cynthia had learned the hard way that the best way to approach life was with humour. She hoped to pass this lesson on to her younger friend.

So Rachel was still miserable, but that was okay. She dwelled comfortably in that role, used to being the victim. Then one morning, she sat nursing her coffee mug, still in her dressing gown, she hadn’t yet mustered the energy to get dressed. And then she heard a woman being interviewed on the radio. This woman called herself a survivor of domestic abuse. Not a victim. A survivor. By the sounds of it, a victor too. This woman was incredibly inspiring. As Rachel listened something grew up inside her, something strong and powerful and starting at her core. She could do this too. Just this one shift in perception could change everything.

When the interview was over, the radio station played ‘Survivor’ by Destiny’s Child. With a determined scrape of her chair behind her, Rachel got up and discarded her worn and comfortable dressing gown, shrugging her shoulders and letting it fall to the floor.

Then she started to move her body, shoulders at first, loosening, then hips, then feet joining in. Movements jerky at first, turning fluid. Until she was in full Beyonce mode, singing too, loudly and joyfully and completely out of key. She inhabited that song. She hoped too that she could learn to fully inhabit her new role.

Flame came with her every night now, to shut the iron gates. It was part of their nocturnal routine. She wouldn't necessarily see him at first, but she knew he was always there. She would hear him trotting along the path, slightly behind her and to her right, as if he intended to stay within her peripheral vision. She would hear his claws click-clacking against the pavement. Then he would silently wait as she clanged the gate shut then whispered her goodnight words to the copper beech. Then they would begin their return journey, the click-clacking once again. And then he would usually sit with her for a while, before merging back into the trees, to do whatever a fox did at night time.

Or perhaps he just kept watch.

Of course he was motivated by food. Why else would he do such a thing?

Chapter

Ben hammered away, trying to work out his frustration, welcoming the hard graft and the sweat, thinking random thoughts, mainly about Rachel. God that woman was so.

Fucking. Frustrating. He hammered in time with his thoughts, making it a game.

After a time the rhythm changed as his mood improved.

If you build it they will come.

The thought came from nowhere.

Or the everywhere.

If you build it they will come.

If you build it they will come.

He hammered along happily and rhythmically, this line from one of his favourite films.

Until something told him it was time to lay down his hammer and walk through the woods to Rachel's house.

She was sitting on her bench, listening to the sounds of the summer night. Up until quite recently, Ben's hammering had been one of these sounds, carrying through the night air, the stillness. But now he had stopped. Probably gone to bed. She sighed at the thought.

The fox, who had been sitting quietly up until now, suddenly rose to all four paws and emitted a strange, muffled sound. Rachel looked down at him, slightly alarmed. Was that a bark? She saw that the animal's attention was totally trained on the trees in front of them. What could he see? What could he hear? What could he smell? Her alarm grew. Just as it was about to reach its peak, the fox began to wag his tail. And Ben appeared between the trees and the bottom of the garden. Something else rose up in Rachel now. She rapidly stubbed out the cigarette and shoved it behind her with her foot. Damn! No mints!

Ben advanced with what looked to Rachel like purpose. As he drew close, Flame lay down and rolled over on his back, his tail continuing to wag, exposing his

soft, white belly to be rubbed, by this man that he'd known since early puppy-hood.

Rachel had no idea how the fox viewed Ben. Or any of them for that matter.

What was she to him? A quasi-mother figure? An honorary vixen? She did think Ember was his brother though. Ben laughed gently and rubbed Flame's tummy as delicately as was possible with the toe of his work boot.

'You're a big eejit.' He said, with affection.

It gave Rachel pleasure to see it. To see him. She almost forgot she was angry. Not quite. Ben removed his foot from the fox and focused on her.

'Look Rach. I'm fed up with this.'

She felt her heart dropping to her knees. A sickly feeling. As if she were in a rapidly falling elevator. He was breaking up with her.

She would not cry.

She would not cry.

'I have no interest in Sally. That's ancient history. You're the woman I love and you're the one I want to be with.'

Rachel couldn't comprehend what she was hearing. The normally taciturn Ben making such a declaration. Her heart rose up again, like some flesh and blood hot air balloon.

She gulped.

She would not cry.

She would not cry.

She whispered something.

'What was that?' His voice and manner, all was soft, all was gentle, as he crouched down in front of the bench and took her two hands in his own, all the while peering

intently up into her face.

‘I love you too.’ She said.

He smiled fully at her, all his laughter lines coming out to play.

‘Well, can we stop all this nonsense then? All this stupid fighting.’

‘Alright then.’

‘Alright?’

‘Alright.’

And she pulled him into her embrace, her arms around his neck, her legs wrapping themselves about his waist. He lifted her bodily towards him, up off the stark, hard bench and into the lush, long grasses, dry from the summer heat, luxuriant with wildflower. And hidden from the world by nature’s bounty, they stripped each other bare, until all that was left were two bodies twisted into one animal and two exposed souls twisting one another in their vulnerability. Rachel found Ben utterly beautiful. Ben thought the same about her.

Rachel giggled after they’d finished round one.

‘I tickles a bit, doesn’t it?’

‘Mmm. Ben went in for a kiss to the curve of her neck and stayed there.

Neither could remember where and when they had tasted something so delicious.

When round two was complete, Rachel turned her head and looked Ben in the eye.

‘I’m ready to tell you now.’ She said.

Chapter

It had all started out so well. Everything looking so promising. Good on paper. Picture perfect. Such a handsome couple. Your Daddy's rich and your mama's good looking. Smile for the camera. A thousand cliches drowning out the truth. What looks wholesome is putrid underneath, alive with a thousand maggots, gorging on the flesh of this perfect life. The human willingness to worship the happy image. To aspire to what is ultimately unreal.

Rachel aspired to it all. It hadn't been simple - working and studying and bringing up her little boy all on her own. But she loved it so much she oftentimes forgot how hard she was working. Until she landed heavily into bed at night, the book she was reading falling with a thud out of her hand, before she managed to reach the end of the first page.

Rachel had fallen for Ember's father hard. He was the latest in a long line of hard falls. She continually got the wind knocked out of her, continually went right back for more, in a constant, misguided quest to find sanctuary. Home. The security she had always craved.

Stephen was his name. He wasn't all bad. In fact, he looked a lot like Jesus, with his long, dark, oily hair and his juvenile attempt at a beard. They had met at a dodgy party, which teemed with art students such as himself. They bonded over a love of design and several Jaegermeister shots. Their courtship - such as it was - was brief and tempestuous. Rachel fell pregnant rapidly and shamefully naively. Naive in the manner of conception and also in her skewed judgment of Stephen's probable reaction. Which was, in fact, to take off to Europe as if shot out of a catapult. Leaving Rachel to deal with two irate parents and no clue how to handle this terrifying and baffling situation.

Of course, his year in Paris, studying textile design, had been prearranged. And he would contact her upon his return to meet up with his child - if indeed it was his child - and forge the required paternal connection. Needless to say, she was still waiting to hear from him.

According to Facebook, he had since fallen in love with a French girl called Anouk and the two resided permanently now in Paris, together with a matching set of petite twin girls. His latest exhibition had been quite a success. Rachel's resentment had long since dissolved and she left her emotional guard down, should Stephen ever decide to do the decent thing. Or if Ember wanted to seek out his blood in years to come. Because apart from anything else - no matter his intention - Stephen had given Rachel the greatest gift of her life. The love she had felt for Ember once he was born, shot through her with the power and the velocity of a high speed train, sustaining her and enabling her to do whatever she had to do to bring him up.

It was love for her boy, her desire to make a better future for them both, that led her to study architecture, which in turn led her to the office of Whelan and Baxter Associates where she applied for practical experience after her third year of study.

Her inner thighs were sticking together with sweat, as she waited to be called into the partner's office, her tights uncomfortable and unfamiliar, like everything else. She didn't belong here amongst these trappings of success and affluence and she felt as she had for much of her life - an impostor.

Then the interview occurred. She only saw one partner that day. One was enough. Dermot sat back behind his massive, marble, modern block of a desk, his manner relaxed and super-confident. *He* certainly didn't feel like an impostor. How she envied him

this. Longed for a piece of that herself. Maybe when she was fully qualified. Maybe when she was Rachel Doyle, MRIAI, she would feel that she deserved and that she belonged.

‘So tell me a little about yourself Rachel.’

Why would anyone want to know anything about her? But - she would pretend to be interesting. Isn't that what interviews were all about? Projecting a false self.

‘Well. I'm thirty three years old and I'm from Dublin. I've recently completed the first three years of my studies and now I feel its time for some practical experience I was doing secretarial work before, mainly to support myself and my son. But what I've *always* wanted to be was an architect. So here I am.’

She gave him a sidelong glance. Was he listening? He was picking an invisible speck of dust from his lapel. He looked up at her, mildly surprised, that she'd finished talking. Then he smiled right into the pit of her stomach.

‘That's wonderful Rachel. You're clearly passionate about this line of work.’

‘Oh I am. I *really* am.’

He grinned. ‘I can tell. You know, we mostly get young men in here looking for experience. But it's nice to see a few women entering the game. About time.’

He had all the slickness of a radio DJ, oozing confidence, oozing charm, oozing oozing something. Her social self was so impressed that her instinct was completely overridden. And he was so good looking, this man. So impressive. Imagine showing up to the school reunion with him. Oh yes, this is my husband, oh yes, I'm a qualified architect don't you know, we both are - partners in every way.

It was his chin that most impressed her at first, although she'd never before been aware of prioritizing a man's chin. It was like a super hero's - chiseled and square, with a dimple in the centre, a deep and defined groove. His whole face in fact had a chiseled quality to it, so much so that you would almost suspect him of being gay. But he had such a strong aura of testosterone about him, despite the perfection of his blond head of hair. A few silvers at the side, only adding dimension. How did some people manage to look so immaculate? She was in awe. And elated when given the opportunity to work with him. She didn't realize at the time, that she was being interviewed for an altogether different, more intimate and insidious role.

At the end of her first Friday on the job, Dermot asked Rachel out for dinner. Not on a date. That would have been unethical. Just two colleagues heading out to chew the fat.

She had been tidying her desk, when all of a sudden, that prickling sensation - the certainty of being watched. Her eyes widened and darted upwards, like prey sensing imminent attack. But it was only Dermot. Leaning casually against the door jamb, hands in pockets, ankles crossed, tie loose and noose-like. His face altered and he smiled at her, like someone starring in his own toothpaste commercial.

'Well Rachel. How did you find your first week?'

She was jittery all of a sudden, her relaxed feelings deserting her. Her fingers became all thumbs as she gathered up the last of her papers and her heart commenced a little jig in the suddenly hollow cavity of her chest.

'Great thanks. I loved it.' She had. She smiled and it seemed as if her inner top lip

was overly dry and stuck fast to her teeth. She drew it down self-consciously and took a gulp she hoped was not too visible. None of this was lost on Dermot Whelan.

‘Come on. Dinner’s on me.’

He didn’t wait for a response. Didn’t give her a chance to explain about Ember and having to alter her child minding arrangements. He just disappeared around the side of the door with the clear expectation that she would follow. Follow she did, fearing abandonment. She whipped up her belongings and scurried rapidly after him, feeling foolish in her eagerness, wanting so desperately to be wanted.

She found him waiting at the front door, in similar casual pose. He smiled at her once more.

‘Let’s go.’

This time he held the door for her. Gentleman. She ducked somewhat breathlessly under his arm, which bulged in a promising way beneath his shirt sleeve. She attempted nonchalance as they sped off in his sporty, little Merc. It may have been fueled by pure testosterone alone.

The restaurant was new and swanky. She’d walked on by it before, but never dreamed of going inside - yet another place where she didn’t feel she belonged. Such locations were numerous.

The menu was long and baffling. To Rachel’s relief, Dermot offered to order for her. She didn’t dare say she was flirting with vegetarianism. Of course she’d love the steak. Medium well. Perfect. Thank you so much. Dermot took his rare and bloodied.

The conversation flowed nicely. Dermot did most of the talking, which suited the dumbstruck Rachel, who was much more comfortable in the role of the listener. More

than happy to be the mirror in which Dermot admired himself. The system worked well for both of them. At the conclusion of their meal - which Dermot paid for, of course - he insisted on driving her back to her own rust-mobile, which remained forlorn and alone, in the car park at the back of their building. Rachel's breath caught in her windpipe as Dermot got out of his side of the car and walked slowly around to hers. He was never in the rush that she felt herself perpetually to be in.

'Thank you for the lovely dinner,' She said.

He nodded in acknowledgment. 'Thank you for your company. I really enjoyed talking to you. I feel as if ...,' he looked in the air above their heads, as if for the appropriate words, then back down to her, 'as if I've known you all my life.'

And with that he kissed her chastely on the cheek. But she felt the hotness underneath.

She remained blissfully unaware that she had now been branded.

Her friends and female acquaintances were similarly taken - jealous in turns.

How did *she* manage to bag *him* - she imagined them to be saying behind her back.

This Catch.

But there was a catch.

There's always a catch.

Dermot's courtship of Rachel was overwhelming. It was almost as if he'd read a book entitled "How to be the Perfect Boyfriend". His manners were impeccable. And he seemed to accept Ember. He was helpful too, giving her advice on what she should wear. Not letting her pay for anything. She had her first understanding of those cliched terms - whirlwind romance and swept off your feet. Because she existed within such a

maelstrom of emotions, she literally didn't know where she was, the ground underfoot constantly shifting, as if she could no longer trust her own judgment or her very emotions. She had what all the world wanted, what all the people around her said that she should desire. And so their voices, the voices of the world, drowned out her own small inner voice.

And that was a pity.

She slept with him earlier than she had meant to. The sex had a kind of dark thrill to it. It occurred in total blackness. She couldn't see his face, but she could feel the power unleashed. As if the animal within had escaped the confines of its cage, the one that was constructed of social mores. It was exciting. If a little bruising. His fists around her wrists like fleshly clamps.

When he was finished, he suggested that they go out for a drink. Clothes and social masks back on, they stumbled out into the night time, Rachel a little drunk on hormones and happiness. Dermot wrapped his arm around her shoulder, in a new, all-encompassing way. She shrunk into his body feeling wanted. Possessed.

She brought him home to meet her mother and her sister. Her father was long gone. Long lamented. A false castle of memories constructed in order to contain the past.

Her mother was rather overweight, her sister rapidly following suit, the two of them semi-reclusive. The arrival of this handsome stranger into their tiny lives was almost more than they could comprehend. Had he arrived on a white steed, wearing a full suit of armour, he could scarcely have had a greater impact. They, in turn, mistook him for

having a big life. Mistook him for being big. But Dermot wasn't big. He wasn't even medium. He was a tiny little person with a meagre little heart, which pumped the blood feebly about his body, performing little or no other function. Certainly not love. Never to love. This heart didn't know how. But he was shiny on the outside, and that was all that mattered..

Even more mystifying to Rachel's close female relatives was Dermot's apparent interest in Rachel herself. It was younger sister Rose who had a long time before been hand picked by their mother as the golden child. Which left her elder sibling, Rachel, to be relegated a long way down to the position of scapegoat. Her father and sister went along readily with this role assignment. It was handy having someone to blame when anything went wrong. A useful receptacle in which to dump one's bad moods and frustrations. It saved having to kick the cat. And thus in its dysfunctionality, their family functioned.

Dermot brought flowers - of course he did - along with a veritable cornucopia of gifts, with which to tempt the willing taste buds of his prospective in-laws. He was clever with his choice of chocolates and cakes, which the women consumed with gusto as soon as their guests had departed, enabling one another in their overeating as usual.

As the front door opened at the top of their visit, Rachel couldn't help but feel smug, even a small bit triumphant, at the expressions on the faces of her mother and her sister. Her mother in the foreground, practiced expression, her sister in the background, a younger mirror image, mouth hanging open in an unconscious O, ready for someone to pop a sweet into it.

Rachel resembled her father's family entirely. A species of dark, small-boned

people who remained shadowy figures in her life, occasionally surfacing at funerals and the like. Her father - the black, black, darkest of sheep - had fallen out with his family years before. They were the 'bad' family, just as she was the 'bad' daughter. And no amount of effort could ever remove that label. So Rachel didn't know her aunts, although she sensed a kinship with them, as if cut from the same cloth of DNA. In her own way she felt as an egg that had landed in the wrong nest.

Rachel tried and failed not to be pleased at the mix of wonder and bewilderment on her mother's visage. She wished she didn't care what the woman thought of her. How convenient that would be. How relieving. But care she did.

'Won't you take a seat Dermot?' A theatrical wave at the honoured armchair, where Rachel's father used to sit. Her mother was fully made-up, her attire, floaty and floral, in keeping with the over-feminized decor in the living room.

'Thank you Mrs Doyle.'

'Oh, call me Moira.'

It was like the queen telling somebody to call her Elizabeth.

Moira and Rose sat opposite Dermot hanging on voraciously to every syllable.

Rachel sat on the edge as usual, just outside the inner circle.

'Are you Dublin Dermot?'

'Yes. Foxrock.'

Her mother nodded slowly. 'How lovely.'

Rachel could read her mother's mind as surely as if the woman's thoughts were written with magic marker in the air above her head. Impressed by his salubrious background. Distressed that she might suffer from comparison. But Dermot showed no signs of

disparagement. He lavished praise on everything, nailed down or otherwise. Looks, design, food - no opportunity wasted. Until the two women never wanted him to leave. In fact they both suffered from severe flattery withdrawal when Dermot at last excused himself, Rachel trailing behind him in the wake of his glory. How proud she was that such a man had chosen her. He who could surely have his pick. This handsome professional with the all too easy charm. And he had chosen her. For a reason not one of the three women could fathom. Rachel fervently hoped that at last her mother and sister would see her with new eyes. That the murky veil through which they viewed her would finally be removed.

The two waved enthusiastically as the Mercedes Benz pulled out of the driveway of their modest, suburban home, mother hoping against hope that Bridget Brophy from number six was watching. Dermot waved back in an equally friendly fashion. Then as they made their way out of the estate, his laughter finally escaped like hostile gunfire.

‘Jesus Christ. I’ve never seen such a pair of enormous fucking heifers.’

Rachel turned to look at his incredulous profile. Absorbed his mocking tone. She was torn in so many ways.

When later in shy and subdued tones, under cover of darkness and duvet, Rachel brought up the topic of meeting Dermot’s family some day, she was met with a silence so rigid and foreboding, that it called to mind a prison wall, complete with knots of barbed wire and vicious, snarling dogs.

In hindsight, there were many red flags. But as each one was raised, it was lowered

straight away to half mast. By the pure intensity of Rachel's neediness. One such flag almost came with bells and whistles on it. But still it was ignored. Pushed right down into the wasteland of her tattered self esteem.

They were sitting outside a cafe, she and Dermot, springtime sunshine pouring down on their crowns - the setting almost idyllic. Rachel couldn't say for sure how long the woman had been there. But there she was. Standing. Staring. Looming almost, above their outdoor table. Dermot noticed her several seconds after Rachel did. He followed her eyes to the woman's face which glowered in an extraordinary way. Rachel felt instantly uneasy. Then the unease traveled upwards from her gut and into her throat. She could not read the expression on the woman's face. Or maybe she chose not to.

The woman remained silent for quite some time. She was slight and brunette, not unlike Rachel. Her eyes raked over Dermot's features as if wishing him pestilence. Then her gaze rested on Rachel, the expression instantly altered.

'Get out while you still can.'

Then she walked away from them both, visibly straightening her shoulders, one foot in front of the other in brisk, purposeful fashion.

Rachel finally found her voice. It came out after a gulp.

'Who was that?'

'Oh, just some mad cunt I used to know. Fucking fruitcake she was. Well rid.'

He speared a tomato with the prong of his fork and the seeds spilled out, red and gutlike.

She watched him crunch the love apple, his eyes wide and unseeing. Her own appetite appeared to have diminished. As if something bitter had occurred in her mouth. As if she herself had tasted his very words.

An uneasy, unsettling feeling landed in her stomach and remained there for a long time. She filed it all away under “Didn’t want to know”.

They were dining out again. This time, in a very posh, night-time eatery. Dates with Dermot always felt like walking on to a film set. She was honoured to be cast as the leading lady in his life. The other diners all had bit parts - the extras at the surrounding tables. The good looking waiter.

Their relationship had motored along at break-neck speed. He had already told her several times that he loved her. That he had trouble imagining life before her. Even that he couldn’t live without her. These words were such a balm to Rachel. So soothing to the wounds in her psyche. To be needed. To be wanted. It was all she’d ever wanted.

The waiter was very attentive. It was the kind of place where they refilled your water glass after each and every sip. Rachel smiled up at him, gratefully and in sympathy. She was usually the one doing the serving.

Dermot appeared unusually quiet. Rachel’s attempts at conversation came to nowt. At the end of the meal, he threw down his napkin, as if in disgust and perfunctorily paid the bill, without asking Rachel if she wanted coffee. She knew he was angry. Was familiar now with the signs. She just couldn’t fathom the reason why. She walked rapidly alongside him, looking upwards all the while. She couldn’t get him to turn his implacable profile towards her, no matter how many times she pressed his arm of steel, or made pathetic jokes for his benefit. It wasn’t until they were in the car that he made his feelings known to her, having slammed them both inside. His look conveyed bitterness

and deep, deep hurt.

‘I can’t believe you did that?’

‘Did what?’ Her head drew back in bewilderment.

‘Were you *trying* to humiliate me?’

She searched his wounded expression for clues.

‘I’m sorry Dermot. But I really don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘You know exactly what I mean. Flirting with the waiter like that. Right in front of me.

Like some two bit ... whore.’

The word slapped her right in the face, unexpected and unpleasant. Before she had time to respond, Dermot slammed his palm down on the steering wheel. Thwack. She winced.

That night he just brought her home.

Rachel was used to love being a perpetually elusive commodity. Used to consistently striving for it, the feeling that it was always tantalizingly out of reach. If she could only stretch herself out of shape just that little bit more ...

Dermot asked Rachel and Ember to move in with him. This truly capsized her. She had never expected a man as impressive as Dermot to be willing to take her on, let alone her and her son. How generous he was. And Ember was to have his own room, crammed with all the stuff that a boy of his age could possibly wish for. Everyone told her she had landed on her feet. So why did she feel so disorientated?

She and Dermot attended many functions. How fortunate that he loved to buy her clothes - his taste flawless. He was much more skilled than her at putting outfits together. She was so lucky she had him to give her advice in this regard. At first this advice was solely dispensed in the shops. After a time, it extended into the bedroom.

He would come up behind her while she was getting dressed. Silently. Like a big, blond panther.

‘Are you sure about that dress?’

‘Um ...’ She had been until that moment, the soft, dove grey one she had chosen herself.

‘What about the one I bought you last week. The midnight blue?’

‘Well, I think this one ...’

‘No. The midnight blue.’

He unzipped the dress decisively, down the whole length of her back, where it gaped apart like an open wound. He slipped it off her shoulders with fingers that were firm and deft, until it fell into a puddle of tears at her feet. She stepped out of the comfort of the soft grey and into the rigid blue of the dress that he had selected. In much the same way as he had selected her. It only just fit her. It had to be forced up her spine.

‘Have you put on weight?’ This comment was administered together with a mirthless chuckle.

‘No.... I don’t think so.’

The zip nicked her skin on the way up and at the cut off point at the nape of her neck, a strand of her hair got caught. Dermot yanked it out for her. She uttered a yelp, as the needle sharp pain reached her scalp. He chuckled once again.

‘Sorry about that.’

He didn't sound sorry, she reflected. More like someone who had made his point.

When Rachel looked back at this incident, she was to recognize it as the first of a thousand cuts, that her old self was to die of.

Dermot had a myriad of ways in which he made his displeasure clear. He particularly disliked it when she talked to her friends on the phone in the evening. If she did it in the sitting room, he'd turn the TV up so loud that she'd have to go outside into the hall.

'Who was that?' He'd say when she came back in, not once removing his eyes from the screen, his manner was casual, his tone was not.

'That was Ciara.'

'The vacuous one?'

'She's not vacuous. She's just ... a little kooky.'

'Is that what you call it?'

Or else it was Deborah, who was bossy and opinionated or Samantha who was too clever for her own good. So these phone calls diminished. As did her contact with the outside world.

She found she saw her family less and less too. And in the beginning, she didn't realize that this was not her choice.

But he provided so well for her, gave her every creature comfort a woman could possibly ask for. Except she didn't ask. He decided. So much so that she no longer needed to shop for herself.

'I'm going to start doing the grocery shopping on line. Save you the trouble of having to go to the supermarket.'

'I really don't mind ...'

'It makes more sense to order it and have it delivered.'

So their diet was very healthy, which was good. If she did fancy a treat - a chocolate bar or a packet of crisps - she took to sneaking it a break time. At first, she would consume her guilty pleasure in the back of her car, vigilant about hiding the evidence, picking up every crumb, disposing of the packets in a neutral bin. (The bin in her own office was a no-no. She had made that mistake once before). But she no longer had the car.

'That thing's a death trap. We don't need it anyway - we have the Merc.'

So now she lurked around the back of the office building, keeping a look out at all times, cramming the contraband rapidly down her throat, barely tasting anything. She often sicked it up after anyhow, on the basis that if he didn't spot her eating it, he'd spot it on her hips at some later date. He was so proud that she could now fit into a size six. She wouldn't want to disappoint him.

He really did make a big effort with Ember. Unfortunately, their interests didn't quite coincide. Dermot had been a keen sportsman in his youth. Even now, he still kept very fit, playing five-a-side in an inter-company league and decimating his opponents on the squash court. It made her uneasy when he played. When he had a victory he came home all pumped up with adrenaline, his aggression heightened instead of diminished. The rare occasions when he lost were even worse. She tended to feign exhaustion, or, if at all possible, sleep.

Ember was not a sporty boy. He was the artistic type. Highly sensitive, he liked to read or draw pictures or stage elaborate plays with his teddy bears in starring roles.

'He's a bit old for teddies, isn't he?'

Dermot's sole comment after one of these productions.

'He's only six.'

She was much quicker to jump to Ember's defense than her own.

'What he needs,' continued Dermot, 'is to join a boy's soccer league.'

'He's very young.'

'No he's not. Harry's son is in a league and he's only five. I'll ask him how we can go about getting Ember signed up.'

He's not your son.

The voice was only audible in her head. But the realization that she was glad that Ember was not Dermot's son shocked her.

The three of them went along the following week, to register the reluctant child into the mini league. Dermot spoke constantly and confidently, all the way on the short car journey to the pitch. How much Ember would love it. How it would bring him out of himself. How it wasn't good for a boy to spend so much time indoors. Rachel privately thought that Ember spent plenty of time outdoors, racing around on his bike, mostly pretending that it was a horse. And collecting leaves and stones in the back garden, happy with the company of other children, but by no means dependent on it. But she knew this was not the masculine outdoor activity that Dermot had in mind. And Ember did try. To please the only father figure that he'd ever known. It wasn't skills he lacked. It was a competitive temperament. He just didn't care all that much whether or not he scored, or whether he could get the ball off the other player. And would in fact avoid doing so, if he particularly liked the boy or if the manoeuvre might result in an injury for either.

He seemed deaf - or at least numb - to the yells of Dermot and the other less genteel parents, that were pelted at him from the sidelines.

‘Come on for God’s sake, chase the bloody ball, tackle him.’

But Rachel knew her son better. Knew that he internalized every word. Then retreated into his shell, transporting himself to another location in his imagination.

But Dermot wouldn’t give up. Enforced practice ensued in the back garden of their Foxrock home. A goal net was purchased. Rachel watched with sinking heart as Dermot and Ember alternated their positions of goalie and striker. Dermot had spoken excitedly about how he suspected that Ember’s natural position was in goal. So he fired shots at the boy. Some verbal. Ignoring Ember’s protests of hunger or tiredness.

Rachel found she could no longer watch. She sat on the edge of the bed she shared with Dermot, her face turned away from the generous window that glinted down onto the garden. But she could still hear them. And suddenly, a shrill cry followed by gut-wrenching sobs. Then Dermot’s voice:

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake. Don’t be such a fucking drama queen.’

Without pausing to look out of the window, Rachel cleared the stairs in what felt like one gigantic, super-human leap and out to the long back garden where Ember was wailing on the ground between the two goal posts, his head in his hands and bowed between his knees. Dermot stood several feet away, on the spot from which he took his shots, one hand on his hip, the other bouncing the ball, repeatedly and impatiently.

‘Leave him. He’s just being a cry baby.’

Rachel flew by, oblivious.

‘I said leave him!’

This time it was a roar.

Unthinking and blind with anger herself, Rachel yelled back.

‘I will not leave him, can’t you see he’s really hurt?’

She thought no more about it as she tended to her son. She had difficulty making sense of his words, through his snotty, muffled sobs.

‘He hit me in the face.’

Seemed to be the gist of it. He must have got a smack of the ball in the face. She assisted him to his feet and one arm around her son, led him towards the open back doors.

It happened so quickly, she didn’t see it coming. Although in hindsight ... Dermot snatched her arm as she was passing and dragged her into the house with a strength and a ferocity that shocked and horrified her. Ember fell away from her at some point. She heard him scream. ‘Mammy!’

As soon as they were inside the French doors that Rachel had once so admired, Dermot flung her bodily onto the floor. The Italian marble tiles were cold and hard beneath her. He stood directly and threateningly over Rachel, his distended, purple face close above her, spittle collecting at the corners of the lips that she’d once considered so sensual.

‘How dare you speak to me like that, you stupid bitch.’

Whereupon he delivered a resounding slap across her left cheek, like nothing she’d ever felt before, she thought her head would twist right off her shoulders. Instead her forehead connected with a loud thwack to the tiles. She lay there dazed for some time, vaguely aware that the shadow of Dermot had passed over her. Her consciousness was trying to grasp that Ember was kneeling over her, shaking her by the arm and screaming

out for her. She must get up. She must get up for her son. She must protect him. But when she finally did pull herself up, their desperate arms reaching for one another, she found that she no longer had any strength. It had finally and completely been knocked out of her.

Chapter

Ember didn't say much after that. Only to tell her that Brian had kicked the ball at his head on purpose.

Rachel would look at herself in the mirror in the morning to check if she was still there. She couldn't believe that such a convincing facade remained.

She didn't tell anyone. She was too ashamed. She imagined the questions they'd ask her. They were the same ones she routinely asked herself. How could she let a man treat her this way? She who was meant to be clever and educated, a modern woman. The truth was, deep down, she believed she deserved such treatment. He made her believe that this was the case and her family background had done nothing to contradict him.

It got worse. Steadily and consistently. And so did she. Her confidence seeping out through her cuts. Her face looked normal enough. Unbelievably so. But her fingernails were like that of a madwoman. She hid them. Just as she hid it all.

She knew that she should leave, but didn't seem to have the wherewithal to put any plan in action. Having somewhere to go was a problem.

Dermot had stopped trying to ingratiate himself with Rachel's family a long while before. Instead he had appeared to go out of his way to alienate them. They felt patronized by him. Marginalized. They had fallen out with Rachel over it. Cut off all contact. She felt unable to go to them. Unable to do almost anything. Or was it incapable? She could hardly make it up the stairs, without having to sit down half way. She had been due to sit her next set of architecture exams. She'd canceled. With Dermot's blessing. They both knew she couldn't do it. And all the while that terrible guilt. Of what she was exposing her son to. But she felt so utterly powerless. No way out was visible to her. So she went to see her mother just the same. On the basis that family were meant to support you. That was the official line anyway.

Her sister was at work, which was how she had designed it. One on one was better. Better than two against one.

Since her relationship with Dermot had begun, the two women had treated her with a grudging respect, which was mingled with a resentment she could almost taste. It was the pinnacle of what she had hoped for, knowing that they could never be genuinely happy for her - or for anyone who had "more than them". It wasn't in their nature, no matter she was kin. She scarcely counted as such. And whatever tenuous relationship she had with these two women, only made her crime of success all the more severe.

She felt the usual tension in her chest, as her mother opened the door to her. As Moira had been expecting her, her expression was practiced and in place. Rachel tried her own version of a smile - nervous and hopeful. She proffered the customary cake and followed her mother's receding figure into the kitchen, so bland and so small in its

familiarity. Her mother's back was to her as she filled the kettle with the tap.

'So. To what do I owe the honour?'

Rachel sighed. 'Sorry I haven't been to see you for a while.'

'I suppose you've been too busy.' Moira emphasized the final word with gleeful savagery.

Rachel swallowed as she eased herself up on a stool.

'Something like that.'

The words were quick and throwaway.

Her eyes were level with the kitchen window now and she looked out at the external scene. Blank.

'How's Rose?'

'Grand. Working away. How come you're not in work today?'

Rachel gathered herself up. 'I've taken a bit of time off.'

Her mother turned and frowned at her, leaning against the sink.

'You have?' Then her face cleared as she nodded. 'I suppose it helps to be the boss's girlfriend.'

Rachel looked down at her hands, folded limply on her lap like a pair of dead doves.

'It's not really like that.'

The words were murmured into her chest, drowned out by the sound of the kettle, which took off like a plane in the corner of the kitchen, trembling as it reached its crescendo, before finally touching down. Her mother scalded the crusty pot, then flung in two tea-bags with practiced wrist movement. Then she poured the boiling liquid all over them.

‘And how’s my grandson? I haven’t seen him for such a long time. I doubt he remembers what his Granny looks like.’

And here was the block over which they habitually stumbled.

The older woman shook her head in the manner of a maligned victim. Rachel felt her frustration rise. If her mother wanted to see Ember, she had to see her too. That was the catch.

‘Ember’s alright.’

So far. Was he?

‘And Dermot?’

Her mother’s expression changed once more as she mentioned Rachel’s partner. She drew herself up from her slumped position and stared into the distance, her eyes glowing in the manner of a schoolgirl, thinking of her latest crush. Rachel drew herself up also, before sitting herself forward once more.

‘Not so good.’ Rachel half mumbled.

‘What was that?’ Her mother handed her a visitor’s mug, filled to the brim with steaming, beige liquid.

‘I said, he’s not so good.’

‘What’s wrong with him? Is he sick?’

‘Not in the way you mean, no.’

Her mother’s brows knitted forward. ‘What way do *you* mean?’

Rachel sighed into her core.

‘Look. Dermot isn’t the man you think he is.’

‘What do you mean?’

Rachel lowered her forehead into her palms and rubbed her temples rhythmically, as if trying to force images out of her brain.

‘He’s really not ... a good person.’

She looked up to meet her mother’s gaze. Moira Doyle was studying her daughter as if trying to figure out a puzzle that was far too difficult and frustrating. Rachel was accustomed to this look.

‘Well, I think your attitude is quite ungrateful, considering how Dermot took you both in and gave you ...’

‘Mam. He hit me.’

This silenced her.

Rachel saw a flicker behind her mother’s eyes. She couldn’t identify it. Was it shock? Compassion? Understanding?

‘Right.’ Was all she said, drawing a deep sup and averting her gaze to the kitchen tiles.

‘So I was wondering.’ The words came tumbling out. ‘Do you think it would be possible for me and Ember to move in here for a little while?’

Her mother took another gulp and set her mug down on the counter.

‘You want to move in?’

‘Well it would only be temporary. Just until we can get back on our feet ...’

She felt the dismay somewhere around her heart. Also behind her eyes. All over. Felt the rejection even before it was stated. Knew that she had expected it but still couldn’t quite believe it. This was her mother. Her mother.

‘I can’t believe you’d want to move out of that beautiful house.’

‘Did you not hear what I said?’

‘I heard you. I suppose you were having an argument at the time.’

Rachel didn't reply. Her mother went on.

‘Has he hit Ember?’

‘No, not ...’

‘The boy needs a father figure and Dermot can give him so much - pay for private schools. Sure Ember has the best of everything. In Foxrock! His own room. He'd have to share with you here ...’

‘That would be okay.’ Rachel interjected desperately, but her mother was in full flow.

‘I stayed with your father, even though it wasn't always ideal. But I did it for you girls. That's what you do when you have kids. You have to put them first. Make sacrifices. And a marriage - well, I know you're not married - takes a lot of work. You can't give up at the first hurdle....’

Rachel felt a strange kind of exhaustion. As if she didn't know how she'd make it up off the stool. Out the front door. Home again. Home. She had ceased to listen to her mother's words. Or fragments of disembodied sounds, as they had now become to her. They fell on her bowed head, like droplets of acid rain. She looked down at her hands again. Miraculously, they were still attached to her disembodied body. Slowly, she coaxed herself up into a stand and repositioned her handbag stiffly on her shoulder. She had her bus money. She had been saving up her change.

‘Are you off already? You haven't even finished you tea yet.’

Rachel mumbled something about having to pick up Ember.

‘So, as I was saying, it's not as if you're not welcome to stay. Of course you are. It's just that I think you shouldn't do anything too hasty. Appreciate what you have.’

Zombiefied, Rachel headed for the front door.

‘Ok so.’ Her mother followed her, voice cheerful. Relieved. ‘Keep in touch.’

Rachel traversed the short distance to the front gate. This oh-so-familiar path. She knew she wouldn’t be back.

Then one day there was an incident which finally moved the situation along.

They were getting ready to go out, Ember remained at the childminders. The occasion was an industry award ceremony and Brian’s firm was up for a prize. Of course Rachel knew better than to plead not to go. She was sure her eyes pleaded silently on her behalf. But keeping up appearances was fundamental. So what if her body felt shaken to the core? Her head as if it was stuffed with cotton wool?

She had ironed her new black dress for the occasion. She observed it hanging now, neatly pressed before he. Funereal looking. Now she was ironing Brian’s shirt. In a world of her own - the one she tended mostly to exist in now - she didn’t hear him coming up alongside her. So he caught her completely unaware, as he got her by the hair and pushed her head down onto the ironing board.

‘What’s that?’

She struggled to get her breath.

‘What’s that?’

He rammed her face down harder so that she winced at the pain in her cheekbone.

‘A crease.’ She gasped.

‘Have I not told you how I like my shirts? Are you not able to listen?’

‘I’m sorry.’ Her voice was a tear-filled squeak.

‘Sorry’s. Not. Good. Enough.’ He ground her face further down with each word.

The pain in her cheekbone was fierce. Then thankfully the pressure was lifted. In pathetic gratitude, she started to peel her face away from the ironing board.

‘Where do you think you’re going?’

This time he jammed his forearm with great force down across her shoulder blades.

‘Do I have to show you again? Do I? Do I?’ His voice was rising in volume and ferocity. He ran the iron over her back, her thin, cotton top her only protection.

‘No.’ She started to scream.

‘Shut up you stupid bitch.’

He applied more pressure, back and forth. Then stopped. She could feel the heat building up like an unstoppable force, at the same rate the scream rising up in her throat.

‘This is what you’ll be doing next.’ He said. ‘Burning a hole in my shirt.’

Her scream reached a crescendo, but only in her head as the hot metal bit into her skin, her mouth crushed into the padded board. And then it was almost cold. Like ice. Her body didn’t know what it was feeling any more. And then it was over. The iron was dropped with a clatter.

‘Get up.’ He said, grabbing a handful of her hair. He yanked her up and pushed her against the wall, shoving past her into the hall.

‘You disgust me.’ He said, a parting shot, hissed into her ear.

Leaving her to cave in on herself, a crumpled heap on the floor. But she didn’t have long. She knew that he’d be back, expecting her punctuality and her readiness. So she zipped the dress up her back, trying her best to ignore, afraid of her life to look, at the sweltering, throbbing area under her left shoulder blade.

Their company won the award, Brian went up to accept it, kissing her on the cheek on his way up, as if he'd won an Oscar, the James Cameron of the architectural world. He kissed the other women at their table too. Some on the lips. Some quite lingering. And she tried not to wince as his hand pressed the hot spot on her back as he passed. She couldn't tell whether it was accidental or not. Either way she clapped, her mouth trained into a tight, wide smile.

The next morning Brian was in great form. He even brought her breakfast in bed. She sat up gingerly, to accept the tray across her lap, taking care not to touch her back against the head board.

'You're quiet this morning.' He said jovially as he was putting on his tie.

Rachel gave him a sidelong look as she nibbled delicately at the corner of her slice of toast and fantasized about throttling him with his own tie. Or hanging him with it from the light fitting. She imagined him dangling there, from the blue and white silk rope, his eyes bulging unattractively out of his head. The violence of this image surprised her. Yet somehow energized her also. Maybe - just maybe - her anger could serve as a fuel.

'I'm not feeling very well.' She said. 'I think I might skip work today.'

He sat on the edge of the bed beside her, his brow creased with concern and placed the palm of his hand against her forehead. She managed to restrain her impulse to swat it away, lowering her eyelids to hide her true feelings.

'You do feel hot.' He said. 'Maybe you're coming down with something. Why don't you treat yourself to a duvet day?'

‘I think I might.’

He kissed her on the side of her face and got up to leave, singing tunelessly to himself. Rachel was afraid to move a muscle, lest he change his mind. But this morning it seemed that his unpredictability was working in her favour. She stayed that way until she heard the Merc, pulling out of the driveway and purring down the street, a couple of urban predators journeying together. Then she clambered out of bed and eased the pajama top down past her shoulder blades, to at last examine in the mirror the area on her back that throbbed with the intensity of an extra, external heart beat.

‘Oh Jesus Christ.’

She pulled the pajama top all the way up again. She was no expert in medical matters, but that did not look good. And she did feel extremely weird - she hadn't been lying about that.

She dressed in the loosest, most comfortable clothes she could find, foregoing her bra just this once. It hardly made all that much difference. She was so skinny these days that her breasts barely registered a curve under her clothes. Then she got Ember up and ready for school, as rapidly as possible, her fake cheeriness failing to fool him one iota. He didn't want to go. Wanted to stay with her. Her heart nearly caved in. But she desperately needed this time.

So Ember was sent into school, his eyes ever wider, his voice ever quieter, as if he were diminishing day by day. Before long, they would both be invisible.

She took herself to the nearest hospital. It was unfamiliar to her. Although everything in her life had an air of unfamiliarity to it these days. She sat in A and E, awaiting her turn, drifting in and out of what she thought was sleep, almost enjoying her

delirium.

Eventually it was her turn. The nurse had that kind, brisk way about her. She entreated Rachel to sit down on the edge of the bed and drew the curtain around them for privacy. She instructed Rachel to remove the clothing from her upper half. When Rachel was clearly unable to do this by herself, the nurse tenderly pulled her top over her head, Rachel's arms aloft, her hair flopping back over her face. It gave her the feeling of being a little child again, only carefully looked after. The nurse was silent for a while. Rachel joined in. There was no rush.

'Who did this to you?' The nurse - her name was Josie - said.

'No one. It was an accident.'

Josie came slowly around the bed and stood directly in front of Rachel. Rachel realized for the first time that she was probably a few years younger than her. Funny how she always felt like the minor in every situation. The nurse was in her eye line. There was no avoiding.

'You fell backwards into an iron that was on and decided just to stay there while it burnt into your skin?'

'How did you ...?'

'I can clearly see the shape. It's imprinted.'

The two women stared into one another, their expressions as naked as Rachel's top half.

'It's become infected.' Said the nurse. 'I can treat it for you. You'll need antibiotics too.'

Rachel nodded barely.

'I'll be back in a minute.' Said the nurse.

Rachel sat alone on the edge of the bed in a kind of a trance. The weeping sore on her back pulsed in time to the clock as it ticked on the wall. It gave her a weird, out of body feeling.

Josie was gone longer than a minute. When she returned she had another woman with her. Slightly older this time, her face creased with time and care.

‘Hello my dear. My name is Deirdre. I’m the duty social worker.’

Social worker. Social worker. It took a few moments to register. Oh ...

‘Do you mind if I just show Deirdre ...?’

Rachel looked up at the ceiling as the two women examined her back. Deirdre came around to her again.

‘Did your husband do this to you, Love?’

‘We’re not married.’

‘That’s better. Easier to disentangle yourself.’

Rachel was searching her face.

‘You know you deserve better, don’t you?’

Rachel stared at her blankly. Did she know such a thing? Had she ever?

Pain felt so normal now. Hurt felt normal. Being hated. It all felt normal. And who was she to say it wasn’t?

She didn’t know the tears were flowing down her face, as a river that had finally reached its capacity and burst its banks. The landscape is oblivious. Accepting. As one woman gently treated her back and the other similarly treated her soul, Rachel slowly and steadily began the process of healing.

Deidre had given her lots of information, so much so that Rachel's head was reeling. Was there really so much help out there? People who were on her side? She had felt alone for so long that this was hard to fathom. An escape plan was put in place. Once Rachel's back was all patched up, once she was partially put back together, she went back to the house. Deirdre gave her a lift, then sat outside in the car on sentry duty, while Rachel gathered together their stuff. One black, plastic bag for Ember. One black, plastic bag for her. Was that all their lives amounted to? But it felt light. It felt like shackles falling off as they drove away from that beautiful house, all the expensive dresses that Brian had bought for her, lined up in the wardrobe, like empty body bags.

Next stop was Ember's school. He emerged early from his classroom, blinking and bewildered looking. Why was Mammy so early? Who was this woman with her? But he didn't say any of this out loud. He only talked to Rachel now and only when they were alone. So she spoke quickly and quietly to him, kneeling down before him in the playground as Deirdre watched discreetly from beside the car.

'There's nothing to worry about Sweetheart. You're safe. We're both safe. We're going to a kind of hotel, for other mummies and children. And after a while we'll get our own place. But we won't be going back to live with Dermot.'

She expected a flurry of questions, even if they were just about the whereabouts of his favourite toys and teddies. But after scrutinizing his mother's face for the truth, Ember merely hugged her around the neck, clasping on tightly, his breath hot and urgent, his face pressed against her own, warm and damp with tears.

They got into the car and Deirdre drove them both to the Refuge.

The place was fraught. Full of the flotsam and jetsam of former lives. And every walk of life was represented, from the most exalted to the lowliest humble. There were women, like herself, whom friends and neighbours might have mistakenly envied and women whose neighbours had heard their screams on a daily basis, through flimsy walls of terraced council houses and witnessed their bruises on many the occasion on footpaths and outside school yards. Women who's families, for one reason or another, couldn't or wouldn't take them in. There were those that cowered, barely uttered a word. Those that relied on their tough exteriors but who very well may have been brittle underneath. But there were those that really had seemed to have transcended. And these left an indelible imprint on Rachel's memory. These were the women that she aspired to be like. With their calm and their unshakable inner cores. Women who were taking court cases. They seemed to her to have completely forsaken their victim roles and gone beyond even survivor mode. These she thought of as warrior women. She longed to be like them when she grew up and could quit smoking through weak and trembling fingers. It was some of these women who came from the very worst backgrounds. Had survived more than she had. But they were still standing. Standing tall up for themselves and for their children. Their scars had healed into a kind of inner armour. No man would ever do such things to them again.

There was solidarity between them all, this peculiar, imbalanced, estrogen driven family. There was comfort to be had, which was just as well because all had a difficult journey ahead.

Rachel started hers on shaky ground, on shaky feet, a couple of months later when she

and Ember were allocated a council house. It was in an area she was completely unfamiliar with, which was good of course, because it was far away from her former life. But the loneliness was intense. Sometimes it threatened to completely overtake her. It felt worse than the physical pain that Dermot had inflicted. Other times she had a sense of freedom. Of letting the past fall away from her, of being whomsoever she chose to be. But she felt that she could no longer work in architecture. That particular pool was too small. The ripples too easily detected. And she abandoned her studies for the time being. It broke her heart to do this but she didn't allow herself to think on it too much. The moment wasn't right. Maybe she'd get back to it at some later date. Maybe.

So she worked in a series of anonymous jobs, mainly temping in various offices. It was okay. The worst thing was Ember having to change schools. It was hard enough for him to fit in as it was, in a place where he'd always been, where he knew everybody. But this. Now. Everyone a stranger. When he barely spoke. Rarely smiled anymore. Rachel worried about him incessantly. And whenever the two could be together they were inseparable. Stuck together with God's glue. But she could handle it all because she was a warrior woman. No. A warrior mother. If she said it often enough, she might convince herself.

But slowly and surely, their internal scars, always the deepest, started to heal. A sensation of safety descended and blanketed their days, which ran into each other like water colours, pale and indistinct but pleasing enough.

Until one evening she was putting out the bins. It was Autumn now and already dark by the time she got home. Ember was watching cartoons while the fishfingers slowly

softened and expanded under the grill. A chill was in the air. In one way she welcomed it - like the start of a new era. But on the other, she worried about being able to heat the house.

‘Hello Rachel.’

His voice was like a jolt going through her, all at once disorientating and sick inducing. Her skin crawled, as if beset by a thousand spiders, and her hair appeared to have lifted clean from her scalp. She wanted her legs to run but it took every effort to prevent her knees from buckling underneath her.

He was walking up the path, in slow, measured steps, his hands behind his back, his social smile in situ. If a zombie had been coming towards her she couldn’t have been more terrified. Because this monster was real. Somehow she found her voice, although it didn’t sound like her, it sounded like someone stronger. Perhaps it belonged to her inner warrior.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Just thought I’d pay you a visit.’

‘You have no right. You know I have a restraining order.’

‘I know.’

He was getting closer. His smile clearer. She thought she might be frozen, like the fishfingers when she’d put them into the oven. She wished that she could thaw. Instantly.

He was standing a couple of feet away now. His suit was expensive and immaculate. It hid the body of a predator.

Could he hear her heartbeat pounding in her ears?

Scent her fear?

She felt that his breath was discernible on her face. But this was surely an illusion.

Her senses fooling her.

‘Why don’t we go inside?’

His tone was so reasonable. She wasn’t fooled. She had heard it all before. She would sooner invite a vampire into her home.

He was almost on her now. She could see the whites of his eyes. The cold calculability of his expression. All of a sudden she turned and fled, away from the house, away from Ember. Although part of her already knew her strategy to be useless. Yet what else could she do? She prayed for some miraculous stroke of luck. He pounced and was upon her almost immediately, his arm around her throat, he wrestled her to the ground. They may as well have been a lion and a baby wildebeest. She was well aware of his strength. But she wasn’t going down without a fight. Not this time. She struggled and she kicked like a wild woman, one foot managing to connect with his balls. He drew back momentarily, with a winded, groaning sound. She took the opportunity to scramble to her feet, this time heading towards the house, hoping to lock out the big bad wolf. But his recovery was swift and in seconds he had her by the ankle, the ground hurtling up to meet her once more. She smelt the cool, green, dampness of the grass, as her nose connected with the earth, as if all of her senses were heightened. But they weren’t enough. No match for the brute force of his strength. He picked her up with one hand, as if by the scruff of her neck and dragged her along several feet before flinging her in through the back door. The cold of the floor jarred and ran right through her. She heard the slam of the back door, knew that he stood between her and it,

imagined his breath hot and ragged and although she couldn't see him, she knew that he had taken off his mask of civilization. But where was Ember? She lifted her head and looked through to the sitting room. The TV was still on. Scooby Doo. She heard Shaggy say "yikes", but the couch where he'd been curled up was now empty.

And then, in one of his favourite tricks, Dermot lifted her by the hair, in a move designed to make himself feel powerful and to inflict the maximum pain and disability on her. She gasped in agony as he twisted her around to face him. She could see the spiteful glee in his expression, had fully expected to see it there.

'Thought you could get away from me, did you? Well you're never getting away from me Rachel. Did you know we lost a major client because of you? Did you? Did you? Because of your ridiculous allegations.'

The irony of his words appeared to allude him. He had her fully up against the wall now. And his dominant, right hand closed around her throat. She thought she had known true terror before ... He intended to kill her, she could see it in his eyes, that held nothing but a kind of cold rage. No human decency remained behind those eyes. No empathy. No compassion. Was this the last sight she was destined to see on this earth? She thought of her beautiful boy. Where was he? Had he managed to get away?

She scrabbled ineffectually at Dermot's hand, but she could feel the strength draining from her body, as he literally tried to squeeze the very life out of her. Her vision was blurring. Burning. Then all at once, another male presence in the room. Two of them. Dragging Dermot off her, shouting and roaring as she fell limply to the ground. The police. Someone had called the police. And they had come. And they had saved her.

‘Are you okay?’

One of them lifted her up off the ground and looked into her scorching eyes. She looked beyond him to the other man who was kneeling on Dermot’s back, having restrained his hands behind him with a pair of steel hand cuffs. She felt the relief like a palpable force. Then.

‘Ember.’ A whisper.

‘What was that?’

‘My son.’ Louder.

The officer called back over his shoulder.

‘There’s a boy.’ Then to her. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Ember.’

She and this man called all over the house, while the other police man concentrated his effort and his weight on Dermot.

Rachel found him eventually, following her nose and her instinct to the hot press at the top of the stairs. There he crouched, wedged between the boiler and the shelf, her mobile phone clutched in one hand, a pool of vomit on the floor in front of him. She tried to coax him out but she couldn’t reach him. And from that day on he wouldn’t say a word to her either.

She struck up a friendship with one of the investigating officers. D.C. Anna Boylan with her unquestioning support which Rachel sensed went beyond the professional. Again the solidarity of other women proved so vital to her. They worked together diligently, put in long hours, in their efforts to bring this man to justice.

There was no way Ember could give evidence. Not even by video. How could he when he couldn't so much as speak. No neighbour had witnessed his final attack. Luckily she had the word of the policeman who had, she believed, essentially saved her life, to back her up. Otherwise, would it have been her word against his? She did have the photos of the bruises on her throat to speak up for her.

What a plausible witness he was. This good looking man in his dashing suit, with his clipped, educated tones. The male judge listened to his evidence intently. It was easy to identify. They had both attended a similar private school. Unlike Rachel. A regular Josephine Soap who had attended whichever school happened to be closest. She, on the other hand, stumbled through her evidence, hugely uncomfortable, feeling so unworthy.

He got three years for assault, the charge of attempted murder having been dropped a long time before. The judge felt he was being quite strict. There were others on their legal team who were satisfied enough. It was a result. He got to serve jail time. Naturally he'd be out in a year and a half if he behaved himself inside. And that sort always did. There were no women available for beating up in prison. Only Rachel and DC Anna Boylan looked at each other with horror. Rachel had witnessed the murderous intent in Dermot's eyes. Anna believed her. And they both knew he'd come after her again. There was no safety for her while Dermot lived and she herself lived on borrowed time. Although there was a sort of grim satisfaction in watching him being led out in handcuffs. To serve time. For hurting her. It just wasn't enough time. Could it ever be? He didn't make eye contact as they led him away after the sentencing.

She sensed he wanted to, give her one parting glance - you'll pay for this bitch - but the eyes of the courtroom were upon him.

They were allocated a new home - a different location. Too far from Ember's existing school. He would have to be moved again. But this time he shut down completely, totally balked at the notion. Rachel found that she couldn't put him through it again, so she home-schooled him, giving up work to do so, the two of them living solely on social welfare. Because how could she ever leave him with anybody? The only breaks from their insular routine were trips to the psychologist, whom Ember would mostly stare at in a blank, determined silence.

They lived a life of sorts, each the others only real company. Rachel couldn't help feeling it was more of an existence. And the fear never went away. It sat on her shoulder like a ragged crow, squawking unpleasantly and intermittently into her ear. So Ember. Fear. Shame. Guilt. These were her constant companions.

Then one day - a couple of months before Dermot was due for release - a letter appeared in the post. No ordinary letter. It didn't bear a stamp, or an address on the front of the envelope. So it was clearly hand-delivered. Inside was a blank sheet of paper. It perplexed her at first. Then terrified her later, when the implication hit her. It was Brian's calling card. His message that he was going to come and get her. She didn't know how she knew this with such absolute clarity. Only her body told her so, in particular, her highly sensitive and ultra reliable solar plexus. She didn't know how he'd managed it. Paid some lackey to do it for him. Or manipulated someone into it.

She took the letter, which while completely blank, managed to convey such a

strong message and brought it in to show DC Boylan.

‘But how do you know?’

‘I just do. It’s exactly the type of thing that he would do.’

Anna had it checked for fingerprints. Unsurprisingly, this investigation bore no fruit.

But she had to agree with Rachel. He was letting her know he knew where she was.

And that he was coming to get her.

‘We have no evidence.’ She said. ‘There’s really nothing we can do at this point.

But I strongly suggest you move.’

Again? Could she take it? Could her son?

So she looked a little further afield, until she found this lodge house, buried deep in the heart of the Kilkenny countryside. And the rest is herstory.

Ben listened deeply. It was a talent of his - this listening. He created a safe place into which she could pour out her memories and her feelings. At times she almost forgot that he was there and it was as if she recounted the tale to herself. At other times, she was acutely aware of his presence, couldn’t have gone on without his arm, ever present and reassuring about her shoulder.

They had been sitting in front of the wood stove for hours, in the great tradition of telling stories around the camp fire. Rachel was wrapped up in her fluffy robe - only the most comforting of clothing could endure such a tale. And every now and then, Ben would put a log on the fire, even though it was the summer, she couldn’t get the heat into her bones.

Ben was normally a mild mannered man but he experienced a large range of

emotions that night. As he watched Rachel tell her story, the firelight flickering across her delicate features, this slight woman of lower than average stature. Yet it was clear to him now, her bones were welded together with titanium.

Chapter

She wasn't sure what had bound them together in such a spectacular way - the phenomenal sex or the telling of her story. Well, she did know really. But that night heralded a momentous shift in the relationship of Ben and Rachel. It was as if they had now bonded on so many levels. Deeply - emotionally and spiritually and their physical relationship reflected this, making Rachel feel she had only ever scratched the surface in her previous relationships. One delicious evening, she had fallen asleep with her head in Ben's lap, fully clothed on the couch. She had woken up and looked up into his face. He had been holding her the entire time. And a silent word resounded in her head. Family. He was family now. Not in the fucked up, dysfunctional way that her own family was family, but in a way she had always yearned for it to be. And it felt completely effortless. His love was not something she had to strive for. The trust seemed automatic. All thoughts of Sally Hogan and her revolving bosoms fell away.

The feeling was heightened when the three of them were together - Ember, Ben and herself. They felt like a proper unit now. Cohesive. Strong. Like the beginning of a new tribe. Ember picked up on this almost immediately and Rachel picked up on him picking it up.

They walked together through the woods one day, from Rachel's house to Ben's,

Ember in between them, holding on to Rachel's hand as usual. Then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, Ember slipped his other hand into Ben's. The two adults glanced at each other over the boy's head. Rachel felt she'd melt into everything. She felt the force like a flow of electricity between them, running through, connecting and energizing them. And trotting along behind them, Flame brought up the rear, like Rachel's true, wild nature that could never, ever leave her.

They entered now the clearing and Ember turned to Ben and uttered the first words that he had ever spoken to him.

'Will I collect some sticks to light the wood stove?'

Rachel stared at one and then the other, Ember unaware of the enormity, Ben silent and rooted to the spot.

'That'd be great thanks Ember.'

The boy nodded as if this were an everyday occurrence and ran to the edge of the woodland, with Flame tracking him closely, hoping for play. Rachel walked slowly over to Ben and put her arms around his waist, pressing her cheek against his chest. She didn't have to ask him what Ember's words had meant to him. She felt the emotion trembling through him, as he struggled to stem his tears. She hugged him closer to her and knew that he felt accepted. And this at once seemed the most natural yet most profound thing in the world.

Chapter

The plaster work was complete. It looked like a proper house now. Like it could

withstand all weathers. It was entirely made out of wood, the natural fiber of the forest from which it grew. Rachel carefully selected her words:

‘So you have complete confidence in the house then?’

‘Oh yes. Why wouldn’t I?’

‘No reason.’

‘You mean because it’s wooden?’

She nodded her head and looked ashamed but he just laughed.

‘You have a background in architecture. You know how durable wood is.’

‘I know. It’s just ...’

‘It’s just that you’re Irish and used to bricks and mortar.’

‘Mmm. Kind of.’

‘What is it then?’

He looked genuinely perplexed.

‘You know. I’ll huff and I’ll puff and I’ll blow your house down ...’

He laughed as realization dawned, crossing his arms across his chest and his legs at the ankle and leaning back against one of his sturdy wooden walls.’

‘You mean this is the house of sticks?’

‘Well. Is it as strong as a house made of bricks.’

‘Absolutely. This house will still be here when you and I are pushing up daisies.’

Pushing up daisies. She liked that. Sounded like a pleasant enough way to spend eternity. Although the phrase sounded strange on his tongue. Quaint. Not one to which she would have associated him.

He put his arm around her shoulders.

‘Don’t worry Rachel. The big, bad wolf can’t get you here.’

He almost had her convinced.

‘But you know, it’s not a good idea to smoke in a wooden house.’

‘I don’t smoke.’

‘Well that’s alright isn’t it.’

Chapter

“The fox is such a successful species because of its innate adaptability.”

She read over this line several times, before closing the book and setting it down on the table. She folded herself back into the sofa and sat there thinking for several minutes.

Had she adapted? To her new life in the country? She considered this. It was seven months now. And in that time she had landed herself a job. Okay. It was hardly the springboard to a magnificent career but she *did* like it. Loved it even. It wasn’t too mentally or physically exhausting and the hours were flexible and fit in around Ember. Madame Cyn’s was one of the hot spots of the community. A local hub where people came to meet and greet, gossip and socialize. And Rachel being part of it all, gained much quicker acceptance. Also, she’d stopped dropping things on the customers. Which definitely helped. And she got to work every day with one of her favourite people and a woman who was proving to be one of the best friends that Rachel had ever had. The thought filled her heart with gratitude and her eyes with tears. And she got to eat as much free cake as her heart desired. She chuckled out loud to herself, not realizing she was doing so. Flame rotated his ears and opened his amber eyes

momentarily, before dropping back down into peaceful slumber on what had become his cushion.

Then there was Ben. She snuggled back further into the cushions and mentally hugged herself. She felt so warm and smug when she thought about that man. Something about their sense of connection silenced the voices of doubt that had previously beset her. And again. The gratitude. Washing over her. Raining down on her and drenching her with its refreshment. And she hadn't even got to Ember yet.

The transformation in her boy had astounded her. It was as if he drew sustenance from the very earth itself. The countryside suited him. Sustained him and nourished him. He was nature's boy entirely and it was as if nature, left to its own devices would eventually heal itself.

And last but not least, she had adopted a fox. Her mouth curved upwards as she reached out to touch Flame. She molded her hand to the shape of his body and as she did so, he stretched out his limbs luxuriantly and uttered a small, contented snort.

She glanced up at the wall.

'Well Clara, what do you think? Not bad, eh? Not bad at all.'

It was Ember's first day back at school. Was it really the start of September already?

Was her baby really nine years old? The passage of time was a wonder.

So was its capacity to heal.

She watched Ember blend in joyfully with his classmates, no longer holding himself apart on little spindly legs. He was part of the pack now and as sturdy a member as any, like a little stripling that had found its place on the forest floor and was shooting up

towards the light above its uppermost branches. And she intermittently lost sight of him through the throng of children that teemed back and forth, constantly moving and ever changing. It was almost as if he was camouflaged in his brand new, slightly-too-large school uniform, as Flame was camouflaged as he moved through the smaller trees and the undergrowth, now tinged with shades of rust and singed orange and rustled by the restless Autumn winds. Those winds of change.

Dermot had assumed he would re-enter his old life as if nothing untoward had ever happened. Perhaps even offered a hero's welcome. The wrongly accused, home at last. He was soon disabused of this notion. Which confused him and angered him because he felt no wrongdoing. She had driven him to it.

His business partner, Harry, who had at first stood by his old college friend, had been obliged to terminate their relationship when the majority of their clients threatened to go elsewhere if Brian was permitted to return. So Brian was not permitted. His disappointment was bitter.

He set up on his own. A few new clients came his way. But his reputation appeared to be irrevocably tarnished. He felt himself blacklisted. His former contemporaries, those who had jostled to work and socialize with him before, fell away as if he was some sort of leper. He could barely get himself a squash game. And his former place on the five-a-side team had been given to someone else.

He started to drink alone in the house in the evenings. Whiskey mostly. This only served to make him meaner. His once chiseled features became less defined - more blurry. And a roll of gut settled above his belt. All in all, he had lost his edge. But he

hadn't lost any of his venom. That conversely began to build and it was concentrated in one direction only. He smashed his whiskey glass against the once pristine wall. The amber liquid dripped down ominously.

Chapter

Flame's testicles had descended, Rachel noticed with a start. She knew that this happened in the human male - dreaded it happening to Ember. But it seemed it happened to male foxes too.

She wondered at the implications. Was he ready to find a mate? Would he fight with other males for territory? And females? Would he be able for this?

She didn't think he would be able.

An even worse fear: what if he left them altogether? Went off to live his own foxy life? They might never see him again. How would Ember cope? And the more honest question, she now realized - how would she cope? She'd grown accustomed to his company. His constant, unassuming presence. Well, he did assume he'd be fed, of course. But it was so easy being with him. No judgment. No need to make exhausting small talk. That was the best thing about animals, she reckoned. They didn't talk. Rachel had no desire to talk to the animals. She just wanted to be with them. Share in their being. She could always get a dog, she supposed. But Flame - her Fantastic Mister Fox - would prove a very tough act to follow.

She realized he made her feel safe too. Though this became less of a priority the more, the longer, she moved away from her past. Brian hadn't come looking for her.

Maybe that meant he never would.

Sometimes she would walk past the old, ruined house. But not often. It gave her a strange feeling. Disjointed. Like she no longer belonged in her body. Yet she still felt oddly drawn to it.

It always seemed to rain when she went there - even if the sun was in a glory state when she left the house. Banks of clouds would gather. Settle over the house and weigh down on her soul. She would always walk away at a quicker pace than had carried her there. Wondering why she had chosen that particular destination, knowing how uneasy it always made her feel. Perhaps it made her think of her own inglorious past as well as the less than uplifting history of the house.

The feeling was lessened if she brought Ember and the fox with her. The two would forage along the way - blackberries mostly. Ember selecting from the tops of the hedgerows, Flame snuffling along the lower branches, making a pleasing, contented, munching sound. Sometimes Rachel would charge them with collecting sufficient berries to make a pie or some jam. They ate more than they collected. She would laugh at them, their matching, purple tongues, Ember's fingers stained indigo, and send them back out for more. The jam she made, stirring the scent, the aroma filling the house to the rafters, she would put in the same jam jars in which she and Ember had displayed their wild flowers in Spring. Each season had its use. Its newly revealed treasures.

Chapter

There came the day when Ben finished his house. He had been racing against the seasons, anxious to get the structure weatherproof by winter. It seemed as if he had finally achieved this. He hammered in a nail to a now familiar rhythm: if you build it they will come. If you build it. They will come. If. You. Build. It. They. Will. Come. Then it was fully hammered in and there were no more nails required. Nothing left to saw. He stood up and looked about him. The feeling was disbelief. Relief. Euphoria. This house that had existed so long in his imagination was finally a reality. His once castle in the air was now a wooden palace in the forest. This long held dream would now shelter his dreams. Shelter his loved ones. Protect them from the elements. Or from anything else they might possibly need protecting from.

He knew now what he had to do. It was time to put the next phase of his plan into action. But first ... he lifted his slightly damp t-shirt away from his chest and sniffed it surreptitiously. Jesus. He'd better have a shower first. He ran up the staircase he'd constructed himself, almost taking flight in his speed and his enthusiasm, pulling the t-shirt over his head as he went. And his feet moved to the rhythm once more. If you build it they will come.

Rachel loved that tingly Autumnal feeling in the air. She felt it as an energy. Something that infused her. A force that she could harness.

She was keeping half an eye out for the boy and the fox. They were off picking

edible leaves. Ben had taught Ember what to look for and the boy liked to think that he was teaching Flame in turn. But the fox knew better and more instinctively than all of them put together, his vulpine nose sniffing out what was safe and what was best left alone.

Rachel was possessed of an easy, lazy feeling. She couldn't see them but she could hear them. Ember, more particularly, shouting excitedly at the animal, engaged in some manner of play. She was enjoying the Autumn sun, which shone oblivious to the time of year. She even had her socks off, toes nestling in the grass, the sensation rendered more precious by the likelihood that she may not experience it again until the following Spring. It was cool and damp, in delicious contrast to the golden warmth on her head and shoulders. And suddenly there he was, coming across the lawn towards her. Her Ben. Her man. Their faces broke out into matching smiles, mirroring their feelings for one another. There was no hiding any more, no playing it cool. There was no need. God, it felt good!

As he approached her she held out her two hands for him to clasp, then she drew him in for a bear hug. She was the black bear, he was the grizzly, the cub was playing in the woods. She smiled into his chest. Had she really only known him for less than a year? It felt like he had always been a part of her. They drank in each others body warmth. He asked her, with his body, with his strong arms around her. With his breath, breathing into her. With the power of his intention. His very being. And she responded in kind with her own body, melded into his. But not a word was spoken by either one of them. Ember came back into view, bounding - he and the fox. And without a thought he ran to them and flung himself around their hips, clinging on, entirely

without desperation, but with full acceptance and trust. And they stayed like that joined together, for many blissful moments. The words were not for that day. The words would come later.

He decided to go to Romance Consultant, Madame Cynthia McGuire. He chose Rachel's day off - that auspicious day - to enter the cafe. This alone aroused her suspicions. She raised a quizzical eyebrow, hand on hip as she appraised him.

'Well hello. What brings you to these parts on so fine a morning?'

He nodded his greeting.

'I'm out of coffee.' He said.

'Triple blend - super rich roast ...?'

'That's the one.'

'And will you have a cup while you're here?'

'I will. I will Cynthia.'

'Sit yourself down and I'll bring it over.'

The place was uncharacteristically quiet, which suited him down to the ground. He sat in his usual place, trying not to feel too nervous, but his fingers drummed the table nonetheless. He didn't notice he was doing this. Cynthia came over and placed the mug in front of him.

'There you go.'

'Won't you sit with me for a while Cyn?'

Her face registered amused surprise.

'Come on. It's nice and quiet.'

‘Alright so.’

She sat down opposite and continued in her wry observation.

‘What can I do for you, Love.’

‘Nothing. Can two old friends not sit down and have a chat every now and then?’

‘They can.’

She wasn’t buying any of it.

‘How’s the house coming on?’

‘It’s finished.’

‘No! Really?’

His facial features relaxed as they broke into a delighted grin.

‘Well, congratulations you. You made it in before the winter after all. I wasn’t sure that you would.’

‘I wasn’t sure either. Not one little bit. But it’s done.’

He held up his hands in a gesture of finality, as if the house had virtually built itself.

‘Can I come and see it?’

‘Of course. Any time. Bring Canice. And tell him to bring a few cans of beer. We can christen the place properly.’

‘Will do. Has Rachel seen it?’

‘She has. Just last night. And Ember too.’

‘And what did they think?’

‘They seemed to like it.’

‘Suitably impressed.’

‘I think so.’

This was the moment. He looked suddenly distracted and his body tensed up again.

Cynthia watched him curiously as he delved around for the right words.

‘You know Rachel, don’t you.’

‘I do.’

‘I mean. You know her well - know what’s she’s into - what kind of things she likes.’

‘I suppose so.’

‘I wanted to bring her on a special night out....’

‘How special?’

‘Really special.’

‘I knew it! You’re going to propose!’ She scrunched her body up with glee and a few heads turned at neighbouring tables at her tone as it raised several octaves.

‘Jesus woman, keep your voice down.’

Cynthia squealed.

‘I knew it!’

‘Cynthia. Put a sock in it.’ It was a warning hiss.

‘Sorry.’

She squealed again, at a slightly lower volume.

‘It’s just so exciting.’

‘I haven’t said I’m going to do it yet.’

‘But you are though, aren’t you.’

He shrugged and allowed himself and her a grin.

‘I am, yes.’

‘Oh. Okay. We’ll have to come up with a plan. A really good one. Now, what

would she like?’

It was her turn to drum the table.

‘I’ll babysit of course.’ The thought struck her.

‘Thanks Cyn.’

‘No problem. Sure I love that little fella like he was me own.’

‘I know you do.’

‘Not unlike yourself.’ She shot him a look, which he acknowledged with a smile and a nod.

‘I’m not minding the fox though.’

‘Fair enough.’

‘Now what would she like? Have you got the ring yet?’

‘Um, no. I thought that was something we could do together.’

‘I’m free Tuesday.’

‘I didn’t mean ...’

‘I know what you meant, you silly twat.’

He smiled. At her humour and her choice language.

‘Well I don’t hold with that modern carry on.’ She continued. ‘I think you should have the ring when you propose. I’ll help you pick.’

‘Where? ...’

‘I know just the place. I can go into town with you this Thursday - that’s my day off. I know them well in there. Peter will do you a good deal. And there won’t be any hassle about changing the ring if she doesn’t like it. Because my taste is a bit different to hers, in fairness. And you don’t have a clue.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You’re welcome.’ She gave him a cheery smile. ‘Now. That’s the ring sorted.

Next thing - venue.’

‘Jesus woman, you’re fierce bossy.’

‘You’re not allowed to call women bossy any more. You have to say I have good management potential. And do you want my help or don’t you.’

He laughed. ‘Course I do. Only I was just going to ask you where I should take her.

Now you’re picking out the ring.’

‘Ah, it’s all the same. You need all the help you can get.’

They laughed at one another. In their delight at the other person and the situation.

Then Cynthia’s eyes widened. ‘Oh. Oh. I know just the place.’

‘Where?’

‘Dungarvan!’ She grabbed him by the wrist. ‘I know this great restaurant there, michelin stars coming out of their arses. You should take her there. Then after dinner, a walk on the beach, down on one knee, bob’s your uncle.’

‘I’m not getting down on one knee.’

‘You are so.’ .’

‘Is that what you’d want?’

‘C’mere. When Canice proposes to me - properly mind - I want the whole caboodle.

The Eiffel Tower or The Grand Canyon at least.’

‘Do you think ...?’

‘No, I don’t think. She won’t leave Ember for more than a night. You’ll have to do it on home soil. Now where were we? Clothes.’

‘Is that where we were? I’m able to dress myself you know.’

‘No offense Love, but you don’t have a notion.’

‘Is that right?’

‘Now. On no account are you to wear your work boots.’

‘I wasn’t ...’

‘I think smart casual is the way to go. No tie. That’s really not you, Tell you what, we’ll buy you something this Thursday. You probably don’t have anything suitable.’

‘Thanks a bunch.’

And again, you’re welcome.’

She held out her arms and gave him the most generous of smiles. It was impossible to be offended.

His expression and tone then took on a more serious aspect.

‘Do you think she’ll ... you know?’

‘Do I think she’ll say yes?’

‘Well ... yes.’

‘Probably.’

‘Probably?’ His shoulders sagged forward somewhat. ‘I was hoping you’d be a bit more positive than that.’

‘It’s not my answer you have to worry about.’

Cynthia smiled, but there was something behind it this time.

‘Look.’ She said. ‘I take it you know about her ... past.’

‘Yes.’

They looked at each other frankly.

‘Well then. That kind of thing can affect a person. Big time. Make it hard for them to commit themselves again.’

‘Is that why you won’t marry Canice?’

‘We weren’t talking about me now, were we?’

‘No. We weren’t. I’m sorry.’

‘Hmmm.’ She gave him a look that said don’t do it again. ‘So. The point is. That kind of thing makes a person unpredictable.’

He nodded and looked thoughtful. Worried. Cynthia’s demeanour visibly softened again.

‘But anyway. The two of you are made for one another.’

He looked seriously at her.

‘Do you think so?’

‘I know so. Don’t you?’

‘I do feel that strongly, yes. It’s just, you know, you don’t know how it looks to other people on the outside.’

‘Doesn’t matter a damn as long as you both feel what you’re supposed to be feeling on the inside.’

‘And you think that Rachel ...’

She nodded and smiled again, leaning forward across the table.

‘So go for it and good luck.’ With that, she moved fully forward, getting halfway up from her seat. She grabbed Ben on each side of his head and gave him a big smacker on the lips. Then she ruffled his hair vigorously, as if he were her son.

‘Oh.’ She said, before heading back up to the counter. ‘You could do with a haircut

too.'

Chapter

So the ring was procured. Cynthia and Ben attended the jewelers together, the former all business, the latter hanging back awkwardly.

'Can you show us what you've got in the line of engagement rings please Peter.'

The owner looked uncertain. He knew Canice too.

'Am I to understand ... congratulations are in order?'

Cynthia rolled her eyes and flapped her hand.

'God no, I wouldn't marry this dirty looking eejit. I'm just helping him pick out a ring for his girlfriend.'

The owner laughed nervously and looked relieved. Ben advanced slowly and reluctantly.

He'd never heard Rachel referred to as his girlfriend before. It gave him an odd feeling.

Soon she'd be more. Perhaps. If she said ...'

'What do you think about this one?'

'A bit flash.'

'Now you can't be mean when it comes to an engagement ring.'

'I'm not. It's just, I think Rachel's taste is more - simple. I can't see her wearing something that fancy.'

Cynthia held out her hand and appraised the ring.

'Mmmm. You have a point. The goes for more delicate looking jewelery. I like this myself though. I might send Canice in for this one if I ever decide to do the deed.'

She stood in the window, trance like, for half a minute or more, admiring the diamonds as they glinted in the sunlight.

‘Um. Cynthia.’

‘Sorry, sorry. I’m back.’

She took the ring off and handed it back, albeit reluctantly, to the owner.

‘What else do you have for us Pete?’

Several trays were examined. Ben selected a large, square cut diamond with two smaller diamonds set on either side, all set in platinum.

‘What do you think of that?’

‘Mmm. Classy. I mean, a bit plain for my tastes but a fine, big rock all the same. I think she’ll love it.’

The proprietor raised a brow and his eyes glinted like the diamonds he sold as he sensed an imminent sale.

‘I’ll take this one please.’

‘Great choice Sir.’

‘Sir. Do you hear him? That’s you, that is.’ Cynthia nudged him with her elbow.

Ben stuffed his hands nervously in his pockets. He couldn’t believe he was really doing this.

His incredulity extended to the men’s clothes shop. It reminded him of shopping with his mother as a boy. Equally toe-curlingly embarrassing. Cynthia enlisted the help of two girls who worked there and the three of them made tasteless jokes about measuring Ben’s inside leg.

‘You know, if I was a woman and you were men I’d have a case for sexual harassment.’

‘Ah, would you get away out of that. Get in there and try these on.’

He came out minutes later in navy trousers and a vertically striped blue and purple shirt.

He felt like a prize bull as the women evaluated him.

‘What do yo think girls? Good enough to eat?’

The two young women nodded their heads in unison. One of them licked her lips.

Next stop was the barbers. Cynthia knew him too, of course. She stood at the chair the entire time, chatting amiably and making “suggestions”. Of course, she conducted herself with such charm that the barber never once felt he was being told how to do his job.

‘Now!’ Cynthia finally pronounced him as presentable. ‘I’d marry you meself. All you have to do is make the booking and tell me when I’ve to babysit.’

‘Thanks Cyn.’

Thank fuck that was over. He didn’t know why he’d agreed to it in the first place.

Yes he did.

Dermot had managed to wrangle himself a squash game at last, with a guy he’d met in the car-park of the club. Previously unknown to one another, this man was a good decade younger than Dermot, but the latter was confident he could take him. Relished the prospect, in fact. Welcomed the competition - could practically taste the victory. It had been such a long time.

Dermot got off to a good start, annihilation on his mind and flying off the tip of his racket. But his opponent found his rhythm, sussed out Dermot’s game and soon started to match him tit for tat. Before overtaking him entirely

Droplets of sweat began to impede Dermot's vision, until they joined other droplets, to form rivulets that ran down his temples and back. He was wrong footed, time and again, at one time colliding with the wall and almost blacking out. His opponent showed concern. Would he like to take a break? End the game?

No break necessary. He would fight on. He indicated this with a derisory shake of his head. Defeat was not something that Dermot Whelan could ever contemplate. So when the match was over, the score no less than definitive and the victor advanced to shake his hand, Dermot clasped it at first, but only to steady himself, for the most vicious Glasgow kiss he had ever administered, in his vicious, inglorious life. Beautifully timed and beautifully aimed, Dermot the victor once more.

He left his opponent writhing and moaning, in agony on the squash court, a pool of blood collecting slickly before him. Dermot didn't look back, as he threw his racket on the ground, never to be used again.

Ben felt a right twit standing on the doorstep of the lodge house that Friday evening. He was not alone. Flame sat hopefully beside him. He wanted in too. He looked up at Ben, eyes burning into him and his tail began to thump on the step, keeping in time to the human's heart beat. They both looked away from each other and directly faced the door as footsteps could be heard growing closer. They both recognized them as Rachel's and would have independently recognized them had twenty women inhabited the house. In a footstep line up perhaps. Ben guessed that Flame could recognize her scent too and he too was overwhelmed, when she opened the door in an invisible cloud of musk and

wildflower. She gave him such a smile. He just stood there like a lemon. She was wearing a long, floral dress that he hadn't seen before and her hair was up in a kind of messy bun. Ben was naive enough to believe that the tendrils had escaped by themselves. Flame attempted to run through past her legs. She wasn't having any of it.

'Out.' She pointed deliberately and her voice possessed an authority that Ben had seldom heard. He was impressed. So, apparently, was Flame, who beat a hasty retreat and sat in a resigned manner several feet from the door.

'I can't let him in when there's nobody here. It's like leaving a teenage boy home alone for the weekend.'

'Does he invite his fox friends over for a big party?'

Rachel laughed as she gathered up her bag and coat.

'I don't think so. But it looks like it sometimes. I reckon it's just him though. He's well capable of destroying the house single handed. Pawed. Oh.' She stopped in her tracks. 'Did you want to come in for a while? Or ...'

'No, lets just go straight. The reservation is for eight.'

'Right so.' She locked the door behind her.

'What about Ember?'

'I dropped him off at Cynthia's earlier. She's keeping him overnight. She said she wanted to give us some "privacy". She actually nudged me and winked at me. It was like being in a carry on film.'

Ben laughed in a forced kind of way. 'Did she say anything else?'

'Like what?'

‘Nothing. Let’s go.’

She brushed past him on the way down the path. He pulled her towards him and stared intently into her face.

‘I’d kiss you.’ He said. ‘But I don’t want to ruin your lipstick.’

‘Just a little peck would be fine I think.’

‘Alright then.’ He obeyed orders. ‘You look gorgeous, by the way.’

He watched her sparkle as he said it. It seemed to Ben as if she was getting sparklier by the day.

‘Thanks. You look very nice too. Is that a new shirt?’

‘Had it for ages.’ He held open the door of the newly washed jeep.

‘Thank you kind sir.’

Rachel got in, in the most lady like way she could muster. Her heart was fluttering all over the place, like a little trapped bird. She wasn’t sure why. Something about Ben’s expression. A new seriousness. And he looked seriously good too.

It was one of those Autumn evenings - everything suffused in a certain, golden light. It lent the countryside a dreamlike quality, as it whizzed by on either side of them, on the way to the restaurant. Their destination. Their destiny.

The small, sea-side town, once a humble fishing village, similarly glowed. The mood was light and festive, people possessed of that Friday feeling, released from their nine to fives, ready for some fun. The restaurant, a converted barn, matched the mood of the town. Ben felt relieved. They’d come to the right place.

‘This is lovely.’ Rachel’s face was radiant as she looked all around her. It had been a long time since she’d been in such a fancy restaurant. Not since

‘Do you have a reservation?’ The hostess smiled, the whole place smiled, the sun in the sky outside smiled.

I have plenty of reservations, Ben felt like saying, but I’m going to do it anyway.

She led them to their table upstairs. They were looking down on the tops of the heads of the diners below. Like a king and queen, waving down at their subjects. Ben examined Rachel’s face as she settled her bum in the chair, a grin so wide her face would surely split in two. She looked receptive anyway. So far so good.

The starters arrived - frothy confections resembling lady’s hats at Ascot Delicious though. They tried each others, felt like a proper couple. Then the main courses. Rachel had the fish. The conversation flowed like the alcohol. And then. The unthinkable occurred.

‘Rachel? Are you okay?’

Her face had gone all red and she had stopped talking. She started to make choking sounds, her hands flying up to her throat, her eyes bulging out of her head. Oh, Jesus Christ. Ben flew to her side of the table, yanked her out of her chair and began to administer the Heimlich Manoeuvre. One. Two. Three. A fish bone went catapulting across the room and into a plant pot. The colour of Rachel’s face returned to normal and the assembled waitresses and customers gave Brian a round of applause.

‘Are you okay?’ Several members of staff hovered around Rachel, offering glasses of water and serviettes and many a complementary morsel. Rachel politely declined them all, sitting there white and quiet. She found her voice after a while and looked across at Ben who was staring at her intently.

‘You saved my life.’ She said.

‘Any time.’ He meant it. She was precious to him.

Rachel waited for Ben to finish his own main course. She somehow didn’t feel like eating her own. She declined desert also.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes. I feel a bit shook. Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d just like to go home.’

‘Already? But it’s only ...’ He looked at his watch with something akin to despair. ‘I thought we might go for a walk on the beach.’

She sighed. ‘Okay then. Maybe a short one. I just want to get out of here really. It’s a bit embarrassing - everyone seeing me choking like that.’

He got up and paid the bill. Relieved that she had agreed to the walk - albeit reluctantly. Relieved, in fact, that she hadn’t choked to death. Maybe this wasn’t the right moment to propose. It was hardly shaping up into a fairy tale evening. Ben found himself to be beset with uncertainty.

The wind had picked up. They felt it the moment they exited the restaurant, whooshing around at their hair and their clothes. Banks of clouds had started to gather, increasing Ben’s feeling of foreboding. They walked hand in hand to the nearest stretch of coast. Fuck. Why hadn’t he thought of it. The tide was in, leaving very little beach left to walk on. Rachel gave him a questioning look - did he still want to go through with it? But she didn’t say the words so Ben proceeded, clambering down through the rocks, guiding her by the hand. She took off her heels as they reached the sand - not because it was warm. Because it wasn’t warm. Not even mild, not even tepid. The wind was whipping up a frenzy now and the sky was murky grey, reflected in the sea which moved stealthily like sludge. There was barely any sand to walk on

now. Ben could feel her looking at him, willing him to turn back. He looked down and saw the goose bumps on her arms, then the first, heavy drops began to fall.

‘Please Ben, can we go home now?’

She was pleading rather than angry.

‘Yes, of course we can.’

They huddled up as they headed back to the jeep.

Mission aborted.

‘Hiya!’ Cynthia sounded improbably, headache-inducingly cheerful.

‘Oh hi, how’s it going?’ Rachel was still groggy.

‘Well?’

‘Well what? Oh. Do you need me to come and get Ember? I was just ...’

‘No, no, not at all. He’s grand. I meant, how was last night?’

‘Oh. It was fine.’

‘Fine?’

‘Well nice. Apart from the fact I almost choked to death.’

‘You’re not serious?’

Rachel gave a small laugh. When she did so she could still feel the rawness in her throat.

‘I am. On a fish bone in the restaurant.’

‘Jesus. Are you alright?’

‘Oh yeah. I had Ben on hand to give me the Heimlich Manoever.’

‘What a hero!’ She used her best damsel-in-distress voice.

‘I know.’

Cynthia imagined Rachel smiling down the other end of the phone.

‘So. Did you ... go anywhere nice afterwards?’

‘Well we tried to go for a walk on the beach but the tide was in and it started to lash, so we just went home.’

‘Oh. That’s disappointing.’

‘Ah well. These things happen.’

‘And did you have an early night?’

Rachel laughed.

‘Yes. But not the kind you’re talking about. I was still feeling pretty shaken up after the whole choking thing so I just went straight to bed and fell right asleep. How’s Ember?’

‘He’s great. Great. Playing Mario Car with Rob.’

‘I’ll be round for him in a bit.’

‘No rush. You take your time. Is Ben there with you?’

‘No. He left early to do ... I don’t know, something tree-related.’

‘Okay so. See you later.’

‘Bye Cyn.’

Cynthia ended the call and immediately speed dialed another number.

‘Hello.’ The male voice on the other end of the line was gruff and croaky sounding.

‘You didn’t ask her.’

‘Well, Cynthia.’

‘What happened?’

‘I take it you’ve spoken to her.’

‘I have.’

‘Well then, you know what happened.’

‘Ah Ben. You should have asked her anyway.’

‘Jesus Christ woman. The world doesn’t run to your agenda, you know.’

‘I know that, only I baked you a cake.’

‘A cake?’

‘Yes. A special engagement cake. With little marzipan figures of you and Rachel on top.’

He laughed. ‘You’re having me on.’

‘I’m not. Ah, it’s lovely. You should come in and have a look at it. The likeness is only brilliant, even though I say so myself.’

‘Unbelievable.’

‘So do you think that you might ask her soon? Before the cream goes off?’

‘Bye Cynthia.’

He hung up.

Women!

Dermot thought the banging was occurring in his dreams. It took him a while to come to. To realize it was occurring on his own front door and not as a part of his night-scape. He arose blearily, as he did most mornings and took a swig of whiskey from the bottle that was ever present on his bedside locker. Hair of the dog. He’d assumed a whole canine coat at this stage. Donned an entire wolf’s clothing. He desultorily pulled on

his grubby robe and descended the stairs unrhythmically. He saw two shadows behind the hall door, two vague male forms. He didn't give it much thought, beyond the intention of giving them an earful, for waking him so early.

The two men were large and darkly dressed. One handed him a sheet of paper, mostly avoiding eye contact. The other pushed past him aggressively, shoving Dermot and his angry protests aside. Flattened against his own hall wall, Dermot scanned the words on the paper before him. They blurred and hopped across the page at first. He rubbed his eyes vigorously, attempting to re-focus. The bailiffs. It was the bailiffs.

As if on cue, the two men entered his line of vision once more, Dermot's wide screen TV between them, not an ounce of compassion between them. He considered wrestling them for it, but instead found himself sinking down on a lower step of the stairs, the energy leaving his body, like the air escaping a rapidly deflating balloon. He watched on wordless as the men made repeated journeys - with his laptop, his sound system, even his reclining, leather chair.

The widely opened front door blew and blasted freezing cold air onto Dermot's exposed shins. He felt his follicles rise as he noticed a white, rectangular envelope lying innocuously on the hall floor, a foot away from the letter box. With some effort he leaned forward and picked it up. It was from the bank. He ripped it open in a jagged way and read the contents distractedly. It took him a number of moments to decipher. Then the free-falling moment as it hit him. Foreclosure. That three syllable word, signifying so much. And whatever plank was left in Dermot's reason, at that very moment broke and fell. Down and down. And fury would be the only force that from that point on could rouse him. He ripped up the letter in a frenzied fashion. This time

he wouldn't stop 'til he found her. Because it seemed to Dermot he had nothing left to loose. She had already taken everything from him.

So what to do. Just be himself. That's what Ben's instinct told him to do. That's what he felt that Rachel would like the best. No fancy clothes or restaurants. Just the two of them. Stripped down. To the core. He did want to make it just a little bit special though. He wondered ...

Two nights later found them sitting on the sofa. It now sank even more dramatically in the centre, so much so that their bodies were almost on top of one another. Neither had any complaints.

'This is cosy.' Said Rachel, feeding Ben a prawn dipped in sweet and sour sauce.

'Isn't it.' Ben concurred, accepting every tempting morsel that Rachel offered to him. Ember slumbered peacefully above them. Flame snoozed contentedly on the chair beside them. Ben felt the moment was upon them. He was half tipsy from the bottle of wine they had been sharing. Which was helpful. He struggled to his feet.

'Come Flame.'

The animal leaped to his feet, at the ready.

'What are you doing?' Rachel looked up surprised, if a little bleary eyed.

'He hasn't been out for a while. Just letting him do his business.'

'He was just out ...'

'Back in a minute.'

'Oh, alright.'

She continued digging around in her fried rice.

Flame trotted to the front door with Ben. The two of them stood outside for half a minute.

‘Now. Remember what we rehearsed.’

The fox looked up at him, all alertness. Ben fished around in his trouser pocket and drew out an object. He crouched in front of the fox and held it before his nose. Flame delicately took the item between his teeth.

‘Now come.’ Ben instructed.

He re-entered the room, Flame trotting along behind him, impeded somewhat by the weight in his mouth. Ben reached the sofa first.

‘Bring.’ He commanded.

Rachel looked up from her takeaway. Flame was coming towards her, looking odd.

‘What’s? Oh, he’s got something in his mouth. What have you got there boy?’

She gestured for him to come closer towards her.

‘Drop.’ She said.

And with that the fox deposited the ring box at her feet. He looked up hopefully, at which point Ben handed him a piece of chicken. Rachel stared at the box for a long time, its significance becoming clear to her after several seconds. Her head swung up to Ben. He caught her eye momentarily then looked away, shifting awkwardly in his spot. She looked once more at the box and picked it up. It was ever so slightly damp.

‘A bit slobbery.’ She looked up at him again, smiling uncertainly.

Ben didn’t respond. Looked as if he was incapable of doing so. Rachel opened the box. The universe pounded in her ears. She was aware of Ben moving closer. Until

he was in front of her. He gently removed the box from her hand. Then he took out the ring and held it at her eye level.

‘Rachel. Will you marry me?’

‘Are you down on one knee?’ She said.

This unnerved him. He looked down at his knees, unsure. He was.

‘Yes. Cynthia told me I had to.’

‘Did she?’ Rachel laughed gently. ‘Do you do everything Cynthia tells you?’

‘Only most things.’

‘And did she tell you to propose to me?’

‘No. I came up with that idea myself.’

He was acutely aware that she hadn’t said yes yet. Then she held out her left hand, all the while keeping her eyes on his. Hers were all shiny. He thought they might contain tears. Happy tears, he hoped. He took the ring out of the box and slid it onto her finger. Were his hands shaking? No, they couldn’t be.

‘Does this mean ...?’

‘Yes Ben. I will marry you.’

They kissed then. It was a long kiss. When they finally came up for breath, Ben jumped to his feet and punched the air.

‘Yes.’ He said.

The fox jumped to his feet as well and looked around alarmed. Rachel laughed. Then she started to cry. The two were intermingled. Such was life.

Chapter

‘Will we go for a little walk, honey pie. Just you and me?’

Ember looked up from his drawing.

‘Can Flame come?’

‘Of course he can.’

Ember got up instantly and went to get his coat. Would he always be so well behaved?

So pliable? Throughout the teenage years? Rachel shook her head at the thought.

Thankfully, those years were still far enough away for her to dismiss them.

They walked along in joyful and companionable silence. As they entered the woods they could hear Ben chopping logs on the far side. Ember allowed Rachel to place an arm around his shoulder. Flame ran hither and thither, chasing invisible scents, creating crazy zig zags on the forest floor.

They came to this fallen log, where they often went to sit. Together or alone. To think. Or to talk.

‘So.’ Rachel couldn’t believe how nervous she was. As if she was asking his permission or something. Which in a way, she was. Because if this caused Ember a set back, she wasn’t going ahead with it.

‘Something kind of exciting happened last night. Well, I hope you think its exciting too.’

He tilted his head up towards her, all eyes and ears, perfect trust. As she looked into those eyes, she was struck newly by their depth. Fathomless. And for the umpteenth

time since they'd first placed her son in her arms, she felt she was communing with an old soul.

'Ben asked me to marry him.'

Ember nodded slowly, his eyes fastened to hers. She didn't know if he was going to speak or not. But speak he did.

'I hope you said yes.'

Her laugh was an escape of breath and relief.

'I did say yes. So you don't mind then.'

'Nope. He shook his head.'

Then he grinned delightedly at her and hugged her tight around the waist.

'We can be like a proper family.'

She thought she'd expire from happiness. Then ...

'I'm glad you didn't marry Dermot.'

She was afraid to move a muscle, it was the first time he'd said his name since the incident that had landed Dermot in jail.

'I'm glad I didn't marry him either.' She said.

They were both silent for some time, continuing in their embrace. Rachel broke the silence but not the hug.

'Do you think about him much Ember?'

'Sometimes. Not too much any more.'

'Well that's good. That you think about him less.'

Ember nodded against her stomach before continuing.

'He feels very far away from here.'

Rachel nodded too.

‘He does, doesn’t he.’

But he wasn’t that far away.

Mother and son followed the echo of the rhythm of the axe as it chopped. Until they were out of the trees and the sound was no longer an echo. It was right in front of them. As was Ben. They stopped the song of the axe as he caught sight of them. His smile split his face as his axe had split the wood. He came slowly towards them, wiping his hands on the back of his jumper. He knew Rachel had probably told Ember. He was nervous too.

The boy’s features were inscrutable. He stood some distance away, bouncing a ball he’d brought to throw for Flame. The fox jumped around his feet in a highly excitable state, completely ignored by all the humans.

‘Rachel. Ember.’ Ben nodded at them, his eyes on the boy.

Ember stared for a few seconds longer.

‘Do I have to call you Dad?’

‘Not at all. Ben is fine.’

A few more bounces.

‘But what if I want to call you Dad?’

Ben’s gulp was visible.

‘Then that will be fine too.’

Ember nodded as he continued to bounce the ball thoughtfully. Then he smiled shyly at the ground. He lifted his eyes bashfully, all soft brown and lashes like a baby deer.

‘Congratulations.’ He said.

Ben laughed with delight and gratitude.

‘Come here you.’ He said. Advancing and grabbing Ember up into a hug. The boy’s laughter lifted to the uppermost treetops.

‘Group hug!’ Shouted Rachel, wrapping her arms around them both and squeezing the life into them.

Chapter

‘Will I tell her?’

‘Well, I’d really like to. ... no, you tell her.’

‘We’ll tell her together.’

‘Okay.’

They were walking along the path towards Madame Cyn’s. After a short pause ...

‘It might be fun to tease her for a few minutes.’

‘Yeah! Ah no. That would be mean.’

‘But fun though.’

They were there. They stood for a few seconds outside the door and looked at one another.

‘Ready.’

‘Ready.’

They swung the door open and it issued its welcoming ring. Cynthia looked up from

spreading butter on bread. Her eyes immediately widened and the expectation spread across her face. She came around from behind the counter, her eyes traveling a direct route to Rachel's left hand. When they found what they were looking for her arms rose into the air and she uttered a triumphal sounding whoop, thereby startling all her customers and reducing Ben and Rachel to helpless laughter as she embraced them. She jumped up and down as she did so, like a child in need of a pee.

'Oh this is so wonderful, I'm so excited.'

To prove it she squeezed them even harder.

'Go easy woman!'

She released her grasp and turned to her customers and with an expansive gesture:

'Coffee on the house!'

This elicited a half bemused, half asleep cheer from the assembled crowd. 'Even fluffy, designer ones.' She added with enthusiasm.

'What'll you two have?' She turned back to Ben and Rachel. 'Ah, come here to me.'

Another hug. Her warmth. Her enthusiasm. Her love. Without question. She turned once again and addressed the room.

'Rachel and Ben are getting married.'

Another cheer, louder and more coherent than the last time and a smattering of applause which grew in volume and intensity. Rachel and Ben turned and acknowledged their audience. Rachel felt like executing a small curtsy, her cheeks pink with embarrassment and happiness.

'Here. Sit yourselves down at that table that just came free over there. I'll clear it off for you.'

‘I’ll do it.’ Rachel began to walk towards the counter.

‘You will not. Do what you’re told and sit down. You’re not an employee today.

You’re an honoured guest.’

‘Alright. If you insist.’

‘I do. Now. I’ll bring you over two fluffy coffees.’

‘I’d prefer an ordinary ...’ Ben was stopped in his tracks.

‘Ah come on. You’re celebrating. Have a fluffy one.’

This meant a cappuccino. It was what Robert had called them as a boy and it had stuck.

It even said it up on the board. Right beside latte. Which Richie Brennan, one of Cynthia’s oldest regulars, pronounced as “a late coffee”.

The beverages were duly placed in front of them.

‘Will you have some cake?’

‘I don’t really ...’

‘Ah you will.’ She was off again. Came back with a giant lump of coffee walnut cake and two forks.

‘You won’t mind sharing, will you? Sure, you’re practically a married couple now.’

Cynthia let out what seemed like an involuntary sound, midway between a squeal and a whoop and hugged herself, wiggling around on her chair.

‘Oh, I’m so happy for you.’

‘Are you? Because we really couldn’t tell.’

‘Ah, would you get away out of that.’ She flapped her hand. ‘It’s only brilliant. Have you set a date yet?’

‘Well, we haven’t really ...’

‘Christmas is always lovely. Might be a bit too soon to arrange everything. Oh. June. Next June would be perfect.’

‘We’ll let you know when we’ve decided.’ Said Ben, placing his cup down definitively and removing his fluffy coffee mustache with his lower lip, as Rachel had seen him do before with pints of Guinness.

‘What’s next?’ Cynthia wore an expression that spoke “getting down to business”.

‘Oh yes. Your engagement party.’

‘We’re not having ...’

‘Now you know I don’t like to interfere ...’

‘Hah!’

‘Perish the thought.’

Cynthia had the good grace to smile.

‘As I said, I don’t like to interfere but you *have* to have an engagement party.’

‘Is there some rule book we don’t know about?’ Said Ben.

‘Everyone knows you’ve got to have an engagement party. The dogs on the street know it. Ask Flame.’

She hooted as she clasped Rachel’s hand in her own.

‘Actually.’ Said Rachel, surprising them both, and herself a little bit too. ‘I think a party might be nice.’

‘But you hate parties.’

‘Well, I do normally. But. You know. Cynthia’s right. This is a special occasion. I only intend doing it once, you know.’

‘Me too.’ Said Ben.

‘Ah, would you listen to the two of you. So romantic. Like a couple of love birds so you are. You’re like ... Ken and Barbie. Ben and Barbie.’

She threw back her head and laughed in that deep, delicious, contagious way she had.

‘Her chest is a little bit bigger than mine.’ Rachel laughed.

‘We can have it in Shems. I’ll do the food, Canice will do the drink. It’ll be perfect.’

‘Sounds good.’ Said Rachel, drawing an amazed look from Ben.

‘So that’s settled then.’ Said Cynthia.

It was settled.

And Cynthia settled back in her seat in a manner of supreme contentment. Rachel smiled inwardly - and a little bit outwardly too - as she watched this woman. Thinking maybe that was her secret. That she wore other people’s happiness as if it were her own. Delighted in it. Almost as if it were a shared pool in which to dip her toes. There was no jealousy, no resentment, no coveting of someone else’s good. Or goods. She intrinsically knew that there was more than enough to go around. Her own cup runneth over and overflowed into everyone else’s. Rachel made a silent vow to emulate her more and more every day. She might be a bit less bossy though.

October continued to be kind to them - like a graceful extension to that year’s summer. The night of the party was no exception, although the mist hung in chilly patches. They drove through it to the pub, dipping their headlights when appropriate. Ben drove, Rachel rode shotgun and Ember fidgeted excitedly in the back. He had asked if he could invite a friend to the party - the boy called Michael from his class. His parents were bringing him over a little later. Rachel glanced back at him for the umpteenth time.

And she felt that if everything else went wrong tonight she wouldn't care. She already had her joy. Her son bringing a friend. Having a friend. In fact, the moment he had asked her a few days before, that in itself would make the whole party worthwhile. It was already a roaring success as far as she was concerned.

They pulled up outside Shem's. The car park was crammed with cars - nothing unusual there - especially for a Friday night - overflowing with life. The lights were all on, shining merrily, and when they opened the door, every sense was assaulted. Stale beer and salty snacks tickled at their nostrils. A wall of sound, raucous laughter and overly loud music, gaggles of people and lights and movement. Rachel shrank back and felt Ember do the same beside her - but only momentarily. Then a cheer rose up and kissed the ceiling as their presence was noted, welcomed and embraced.

It wasn't clear who was there for the party and who was engaged in regular Friday night drinking. After a short time, it ceased to matter as the whole pub got involved. And Rachel felt fully accepted. Because she was marrying one of their own. A heady, unfamiliar feeling, all at once disconcerting and alluring. Tears nestled just beyond the outer rims of her eyes for most of the evening. Gratitude caused them. Mistrust prevented their escape. She was hugged by perfect strangers, some well-meaning matrons of the parish, others drunken chancers, trying to cop a feel. Then it was Cynthia's turn, her arms plump and slightly damp, almost pulling the head off Rachel. Then Canice, his stomach protruding and comforting. It was as if these two people were so stuffed full of joie de vivre that it spilled out from under their skins and over their clothing. It was all quite overwhelming really. As soon as she was able, Rachel took her drink and sat alone in a quietish corner.

Ember had already found his friend and the two boys chased one another, weaving between the tables, squealing and laughing with excitement. She was so happy for him. Wished she could be him. Without these adult expectations weighing upon her shoulders. Having to make small talk with all these virtual strangers when all she wanted to do was curl up on her couch, book open in one hand, caressing Flame's warm, comforting body with the other. She was grateful at least for her glass of wine. She downed half of it in the one go. Fortification. What it must be to relish these social situations. She found it hard to imagine. Then she looked up and Ben's face was above her, his hazel eyes smiling into her own, flooding her with gratitude and relief.

'Ready?' He said.

'As I'll ever be.' She got up and took the arm he offered her. He knew how this was for her. He knew her innermost thoughts. But with his arm, warm and reassuring, about her shoulders, it wasn't all that bad.

In fact it was pretty darn good. The alcohol and the tangible good will relaxed her body and her tongue and soon she was conversing like a bona fide extrovert. Introduced to people she half knew or didn't know at all, basking in Ben's ease around his own kind. She had never lived in one place for all that long. Knowing so many people back to childhood and even birth was an alien concept to her. So different. So very different. Until there loomed Sally Hogan, perched atop a bar stool like a chirpy and colourful bird. She was back with Leppy now and he stood loosely and lankily over her, pint glass dangling from an elongated hand. She refined her pose upon their approach, her head to

one side as she showed her teeth broadly.

‘Ben! Rachel! Congratulations to you both.’

Ben nodded, smiled and leaned towards her, allowing her to peck him on either cheek.

Then he shook Leppy’s free hand, loosely and amiably.

‘Congratulations to you two as well. Delighted for you.’

‘Thanks.’

They did look happy.

‘I don’t know if you’ve both been properly introduced to Rachel.’

‘Of course.’

Sally was off her bar stool and air kissing Rachel, who caught a generous gulpful of her sickly, sweet scent. Leppy did the same, leaning impossibly low to accommodate the disparity in their heights.

‘Can we get you both a drink?’ Sally said brightly. ‘I can see you’re running low.’

‘Go on then.’

‘Wine and a pint of Guinness, is it?’

‘Great.’

Sally turned to the bar, leaving Leppy to grin at them. The two men began a discourse on Ben’s completed house.

‘You should come and see it some time.’ Said Ben, sincere in his enthusiasm and his Guinness.

‘I’d like that.’ Said Leppy, beery and enthusiastic himself. He turned to Rachel.

‘So you’ll be moving in there too, I guess.’

Rachel and Ben exchanged wary looks. They hadn’t really addressed it yet. Of course,

it was going to happen if they were getting married some day. But when would that be?
Rachel's lease still had several months to run its course.

'Whoops.' Said Leppy, in his big man's genial way, looks like I've walked into something here.'

Had he? Was there anything to walk into? They were saved from answering by Sally, turning and offering them their drinks.

'Thanks Sal.'

'No problem.'

She handed Ben first his stout then Rachel, her wine. It was a glass of red. Rachel had been drinking white.

'Cheers.' They all clinked glasses together, the women through gritted teeth.

'So.' Sally was perched once more. 'Have you two set a date yet?'

'Um ...'

'No, not yet.'

'I see.' Sally took another sip and nodded sagely.

What did that mean? What did she see? There was nothing to see?

'Me and Gerard set a date right away, didn't we love?'

Gerard? Who was Gerard? Oh yes, Leppy's real name.

'We couldn't wait to be together.'

Then you couldn't wait to separate - the vicious thought reverberated through Rachel's mind and flashed behind her eyes.

'Still, you two barely know each other. Probably better off waiting.'

This time the retort was about to escape, forcing its way up Rachel's throat and into her

mouth. It was just at the back of her teeth when Ben interjected.

‘Well, I feel like I’ve known this one forever anyway.’ He squeezed Rachel towards him and looked down fondly at her. She felt flooded with warmth. She chanced a look at Sally who was regarding her stonily.

They were saved from further conversation by the announcement of the commencement of the karaoke. You’d better not try that trick from last time, bitch, Rachel said silently as they brushed past Sally and Leppy and seated themselves at a nearby table to watch Cynthia’s opening number.

“I am what I am”, delighting everyone. Particularly the only gay in the village.

Later there was the cake cutting ceremony to get through.

‘Good practice for the big day.’ Said Cynthia jovially, as she aimed her smart phone at them in order to capture the moment. She’d had to re-do the cake, but the marzipan figures were re-used. Rachel enjoyed her figure’s lopsided grin and the way her legs crossed at the ankles. Ben’s marzipan hair was as messy as in real life, his bottom almost - almost - as delicious.

‘Hey Ben! I’ve just eaten one of your arms.’

It was shared and guzzled and gobbled. By the end of the night, all had consumed a piece of the couple. And when they closed the karaoke session with a powerful rendition of “Islands in the Stream”, they almost brought the roof off. Rachel couldn’t believe it was her up there singing - it was almost an out of body experience. Her joy lifted her up onto the stage and her voice up to the ceiling, especially for the high, Dolly Parton bits. And it felt to her that the cocoon she’d been living in for such a long time was exploding all around her.

The day after the party, Dermot began his return journey. As he slammed the door of his new, second-hand car - he'd had to sell the Merc - Ben was wrapping his arms even tighter around Rachel in bed, pulling her into him, protectively. As Dermot pulled out of his driveway, Ben whispered into her ear that he loved her.

Dermot was determined that this time he wouldn't leave the county empty handed. He had nothing to return to after all.

Chapter

Flame was magnificent now. There was no longer anything comical about his stance. The awkwardness had exited his body, leaving a noble creature in its wake. His face looked somehow more serious too, like he'd lost his wide-eyed, youthful look and his ears were somehow less quizzical. But then he and Ember went bouncing on the trampoline and it was just like old times.

It was just the two of them that day. Woman and fox. Mother and motherless. Flame sat upright in the armchair, as if in solemn contemplation, occupying the entire space. Rachel stared out the window, trying not to let the sludge like quality of the day get her down. The relentlessness of the rain as it fell in sodden sheets before sinking back into the earth. It had been pouring down for three solid days now - she was thinking of building an ark.

One further presence inhabited the room. It was the silence that fell between them.

It grew to dominate, but in a gentle way. It was welcome. Comforting. And then its presence was shattered as a photo came clattering off the wall. Both creatures looked 'round startled, in the direction of the noise. Next, at each other.

'Was that you?' Rachel's words were redundant as Flame regarded her quizzically, his ears twitching busily, his nose held high. Of course it wasn't him. He was nowhere near the photo. She walked over to where it lay, presuming the hook had given way. She lifted it off the floor. It was the same picture that had fallen before, the one that Flame had knocked in his most memorable rampage. The one with the crack in the corner of the frame which Rachel had vowed to get mended, then duly forgotten all about. Shit. The crack now extended across the entire face of the family portrait. A jagged line, distorting and fragmenting the members. The irony wasn't lost on Rachel, who sat on the edge of the sofa, a few feet away from Flame. He issued one of his strange sounds, a kind of muffled woof.

'What?' Rachel looked at him and smiled.

He didn't say another word.

She would definitely have to replace the glass now. Oh well. She probed and felt her way around the back of the frame with her fingers, attempting to ease the photo out. For the first time she understood the actual age of the frame. No new-fangled object from a modern day department store. The backing was velvet, layered onto fragile card. The frame itself was a deep, dark wood. Mahogany, perhaps, from one of the colonies. In fact she was amazed the thing had lasted so long.

She got purchase at last with her nails and prised the backing away. What happened next was something she could never have predicted. The back sprang suddenly open,

releasing a musty fragrance, not unlike that of the lodge house on the first day she had met it. And the scent was not the only thing revealed. A sheet of paper, neatly folded, the edges sharp and tinged with yellow, almost rendered sepia, like the photo itself. Rachel looked up at Flame. As if for confirmation. He regarded her intensely, his front paws folded neatly and blackly before him. Rachel lifted the paper out, her movements slow and delicate, feeling that she should be wearing special gloves at least. To handle this relic of the past which was soon to reveal itself to be a portal. She unfolded it with care, holding her breath throughout, lest it should disintegrate. The paper felt so fragile, so easily torn, like the wings of a dead butterfly. Almost weightless.

It was a single page only, black Indian ink traversing either side, a sloping script, elegant, yet somehow conveying the impression of speed, the author in a hurry to get the words down - get them out of her - burden the page instead.

“April 1919”.

She read the date out loud, appearing as it did in improbable letters at the top of the first page. She looked at Flame again. The fox continued to regard her intently. Remarkably still, he gave the appearance of listening. Rachel cleared her throat and read the words out loud. To whom she read them she had no idea:

“Dear Reader.

I do not know who you are or indeed, if these words are destined to be read. I do not even comprehend exactly why I write them. I only know that I must, compelled by an urgency I do not fully understand. Perhaps it is to prove that I exist. To myself and to

the rest of the world. Perhaps to record my testimony while I still have the chance. As I don't know how much longer I will have."

If Rachel was not already feeling chills, an icy shiver wend its way now down her spine, ending in a comprehending shudder. She became aware of a tremble in her fingertips, as she gathered herself up and continued to read.

"If anything should happen to me, please don't let that monster have my babies. They need to be taken far away from here, especially if I am not around to protect them. I wish for my relatives in London to take them in. My cousin Sarah Whittaker and her husband Charles in Chelsea. They are good, good people and have always longed for children of their own. They could be happy there, I'm sure they could. Or if not somewhere else. Anywhere but here, in this cursed house. With him.

No one would believe the things that I have endured. No one does believe it. Only Gertie. Gertrude Byrne. My one true friend in Ireland. She would take good care of my children, but that would never be allowed. If not for her I would be completely alone."

The writing blurred on the page, then reinstated itself.

"I do not know what will become of me now. But I am frightened. So very frightened. Completely at his mercy."

Here the wording was smudged, as if a tear had fallen and been wiped away.

“But I care not for myself anymore. I see it is too late for me now. But please God, please someone, please protect my children. I beg you. You must. They cannot stay with their father. They must not stay with their father. Please God. Do not let them stay with their father.

And if you ever read this, my darling boy and girl, a thousand kisses each from your Mama, who will love you for the whole of eternity.”

It was signed carefully and deliberately:

“Clara Winterbourne”.

Rachel had stopped reading the words out loud some time before. The silence grew around her and the fox. Around the letter itself and around the single bluebell, dried and compressed in the secret cavity close to a century old.

Outside the lodge house, the rain continued its soft descent.

She opened the front door, approximately half an hour later.

‘Thanks for coming at such short notice.’

The kindly features of Dolores Byrne were creased into a frown.

‘Not at all. Is there something wrong? You sounded a bit ... funny on the phone.’

‘No, nothing wrong. Come in, come in. I’ve found something ... quite unbelievable.’

Rachel ushered the other woman to be seated. There was no time for cups of tea today.
No time for idle chit chat.

‘Here. Look what I found. Careful. It’s very delicate.’

Rachel handed the letter to a bemused Dolores.

‘What is it?’

‘Read it.’

Rachel was like a coiled spring. Dolores frowned some more and commenced reading. Rachel’s eyes burned into her, guessing her place in the letter by the positioning of her eyebrows, the softening or otherwise of her lines. Dolores looked up at one point.

‘Where did you get this?’

‘It was at the back of the family portrait, hidden in the frame.’

Dolores’s eyes reverted back. Rachel watched them fill at one point, felt her own eyes do the same. Blinked a couple of times.

Dolores finally looked up again. Her hand and the letter fell limp across her lap. She shook her head at Rachel.

‘I still don’t understand. How did you find it again?’

‘The photo fell off the wall and the glass cracked, and I was trying to get it out, and there it was.’

Dolores nodded barely, then looked down at the page again, as if in disbelief.

‘She speaks very highly of your grandmother.’ Rachel said softly.

‘She does, doesn’t she.’

Dolores gave a small laugh, her face etched with emotion, her eyes far away, as if searching down the years.

‘I thought you’d be the one to show it to. That you’d know what to do with it.’

‘What to do with it. What to do.’

‘Does she have any living relatives?’ Rachel had had longer to take it in.

‘She does. Yes. In England. I still have their last address I think. Kept it this long time, just in case. Although what I thought I’d need it for ...’

Rachel could almost see Dolores’s mind working under her forehead.

‘Although maybe it’s the property of the state. They own the lodge house and all its contents.’

‘But something so personal?’

‘I don’t know. And I suppose it could be classified as a piece of local history. Maybe the County museum is the place of it.’

Rachel nodded at all these ideas.

‘And you said it just fell off the wall.’

‘Yes.’

‘Just - fell off. On its own.’

Rachel nodded, her skin starting to tingle, her scalp beginning to rise.’

‘You were alone in the house at the time?’

‘I was.’

It was only half a lie. She had been the only human present. Flame had since been dispatched to the forest, the hairs brushed off his cushion, a window open in his wake and the awful, turgid, cloying air freshener deployed.

The clock ticked on the wall and somehow became their heartbeats. Dolores slowly shook her head.

‘Well how about that. You know what this means, don’t you?’

‘What?’

‘Well it’s a kind of proof. Evidence. That she was in fear of her life. If this had been found at the time ...’

‘Perhaps he would have been brought to justice?’

‘Perhaps. But probably not.’

‘No, probably not. But at least she can have her say now.’

‘And she would be so happy that her children got away from him.’

‘Yes.’

‘So maybe a kind of justice.’

‘Her chance to set the record straight.’

‘Yes. God rest her.’

Dolores Byrne blessed herself. And Rachel Doyle, who hadn’t been to mass for many years, blessed herself also.

Later on, she was washing up, as there was no dishwasher in the lodge house. At first she had considered this to be a minor catastrophe. But she had since learned to relish the suds, as they slid through her fingers, back into the basin. Sometimes, when alone, she would fantasize she was starring in a retro fairy liquid ad. A smiley, old-fashioned housewife of yesteryear. Other times, Ember dried up or sometimes they switched roles, their breathing matching one another’s.

On that particular day, she stood alone, the windows all ajar, Dolores gone, Flame still gone, the rain having passed over. She could smell it though through the kitchen

window, all damp and greeny, the drops blobbing on the branches, dripping down.

The birds had come back out again, their joyful song of survival. And she felt joyful also, an ecstatic peace descending, and all at once no longer alone. At first she thought it was the forest, seeping into the lodge house. Then she felt it brush her cheek, so warm, so loving. A caress. Perhaps even a kiss. And then it left her. Standing there in awe. Knowing with a certainty she knew she could never explain.

Rachel kept the bluebell. She felt that it was somehow meant for her. Some secret finders-keepers clause, between the giver and the findee.

Chapter

November bit into Rachel's skin. The clocks had wound back. Halloween was but a cloudy memory, as was the extraordinary autumn energy that had enlivened Rachel's being. Her nerves began to prickle across her skin again. It must be the cold, she thought. The new and perfect darkness. The quality of which had both shocked and fascinated her when she'd first arrived here the previous February. A constant city dweller, street lights had been a given all her life. One of those things she'd taken for granted until it was taken away. And the night was then so deep. So never-ending. So fathomless. Until the stars came out and she stared open-mouthed until she dared to no longer, unless she fell right up and into them and never returned to her normal life.

They did change her, she felt. Just as she changed with the cycle of the moon, which she'd never been more aware of, checking each night its position in the sky and its form - from crescent to full. She'd never noticed before that it could sometimes appear orange hanging, glowing, eerily suspended. Like someone had just placed it there for her ultimate awe.

November brought its own gems, as had every other month since her arrival. But it also brought back The Hunt.

The horn gave them their first warning. Of what was to come. Before even the flash of red through the semi-naked trees. Or the thunderous sound of so many horses galloping en masse. Rachel and Ember's eyes instantly found each others as the bugle sounded. The horror. The terror. That raised the primeval hairs on each set of hackles. Where was Flame? Nowhere to be found. No language necessary, they each fled to the door on a Sunday morning that all at once had ceased to be sacred. They each were hit by an icy blast as they stumbled out the back door and fell into the garden. Neither returned for a coat. They ran into the forest.

'Flame!'

'Flame!'

Each call more high-pitched, each shout more hysterical.

The sun sliced down through the gaps in the trees, the flawless, blue sky making a mockery of their fear, adding weirdly to the surreal, nightmarish quality of the scene. Their pet, their puppy, was being pursued and as far as they knew, there was nothing they could do.. There *must* be something they could do about it. Rachel cursed herself.

How could she have been so negligent? To let him roam freely at this time of year. She had been so selfishly caught up in all the engagement hoo-haa. And why hadn't she insisted they make him wear a collar? Although would that make a difference? Certainly not to a pack of hounds with the scent of blood in their nostrils. They ran in opposite directions now, an unspoken strategy, keeping track of one another by voice and intuition. They couldn't locate the fox so by mutual, silent agreement, they ran in the direction of the noise of the hunt.

The direction kept shifting and changing, like an ever-elusive willo-the-wisp as the hunt zig-zagged back and forth through the woods. At times they would catch a glimpse, a sheen of chestnut horse-body or the sleeve of a red jacket before it disappeared. They scrambled over the fallen trees and cleared the narrow streams with which they had become so familiar. Rachel almost felt that she could navigate this terrain in the dark. That it would appear in her mind's eye as clear as day. So busy was Rachel with tracking, following hoof prints and observing trampled undergrowth, that she forgot to look up. So she gasped and fell to the ground with a thud as a mighty, white steed reared up in front of her, whinnying as he went, making himself appear twice as big as he was. On his back sat a portly man with cheeks almost as scarlet as his coat. His grin and the look in his eyes gave Rachel all the information she needed: he had reared the horse on purpose to intimidate her. Well he wouldn't get away with it. She scrambled to her feet with all the dignity she could muster and drew herself to her full five foot four and a half inches, extending her neck and swelling out her chest in an effort to appear larger - just as the horse had done. She was about to open her mouth to tell him what she thought of him, but it turned out that there wasn't any need. As a tiny bundle of

furious energy barreled up behind her and let fly at the man.

‘You leave my mother alone you big ... bully.’

The man chuckled, his face appearing ruddier.

‘I didn’t touch your mother.’

‘You tried to frighten her.’

‘I did no such thing.’

The man made to leave, coaxing his horse in the other direction with pressure from his knee and a tug on the rein.

‘Oh no you don’t!’

Ember’s voice rose in volume and fury, as he launched himself at man and beast.

Rachel watched on in stunned amazement as her son grabbed onto the man’s nearest calf muscle in a frenzied bear hug, his other hand white-knuckling onto the saddle. Ember was broadcasting strange, guttural noises.

‘Get your lunatic child off me, woman.’

At which point Rachel’s temper flared up to match his own.

‘He is not a lunatic. How dare you!’

But she moved towards them just the same. It didn’t look safe.

‘How would you feel if someone tried to kill your pet?’

‘I’m not trying ... What are you talking about?’

‘He has a pet fox.’

The man harrumphed. All the while attempting to shake Ember off his person.

‘You have a pet fox! Oh for fuck’s sake, it’s people like you bringing vermin into your home who cause all the problems in the first place.’

‘Flame is *not* vermin!’ Rachel was really seeing red now and not just the scarlet jacket flashing before her. She approached the horse and attempted to pull her child away. She struggled at first.

‘Honest to God, the boy is feral.’

That did it. With a roar worthy of Wimbledon Centre Court, Rachel ripped Ember’s body away from that of the horse, causing the animal to whinny and flare his nostrils in alarm, after which he reared up onto his hind legs, dislodging his rider fully and depositing him on his buttocks on the forest floor. The fury left Rachel’s system, alarm flooded it instead. She approached the man rapidly.

‘Are you alright?’

He was momentarily winded. His horse galloped away into the middle distance. They all watched it silently. The vision seemed to bring him back to his senses. His face coloured vividly.

‘Look at what you’ve done? Wait ‘til I get my hands. ...’

But they weren’t going to wait. Exchanging one, quick, frank glance, Rachel and Ember raced back through the trees, in the same direction they had come, and didn’t stop running until they reached the safety of the lodge house. Rachel slammed the door and leaned heavily back against it, panting. Then they looked at each other and started to laugh with some hilarity. With some hysteria.

‘Did you see his face?’ Rachel finally managed to get the words out.

‘Mammy.’ Said Ember, through manic giggles. ‘He landed on his arse.’

Rachel was momentarily shocked.

‘You’re not supposed to use that word.’

‘But you said it the other day in the car.’

‘I did not.’

‘You did. When that old man was driving really slow in front of us and we were rushing to school. You said - “Oh would you ever move your arse”.’

Rachel regarded him silently for a moment, then exploded into a fresh gale of giggles.

So what if her son said “arse”. He was talking, wasn’t he?’

‘Do you think he hurt himself Mam?’

‘Who - oh - when he fell. I wouldn’t say so. He looked fairly well padded.’

Ember grinned at her. Then the bugle sounded again. The smile died from his face and behind his eyes. The colour drained once more. The hunt wasn’t over. Far from over. And Flame was still out there. Somewhere.

They spent the rest of the morning frantically trying to follow the hunt, as it traversed hither and thither across the neighbouring fields. To no avail. The horses were too quick for them. And eventually they moved further on. Rachel and Ember returned defeated. If only Ben had been there, perhaps he could have made a difference, but he was away for the weekend in Kerry, visiting a sick aunt. Rachel felt sick herself. To her stomach and her soul, as she sank down on the coldness, on the hardness of the back doorstep. Ember descended beside her and cradled his head in his arms.

‘Hey.’ Rachel leaned over and embraced him, trying to transfer all the motherly love that she could muster, to somehow take on his pain as her own, or at least to share it, lessen the load. Because it was a load. A heavy, clinging, dragging one. But almost the worst thing was - they didn’t know. Had the unspeakables managed to get a fox?

And if they had, was that fox Flame? And if not, where the hell was he? Rachel kept staring into the trees, willing his rust coloured form to wend its way through them and track its familiar path through the garden. She could almost see him. Almost imagine him into actual existence. But not quite. Ember started to sob. She felt his shoulders shaking underneath her arm. She rubbed his upper back feeling helpless, wordless. Eventually she said:

‘You know how smart he is. He’d never let those idiots catch him.’

Ember lifted his head slightly as hope ignited something in him. He sniffed.

‘Yes. And fast.’

‘Very fast.’ Agreed Rachel.

Fast enough to beat a pack of hounds?

‘And he knows the forest better than they do.’ Said Ember, wiping his nose with the back of his hand.

‘That’s true. He does. Like the back of his paw.’

She carefully examined her son, saw him nodding, trying to convince himself.

‘He’ll come back to us soon. I know he will.’

Rachel continued the rhythmic rubbing and Ember leaned into her, half believing.

That night in her dreams, Clara came to Rachel once again. Wearing the dress she always wore, the same sepia expression. She was running again, through the corridors. Rachel could sense her panic. She felt as if she herself were traveling with her, just behind her, slightly above as if disembodied. She could hear the woman’s breathing, ragged and disturbing and every now and then, a terrified whimper. It seemed like there

was no end to it - this chase - these corridors. Until the woman turned her head and looked right up at Rachel, straight into her eyes, into the back of her soul.

‘He’s coming.’ She said.

Rachel woke herself up with an anguished scream and sat up ramrod straight in bed, like someone receiving an electric shock. Her breastbone, her back, her nighty - all stuck together with sweat. If she didn’t know better, she’d think she was going through the menopause - a night sweat.

‘Oh my God.’ She said, over and over again. She clambered out of bed in an attempt to dispel the feeling. The creeping, crawling, unbearable feeling. Of fingers clasping her throat and closing in. Oh my God, she couldn’t breathe. She flung open the bedroom window and plunged her head into the darkness, into the dark, night air. She took numerous gulps of the stuff, like a woman’s first taste of water after a long sojourn in the desert. She was still alive. He wasn’t here. But the woman had said he was coming. She had looked Rachel in the eye and she had told her. Why would she lie ...? But it was just a dream. Just a dream. She repeated the words like a chant, like a mantra, willing their meaning to permeate her. But they did not. She didn’t find sleep again that night and when she got up to face the Monday morning, everything had altered. The hunters had caught a fox.

That was all they knew.

Cynthia sensed her mood straight away. She cornered her at coffee break.

‘What is it? Is it the fox?’

‘Mmm.’ Rachel didn’t make eye contact.

‘There’s something else too, isn’t there. Did you and Ben have a fight?’

‘No, nothing like that.’

‘What then?’

She told her about the dream. Cynthia listened silently, her face solemn. Her response was considered.

‘Look. I hate to say this. I mean - I really hate to say this - but did you ever consider emigrating?’

Rachel’s eyes widened. This wasn’t what she had expected.

‘I did.’ She said. ‘A good few times.’

‘Then why didn’t you?’

‘Because I was never able to put enough money aside to qualify. I don’t come from a rich family and it’s been pretty much hand to mouth since it all happened. And besides. I love this country. This is where I wanted to bring up my son. I wanted Ember to be an Irish boy.’

Cynthia nodded.

‘The reason I ask is ... well ... It just seems, you’re always looking over your shoulder. Always afraid that he’s going to come after you. It was different for me. My fella moved on to a new woman the minute I moved out. I didn’t even have to apply for the divorce - he did it - because the new one wanted them to get married - God love her.’

Cynthia laughed a sad laugh that failed to reach the upper echelons of her face.

‘I even sent her a letter.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Warning her. About what she was letting herself in for.’

‘And did she ...?’

‘She never got it. Himself found it. Sent it back together with an abusive note. Said that if I ever tried to contact her again, he’d have me for slander. And me guts for garters. The usual threats.’

‘And that didn’t bother you?’

‘What? The threats?’

Rachel nodded, her face tense, her mouth all tight at the corners.

‘Not at all. He doesn’t scare me any more. Not since I got away from him. I can see him for what he is now. A coward and a bully.’

‘How *did* you get away?’

‘My family. My mother and sisters. They saw what was happening before I did. Saw him for what he was. Not that I believed them at first. Thought the sun shone out of his backside. But they didn’t give up. Didn’t give up on me. Even when I stopped talking to them.’

She shook her head as if in wonderment.

‘They kept ringing - no matter how many times I hung up on them. I didn’t want to hear it, you see. Told myself they had it all wrong, or even that they were jealous. Hah! How deluded can a person be? How brainwashed. He was so clever, the way he turned me against them. Telling lies. Manipulating.’

Rachel nodded, the ring of truth resounding.

‘And then, one day, I woke up in the hospital. And. I woke up.’

Rachel nodded again, absorbing it all. The two women pondered in silence for a while, fondling their coffee cups.

‘You know Cyn.’ Said Rachel. ‘It’s just so hard to believe that somebody like you. Somebody so ... strong ...’

Cynthia smiled wryly. ‘We all have our weak spots.’ She said. ‘And he was one of mine. For a while. But I know what you mean. I’d always thought of myself as strong. Came from a line of strong, capable women. But it can happen to the best of us.’ She smiled at Rachel.

‘But I’m not strong like you.’

Cynthia leaned forward, her face all at once earnest and serious.

‘Oh but you are. You’re stronger than me.’

‘How ...?’

‘I had my family to help me. You didn’t. You got *yourself* out. I don’t know how you did it, but you did.’

‘I had to find my own sisters in the world.’ Rachel’s voice was quiet.

Cynthia leaned back in the chair. ‘Your tribe.’

‘Yes. My tribe.’

‘Family can crop up in the unlikeliest of places.’

‘They can.’

They smiled at each other and left it at that.

Chapter

She missed Flame more than ever. Now that the nights were dense and close again.

His familiar trot as he accompanied her to close the gates at day’s end. The click of his

claws on the concrete. She felt such a sense of unease now. Dis-ease. This feeling didn't leave her on her now infrequent visits to the forest. She rushed through now, only by necessity, on her way to see Ben. The sense of enchantment she'd always received therein seemed to have deserted her. Or had it deserted the place entirely? The two seemed intertwined.

The effect on Ember was as bad as she had feared. It had set him back months. He still spoke to her and a few trusted others: Ben, Cynthia, Michael his best friend in school. But the mutism had returned, albeit in selective form.

She hadn't been able to face the trees that day. They no longer seemed to offer solidarity. She had agreed to go to Ben's for lunch at one. He came seeking her at half past, pounding on the door of the lodge house. She saw the look of consternation on his face as she peered through the side window to check who it was. She stood there looking all crumpled - her face and her clothes, her hair still in the same pony-tail she'd worn the day before. He frowned at her and she held the door open silently. They sat side by side on the couch.

'What is it Rach?'

She shook her head.

'You haven't ... you haven't gone off me, have you?'

She took up his hand and clasped it in both of hers against her breast.

'Of course not! Don't be silly.'

'It's just that you've been acting so strange. And then today when you didn't show up ...'

'I wanted to come and see you, I really did.'

‘Then why didn’t you?’

‘The woods. I was ... scared, I guess.’

He frowned. ‘But you must have walked through them hundreds of times.’

‘I have.’

‘So what’s changed?’

She hesitated. ‘Remember I told you about ...’

‘About Dermot?’

‘Yes.’

‘Jesus. Has he contacted you?’

‘Nothing like that.’

‘What then?’

‘I just feel ...’

‘What?’

She couldn’t get the words out.

‘I just feel ... like he’s coming for me.’

The tears betrayed. She hated herself for them. For her weakness, as they spewed out over her cheeks. She hid her eyes with her hand. Ben pulled her close. His warmth and his scent - his strength - reassuring. He rocked her gently for a while, rubbing her upper arm with great tenderness.

‘Move in with me.’ He said.

She stopped rocking.

‘But I still have three months left on the lease.’

‘Fuck the lease. You’re in my place half the time anyway. Or else I’m here. It makes

sense. It's time.'

He kissed her softly on the forehead.

'I've waited long enough for you. Would you like that?'

She didn't want to admit it, to herself or to him. It made her somehow feel like a foolish girl who couldn't take care of herself.

'What was that?'

'Mmm.'

'Is that a yes?'

'Yes, that's a yes.'

He hugged her even closer to him and she smiled into his jumper. The relief. The joy.

Because she'd felt, rightly or wrongly, that it'd had to come from him. And now it had.

And it would shut that Sally Hogan up once and for all.

Chapter

Bereft. That was the word that came to her mind when she looked at her nine year old son. He sat curled up in childish pose at the window seat, staring into the garden, into the trees. Waiting. She sat down beside him and ruffled his soft, dark hair. His face barely registered a flicker. He continued to stare.

She loved her son. Loved his precious sensitivity. Yet feared for him at the same time. He was living on the wrong planet, she oftentimes felt, for one so sensitive. She longed to whisk him away to another world, where bad things never happened. Until

then, they were stuck here in their earthly home. Better make the best of it.

‘I have something to ask you Sweetheart.’

His eyes flicked over briefly to hers before resuming their scanning of the forest.

‘Ben would like us to move in with him.’

Several heartbeats passed.

‘What do you think?’

‘What if Flame comes back looking for us and we’re gone?’

She’d anticipated this.

‘But don’t you know he’d find us at Ben’s house no problem. He’s been there with us loads of times. And he’d catch our scent on the wind, no problem. You know he would.’

Ember appeared to be considering this. He gave the barest nod. Even the ghost of a smile.

‘Where would I sleep? He startled and delighted her by saying.

‘Up in the turret room of course, your favourite place. With the view over the treetops. You can be like a bird in its nest, looking down.’

He shifted his position and she thought his eyes shone a little.

‘I like Ben.’ He said.

Her heart expanded with relief.

‘I know you do, honey-pie.’

‘Can I come back here every day to check for Flame? Just in case.’

‘Of course you can.’

‘I don’t want him to think I’ve abandoned him.’

She was moved.

‘Flame knows you’d never do that. You have your special connection.’

He nodded, acknowledging the truth of her words.

‘He knows you *always* stand up for the people you love. Like how brave you were with that silly eejit on the horse.’

‘With the big arse.’

They smiled at one another.

‘So I’ll tell Ben it’s a yes, will I? That we’ll move in with him.’

He nodded his nine year old head. Enthusiasm for the first time since Flame’s disappearance.

‘It’s a cool house.’ He said.

‘It *is* a cool house.’ She agreed, relieved.

They sat side by side for a while, each in their own private space.

‘You know Mammy. He might have gone off to find a wife.’

Her head swung to look at him, all alertness.

‘He’s a grown up now. He might be mating.’ Ember continued.

‘It’s possible.’

Did Ember even know what mating meant?

Was he aware that she and Ben sometimes engaged in such activity? She hoped not.

‘It’s only natural Mammy. He is a wild animal.’

Weren’t they all.

‘True ...’

‘He might be just obeying, you know, the laws of nature.’

‘You know, I think you might be right.’

If this was the story her son wished to tell himself, then who was she to spoil it for him.

And maybe he was right. Flame responding to the call of the wild ...

‘Maybe he’ll become a Daddy himself.’ Rachel joined in. ‘Have his own pups.’

‘They’re called kits.’

‘Oh yes. Sorry. But do you remember how cute he was when he came to us first?’

Ember grinned and nodded at the memory, then rested his chin against his knees and grew thoughtful looking once more.

‘You know it’s a good thing I gave him all those hunting lessons when he was young.’

He said in all seriousness. ‘It means he’ll be able to look after himself now.’

‘I know. He’s a great hunter. I’ve seen him.’

‘Have you?’ His head swung to look at her.

‘Oh yes. And he’s fast.’

‘I know.’ Ember looked proud.

‘The fastest fox in the West.’ She looked at her son carefully. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking. How would you like to get a dog.’

‘Oh I don’t know if Flame would like that.’

‘He might. Maybe he’d like someone to play with. Apart from you of course. It might be nice for him to have a doggy friend too.’

Ember looked doubtful.

‘You wouldn’t be replacing him you know.’ His mother said gently.

She had been thinking about this for a while. Getting a dog for protection. A great, big, snarling one with a loud bark and large teeth. Now that it looked like they’d finally be

staying put for a change - not moving on in a few months time. No more new starts. New schools, new jobs, new stories to tell. New lies about her past. Enough of all that. She wouldn't let him do that to her any more. This was their home now. The place where they'd found friendship and love. And if she had to face him anywhere, she'd rather face him here. Fear was no longer going to run her life.

She told Cynthia as much while relating the good news of moving in with Ben. Her friend was predictably delighted. She squeezed her by the arms and beamed - shooting out beams of happiness and love.

'That's brilliant. Makes it seem even more real, if you know what I mean.'

'I do know what you mean.'

'I know. You can have a house warming party ...'

'Oh no you don't. No more parties.'

'But it would be great ...'

'No Cynthia. Absolutely not.'

'Did you not enjoy the last one?'

'Of course I did but ... enough already. We're not like you, me and Ben. We're not party people. It takes a lot of effort for us to socialize you know.'

'Sure, I know that. You both prefer talking to the trees.'

'Exactly.'

'But it's not every day you move in together - and into a new home. And a home like that one. Ah, would you not ask him?'

'Okay, I will, if you want. But I know what he'll say.'

‘I could make a cake in the shape of a house!’

‘Cynthia!’

‘Sorry, sorry.’

So preparations for moving in commenced.

On that same morning, approximately twelve miles away, a man booked into a hotel in the capital of the County. The woman in reception recognized him. At the same time she was shocked by his appearance. It made her think of her brother in law, after he’d taken to the drink. That unkempt look, on a man who was previously flawlessly turned out. A blurring of his edges - his jawline - the beginnings of a paunch - a certain puffiness about the eyes. In need of a good haircut too. Whereas before, he was like something from a bryl cream commercial. Still that full wattage smile though, turning on and off, still failing to reach the eyes. Those blue-chip, white collar eyes. Now red-rimmed. He booked himself in for an indefinite amount of time. However long it took.

Chapter

It was a house made for parties, elegant and lavish in its own design and structure. A vast expanse of sweeping and curvaceous stairway, greeted each guest upon arrival. As a young boy, Dermot watched stealthily from the upper banisters, as his glamorous mother air-kissed visitors far below and his distant father administered many handshakes. The nicer nannies would let him do this, they too enthralled by all the glitz going on

downstairs. One such Nanny stood out - maybe because he had her the longest - a couple of years perhaps. They all got sacked eventually for one crime or the other. With the benefit of years of hindsight, being young and pretty was the most common misdemeanour. This one's name was Mary. He would follow her around like a little lamb, bleating out her name. His two much older brothers made fun of him, imitating his plaintive tones. But they were away at boarding school for most of the time. Dermot dreaded the holidays when the two of them were at large and took turns in tormenting him.

He hero-worshipped his father in those early years. Longed for a crumb from the table of his affection. Tall and commanding, with an almost military bearing, his barrister father was also Master of the Hunt, a role which he inhabited with conviction and relish.

Horses were a constant in Dermot's young life. His earliest memory was of being bitten on the cheek by one of his father's stallions. His mother eventually pronounced the wound as festering, so one of the nannies brought him to the doctor. The wound was patched up successfully and left no external scar, but inside was a different country. He never totally lost his fear of horses, much to his father's disgust and derision. He was made ride just the same - they all were.

In spite of this, it was hard not to be infected by the excitement. On hunt days, the members would gather in the courtyard outside their house, the hounds milling ill-advisedly close to the back hooves of the horses. Everyone was in high spirits as they set off on Dermot's first proper hunt, the horn resounding through the hardened winter landscape. He tried to squash his fears down deep into his belly, as the adults on their

full sized animals thundered past him. It seemed a scent had been caught and the riders were in pursuit of the hounds, the hounds in pursuit of a fox.

Dermot tried to keep up, at least with the younger members. There was a strange, foreign feeling which caught in the back of his throat. As if all the adults involved, some of whom he'd known his whole life, not least his parents, had been somehow transformed. He didn't quite understand, but followed the sounds of whoops and hollers when they later echoed out. He couldn't see at first. The trees blocked him. Then the riders. The strange looks on people's faces. Some of the women had turned away. Dermot had to see what it was that the others were looking at. He urged his pony forward, sweaty and mud-spattered, the two of them.

It was mostly men crowded around, his father in the thick of it all, as befitted the Master of the Hunt. And he felt a kind of pride, he the Master's son. He heard his father's voice raised, loud and bellowing, as he was used to raising it in the courtroom, to silence a cowering witness. And he held something up in the air, causing the other men to raise their voices to the woodland rooftop. It was mangled piece of something, dangling and suspended. And all at once his father looked at him. As if he'd somehow known his location all along. He advanced slowly towards Dermot, a passageway of booted legs and chestnut flanks, opening up before him. His eyes remained fixed on his son's and the boy commenced an inner trembling. And all the while his father held on to the bloody mass, gripping it by its long and bushy tail. Several hounds pursued him, leaping and snapping and snarling at the carcass.

His father was upon him now. He reached inside the body of the slaughtered creature, its face clearly visible to Dermot now, eyes wild and staring, bulging almost,

and the little mouth wide open, tongue distended.

His father removed his hand and to Dermot it almost seemed pulsating, alive with the stolen life blood of the fox. Then his father smeared the blood on Dermot's forehead and then cheek by cheek, like some weird sign of the cross. It was hot and thick and unmistakable. A raucous cheer rose up from the onlooking men and his father uttered a rare chuckle and patted Dermot on the cheek, causing several droplets to splatter. And Dermot saw something in his father's eyes, something he'd never seen before. Acceptance.

He was a regular in the hunt after that, then he reached his mid-teens, when a hunt of an altogether different kind consumed him.

Gillian was the daughter of a colleague of his father's, small and dark-haired and fragile looking - he had discovered his "type". It was after a hunt he finally got to talk to her. His father had just handed him the reins of his favourite hunter, Diablo. He patted the creature's powerful neck as he walked away from Dermot.

'Rub him down and make sure he gets a bloody good drink.'

His father appeared to reserve all his affection for his horses. His relationship with his wife was cool and distant. At best he treated his sons as mere appendages, capable of making him proud or otherwise. Dermot found he almost resented the horses for this, although he knew himself to be stupid in his own jealousy.

'Come on.'

He tugged the animal along quite viciously, hoping the bit would cut into the soft flesh of its inner mouth. He felt the resistance in the body language of the horse but ignored and

disregarded it. He had just reached its stable when he noticed the retreating form of Gillian, disappearing around the corner of the row of stables. He hastily bundled the horse inside, bolted the door then bolted himself.

‘Gillian!’ He ran after her, catching up breathlessly. The girl swung around to face him, her cheeks flushed and pretty.

‘Would you like to come for a walk with me?’

She would. They did.

And a more pleasant afternoon Dermot couldn’t remember, down by the river, chatting about the hunts they’d been on, the tribulations of boarding school and the friends they had in common. And the sun shone down on their youthful heads and they didn’t feel the time passing, ‘til it fell beyond the far-most trees and they felt the chill of the evening. They headed on back to the house, laughing and chatting as they went. It was only when they reached the stable yard that Dermot remembered Diablo.

‘Fuck. The horse.’ He mumbled under his breath.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing. Just something I forgot to do. I’ll meet you back at the house.’

‘Okay.’

She gave him such a smile. He smiled too, to himself, as he jogged over to Diablo’s stable, newly aware of his own good looks, the fact that girls were starting to like him.

He was whistling as he reached the door of the stable, but his happy tones faded as he saw the scene within. His father had got there before him and he turned now to face his son, his features contorted with rage.

‘How dare you?!’ He bellowed. ‘How dare you disobey me?!’

‘I’m ...’

‘Have you seen the state of this animal? Filthy! And severely dehydrated. Do you realize how valuable he is? Do you boy?!’

‘I ...’

There was no room to apologize, no room to explain himself, as Colman Whelan took up his horse whip and commenced to apply it to his son. Ten or twenty times, mostly across his back, as Dermot cowered in the corner, whimpering and crying tears that his father derided him for. When Colman was spent, he threw the horse whip down.

‘I’ll get someone else to look after the horse. You’re clearly not to be trusted, you useless, little shit.’

Dermot remained in his corner for quite some time afterwards, finally straightening himself up, wincing at each exquisitely painful body movement. Just him and the animal now. The horse regarded him solemnly with soft, brown eyes, then uttered a soft whinny, snorting and nodding its head. Dermot made his way out, discovering with horror that he’d wet himself. Keeping to the dark places, he entered the house through the kitchen, mindful to avoid the library and the areas where he knew the visitors were gathered. His plan was to take the back stairs up to his own room, but he was startled by a burst of loud voices, as a door somewhere was opened. In panic, lest he be seen in this state, he darted into the nearest room, which happened to be his father’s study. The light had all but faded now and he dwelled alone in the darkness, taking a kind of solace in it. He listened to the lone footfall on the corridor outside. The door swung open and the light switch was fumbled for and turned on. After several blinks, Dermot found himself face to face with his mother. She blinked back at him.

She didn't speak to her son, not did she attempt any physical contact. Instead she silently walked over to the tray on her husband's desk, upended the crystal tumbler, unstopped the crystal decanter and poured her son a generous measure of whiskey.

'Here. Drink this.' Was all she said.

It was what she did herself in similar circumstances.

Dermot took the glass from his mother's hand, their fingers failing to touch, his own continuing to shake. The drink was hot and bitter, but seemed to trail a line of fire down to his belly. He took some more then took in his mother. She was dressed in evening attire, her make up newly applied. She looked back at him briefly, in that peculiar, disconnected way she had.

'You'd better get cleaned up.' She said. 'Dinner will be ready soon.'

And with that she left him to it.

Dermot arrived on the other side of his private education with decent exam results and a strong sense of entitlement. He got into his desired college course, an event which elicited a satisfied "hmpf" from his father, as he turned another page of The Financial Times.

He took to college life with copious enthusiasm, relieved to leave the discipline of boarding school behind him. It was the social life which interested him most. Particularly the girls, who were drawn to his cliched good looks and his clipped, controlled tones. He and his best mate Harry attended a seamless round of dorm-room parties - a far cry from the soirees that were hosted by his parents, plastic pint glasses a more common feature than Waterford Crystal.

It was at one of these parties that he saw Gillian again. He recognised her at once, that doe-like fragility. He hadn't seen her since that afternoon by the river. He'd never made it down to dinner that night, had spent the evening crouched and sobbing in his room. "Snivelling" his father would have called it. He emerged the following morning, altered forever.

Gillian recognized him too, if her smile was anything to go by. 'Hello stranger.' Soft, dulcet tones. In truth she was pleased to see a face from home. It made her feel safe.

He wanted her so badly. They soon fell in with the alcohol fueled snoggery all around them. Dermot's blood was up - he felt it ultra urgently. He suggested they repair back to his own dorm room. For some privacy. She shyly agreed and placed her small, white hand trustingly in his, where it fluttered warmly like a captured moth.

Once back in his room, the constraints of Dermot's social restraints fell away from him.

'What are you doing?' Gillian protested in alarm as he pushed her down on the bed.

'Dermot. Slow down. Let's talk for a while.'

But there was no time for that. No desire for it. Only desire to possess her, this beautiful creature that he had to have. When she began to cry out, he covered her mouth with his left palm, hard like a clamp, forcing her teeth into her own lips, causing them to bleed. His other hand supported his thrusts, increasingly fast and violent, 'til he reached his climax with a satisfied roar, containing so many pent up feelings, staring into her eyes as he did so, eyes that were wild and wet and pleading and filled with a terror he realized he found pleasing - which increased his vicious pleasure all the more.

He finally rolled off Gillian, barely registering her flight from the room, clinging her tattered clothes and her dignity to her. He thought little more of it, until made aware by his furious father, down the relative safety of the phone line.

‘What were you fucking thinking? She’s George Malone’s daughter, you know. Of all the people to choose, you stupid little prick.’

His father’s words still stung him, but in a numb area somewhere above his head. They no longer hit at his heart or the back of his eyes. Colman Whelan’s voice became more gruff.

‘I’m going to see if I can make this go away. It’s just her word against yours, essentially. She left it too long for them to gather any convincing physical evidence. Do you have anything at all to say for yourself?’

Dermot spoke calmly at the disembodied other end.

‘She came to my room willingly. She knew what was going to happen.’

‘Good. I can use that.’

As his father hung up on him, Dermot sat on the edge of the bed where the incident had occurred. The only remorse he felt was that he’d been found out and the thought of what could happen to him next.

As it turned out, nothing. The matter was settled out of court, with the aid of a generous settlement by the Whelan family. It seemed pointless to mar the future of such a promising, young man with a criminal record. On the morning this occurred, Dermot walked up to his father and offered him his hand. His father stared at him coldly and meanly - the ice in his eyes matching Dermot’s own. He kept both of his hands on the

handle of his briefcase.

‘I don’t want your thanks. I don’t want anything from you. I only did this to prevent shame being brought upon the family. I want nothing more to do with you. From this day on, you’re no son of mine.’

And Dermot watched his father’s figure, as it retreated down the corridor and out of his life forever.

Chapter

Dermot began his investigations the following day, after copious amounts of caffeine. He first went to the villages he’d failed to cover on his previous visit. The results were similarly frustrating. He had learned to keep his line of questioning subtle. And the questions themselves to the minimum. These country folk could be suspicious - especially the women - nosy cows - oftentimes asking him questions in return. Why did he want to know? And where did he say he was from again? He hadn’t. He usually made up some guff. He could see that they remained unconvinced. He was losing his touch. His edge. The thought worried him at times. Then he’d have another drink and forget about it. Sometimes he even forgot why he was there. But then it would come back, trickling at first, then flooding his consciousness, until nothing remained but those feelings of rage and resentment. Because none of it was his fault. He never once considered that he had landed himself in jail, or ruined his own career. It was all down to her - evil bitch. She deserved to be punished. Wiped out like the blight that she was on the world.

He wasn't as careful as he had been. He saw this the next day as he was parked outside a school. In another of those one horse, two bit towns - a shop, a church and a pub and fuck all else. He parked a little down a lane. To observe the children as they played in the yard at break time. Was that little shit among their number? He searched for that tousled black head, the quick movements, the darting eyes. He'd be taller now, he guessed, although probably still small boned like his mother. He had attracted the attention of two women - mothers themselves most probably - who resided at nearby, neighbouring houses. He watched them gradually noticing him, arms folded across two sets of breasts as they gossiped the morning away. He should have reacted quicker but they were already upon him, the more brazen looking one heading up the attack.

'Can I help you?'

'No thanks. I was just taking a break. I have a long drive ahead of me.'

The woman looked unconvinced.

'Are you looking for anyone in particular?' She persisted.

He fired up the engine.

'No, not at all. I'll be on my way now.'

'I think that's a good idea.'

She continued to stare at him stonily as he swung the car around in a chaotic kind of a u-turn and pulled off at an inadvisable speed. The woman continued to watch him. She had half a mind to take his registration number, but she wasn't quick enough. She cursed herself slightly before resuming her conversation with her companion. The incident continued to niggle at her however. And later on, alone in her house, she rang

the local police station. To report a bleary-eyed blond man in a dark-coloured, medium-sized car, lurking around the primary school at play time. The incident was duly noted. But nothing further came of it.

He was on the verge of giving up again. Probably would have done so already, if there was anything for him to go back for. But there wasn't. So he continued. In what seemed increasingly a fruitless search. Then one day he stopped at a small, one pump petrol station. The old fella that ran it, chatted in a conversationally starved way, as Dermot filled up his tank. He wasn't in the mood, almost told him to fuck off, but that would be drawing on himself too much attention.

'So what brings you to these parts?' The man inquired casually, the stem of a pipe clamped in the corner of his mouth. 'Are you on your holidays?'

'Well I was looking to rent a place. Perhaps a holiday home. I like the scenery around here.' The usual bullshit.

The man nodded, a knowledgeable look.

'Well you wouldn't be the first. We get a lot of Dubs settling down here. That's where you're from, isn't it? Dublin.'

'It is.'

'Whereabouts?'

'Oh, all over. I've moved around a lot. There you go. Fifty quid.'

He handed the old man the note, which the latter accepted with trembling fingers.

Dermot climbed back into his car, anxious to make his getaway. Far too many questions for his liking. But the old man was in the mood for a chat.

‘Sure only last Spring, a woman and her son moved into the Lodge House there. They came from Dublin too. Settled in grand, by all accounts. The little lad doing well in school. I heard tell they’d be moving out soon. So that place might be up for rent again. Grand house. All done up recently. Might suit ye. Lots of character.’

Dermot froze, his body half-way into the car.

‘That does sound very interesting. Is it far from here?’

‘Not at all. Couple of miles.’

‘How do I get there?’

The man gave him a meandering set of directions. Dermot listened intently, mindful not to lose his patience or his cool, then set off with a wave, his mouth set in a grim, determined line.

He found it in no time. The old guy wasn’t completely doolally after all - his instructions were spot on. Look for the large, copper beech. It had lost most of its leaves but he could still see what it once had been, towering above an old, silver, undulating wall, flanking a large and impressive set of gates. He parked a little down the country road, under cover of some ever green trees, along with a few other vehicles in a kind of makeshift car park. It seemed that the gates led not only to the square, pillared lodge house, but to a public walkway through the woodland. Some old biddy plodded along ahead of him, accompanied by an equally arthritic looking Labrador.

Dermot strolled casually behind her. This had to be the place. Of course it could be another woman with another son. But something about it fit. He had a feeling. He walked nonchalantly around the building. Investigating. It appeared that no-one

was home so he grew bolder. Venturing around the back of the house and peering through what was the kitchen window. Everything was locked up but signs of life were apparent. Discarded breakfast dishes. A pile of unsorted laundry. She'd always been a lousy housekeeper. It was a weekday morning. Possibly she was working at some manner of a job. The boy would be in school. He thought about checking out the local school yard. But no. That incident a few days ago had been a little too close for comfort. The woman might even have reported him. He hadn't liked the look in her eyes. No. He had to be careful now. Especially since he'd possibly reached the last hurdle. Let's face it. It was the best lead he'd had since he'd got here. He didn't want to fuck things up now.

No further clues in evidence, Dermot went back to his car and headed off to the hotel. To rest. And to make preparations. He would return.

Rachel had been busy with her own preparations. For moving out. Or - more specifically - moving in. She couldn't quite believe that such a fairy tale ending was hers for the taking. This good, good man. This good, good, gorgeous man. Who loved her. Who adored her son. Who took in his stride all her moodiness and insecurities. Said it made her more interesting. More mysterious. She laughed at the thought. And they were going to have their first Christmas together, in their beautiful new home. If somebody had told her so this time last year the cliché had proven to be true. You never knew what was around the next corner. But still that underlying, nagging feeling, that something wasn't quite right. Was it just that stupid dream that had unsettled her so? Or maybe she just had to get used to the idea of being happy. Did

she still feel she didn't deserve it? That she wasn't worthy? It wasn't clear. She tried to meditate but ended up almost hyperventilating. She took up running again, sticking to the main roads at all times, staying close to the houses where the people were. Cynthia put it down to pre co-habitation nerves and likely she was right. What else could it be? Her new life was working out better than she ever could have believed.

Later that evening, she and Ember returned for one final, clearing-out session. She washed their breakfast bowls for the last time, packed away the last of the laundry and surveyed her surroundings with a sigh of satisfaction. She was leaving the place much as she had found it. With slightly less dust and minus the putrid cheese in the back of the fridge. Their collective belongings hadn't taken very long to pack. They had both become experts at traveling light - a side affect of their hobo-like existence of the past few years. Rachel had discovered how delicious it felt, not to be weighted down by unnecessary 'stuff'. To leave it all behind on a continuous basis. She'd discovered that things weren't important. It was Ember that was important. Her relationship with him. And now her relationship with Ben. There was a slight poignancy, however, in leaving the lodge house itself. She felt it had embraced them. Held out its arms to their two orphaned souls. Welcomed them in. And it had brought them Flame.

Chores completed, she wondered over to her most looked at photo on the wall. The one of the big house. The inhabitants standing stiffly and immortally outside on the lawn. Clara, small and waif-like, her expression, as always, inscrutable. And shouldering above her, her husband and murderer, staring haughtily into the camera lens, top hat erect, mustache thick and black, like that of a Mexican bandit in an old style

Western. The children - innocence lost a long time before - peering mutely. Helplessly. Rachel felt her skin crawl cold at the thought. She turned away. Where was Ember? Looking into the forest of course. He had packed away his lego and his mecca-no, his jigsaws and his teddy bears and - Rachel noted sadly - the books on foxes and dog training and Flame's old chew toys. They best just get out of there. Too much tugging on the heart strings.

What else? What more was left to do? She consulted her rare and ticked off list. Ah yes. Just one more item remained. Check the mail box. In all the too-ing and fro-ing of the last few days, she'd forgotten to check her post. Not that she was expecting anything in particular. But you never knew. Maybe she'd get lucky on the prize bonds. She wouldn't be wholly surprised - life was going so well for her lately.

She reached the metal mail box and pulled out a slightly damp bundle of letters and circulars. There was the usual brochure from the local supermarket, advertising special offers. Free hearing test available. Brown envelope from the tax office. Boring. She'd open it later. She continued to leaf through. Until her heart virtually stopped in her chest. A plain, white envelope, no name or address. Incongruous size. No identifiable marks. Maybe it was just advertising something else ... she turned it over in her hand and started to prise it open, a difficult feat as her fingers had become all shaky and numb. Inside was a single, white sheet. Nothing on one side. She looked on the other. Nothing. Nothing. The scream rose from her solar plexus and up into her throat.

'Ember!'

The mailbox had never been so far from the front door. She felt as if in a dreadful

dream, running with all her might but never getting anywhere. As if the air had turned to syrup. It held her back. Conspired against her as her heart abandoned its normal rhythm, directing blood to out of the way places. At last she reached the border of the open door, which framed the scene she had dreaded a thousand, million times. So much so that it had a taste of the inevitable about it. Dermot sat in an armchair, legs crossed casually. Ember sat on the edge of the couch about a foot away from him. His head was bowed and he remained perfectly still. Rachel could tell that he had retreated to that wordless place within. This all registered within a fraction of a second. Along with the realization that she'd let this madman into her home. Back into her son's precious, fragile life. By causally leaving the door open. Letting him walk right in. She experienced a surge of fury.

'Do come and join us Rachel.' That voice.

'Ember and I were just having a little chat. Reacquainting ourselves.'

This was all delivered with that old crocodile grin. The one that had featured countless times in her nightmares. And here it was, showing up again in her waking life. Lighting up nothing. An eerie, goblin glow. But there was something different this time.

It was her.

'Get out of my house Dermot.'

His face registered momentary surprise. Then he laughed. That horrible, rich, fruity, revolting laugh.

'That's no way to speak to a guest now, is it Rachel?'

She hated him using her name, his vile tongue caressing it, she felt like banning him from

saying it.

‘You’re not welcome here. Now get out.’

Her words were louder, spat out of her in fury. A flicker of uncertainty traversed his features but he laughed again. She noted his physical deterioration. As if he’d aged at a pace supernaturally rapid. His body, once a taut and efficient machine, now resembled the old, saggy couch he sat beside. But his eyes had lost none of their blueness, their coldness, their meanness. And his mouth still curved up in to its old, cruel lines.

‘Is that any way to speak to an old friend?’ He said.

‘When have you ever been a friend of mine?’

She sounded more calm and in control outwardly than she felt on the inside. She was tremendously grateful for this. Gave silent thanks. To something. To someone.

‘I took you into my home, didn’t I?’

He had stopped smiling now. The menace had crept back into his voice - it was never that far beneath the surface. His right hand was in his pocket, playing with something. What was it? She couldn’t see. It caused in her a ripple of fear. She willed herself not to show it. To stand erect. Keep her chin raised.

‘So.’ He said, leaning forward, his tone neutral once more. ‘Looks like I only just caught you.’ He gestured to the suitcase beside the door.

‘Going anywhere nice?’

He was very close to Ember now. Get away from Ember.

‘I’m moving in with my partner. In fact, he’s due here any minute.’

‘Is that right?’

No, it was a lie. She could see him trying to suss her out.

‘Well how very nice for us to meet.’ He said. ‘We can compare notes.’

Her insides were trembling. She hoped she could contain them. She couldn’t think of anything else to say. She was consumed with thoughts of how to get him away from Ember. How to get her son out of here and to safety. He only had her to rely on. She must be strong. Where was that big, snarling dog when she needed it?

‘What do you want from us?’

She said finally.

He laughed that mirthless laugh again.

‘What could I possibly want from the likes of you, my dear. I’m just making a social call. To see how you’re getting on.’

‘How did you find us?’

‘I have my sources?’

She had been so careful. All to no avail.

He got up out of the chair, causing in Rachel and Ember a simultaneous and poorly disguised flinch. But he wasn’t looking at either of them. He was strolling casually, in professional appraisal.

‘Nice place you’ve got here. I imagine you’re sad to leave it.’

She didn’t respond. He didn’t care.

‘Someone’s done a nice restoration job.’ He went on, running his fingers around the window frame.

‘I was thinking of renting a place around here. Would you recommend this house?’

He turned to her and grinned.

‘We could be neighbours.’

He had started to walk again. Further away from Ember - good. Closer to her - not so good. She stood her ground - her eyes the only part of her body in motion. He meandered about the room, like someone who had all the time in the world. Or like a big cat. Supremely confident that he was going to catch his prey. She was seized with horror at the thought of him moving in beside her. Would he? Could he do that? But she sensed that the real danger was more imminent. He was moving ever closer now, in subtle, zig-zagging movements. If he was in the jungle, he would have concealed himself in the long grass. Instead, he hid behind social niceties. She stood stock still, like a dumb gazelle, knowing that as soon as she ran she'd be chased. Knowing the time to be almost upon her.

‘Would you like that Rachel? Would you like to have me as a neighbour? He laughed.

‘Or even better, we could move back in together again.’

She closed her eyes momentarily, to shut out the horror of such a scenario. When she re-opened them, he was closer still. Was she actually glued to the spot? Her eyes darted to Ember. He seemed similarly frozen, albeit rocking slightly backwards and forwards. Then without further warning, Dermot pounced on her. With a speed and an agility she had forgotten and of which he looked no longer capable, he grabbed her from behind, his left forearm around her throat, his breath hot and sickly. Ember leaped up and began to scream.

‘No! Let her go!’

‘Run Ember, get out of here.’ She screamed back at him.

‘You stay right where you are, my boy.’ His words were punctuated by a loud, metallic click and the world came to a standstill.

The knife glinted coolly, catching the various lights and lamps that were on in the room as they bounced off it.

‘Isn’t this nice?’ He rasped into Rachel’s ear, his lips brushing her lobe, causing her to wince. She caught the sour, whiskey scent. ‘The three of us back together again.’

Rachel and Ember’s eyes were fastened together, communicating silently. The boy’s eyes appeared black and enormous - as if they were taking up too much space in his face.

Rachel willed him to stay calm. To wait for his moment. No sudden moves.

‘Now.’ Said Dermot. ‘This is what we’re going to do. We’re not staying in this house, lovely as it is. Your boyfriend might come back and get in my way. And we wouldn’t want that, would we? So come with me. We’re going to my car. It’s parked around the back.’

He started to pull Rachel back with him and as she moved, so did the boy, as if attached to an invisible thread. He’d been banking on this. If you want a lamb to follow you, you first have to bring the sheep. He stepped backwards towards the door, Rachel caught in his steely grasp. Her mind was going like a hamster wheel, one thought alone. She couldn’t get out of her mind a program she’d seen many years before. Giving advice if you ever found yourself in such a scenario: never allow yourself to be brought to a second location. Because this location will be darker, more lonely, more dangerous. But what did they say to do when your attacker had a knife? She didn’t know. She couldn’t remember that part.

They were on the doorstep now, out in the cold, night air. Winter bit into them all. They were already frozen.

‘Come on Ember, there’s a good boy.’ Dermot’s coaxing voice fooled no one. They

were out on the grass now, inching their way to the back of the house. The night was black and starless. The sliver of moon cut the black sky like a scimitar. It hung suspended above their heads. They were around the corner of the house now, past the bench where Rachel had sat on many an occasion, contemplating her new life. She had never contemplated such a scene. This beautiful place forever polluted by his presence. Would she ever be back? Would she ever see the night sky again? She had to act and soon. The moment was almost upon her. They were almost at the car. She threw up a silent and desperate prayer to the universe. And all at once, out of nowhere, a hurtling form whizzed through the air and launched itself at Dermot's face. The man yowled as Flame's teeth connected with his cheek, clamping on, simultaneously knocking him to the ground. The knife fell with a clatter and Rachel was released.

'Run!' She yelled at Ember, and the two of them hurtled towards the forest. Just as they reached the edge of the trees, Ember turned and yelled Flame's name. The last they saw was a monumental tussle, between the wildfire of the fox and the quick silver of the knife. Then a howl of pain and Flame fell limp on the ground. Ember screamed his name again.

'Run!' Yelled Rachel, shoving him in front of her. 'We have to run Ember. We have to get away.'

And the two were submerged into utter darkness. And silence. The only sounds the twigs as they snapped underfoot and the raggedness of their own uneven breaths. After half a minute or so, Rachel urged Ember to a halt. They groped blindly at each other, each battling panic. If country dark was a new kind of dark then forest dark was another new phenomenon. They literally could not see the others face in front of them. But

they felt each other.

‘Let’s stop and catch our breath for a minute.’ Rachel whispered. ‘We need to be smart about this. Make sure we’re heading in the right direction for Ben’s.’

‘We are.’ Said Ember.

‘How do you know?’

‘We just passed the fallen oak?’

‘Did we?’

‘Yes, see.’ He pulled her back a few paces. She didn’t see. But she could feel the rough bark, the distinctive, curvaceous shape. Recognized its dimensions. Could see it in her mind’s eye.

‘Okay.’ She whispered. ‘So we know where we are. We just have to feel our way.’

She thought longingly of her phone. Knew it to be sitting on he bedside locker. Didn’t know that at that exact moment it was ringing in the tone of her favourite song. That Ben was trying to reach her to tell her he’d been held up at the lumber yard. That he hadn’t made it back yet. He’d be home as soon as he could. She didn’t know either, that she was better off not knowing this, as his imagined presence urged her on. The pair were just beginning to feel a little bit safer when a large crack not far behind them announced that they were not alone among the trees. Someone had stepped on a branch. Cracked it open. Sending a flurry of night birds up into the air above their heads. And they knew themselves to be once again pursued. Rachel felt something surge up in her and it wasn’t just fear. It was if she knew she had to marshal all the forces within her as well as around her in order to save herself and her son. Like everything in her life thus far had been building up to this. And she felt the force of the forest around her, almost

as a throbbing thing. Much as she had on the day of the bluebells, the forest as a life form in itself. As an ally and a friend. More than that. Part of her. As if the force that through the green fuse drove the flower rose up within her now and lent her power. That was it. She was taking back her power. With Ember's hand held firmly in her own, Rachel plunged right into the woods, accompanied by a renewed confidence. She knew where she was. She knew where she was going. She knew she had the power to defeat him. He would not take their brave, new world away from them. Failure was not an option.

Dermot lunged into the forest, his fury as blind as his own eyes in the thick of the night. He still held the knife in a death grip. It dripped now oozily with the blood of the creature. He touched his own face. Jesus Christ. Blood dripped from it also. He felt the throb of his wound.

The forest was thick, populated with too many trees. They got in his way. Blocked his path. The ground was uneven - he couldn't find his footing. He thought he heard them at one point, not too far up ahead and the notion urged him forward. Yet his progress was slow. Uneven. As the ground beneath him undulated and slowed down his progress. At one point he stumbled right into a kind of pit and whelped in pain as he felt his ankle twist. Then he cursed out loud, knowing that his sound that echoed throughout would only spur his quarry on. He had no idea what he had fallen into, perhaps an abandoned animal's den, but he scrambled outwards anyhow, ignoring the agony in his foot, throwing his body deeper into the woods.

And it felt to Dermot at times as if the very trees conspired against him,

impeding him. Invisible hands grabbed at his ankles and tripped him up - time and time again. Until he felt that he was doomed to inhabit this forest forever, as if it had become for him another prison. As if it would never let him go.

Rachel was buoyed up. She could feel the trees were thinning out, knew herself to be among her sisters, the silver birch that Ben himself had told her he'd planted right on the edge of the clearing. They could see their own hands in front of them now, glimpsed the light in each others faces. The clearing loomed ahead of them, surely their nightmare was nearly over. Triumph bit at their heels. Almost ... Almost They fell out into the half light, still hand in hand, relief rushing over them like a gigantic wave. No time at all and they would be safe with Ben. Safe in the house. It struck her as suddenly strange that she couldn't see the house more clearly. Was the night that dark? The moon concealed behind a cloud? Then the reality hit her like another, more gigantic wave. This one unforgiving, it almost knocked her down. The house was in darkness because Ben wasn't home. His jeep wasn't parked in its usual spot. Oh God. Oh God. Had he locked the house? Sometimes he did and sometimes he didn't. The only thing Rachel felt sure of was that Dermot was still behind them. She urged her own legs forward - they appeared to have lost all their strength, she seemed to have lost her control. But this was not the time to let that happen.

'Come on Mammy.'

Come on Mammy. Ember pulled her on, and energized by his sweetness and strength , she allowed it to flow through her and fortify. The power in her legs returned - the power in her whole body - and the two of them ran towards the house.

At times it seemed to Dermot that each step forward seemed to bring him two steps further back. Like the forest was dragging him in. Or maybe he was going in circles. He had totally lost his bearings and had no idea in any case how far these dense woodlands extended. He felt he had no choice but to plough on through, fighting with the branches that tore at his clothes, the roots that stealthily tripped him, keeping his curses of frustration mostly below his breath. At one point he stopped and listened. The silence grew all around him, radiating outwards, uncomfortably so. He could hear no sign of other human life. They could be hiding from him. He pictured them, cowering pathetically. This image sent a rush of red hot cruelty coursing through his system. It energized him and he recommenced his thrashing.

The house was in total darkness. How they yearned for some light.

‘Where’s Ben Mammy?’ Desperation and panic in her son’s voice.

‘He must have been held up. He’ll be back soon.’

Rachel was breathless as she ran up the steps to the front door. She yanked fruitlessly at the handle. Locked.

‘Come on. Around the back.’

They bolted around the back of the house and tried the other door. Yes! A tsunami of relief as it gave way to their pressure. Then immediate panic as the realization hit that there *was* no lock on the door. How to secure it?

‘Quick. We’ll drag the table out from the kitchen. Pile the chairs on top.’

The two set frantically about this task, erecting a solid, wooden barrier. Each uttered a

silent prayer that it would hold. Now. Where to hide. They daren't put on a light. They crept and felt their way around. Where to feel the safest?

They chose the turret room, barricading themselves inside with the bed and the bookshelves. They huddled together on the bed. To wait. Who would reach them first? Rachel thought longingly of Ben. Ember tried not to think. He snuggled deep into his mother's lap and fell into a broken, fitful, dreamless slumber.

At last he felt he was winning his battle. The branches held him back less and less and the scratches on his skin had abated. Was the interminable woodland finally thinning out? He thought he saw light up ahead. Not light as such, but a less dense quality to the darkness. It renewed his determination, quickened his uneven tread, until he emerged at the edge of the clearing, looking every inch the madman that he was.

Rachel willed herself not to move a muscle, so as not to wake her son, when she saw Dermot's form emerging from the trees. How horribly familiar it was. She saw him stop to collect himself, brush angrily at his clothing. Then she watched him notice the house. It was like somebody was squeezing her heart from within. Then she realized she didn't want Ben to come home. No doubt Dermot still had the knife and was crazy enough to use it rather than be intimidated by the presence of another man. She started to pray, silently and repetitively, as Dermot moved closer to the house. He circled warily at first, trying to ascertain if there was anyone at home. Then in a casual arc, he approached the front door. Rachel's whole body winced as she heard him tugging aggressively at the handle. This went on for the best part of a minute, before they were

plunged into silence once more. Rachel thought she might have stopped breathing. How long was it possible for a person to survive without drawing breath? Could you drown out of water? Suffocate yourself by neglecting to take in oxygen? Luckily she did not breathe her body. Her body breathed her. And then her insides leaped as she heard him trying the same trick at the back door. Her fingers clutched tighter and trembled at the Swiss army knife that lived perpetually in her pocket.

This door was different. The other one had been locked with a key. This one was merely blocked. The difference was immediate and obvious. And it told him something else as well. It told him that someone had blocked the door deliberately and that now they sought sanctuary within.

They were in there.

He knew it. With an evil certainty. And he was getting in there too.

He heaved with all his might, applying the pressure of his right shoulder. He was still strong. A powerful man. All those years of playing sports stood to him now, his extra weight assisting rather than hindering him. He imagined himself in a rugby scrum, constantly pressing forward. There was a noticeable shift. Result! He took a short break and repeated the process again. Another dragging sound and more give this time. Back of the net! Push. Scrape. Push. Scrape. Until the whole wooden structure behind the door came tumbling to the ground. The chairs now dislodged, Dermot was easily able to force a space large enough for his body to squeeze through. He was in.

Breathing heavily now, he patrolled the downstairs rooms, switching the lights on as he went. He flung open cupboard doors, searched behind curtains and couches. The

entire lower floor had a feeling of emptiness. And so it was he mounted the stairs.

She heard the first assault on the door like a battering ram.

‘Wake up Ember.’ She shook him urgently. He appeared drowsy, only momentarily, then shook himself instantly, fully awake. ‘We have to get out of here.’

‘What is it?’

‘Here. The window.’

Dermot’s shoulder hit the back door once again. They looked at each other through the dimness, each picturing exactly what was happening. Each avoiding picturing what could happen next. But they saw enough to spur them into instant action. Rachel opened the bedroom window as far as it would go.

‘This is what we’re going to do.’

She hoped she sounded confident.

‘We’re going to climb out the window onto the ledge of the roof.’

Ember looked wildly at his mother. He hated heights.

‘Trust me sweetheart. It’s the only way.’

He looked deeply into her, then nodded. He did trust her. She fervently hoped that his trust was not misplaced.

Another large thud from the floor below galvanized them both into action.

‘I’ll go out first.’ Said Rachel.

She didn’t like heights much herself. But there was no time for that. No space for it. Placing her fears to one side, she eased her body out of the window and stepped out onto the wooden shingles that Ben had hewn from the very forest itself. She felt totally

exposed out in the night air, nothing to hide or protect her except the very darkness itself. She found her footing on the rim of the roof, while gripping fearfully onto the window sill.

‘Are you okay Mammy?’ His little voice so small and clear, so dear to her. She looked behind her, for her means of escape - the massive oak, the branches of which grazed the roof. She didn’t know whether or not a single branch could support her, but her bet was that it could take the weight of a skinny, nine year old boy. She trod carefully along, easing her toes along the ledge, trying to channel her inner monkey, pleading with the laws of the universe - including gravity - willing it to be on her side. Then came a terrible clatter from the floor below and the two accurately visualized the chairs tumbling down. The table wouldn’t hold out for much longer. Why oh why hadn’t Ben installed a land line? She’d kill him if she ever saw him again.

‘Ember. Take my hand.’

He did so.

‘Now climb out beside me.’

He looked doubtful. Looked down. Looked frightened.

‘Don’t look down, look at me. I’ve got you darling. I won’t let you go.’

With a slight nod Ember climbed out of the window, more lithe and monkey-like than his mother. He clung to the roof beside her.

‘Good boy.’ She said. ‘You’re doing great. Now inch along slowly this way. Just copy me.’

Inch they did, taking advantage of the slope of the roof, melding their bodies into it. It was almost cause for elation - the height, the night air. If it wasn’t for the terror getting

in the way. They heard his footsteps creaking around the ground floor. Ember's eyes widened.

'Just keep going sweetheart. Head towards the tree. You're almost there.'

Which was just as well, as they heard his footfall ascending the stair. The panic almost unbalanced Rachel for a second. But she couldn't lose it for Ember's sake.

'Now.' She sounded almost cheery, like a scout leader on some ill-advised misadventure.

'Can you reach that great big branch there?'

'I think so.'

'Go a bit closer.' It was an ongoing battle to keep the urgency out of her voice.

'Got it.'

'Great. Now ease yourself onto it.'

'But Mammy ...'

'Go on. You're always climbing trees. You're brilliant at it.'

'But it's so high up.'

'It's all the same, whether the branch is high up or low down. You climb it exactly the same way.'

There was a heavy thud on the door of the turret bedroom. They both visibly jumped and Rachel watched her son's face turn to ash.

'Go Ember. You have to go now!'

'But what about ...'

'I'm right behind you.'

They had jammed the door with the bed and the wardrobe but it wouldn't hold out forever.

Another dull thud. Ember leaped onto the branch like a flying squirrel. He clung precariously for a few, forever seconds, before finding his equilibrium.

‘Now shimmy Ember - in towards the trunk.’

She didn’t bother keeping her voice down any longer. He knew where they were. The thuds became louder and more frequent as he scented their blood.

Ember was creeping forward - not fast enough.

‘Come on Ember, you have to go faster, you’ve done this kind of thing loads of times before. You’re so brave darling. I know that you can do it.’

With what Rachel knew to be a Herculean effort, Ember dragged his body along the length of the branch, ‘til he reached the join with the trunk and hugged it like a koala bear.

‘Good boy!’ She said. ‘Now start to climb down.’

‘No Mammy! You come first.’

‘Okay, okay, I’m coming. Hold on tight.’

Rachel heard a burst of wood, the sound of furniture falling and scraping within. She commenced to transfer her weight onto the branch. It creaked in a worrying manner. She stepped rapidly back onto the roof, her heart racing like a hare.

‘Mammy! Come on!’

‘I’m right behind you Ember. You have to keep going. Climb down and run and get help. Go to Reillys, they’re the closest. Call the police.’

‘Well, well. I think they call this being stuck between a rock and a hard place.’

She whipped her face around, only to see his loathsome head, craning out of the window. He had turned on the bedroom light. They could see each other clearly now. Had his

features always been so diabolical? Or was her imagination making them so. Or the knowledge she possessed of what he was like on the inside?

‘You’ll never corner me Dermot.’

He laughed horribly.

‘I already have sweetheart.’

Crossing her fingers, her toes, her heart and her soul, Rachel put her weight back onto the branch. Just a little at first. Then a little more. She was aware of Dermot clambering out of the window. She applied a bit more weight. The creaking grew more alarming. Then a discernible crack. Rachel leaped back onto the roof and clung there panting.

‘Mammy!’ She heard Ember scream.

She also heard that his voice was further away now.

‘I’m alright. Keep going. I’m right behind you. Fast as you can. I’m with you. I’m always with you. Keep going. Don’t stop.’

Dermot had eased his bulky frame out of the window. He stood fully on the roof now, several feet to her right. He grinned wolfishly at her. Rachel struggled to keep command of her breathing. Maintain her balance. She knew she clung to her life itself as she clung on to that roof.

‘Don’t you dare come any closer.’

Her voice was loud and clear. It surprised her. The way it rang out.

He laughed again in that terrible, familiar way he had.

‘Why? What are you going to do about it if I do?’

‘Why couldn’t you just leave us alone? Gone and got on with your life?’

‘Because thanks to you, you stupid cunt, I don’t have a life any more.’

‘How am I to blame for that?’

‘I’ve lost everything. My career. My reputation. The house. The merc.’

She almost laughed at the sheer preposterousness of it all. Almost.

‘You brought it on yourself Dermot. If you hadn’t been such a bastard, you’d still have all those things. I didn’t take them away from you. *You* threw them away.’

If she was going to die, she may as well tell the truth. He gave her a look she’d seen before - the murderous one - and began to edge closer to her.

‘Stay away from me!’

He continued to advance. Where was Ember? She could no longer see him. Thank God she’d got him away. Hopefully he was almost down the tree by now. On his way to safety and to freedom. And still Dermot advanced. Rachel was amazed at how little fear she felt. Yes, she could feel her blood pumping vigorously around her form. But she seemed to have moved to another zone. A place beyond fear. Somewhere she’d never been before. A phrase from childhood entered her head: the peace that passeth all understanding. It was as if her whole body was a concentrated point of being, every instinct at the ready for whatever may come next. Because Dermot was coming closer by the moment. Almost within grabbing distance. Just a little more ... Just as she sensed he was going to make his move, she raised her own arm high, and plunged her switch blade with all the force she could muster into the back of Dermot’s hand. He howled in pain and surprise, and almost lost his footing - sliding down the roof and clutching his hand beneath his armpit. She used the opportunity to scramble towards the open window. If she could just get in and close it, she could hold him off for a while at least, and by the time ... what happened next was so quick that thought was not involved,

only instinct. Rachel had to scramble over Dermot to make it to the window. She clung like a spider, willing herself to defy gravity itself, praying that the wound in his hand would buy her valuable seconds. Yes! She reached the window and began to haul herself in, the lit up room assisting her in her efforts. But Dermot reached up with his good hand and grabbed her by the ankle. She gasped as she felt his body weight dragging out of her. She was halfway through the window but it wasn't enough. He was going to pull her down and she would go hurtling to the ground. She could not let that happen. She would not let that happen. Drawing on every ounce of strength and determination that she had, with a sound that was almost animalistic, she slammed the heel of her boot down onto the hand that grabbed her ankle. Brian yowled with pain and involuntarily released her. She scrambled upwards once more. If she could only get the majority of her body in ... She was almost there ... She could feel him coming again, she chanced a glance downwards and was just in time to see him make one last desperate lunge at her. It fell short and he lost his footing again. Only in this instance, he didn't regain it. Rachel was just in time to register the horrified realization on his face as he windmilled his arms backwards in a fruitless attempt to stop himself from falling.

'No!' He cried out in anguish as he hurtled backwards through the air. Rachel whipped her head away as his body connected with the ground. She dared not look. She did. She peered down the slope of the roof. Dermot's body lay face upwards, in an impossible looking position. As all this was happening, Ben's jeep pulled into the clearing, the arc of his headlights swinging around and landing on Dermot's body. It could clearly be seen that he was dead. A pool of rich, dark blood gathered and swelled behind his head, which had connected with a rock upon landing. His eyes stared

upwards. Ghoulishly, unseeingly. He would never be able to look on her again.

The engine of the jeep was cut and Ben got out of the driver's side, his eyes fixated on the bleeding corpse. As he stood there statue-like, Ember emerged from the trees and stood alongside him. All three stared at Dermot for several, long seconds. Then the two looked up at Rachel, framed in the window of the turret bedroom.

It was over.

She couldn't define what she felt as she ran back down the stairs, her knees buckling a couple of times, she just about managed to save herself. Then past the felled furniture, out the damaged door, Ben and Ember reaching it just as she did. The three threw themselves at each other, not able to get close enough to administer adequate comfort. Rachel began to sob and her body started to shake as she finally allowed herself to feel her fear and emotions.

'Oh God Rachel. Are you alright?'

She nodded - her teeth chattering.

'Ember.' She sniffed.

Ben lifted the boy up bodily with his free arm and cradled him into the centre of the two of them. The boy was white but unharmed. Happy to be the filling in this human sandwich. After several minutes of hugs and reassurances, the three walked 'round in mutual silence to view the body close up. It was still there. Twisted eerily. Eyes staring icily upwards.

'Ember, I'm not sure...'

'I want to see him Mammy. I want to make sure he's dead.'

They all drew in closer. The blood no longer seeped from Brian's head, but he lay in a dark, congealed pool of his own essence. Rachel imagined it being absorbed into the forest floor. She imagined his whole body being so subsumed also, if it was left there long enough. But of course that wouldn't happen. He'd only get in the way.

'So what do you think Ember?' Said Ben, his voice quiet. 'Is he dead?'

The boy nodded definitely.

'Good.' Was all he said.

After what seemed like an appropriate length of silence, Ben removed his mobile from his back pocket.

'I'd better call the police.' He said.

Rachel looked across at him.

'Would you ever get a land line.'

They touched nothing until the police arrived. Local officers. Unused to such excitement. One of them eventually closed Dermot's eyes. Out of respect. But also because they were freaking everyone out.

Ben had seen Dermot fall as he pulled into the clearing. Ember had witnessed it too, from the cover of the oak tree. They would both testify as much. Rachel was wrapped in one of those blankets, like in a crime program off the telly. Or a winner at the end of a marathon. She felt as though she'd ran one. And she had come out victorious. Yet a man was dead. Was it okay to be happy that a man was dead?

The officers gave her hot, sweet tea and questioned her. When they had finished, she noticed that Ben and Ember were nowhere to be seen. She stood up and looked all

around her. Started to panic as usual. And then something new happened. The panic subsided. As the realization hit her that Ember was safe now. Dermot could no longer take him. Hurt him. Yes, she decided. It was okay to be happy he was dead.

But where were they? It was still strange. Maybe they were being questioned inside the house. But that wasn't where they were. She heard the familiar crack of parched leaves and twigs and beech nuts being trodden underfoot. The trees parted, to reveal her lover and her son, coming rapidly towards them, an air of urgency surrounding them both. Then she saw in Ben's arms a rust coloured bundle that on closer inspection, revealed itself to be Flame. Rachel jumped up to meet them. Oh my God, was he ... 'He's still breathing.' Said Ben. 'But he's lost a lot of blood.'

A young gard ran up to them. 'Where have you been Ben? You can't just up and leave a crime scene.'

Ben ignored him, then, speaking to Rachel, as he rapidly made his way to the jeep, Ember hot on his heels. 'I'm bringing him straight to the vets. I'll let you know how it goes.'

The young gard chased after him.

'I can't allow you ...'

'Ah, would you get away out of that Christy. Can't you see the animal's in trouble. I'll be back as quick as I can and you can break my balls then.'

Without further ado, Ben opened the passenger side of the jeep and once Ember was settled, placed the animal on his lap. Then he slammed the door and ran over to Rachel.

He took her by the two shoulders and peered into her eyes.

'Will you be okay?'

'Yes. Go!'

He nodded and ran back to the jeep, the engine on and the vehicle already moving before he had even slammed his door. Rachel and the young Gard watched him go.

‘Jesus Christ. That Ben McCarthy is a law unto himself.’

Rachel silently agreed.

And didn’t she just love him for it.

The vet worked on Flame throughout the night. She did everything she could. Then left it up to the Gods to decide.

Chapter

The Gods and Goddesses in their infinite wisdom decided that Flame the Guardian, the therapy fox, the family pet should survive. And thrive. Youth and vigour were on his side as well. Once the crucial twenty-four hours after his operation had passed, Flame awoke and rose shakily to his paws. Then he drank out of his water bowl, delicately a first, lustily after a time. Until it was all gone and he looked for more. His first meal followed shortly after - premium dog food - the finest that Ember’s pocket money could buy. Only the best for the conquering hero. The vet joked that they should change his name to Lazarus. But Flame he remained and Flame he would always stay. He had a home with them forever - if and when he wanted it. And it seemed as if he did.

The dead man was removed from Ben’s front garden. Ember and Rachel both received counseling, to clean up any remains that were lying around in their minds. But Rachel

felt better than she had in an age. Lighter. More free. Finally able to fully embrace her new life, her new relationship. She sensed a new security in Ember also - a confidence. They had both faced their worst ever nightmare. Not only had they survived, they had triumphed. Ding dong the wicked warlock was dead. He couldn't hurt them any longer.

They moved in with Ben when all the future had died down. Although Ember no longer desired to sleep in the turret room. They reserved that for a guest bedroom, although not everyone wanted to stay there. Others were irresistibly drawn to it.

Ben's house felt like a real home. It had protected them just like the forest from whence it had come. And it would continue to protect them. Their little family. Plus fox.

Chapter

The matrons of Castleborris, and some not quite so matronly, duly buried their headless children of Prague in their gardens. To ensure sunshine on the day of the wedding, of course. Nobody seemed to know how this tradition had begun, but there were many who could swear fully by it. The O'Shaughnessy daughter, who married the Australian lad - they were steeped in good fortune on their big day. The sun had shone high in the sky, like a precious, golden disc, only to disappear beyond the horizon trailing crimson and magenta, when day was done. Whether today would be so blessed was a matter still to be determined. The sun came out intermittently, before being blotted out time and

again by the clouds.

Rachel had got a manicure and her first ever pedicure the evening before. She'd always avoided the latter, due to freakishly ticklish feet. She had to admit her delight at the effect. She couldn't stop admiring her pearly, lilac toe nails. The dress had been specially made for her. It skimmed over her figure like something out of an ad. She had tried it on repeatedly, merely to admire the way it flowed over her hips.

And now it was the morning of. Six months had passed since Dermot's demise. There were days when it felt as if it had all happened several life times ago. It seemed like another life, her existence now unrecognizable from before. But she was still Rachel at her core. Always had been, always would be. And then there were the days when it dragged out of her, as if the incident was only moments old. But those days were less frequent now and exerted less power over her when they occurred.

She sat in the hairdressers now, side by side with Cynthia, both receiving matching up-dos served with a generous side order of gossip. It was all good-natured stuff though, the room humming with hairdryers and excitement. They were getting their make up done there too.

'Not too orange mind.' Said Cynthia. 'We don't want to be walking down the aisle like a couple of tangerines.' It was said with such good humour that she almost avoided causing any offense. The make up artiste only pursed her lips momentarily. The door opened and Canice entered, looking completely out of place in this ultra-feminine environment. A shriek rose up above the noise of the dryers as a gaggle of assorted women threw up their hands in mock horror.

'Get out of here!'

‘It’s bad luck to see the bride on the morning of the wedding.’

‘I thought that was the night before.’

Canice was jovial.

‘Well Missus.’ He planted a kiss on Cynthia’s cheek.

‘Howaya Love.’ She offered her cheek to receive it. ‘I don’t think it counts if you’re as ancient as we are. Or,’ she added, ‘if one of you is doing it for the second time.’

‘Oh hello Rachel, you’re here too.’ He looked uncertain.

‘I am Canice.’

‘Listen. I just wanted a word. I suppose I can say it to the both of you.’

‘What are you worrying about now?’

‘It’s about the fox.’

‘What about him?’

‘Are you sure it’s a good idea?’

‘What do you mean? It’s all arranged.’

‘But what if he shits in the church?’

Cynthia administered a well aimed thump to Canice’s mound of a belly.

‘Ouch!’ He said.

‘You couldn’t possibly have felt that.’

‘I don’t mind ...’ Rachel began.

‘Well I do. You know well Canice Costigan, that Ember would only agree to be a page boy if Flame could come up with him. We’re already forcing the child to wear a frilly shirt as it is. We don’t want him balking at the idea altogether. Besides. He’s all excited. He’s trained him ‘specially, hasn’t he Rachel?’

‘He has.’

‘So don’t worry. He won’t shit into the church. He’s fully house trained, isn’t that right Rach?’

‘Well, mostly. I mean ... Yes. Fully house trained.’

‘Now. There you go.’ Cynthia turned back to her intended. ‘So get yourself back home and don’t be annoying me. I’ll see you at the church in ...’ She consulted her watch. ‘Jaysus. Less than two hours. You’d better get a move on Breda. We’re none of us getting any younger.’

Breda scurried over with her powder puff, while Canice retreated with his tail between his legs. Rachel laughed.

Cynthia looked at her. ‘What?’

‘You’re incorrigible, you know that?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘What I mean is ...’ Rachel leaned over and grabbed her by the hand. ‘That you’re the best friend that anyone ever had.’

‘Ah, thanks Love.’ Cynthia’s eyes filled up.

‘Don’t!’ Rachel’s voice was filled with panic. ‘Your mascara.’

‘You’re right. Breda! Tissue!’

Breda dabbed expertly at Cynthia’s lower lashes.

‘Now. Disaster averted.’

‘Phew. I’m never going to get through today without blubbing, sure I’m not?’

‘It doesn’t seem likely.’

‘No. Are you sure this mascara is waterproof Breda?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Good. Cynthia looked at Rachel through their joint reflections in the mirror.

‘You know, you’re a great pal too. I can’t believe I’ve only known you a little over a year.’

‘I know.’

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t make you matron of honour, but the sister would have had a pink fit.

Has to be in charge. She’s a right bossy wagon, so she is.’

‘It doesn’t run in the family then.’

Cynthia hooted. ‘Now don’t be cheeky. It’s not too late for me to sack you as bridesmaid, you know.’

‘Thanks for asking me.’

‘Thanks for doing it.’

Rachel inclined her head and smiled.

The salon had become uncharacteristically quiet. Several customers had left together and the women who worked there had congregated out the back.

‘Nervous?’ Said Rachel, examining Cynthia carefully.

‘Does it show?’

‘Not really.’

Cynthia was the queen of putting on a front.

‘Good. I’d hate Canice to think I was having second thoughts.’

‘And you’re not, are you?’

‘No. It’s just ... You know ...’

‘What?’

‘Well, it didn’t exactly work out well the last time.’

‘Well you weren’t marrying Canice the last time.’

‘I know that. But the other fella looked pretty good before he got the ring on me finger too.’

‘Yeah. But you were young and silly then.’

‘And now I’m old and wise.’

‘Mature and wise.’

Cynthia smiled. Rachel smiled back. Then her face grew serious.

‘I was never married to Dermot and he turned as well. So I don’t think it has anything to do with the fact of being married.’

Cynthia nodded.

Rachel continued. ‘And you know, if we close our hearts forever they’ll have won.’

‘And they haven’t won.’

‘No. We have.’

Cynthia raised up her palm.

‘High five sister!’

Rachel laughed and met her friend’s palm with her own.

‘High five.’

Flame didn’t shit in the church. He was a little bit edgy - all those strangers. But given the circumstances, his behaviour was exemplary. He trotted alongside his young master, who had put in many hours training him for this spectacle. He was on his special lead. And attached to his fancy wedding collar was a little satin cushion on which were secured

the rings. The congregation oohed and aahed, the older farmers among them finding it all too ridiculous. But it was Canice and Cynthia's big day - one of their own marrying one of their favourite adopted daughters - so nobody said anything untoward. They just thought it.

The reception was massive - in the Dublin sense and in the country sense. The couple knew everyone so everyone was invited. They all came too. To what promised to be the shindig of the century. The menu was plain and hearty.

'No point giving this lot something fancy.' Cynthia had commented. 'It'll only frighten the horses. Make it meat and two veg and apple tart for afters.'

So that's what was done. It was greatly appreciated.

The newly wedded couple chose "Dirty Dancing's" "Time of my Life" for their first dance. So everyone was up by the second verse and the floor remained jammers for the duration of the two bands and the late night disco. Rachel finally landed on Ben's lap during Cliff's "Congratulations". She sighed and leaned back happily, taking a long drink out of his pint glass. His arms went around her.

'Are you having a good time?'

'Oh yes.'

'Best part so far?'

'This.'

She nestled back into him and they savoured the long moment, the warmth and the meeting of their two bodies.

'So.' Said Ben. 'Will you be ready to do all this again in a year's time?'

‘Just try and stop me.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it.’

It was the day after Canice and Cynthia’s wedding. The build up had been fun, the day itself a blast, but Rachel was so happy to have nothing to do at last. She sensed that Ben and Ember felt the same. Man and boy lounged around after Sunday lunch, fiddling with lego and chatting about all sorts. The sight of them together brought supremely happy feelings up in Rachel. She got up off the couch and stretched out the length and breadth of her body.

‘Mind if I go for a walk?’

The two looked up at her and each sent a silent message of love. She smiled at them both.

‘I won’t be long.’

She always said this. Sometimes she was a long time and sometimes she wasn’t. As she prepared to leave the house, she became aware of another set of eyes upon her. She turned to him with her hand on the door jamb.

‘Come on then.’ She said.

Flame broke his amber stare and bounded out of the house, animated with untrammelled joy. She didn’t bother with a lead - didn’t like to see him on it. It seemed sinful somehow, to attempt to contain this wild creature. She liked to know that he spent time with them at his own behest. If anything, he led her. She allowed him.

Where would he take her today? It seemed their destination was the ruin of the big house. She hadn’t been down this way since before ...

The day was high and frosty, the ground crunched beneath her soles and the crows wheeled and cawed through the unseeing windows. But the sound was not plaintive. It rose pleasantly on the wind. Everything seemed light that day. The cloying, heavy atmosphere she associated with the place seemed to have lifted. Flame brought her close, they skirted the walls together. She felt a high happiness, a deep seated gratitude. She raised her face and arms to the heavens. 'Thank you.' She said. And she thought of another woman who'd lived here long ago and the warning that she'd given - the example she had made of her own life - lived in a time when a woman had far fewer rights. Rachel felt profoundly glad she lived now, in these relatively enlightened times. And she was glad she lived here, in this all-embracing town, with her all-embracing man and all the other blessings it had brought to her. And it seemed like the sun shone down her gratitude and the birds took up the song and the fox bounded with it, across the fields and back to the forest.

The sun slanted through the trees, sunlight shadow, sunlight shadow. Flame ruffled ahead of her, nose attached to the woodland floor as he snuffled through the reams of white garlic. And if the white, wild garlic was out that could only mean one thing Through the sunlight shadow, sunlight shadow, she caught a glimpse of the blue ahead and her pace increased and enthusiasm surged through her, colouring her everything. And she walked among their number once more, this magic carpet of bluebells, as far as she could see, North, South, East and West. Like a demonstration of the Earth's abundance. Almost as if it was showing off. Almost as if it was laughing, experiencing her own joy and its own. She bent down low and plucked one out of the ground. It offered itself easily into her hand, the stem thick and white at its base, and

when examined closer, cool and wet and oozing with sap, its own life blood. Her hot tears fell and mingled with it and joined each other in the earth.

The fox was moving on. She ceased in her stooping and gathering, making do with the flowers she had already picked. There was a new quality to his gait, somehow all business-like. At one point he stopped and looked back at her, as if to ensure she hadn't fallen too far behind.

'Coming.' She said, laughter bubbling up under her tone, stepping over each dapple on the forest floor.

He was leading her out of the forest now, an unfamiliar route, not their accustomed one, which looped its way back to their new home. The graveyard lay before them, square and grey and undisturbed by all that life could throw at it, its inhabitants long past caring. Flame stopped at the low wall and cocked his leg. Rachel laughed out loud this time.

'Have you no respect?'

And even as her voice rang out, crisp and clean and clear, she realized that in his own way, Flame *was* showing respect. He was anointing this place. Making it more sacred.

He followed her through the gate as she swung it open, then sat a short distance away as his mistress stood by the grave.

'Well.' She said. 'Here we are again.'

And she placed the fresh bunch of bluebells on the verdant garden of moss and daisies that blanketed Clara's final resting place.

'Except you're not really resting, are you. Or maybe you are now.'

And as she walked away from her floral offering, she realized that she could have placed

it anywhere. Flung the flowers skywards even, where the winds could have caught them and scattered them to all four corners of the earth. It struck her too that if she wanted she could live her whole life as an offering. Each and every day a prayer of thanksgiving.

One tiny thing continued to bother Rachel. It was a dark blot on the otherwise pure white canvas of her life. It was Autumn now. Ember was back at school, thriving unbelievably in every conceivable way. And she was back at school herself, determined this time to complete her studies, to qualify as a fully blown architect. She and Ben had half a notion to go into business together. She could design the houses and he could build them.

Flame continued to move in and out of their daily lives - a self-appointed sentinel when he felt himself it was required. But every day when she got home - to this home she adored - she had to walk right past the spot. It niggled at her - more than that - created a disturbance, a ripple in her otherwise smooth and calm lake.

So how to remedy the situation? They certainly weren't going to move. And they couldn't go back and paint the past differently. Dermot had fallen off the roof and fallen to his death, right there in their garden. Rachel noticed her own tendency to avoid the area. When she saw Ember doing the same she knew she had to act.

She was musing on the topic, staring out of the window one day, watching Flame dig a hole in the garden, diligently, with his front paws. That was it. She made the necessary purchases before picking Ember up the next day.

'Will you help me with something when we get home?'

‘What is it?’ His head swung towards hers, all eagerness.

‘Some gardening.’

‘Yay!’ He was enthused. He loved outdoor work. Loved it especially with her.

‘Can we do it as soon as we get in?’

‘Homework first.’

‘Mam!’

‘Homework comes first, you know that.’

‘Alright then.’ He sighed heavily.

When the time came, she revealed to him the bulbs that she’d acquired. He examined them with great curiosity.

‘White tulips.’ He said. ‘Daffodils. Cool. And purple hya ...’

‘Hyacinths.’

‘Hyacinths.’ He repeated.

‘So. This is the time of year for planting bulbs - so they come up next Spring.’

‘That’s a long time to wait.’

‘They’ll be worth waiting for. You’ll see.’

He nodded. ‘Where are we going to put them?’

‘Right over there.’

She pointed to the spot. The air about them altered.

‘What do you want to put them there for?’

Rachel crouched down beside him and looked up into his face. His features were all scrunched up.

‘I chose these flowers for a reason. They all symbolize forgiveness.’

He was silent.

‘Do you know what symbolize means?’

He nodded.

‘So what do you think?’

It took him a while to respond.

‘I think it’s hard to forgive someone when they’ve been really mean to you.’

‘I agree with you Ember. The thing is, maybe it’s not just about forgiving Dermot.’

There. She had said his name.

‘Maybe I need to forgive myself too. For bringing him into our lives. For putting you in danger.’

He immediately threw his arms around her neck.

‘I forgive you Mammy.’

‘I know you do.’

It was as if the force of his arms squeezed the tears out of her eyes.

‘So. Shall we do it then?’

‘Okay.’

They walked over and each with their own trowel started to work the soil. Flame came sniffing over to see what was going on.

‘Mam, I hope he doesn’t dig them up again.’

‘Hmm. I hope so too. It’s exactly the kind of thing the little bugger would do.’

Ember giggled at the word he was not allowed to use. Then he stood and examined the area.

‘Do we plant them in the shape of his body Mam?’

‘God no! That’s not what I meant Love. The idea is just to plant them in the general area.’

‘Alright then.’ He crouched back down and continued to work.

Rachel shook her head as she imagined a bulb garden in the shape of a man’s body.

Two purple hyacinths for his eyes. She shuddered. Then laughed a little.

They were almost finished. Rachel looked at Ember, his small face intent, his cheek streaked with earth.

‘You know.’ She said. ‘Forgiveness is a funny thing.’

He looked at her.

‘You might think you’re doing it for the other person - the one who was mean to you.

But really, you’re doing it for yourself.’

He frowned at her. She pressed on.

‘Because if you can let go of what that person did to you, you can move on and live your life free of them.’

He covered up the last bulb, pressing the soil back down thoughtfully.

‘So.’ He said eventually. ‘Forgiveness is like a present you give to yourself.’

‘Exactly!’

Out of the mouths of babes ...

‘Okay.’ He said, standing up and wiping the dirt from his hand.

‘Will we do that then?’

‘We will. Shake on it.’ She held out her hand and they shook in a business like manner.

‘Hug on it.’ She smiled.

He grinned and flung himself into his mother's arms.

'Best Mam in the world.' He said.

'Best boy.'

The following Springtime, the Forgiveness Garden bloomed with great abundance.

Rivaled only in beauty by the wildflowers in the hedgerows which surrounded and cradled their home.

