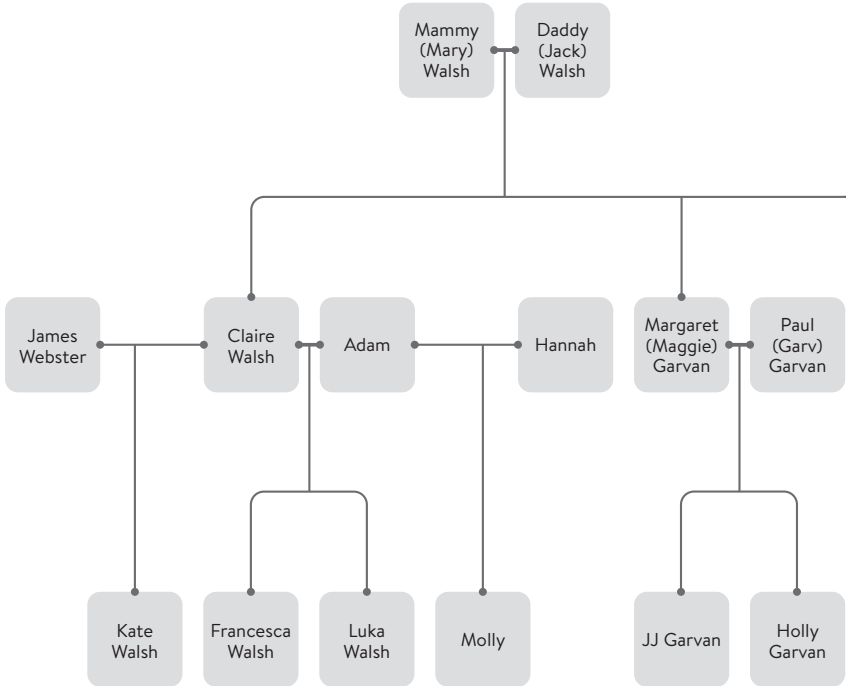
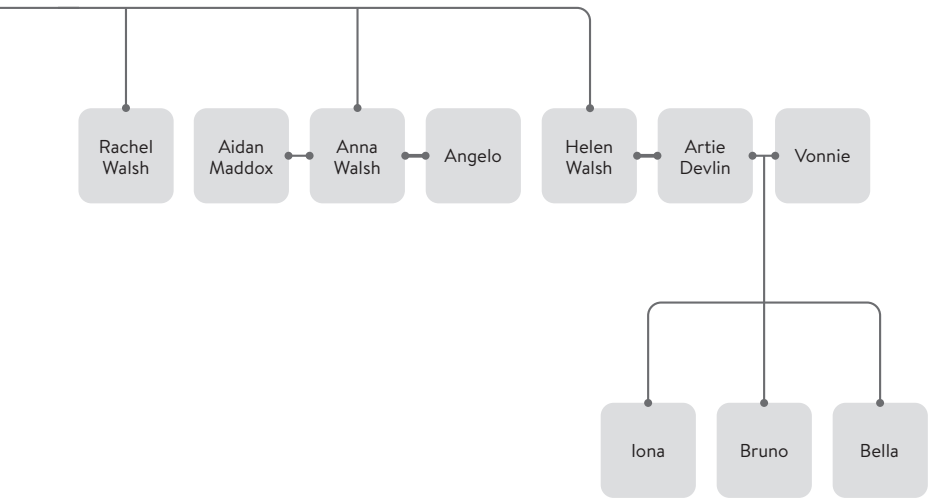


The Walsh Family Tree





I

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

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

‘Ten past seven.’ His voice was thick.

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

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

‘Already?’

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

‘Uh.’ There was that meaningful little pause. ‘Okay.’

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

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

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

He held my wrist. ‘I’ll miss you.’

‘I’ll miss you too.’

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

Finley wandered in, scratching his head. ‘Hey, Rachel.’

‘Hey. I’m off now. See you Sunday?’

‘Nah, I’ll be with Mum.’

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

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

‘Okaaay.’

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

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

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

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

‘How’s Quin?’ she asked.

‘Grand. Off to New Mexico until Sunday.’

‘Lucky him!’

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

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

Her ‘real’ job was acting. But the universe drip-dripped work for her, in exquisitely calibrated amounts, keeping her forever on a knife-edge of uncertainty. Every time she was

on the verge of giving up, she got thrown a small part, just enough to resuscitate her hope.

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

‘Today? No. Bit of work for Helen.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meanwhile, Crunchie was watching, her expression sorrowful.

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

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

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

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

‘Morning, Harlie,’ I said.

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

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

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

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

Moze was reading her report on the previous night. ‘Busy shift. Trassa Higgins – one of yours, Rachel? Didn’t sleep.

Came down to the desk at about three a.m. We chatted, did a crossword, she went back to bed around five, but when I looked in at six, she was still awake.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ted shrugged. 'Who cares? We make the rules.'

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

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

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

Next, each therapist gave a round-table update on their various charges, so that we all knew precisely how every single

patient was doing – who was extra-vulnerable right now, who was pushing back hard – then it was time to leave for group.

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

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

‘ . . . Rachel?’

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

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

When people ask how I met Quin then notice my hesitation, they usually say, ‘Tinder? Hey. No shame in that.’

But it was worse than Tinder. Almost two years ago, in 2016, Quin and I had met at a meditation retreat, a silent one, held in a big old house in the middle of nowhere. I’d gone because I was a Failed Meditator. In all my years of trying, despite the hundreds of candle flames I’d stared into, I’d never been able to stop my thoughts. *Fifteen minutes really isn’t that long, I just need to empty my mind empty empty empty thinking of absolutely nothing. Hey, look, I’m actually meditating. Except if I notice that I’m doing it, does that mean that I’m actually not? God, I never cancelled that appointment with the physio, I’ll do it now, well not now now but as soon as I finish my meditation . . .*

By seven o’clock on that Friday evening in late March, about thirty of us were sitting cross-legged on yoga mats, slyly trying to check each other out without getting caught. We were just this mass of nervous, hopeful people. More women than men – always the way – ranging in age from twenties to sixties.

I’d have *loved* to know everyone’s reason for attending, but we were literally forbidden from speaking. Also banned were alcohol, coffee, phones, electronics, books and magazines.

Our instructors were a kind and deliciously lithe young woman (yoga, of course) and three well-meaning young men, all a bit *lentilly* – rough brown clothing, pale faces with sparse, whiskery beards, their hairlines already in retreat.

Over the forty-eight hours, we did oodles of group meditation, during which I spent a shameful amount of time wondering if all three of the Lentil Boys were in love with Yoga

Girl. They'd have to be, surely? She was so nice. And, of course, there was the litness. When my mind should have been stilling, I was inspecting the unkempt trio and wondering if she ever slept with any of them. Or indeed *all* of them? She was absolutely beautiful, but one thing I've learnt is never to underestimate the confidence of the most unremarkable of men.

As well as meditating, we did a few yoga classes, ate vegan food at regular intervals and swilled down as much sage tea as we could stomach. A large part of Saturday afternoon was spent eating a single raisin. About half an hour in, I realized it was maybe the twentieth time I'd done such a thing: *every* course on mindfulness and meditation wheeled it out to demonstrate how to slow down and live in the moment. I sighed quietly. Maybe it was time to throw in the towel for good on this meditation thing.

Late on Sunday afternoon, just as the end was in sight, one of the Lentil Boys announced a LovingKindness Meditation – an exercise in intimacy where you sat opposite another person, staring into their eyes, thinking kind and loving thoughts for ten long minutes.

It was *excruciating*.

Uneven numbers meant I ended up being partnered with the most whiskery of the Lentil Boys and from the way his pupils flared and dilated, he was clearly giving it socks with the LovingKindness thoughts. The only way to cope was to disappear deep inside myself.

Eventually, someone chimed something chime-y – probably a Tibetan prayer bowl, it usually was – and the longest ten minutes in eternity came to an end; this was our cue to break the gaze and start with someone new. I gave a pained smile and twisted away.

Yoga Girl called, 'Has everyone swapped partners?'

I looked at my new person. A man. His face was as expressive as a poker but there was something going on in his eyes.

Almost a smirk. Something to do with the ‘swapping partners’ comment.

Juvenile.

And yet.

I stared at him. He stared at me. I thought, *I feel kindly towards you. I feel lovingly towards you.*

Holding his unblinking gaze, I decided that he was returning the kind and loving thoughts. Then I *actually* felt something. Some sort of relief.

No one was more surprised than me.

Even as I gave a wobbly smile, tears started to spill from my eyes. Heavy drops plopped into my cupped hands and there were none of the awkward pats or fumbling for tissues that usually accompany public crying. We simply sat still and held the gaze.

When the bowl chimed, the man tilted his head, asking a silent question: was I okay?

I nodded and smiled, dashed away the surprise tears, then turned to meet my next partner.

Maybe half an hour later, the weekend came to a close and our last instruction was to remain ‘non-verbal’ until we were off the property.

Upstairs, in the dormitory, as I threw my few possessions into my bag, my heart was lighter than it had been in a long time. The peace of meditation still eluded me – it probably always would – but, entirely unexpectedly, I felt absolved. It didn’t make sense but that man, that stranger, had cleared away some of the wreckage of my past.

One of the Lentil Boys returned my electronics then I stepped out into the chilly evening – and saw the man standing there, pretending to fiddle with his phone.

This felt awkward. Something good had taken place in that room and that room was probably where it should stay.

After a quick nod, I made for my car, slightly startled by the

long, low, cream-coloured Merc in the space beside mine. It looked as if it had come direct from a seventies' police show, very at home screeching through narrow streets and doing hand-brake turns. It was hard to know if it was beautiful or just flashy.

'Hey,' I heard. I turned.

'I'm Quin.'

Well, *he* sounded sure of himself. *And* he'd broken the rules.

Then I decided that it didn't matter. 'I'm Rachel.'

He walked up to me. 'Could I . . . ?' he asked. 'Could we . . . ?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I'm not looking for, you know, that sort of . . . ?'

'I don't think I am, either,' he said. (A lie, as it turned out.) 'But whatever happened in there, it touched me, and it helped you?'

Even though less than an hour earlier I'd stared into his eyes for ten unbroken minutes, this was the first time I paid attention to the bigger picture. His brown hair was shorn tight and he was taller than me (I was five foot nine, this wasn't always a given). On closer examination, his walking boots, his technical-looking top, the way his skin was pulled tight over his cheekbones were characteristic of those men who did *lots* of gruelling physical challenges. Men who always had three protein bars on their person and whose physical make-up was 0 per cent body fat, 87 per cent sinew, 13 per cent rage.

He didn't look like he belonged here. 'Can I ask something?' I surprised myself by saying. 'Why did you do this weekend?'

'Because . . . I never feel like I'm done.'

I waited.

'I want something,' he said. 'Then I get it. Then I want a better version of it. Or I don't want it any more.'

Oh my God, one of those men.

'My happiness is always over there, just out of reach,' he said. 'Mr Upgrade, that's me.'

I actually laughed. ‘Well, no one can say you didn’t warn me.’

‘So?’ he asked. ‘What brought *you* here?’

Okay, here we go. ‘I’m in recovery. Meditation is recommended.’

If he responded with a blank stare, this burgeoning friendship would immediately hit the skids.

‘I’m an addict,’ I elaborated.

Baldly, he said, ‘I know what “in recovery” means.’

That was a good start because most people haven’t a clue. Then, when they get it, they usually run for the hills. I’ve often said there should be a Tinder for us Twelve Step types.

‘Have you been clean for long?’ And *that* was an excellent question, an informed one. He wanted to know if I was stable or if I was likely to slide and lapse.

‘Years.’

‘O-~~key~~!’ Suddenly he no longer looked tightly wound. ‘So can I have your number?’

Why not? That was what I thought. What harm could it do?

He said he’d be in touch, then slid into his 1970s, flashy-stroke-beautiful car and roared away.

3

A client leaving before completing their six weeks was always disappointing. But this was the second time Simon had broken the rule forbidding sexual contact with other clients. And *still*, even as he was being bounced from rehab, he had that flirty gleam. He just couldn't help himself.

'You're thirty-seven,' I reminded him. 'Too old for this behaviour.'

'And you're . . . what?' He studied me with a dirty grin. 'Thirty-five? Thirty-six?'

I'd never see my thirties again and he knew it. 'Old enough to know I'm being played. Do your cheesy lines ever actually work?'

'All the time.'

'They ever work on women who *aren't* vulnerable?'

At that, a shadow scudded over him.

'If you don't get serious about recovery,' I said, 'your addiction will kill you.'

He shrugged. 'Live fast, die young.'

'That option is no longer available, Simon. You're too old.'

But he was impervious. He was going back out into the world and the first person he'd call would be his dealer.

Between fifty and sixty addicts a year passed through my hands and I cared a lot – maybe too much – about every one of them. If there was anything I could do to help Simon, I'd have done it. Letting him go was really painful.

I over-identified with my charges. Of course I did. I'd once been one of them.

Walking into the Abbot's Quarter (in reality, just a draughty

ex-dining room) for this morning's group, the chatter was both anxious and giddy – rumours were hard currency in here. The possibility that Simon had been expelled would have unsettled them all. Intense bonds formed very quickly in rehab. That's not to say that everyone got on – often they absolutely hated each other. But indifference was rare.

Chalkie was the first to notice me. 'Sketch!' he hissed. 'She's here.'

I took my seat – the second worst one in the circle. That was the bad thing about being late to group, all the comfortable chairs were gone. I'd have to endure at least two hours in this low-backed upright thing with the wonky leg – and do it without demonstrating discomfort. Any display of vulnerability would erode my power.

My little flock of ducklings was quiet now, flicking looks at the last empty place – where Simon would have sat – waiting for me to speak. But their response to this upheaval was information for me, so I assumed my blandest face and prepared to wait it out.

Would today be the day that Fedex delivered my new trainers, I found myself wondering. I'd only ordered them yesterday but sometimes they arrived the next day. Usually, though, it took two days. Occasionally, *three*. (*That* was hard. I'd be all geared up, my head generating pre-dopamine and then the cupboard would be bare . . .)

'Someone say something,' Dennis pleaded. 'I'm sweating like a pig from the silence!'

Right, back to work! Dennis, an alcoholic who had arrived yesterday, was still locked tight in the fiction that there was nothing wrong with him. Apparently, he was only here to 'shut up the wife'. Today – just like yesterday – he wore a wrinkled suit with soup stains on the trousers. His tie was askew, two buttons were missing from his shirt and his straining belly overhung his belt. A local councillor in the town he hailed

from – one of those close-knit places in the middle of nowhere – I found him impossible to dislike.

‘What’s wrong with silence, Dennis?’ My voice was cool but the rocky chair leg, tilting me forwards, then backwards, as I spoke, definitely undermined me.

‘Tis too quiet.’

Couldn’t argue with that.

‘Can I ask a question?’ Harlie’s voice shook. ‘Has Simon been kicked out?’

When he wasn’t romancing Prissie behind the couch in the rec room, Simon had flirted outrageously with Harlie. She’d sparkled beneath his sketchy charms and they were shaping up to be a situation. Maybe it was as well he was gone.

‘Simon has left,’ I said.

Distraught, she crumpled into herself. Giles, another smoothie with an eye for the ladies, shifted uncomfortably, perhaps wondering if he was next to be ejected. Working-class hero Chalkie twitched, primed to sniff out a miscarriage of justice. Roxy, leaving in a week, frowned with concern. Dennis watched the others for hints on how to react. And Trassa exclaimed, ‘You fancy him!’

‘And what if I do!’ Dennis was unable, as always, to resist making a joke.

‘Not *you*,’ Trassa said. ‘Harlie.’

‘I don’t!’

She did, though. I’d keep an extra eye on her over the next few days.

‘So Simon’s *gone*, gone?’ Chalkie asked. ‘Just thrown out on his ear? No chance to say goodbye.’

‘None,’ I agreed. I had to plant my foot firmly on the floor to stop my off-putting swaying.

‘Chalkie, why are you even bothered?’ Roxy asked, doing my job for me. They get like that when they’re nearing the end of their six weeks, thinking they know it all, it’s sort of

lovely. ‘You couldn’t stand him, said he was “a middle-class prick –”’

“– corrupted by his own privilege”. Same as yourself, nothing personal, like.’ Chalkie’s blue eyes burnt with fervour. ‘But he’s still entitled to a fair hearing.’

Chalkie was a self-educated firebrand from Dublin’s inner city. I wasn’t supposed to have favourites, but if I had, it would have been him. Articulate, angry and compassionate (unless you lived in a leafy suburb, in which case he wouldn’t ‘piss on you if you were on fire’), he was in danger of burning up in his own rage.

With his star quality, he was great at galvanizing his community behind a cause – for example, he took on and won breakfasts for hungry school kids. He did a lot of good. But every now and then – often at the most important part of one of his campaigns – he lapsed and began taking heroin again.

‘Simon broke the rules,’ I said. ‘Twice.’

‘Well, maybe those rules are bullshit.’

At this, Giles began to chafe. A well-heeled cocaine addict in his mid-fifties, he was no fan of Chalkie and his causes. A dazzlingly successful, thirty-year career in advertising had imbued him with the conviction that everyone made their own luck.

“‘The most effective way to restrict democracy’,’ Chalkie said – he was quoting somebody, probably Noam Chomsky; it was usually Noam Chomsky, “‘is to transfer decision-making from the public arena to unaccountable institutions.’”

‘*Christ.*’ Giles recrossed his lanky legs and hissed through clenched teeth.

Chalkie fixed his gaze on Giles. ‘Got a problem, man?’ He paused. ‘Ya tennis-playing prick.’

‘Chalkie.’ My voice was low but very firm. The patients were encouraged to go in hot and heavy when discussing

each other's addictions but gratuitous insults were *not* okay. 'Apologize to Giles.'

'Sorry . . .'

Giles inclined his head, to demonstrate pained acceptance.

' . . . for saying you play tennis.'

Giles's head jerked up again, colour flooding his handsome, bony face.

'Prancing around in your white shorts, yelping, "Deuce!"' Chalkie scoffed. 'No wonder you got a taste for the snow. The shame, amirite?'

Laughter broke out. Nearly everyone loved Chalkie, that was part of his problem. He got away with far too much.

'Sorry, Rachel,' Chalkie said, with a grin. 'Sorry, Giles.'

Abruptly, Giles began to weep. Entering his fifth week, it was textbook behaviour. His denial was stripped away, his selfishness detailed by everyone in his life, he'd moved through rage and was currently mired in grief.

'All right, Giles?' I passed him a tissue.

'Fine,' he choked, his face in his hands.

Okay, time for Trassa. Married for fifty-one years, with five children and eleven grandchildren, she projected cosy respectability, underscored by cardigans, shapeless skirts and reading glasses on a chain. A compulsive gambler, she'd admitted herself here to convince Ronan, her middle son – the only one of her children still talking to her – to pay off her latest round of debts.

'Trassa,' I said. 'Your life story, please.'

It was the first written exercise the patients did and usually kick-started their thawing out.

'It's not finished yet.' Her smile was sweet. 'Might I remind you I'm sixty-eight, I don't have the energy these young ones do.'

'Have it ready tomorrow.' I was stern. 'In the meantime, why don't you tell us again exactly why you're in rehab.'

‘Well . . .’ A wide smile creased her soft, powdered features. There was something about her that always reminded me of a bap. ‘Ronan, my young fella, overreacted.’

I let that hang in the air for several long moments – then pounced on Dennis. ‘I’ve seen you having chats with Trassa. What has she told you?’

‘Hey!’ Chalkie jumped in. ‘Don’t make a snitch of him!’

‘No, you’re all right.’ Dennis was confident. ‘No one is snitching. Poor Trassa was unlucky, is all. Took cash out on a credit card for a dead cert on the Grand National. Never saw the bills from the bank because they sent them online. The interest mounted up – the rates are criminal, as I needn’t tell any of ye – and first thing Trassa knew was when debt collectors arrived at her front door, upsetting her husband, Seamus Senior. *Who’s in a wheelchair.*’

Yes, this sounded familiar. Except in the version I’d been told, the race was the Kentucky Derby.

‘By then the amount she owed had trebled. How could the poor woman pay it? She’s on a pension! One of her sons said he’d cover it, but that she had to “go to rehab”. Same as meself, we’re both here to please another person.’

A rhythmic, high-pitched squeaking noise was now emanating from Giles. He didn’t know how to cry properly because he’d had no practice. Before last weekend, he hadn’t cried in forty-five years. Really, he should have been howling and banging on the floor, mourning his lost decades and the trail of abandoned women and children he’d left in his wake, but he was too repressed. Still, it was encouraging that he was crying at all.

‘Trassa?’ I asked. ‘How much money did your son pay off for you?’

Sharply, she said, ‘That’s private.’

I gave her a look. ‘You’re in rehab. Nothing’s private in here. How much?’

I knew that Trassa had, without mentioning sums, given the impression that it was about fifty euro.

‘I took, I think it was . . . two thousand euro out from the cash machine.’

Shock bounced around the room. *Two thousand?* Even Roxy, who was far enough along to understand denial, hadn’t expected that.

‘*Two thousand?*’ I asked.

‘Oh, look, I don’t know.’ Trassa went the full-on, dithery granny. ‘My old head.’

‘It was four thousand.’ She knew it. I knew it. And now everyone else knew it too. ‘How did you get the credit card?’

‘The bank offered it to me.’

‘The bank *offered it* to you?’

Pink heat spread across her face.

‘You mean you applied for it?’ I said.

‘Yes, yes.’ She was desperate to shut me up.

‘In your husband’s name. Because your personal credit is shot to pieces.’

The mood in the room was dismayed – Trassa was regarded with great fondness – and this story didn’t fit their picture of her. Dennis in particular looked desperately confused.

At lunchtime I stuck a hopeful head into the admin office, hoping to see a Fedex box in the corner, but Brianna said, ‘Nothing. Sorry. What have you ordered this time?’

‘Trainers.’

‘*More* trainers? Anyone would think you were an addict.’ We both did fake-wheezy laughs.

Like any sensible person with a job, I got my online purchases delivered to work. Brianna was as good as a personal concierge. Ted disapproved: our personal lives shouldn’t overlap with our professional lives. If any of my ducklings stumbled across me gleefully tearing boxes open and shrieking

with delight, it might be difficult to retain their respect in group.

But what was the alternative? Arriving home from work to find a little card bearing the dread words, ‘Go to depot?’ I don’t *think* so.

Despite the disappointment, I got on with my day and around 5 p.m. I was in the office typing up the daily notes when my phone rang. As soon as I saw who was calling, my heart nearly stopped. What on earth . . . ? Joey. *Narky* Joey? Why was he . . . ? He would *never* be ringing for a friendly chat.

But mixed with the shock was curiosity and – madly – hope. My heart was pounding in my ears as I answered. ‘Joey?’

‘That you, Rachel? Listen, Luke’s ma died yesterday. He’s on his way home. Funeral’s on Friday.’

‘Luke? What . . . How . . . ?’ I had so many questions. How had he been for the last six years? Had he got married again? Had kids? ‘How . . .’ I stammered. ‘How is he?’

‘His ma just died. That’s how he is, Rachel.’ Then Joey was gone.

At the best of times, Joey would never have won a Mr Conviviality contest. That hostility, though . . .

My hands were shaking so much that I needed to sit on them. Had that really happened? Did Joey just call me? Momentarily I worried that I’d imagined it.

‘You all right?’ Murdo gave me a sharp look.

‘Mmmmm.’ My lips felt numb. ‘Fine. Just . . . stuff.’

‘Sure?’

Silently, I nodded. Feelings flooded me: loss and longing and . . . yes, anger, and while it would probably be better if I didn’t see Luke, I knew I still wanted to.

Why had Joey called? Because Luke had asked him?

But that wasn’t very likely.

Unless . . . it *was*?

Should I go to the funeral? Or stay away? Back in the day

I'd been very fond of Mrs Costello but we hadn't kept in touch.

I waited to see if the friendly voice in my head had anything useful to offer. But all there was, was silence.

Really? I asked. *Seriously?*

Still nothing. So I was on my own with this. Maybe I should pretend that there'd been no phone call? Just push it down and get on with my life until Monday, maybe Tuesday, whenever Luke had left the country again and gone home.

But what if I regretted it? Missed the chance of seeing him? Or felt guilty about not paying my respects to a decent woman who'd been good to me?

I hadn't felt this unravelled in – God, I literally couldn't remember when. The right thing was to ring Nola, my sponsor and the Wisest Woman I Knew, clean and serene for almost twenty-seven years.

'What's up, pet?'

'Luke.'

'What about him? No, don't tell me, come straight over. Drive safely!'

Half an hour later, I was pulling up outside Nola's beautiful red-brick house.

Unbelievably, it was twenty years since *I* had been a patient at the Cloisters and she'd come in to tell her story of recovery from addiction. With her beautiful highlights, zippy little sports car and impressive job, I thought she must be an actress in the pay of the treatment centre.

However, when I left rehab, I discovered she really *was* an addict. But she was drug-free, happy, hilarious and robust enough to weather all emotional storms. I wanted to be *exactly* like her so she took me under her wing and helped me to grow up.

My time in the Cloisters had revealed that I was an addict, but Nola had convinced me that, without taking anything

mood-altering, I could live a normal life, a *better-than-normal* life. That I could cope with unpleasant emotions, that I could aspire to a healthy relationship with a man, that I could aim for whatever job I wanted – a life I was sure could never happen to a person as worthless as me.

I parked my car, hurried up Nola's black-and-white chess-board path and Harry, her delicious husband, opened their smartly painted front door and welcomed me inside.

In my early days in recovery I'd a *right* crush on Harry, he was just lovely – always keeping a respectful distance but never less than kind. I *yearned* for a man as good as him.

Nola used to tell me that if I stayed clean long enough, I too would get a life 'beyond my wildest dreams'. That was hard to believe.

Yet it had happened. All of it. Including a man as lovely as Harry.

Nola put a mug of tea in front of me. 'Go on, tell me.'

It didn't take long. 'So?' I asked. 'Should I go to the funeral?'

'Was Joey ringing off his own bat? Or on Luke's say-so?'

'I didn't think to ask, and I'm not ringing him back – I have *some* pride.'

'Grand.' She laughed. 'No one's making you. Okay, let's look at the facts. On the one hand you and Luke have unfinished business –'

'Do we, though, Nola? It was so long ago. Isn't it – what's the word when accounts have been inactive so long that they no longer exist? – moribund? Inert?'

'This might be the chance for you to tidy up some of that mess.'

'But what if I see him and end up devastated all over again?'

'What's your inner voice telling you?'

'Nothing. Radio silence.'

Nola lapsed into thought. 'In which case, you must Golden Key it.'

‘No!’ This was a device Nola was *far* too fond of: when a problem has myriad possible solutions but no clear answer, you put the whole snarly mess into an imaginary box and lock it with a Golden Key – also imaginary. Then, you *do nothing*. You don’t even think about it: as soon as it pops up in your mind, you put it back in the box and wait until the universe unfolds the answer.

You don’t drive your friends and sisters insane by discussing it until everyone is crying from tedium. No. You just keep your mouth shut and wait it out.

(The reasoning is that humans are weaklings who want the solution which gives the quickest gratification; we deliberately blind ourselves to any medium-term damage. I *knew* all of this; I just didn’t want to hear it.)

‘Ah, Nola! Can’t you just tell me what to do.’

‘It doesn’t work like that and you know it.’

‘Sorry. You’re right. Absolutely. Yes. Thank you. Golden Keying it *right* now.’

Feck that. I was getting a second opinion. But I had to choose my person carefully, so they’d tell me what I wanted to hear. Even if I wasn’t sure what that was.

My sister Margaret was very cut and dried, imbued with a bone-deep sense of right and wrong. I could hear her insisting, ‘You have to go to that funeral! She was once your mother-in-law – have some decency.’

Mum would agree, but only because she *adored* funerals, beadily checking out the quality of the coffin, the mawkishness of the hymns and the enthusiasm of the crying. Though she enjoyed robust good health, she was constantly planning her own send-off – ‘The saddest hymns you can find’ – and was adamant about one thing: ‘There’s to be none of this “life being celebrated” codswallop! I want people in *floods*.’ An expensive, hardwood coffin had been earmarked. (‘Do *not* get me a flimsy wicker thing. I heard of a man who slid

out, *slid right out* and fell onto the church floor as he was being carried up the aisle. And he had no trousers on, nor underpants either, only his shirt and jacket. Do *not* let that happen to me.')

Helen would tell me there was no need to go. 'Fuck him!' she'd say, her voice dripping scorn. 'You owe Luke Costello nothing!'

Anna? She had a strong fondness for woo-woo codology. She'd probably agree with Nola.

Claire? Hard to know which side she'd come down on.

Dad? If he dared to express an opinion at all, no one ever paid any attention.

My best friend, Brigit? She'd be so here for this but she was *busy*. A mother of three boys, aged fifteen, fourteen and ten, and a girl of eight, she lived in the gorgeous wilds of north Connemara, at everyone's beck and call. Working from home (but oh my God, *what a home*), her job description was 'part-time' but the hours looked suspiciously closer to full-time.

A breezy text would be the way to go with Brigit. That way, if she liked the sound of things, she could get involved and if she had too much on, she could pass.

I hugged Nola and hurried back to my car, having decided to consult all of my sisters. At least that way I'd get to explore every possible option.

I reached for my phone then – spookily – *at that very moment* a WhatsApp arrived from Claire. Need to talk. Dilemma.

I replied, I've a dilemma too. Calling a summit for 8pm tonight. You round?

Yep, she said. My dilemma a private one, tho. Need a pre-summit with you.

Our family summits usually took place in Mum and Dad's house because they lived equidistant from my sisters and me. But Claire and I arranged our sneaky *pre*-summit for seven forty-five.

Then I WhatsApped the Walsh family group: Mum and Dad's, tonight, 8pm. I need advice, Luke's mum has died, should I go to the funeral?

Immediately my phone blew up with messages, texts, voice-notes – like the internet when Beyoncé drops a surprise album. All of my sisters were on for meeting up, except for Anna, who rang to rage about the inconvenience of her living in New York. (And who advised me to 'Put it out to the universe.')

My next act was to call Mum, to check she'd be home. Even if she wasn't, we'd still meet there, eat her biscuits and frighten Dad. She greeted me with, 'Rachel? Good of you to ring. I could have been lying in a *crumpled heap* on the hall floor, dead for four days, without a person to notice I was missing.'

I called Mum daily and so did Margaret; Mum lived with another adult – Dad; she played bridge approximately twelve times a week; four hours each day were spent on the phone to her pals, complaining about things – she was healthier and more sociable than me.

'Are you in this evening?' I asked.

'Why?' She was instantly suspicious. 'What do you want? But hear me now! I'm not minding your dog, I'm not hemming your skirt and you can't borrow my car. I've a life too, you know.'

'Advice is what I'm looking for.'

'Buy the thing.'

'What thing? No, Mum, that's not –'

'Just buy the thing, whatever it is. Life is short. That's my advice.'

'I'll be there about eight.'

'We've already had our dinner. Gluten-free sausages.'

'Since when are you gluten-intolerant?'

'Hah! We're not! We're just being adventurous. I'll tell you something, you wouldn't know the difference. Next week, we might try vegan cheddar.'

I whizzed home to feed an ecstatic Crunchie – she always behaved as if I'd been gone and given up for dead for about three hundred years – then left again to meet Claire. Foolishly I arrived on time and parked five houses down from Mum and Dad's. Seven minutes later, Claire's car bounded over the speed bumps. Even before she came to an abrupt, ear-piercing halt, her electric window was whining open and her stylish, oyster-grey nails were beckoning me over.

She refused to ever get into my car. The heating didn't work and it made her depressed.

The night was misty. Scuttling along, hugging the wall, hoping to avoid any neighbours, I slid into her warm, fragrant, leather-lined Audi. 'Lovely smell,' I said.

'Diptyque,' she said. 'Tuberose. They do air fresheners for cars now.'

That was Claire all over. Right at the front of the fashion vanguard. Ever-questing, snuffing out new brands – skincare, handbags, lifestyle. *Devoted to Porter* magazine! Never afraid to spend money!

She gave me a quick hug. 'Am I late? God, I am. So, are you okay?'

Her hair, in a fashionable shade of mouse brown, was in a fabulous, falling-down French twist, her skin glowed and although I didn't know what age she was currently claiming to be, she looked good for it.

'Your face.' I took a second look. 'Where'd your pores go? It's amazing.'

'Had a thing done.'

She was always having things done. Her favourite phrase was, 'I'm not going down without a fight.' (That, or 'Make it a strong one.')

She deserved to look as great as she did. She had a personal trainer and – crucially – *showed up for her sessions*, instead of texting ten minutes before the start, pretending she had a sore

throat (which was what I'd kept doing the few times I'd signed up). The only carb to cross her lips was vodka and she was very susceptible to Goop, obediently buying their powdered unicorn hoof or whatever their latest thing was. Her one blind spot was a fondness for fake tan but, on that matter, she couldn't be reasoned with. Everyone has their weakness.

She was so invested in her youthful look that she didn't like spending time in public with Margaret, *who was younger than her*, because Margaret had 'aged gracefully' (according to Margaret). Or 'gone to hell, entirely' (according to Claire).

Their battleground was Margaret's hair. Margaret had stopped colouring it a few years ago, but as far as I was concerned she was the real winner because it was now this amazing cool silver colour. I reckon she actually looked better than she had in her twenties.

Sometimes I thought about doing the same thing myself – the freedom was alluring. Think of all that time and money I'd save. Even more importantly, consider all the *emotional* energy saved – the last ten days before my roots got done were *hard* going.

'Did it hurt?' I asked Claire. 'The thing you had done?'

'Oh Christ, yeah! Even after six co-codamol.'

'Six? Claire!'

And there you had at least two of the differences between Claire and me: I too would like the poreless skin, but I wasn't prepared to suffer for it. Instead, I spent a fortune on serums, doing constant ongoing research. It was one of my many micro-obsessions.

The tragedy in all of this was that our second youngest sister Anna, had The Best Job in The World, an executive at McArthur on the Park, a PR company which repped some of the most exciting skincare on the planet.

In practical terms, it meant that we had glorious, giddy-making access to free products. And even so, I *still* couldn't

stop buying things. Free stuff is always lovely. But nothing is as alluring as New and Exciting. Or *More*.

The second difference was that Claire mood-altered with happy abandon and never developed a dependency: she was an enthusiastic drinker and had a whole suite of pills at her fingertips.

Me, though? I'd been to rehab twenty years ago for being too fond of cocaine and other drugs. It was the best thing that had ever happened to me and these days I lived a normal, happy life – so long as I steered clear of *any* 'mood-alterers'. Which meant no codeine, no occasional Xanax for anxiety, nothing at all – not even alcohol.

Which baffled my 'loved ones' (my sisters and parents). Alcohol hadn't been a big problem for me back in the day, it had been all the other stuff. But I was a person who could get addicted to rice cakes. To tap water. To tofu, magnolia paint, nude lip gloss, boiled cauliflower – *anything*. No matter how bland, how unremarkable, I could get addicted to it. So, no alcohol for Rachel.

'How're you bearing up?' Claire asked.

'We'll save it until we're inside. Tell me what's going on with you.'

She pressed her lips together. 'You know Adam?'

The man she'd been with for twenty-three years? 'Er . . . ?'

'And you know our friends, Piet and Beatriz?'

'Mmmm.' They were fairly new but Claire and Adam seemed to see a lot of them. They were a bit flashy. Very Claire. No offence meant.

'So, turns out that they're swingers.'

Oh, *here* we go. The real surprise was that Claire hadn't taken up swinging much sooner.

Valiantly, I said, 'No judgement.' My personal brand was 'In Recovery but Still Great Fun'; it was important to seem breezy about all lifestyle choices in case I stopped being invited

to things. People were already uncomfortable around me when they wanted to get hammered and I was sitting there, nursing a Diet Coke. I worked hard to *never* seem disapproving.

But the truth was that I had *a good deal* of judgement here. Based entirely on the fact that I wouldn't like to swing with Piet – he was too big, he shaved his head and he wore chunky gold rings.

'They want to, you know, *swing* with us. Beatriz fancies Adam and Piet fancies me.'

Well, they were all adults.

'Piet wants to date me. And Beatriz would, yeah, date Adam.'

Dating? I'd visualized swinging as a more generalized sort of thing, that they'd all be flubbing round together, like kids in a ball pit. But *dating?* That sounded a lot more . . . intimate.

Unless 'dating' just meant 'riding'?

'Piet suggested it to Adam. Adam told him to sling it. But I'd, you know . . . I think I want to.'

'You can't *make* Adam swing if he doesn't want to.'

' . . . yeeeahh. Maybe I should just have a thing with Piet? He's always giving me hot stares and saying things like "If I didn't know that Adam would throttle me . . ." It's sexy.'

'Having a thing with Piet is different from swinging.' Then, 'Claire, are you sure you want to be a swinger? It sounds to me that you just fancy Piet.'

She exhaled. 'I really fancy Piet. On the *mercifully rare* occasions I have to have sex with Adam, I pretend it's Piet.'

Horses for courses. In my opinion, Adam was a show-stopper. Big and tall but not in that meaty, Piet way. And he *suit*ed Claire. They were both immensely social, great fun and said yes to everything – at least everything that involved alcohol and other people. It would be hard to find a more perfect couple.

'It would upset Adam if I had an affair on the sly –'

‘– *ya think?*’

‘– but if we were swingers, it would all be out in the open.’

‘Listen to me, Claire. Swinging is grand if everyone is on the same page. You and Adam need to talk about this. And remember, you and Adam have a good thing going. It’s rare and wonderful. Seriously, you don’t know how lucky you are.’

‘Ah, stop! No need to be all serious. Just tell me what to do. You’re wise.’ Jokily, she elbowed me. ‘Yes or no? G’wan, say yes!’

‘Okay.’ I sighed. ‘I’ll tell you exactly what to do.’

Her face lit up. Eagerly she said, ‘Yes?’

‘Golden Key it.’

‘NOOOOOOO!’ Then, ‘Christ, here’s Margaret, in her anorak of doom. Say nothing.’

Claire and I clambered from the car, while Margaret gave us a wounded look from inside her navy nylon hood. ‘You’d think that, by now, I’d have got used to being left out of things,’ she said as the three of us hurried through the strangely wet mist to Mum’s front door, Claire holding her Bottega pouch over her wonderful hair. ‘But it still hurts.’

Luckily that was the moment when Claire’s high leather boots skidded on the damp pavement, sending her flying into Mrs Kilfeather’s hedge. By the time the diversion was over, Mum was hooshing us into the hall.

‘In, in, get in,’ she said, rotating her arm. ‘Before we’re all drowned.’

‘The soles of new boots should be sandpapered,’ Margaret said. ‘If you don’t want to slip.’

‘You’re right. They should. I’d do it, only they’re *Lou-boutins*.’ That was Claire’s version of an apology.

‘Take off those coats and shoes,’ Mum said. ‘Don’t be bringing the rain into my Good Front Room.’

Margaret obediently slung her anorak on the knob at the

bottom of the stairs, I threw my coat over it but Claire refused to remove hers. 'It's not a coat, it's a shirt-dress.'

Again, that was totally Claire. You'd see a photoshoot in a magazine, say of a woman wearing a floor-length, organza shirt-dress, over flared trousers and a clingy fine-knit jumper, and you'd think, That's beautiful, but no normal person would ever wear it. Claire would, though.

'Shirt-dress, coat-dress, call it whatever you like,' Mum said. 'It's still wet. Take it off.'

'For the love of God!' Claire said, but she complied.

The three of us stuck our heads into the television room to say hello to Dad. Anxiously he looked up, like a badger peering out from a burrow. 'What's going on?' He clutched his beloved remote control against his chest.

'Summit meeting.'

'Feck.' Longingly, he eyed the telly. Golf, from what I could see. 'Am I needed?'

It would be cruel to interrupt his viewing. 'Just tell me. Should I go to Luke's mother's funeral?'

'She's dead? That's a terrible pity, she was a lovely woman. Who told you about it?'

'Joey. He rang me. Out of the blue.'

'Narky Joey rang you? I see.' He paused. 'Lookit, my opinion counts for nothing around here.' This was uttered without a hint of bitterness. Poor Dad had accepted his place at the bottom of the pecking order a long time ago. 'But it sounds to me that you should go. If you can face it, like.'

'Seriously? Okay. Thanks, Dad. Look. In that case, you're absolved from attending the actual summit.'

'God, that's great.' He looked pitifully grateful. Then, 'Did you hear about our gluten-free sausages?'

'I did. I hear you couldn't have told the difference. And –'
'Vegan cheddar next week!'

'Here's Helen!' Mum yelled, opening the front door to a

small, drenched creature, dressed entirely in black. Her silhouette was that of a twelve-year-old girl.

‘I need a towel!’ She unzipped her long waterproof coat with a whizz and flung back the hood with such force that droplets flew everywhere. ‘Old Woman, you!’ She clicked her fingers. ‘Bring me one.’

As Mum happily disappeared up the stairs to do her bidding, Helen yelled after her. ‘Nothing flowery or pink!’ Helen had a loooooong list of things she hated so much she wanted to hit them in the face with a shovel. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was called her Shovel List.) Flowery patterns and the colour pink were among the countless items which featured on it.

‘I’ll get the gin.’ Margaret ducked into the kitchen and returned with a litre of Aldi gin, a bottle of tonic and a selection of mismatched glasses. Nothing for me, but I’m used to it. Even after all these years they still act as if my being clean and sober is a temporary self-indulgence.

When the drinks were poured and we were in the sitting room, Helen wearing a giant turban of a towel (yellow), I told my story. The responses were as predicted.

‘Of course you’re going.’ (Mum.)

‘You have to go.’ (Margaret.)

‘Are you mad?! She doesn’t have to go!’ (Helen.)

Claire was the only one who asked, ‘What do you *want* to do?’

‘I know it’ll hurt but I want to go. I think.’

‘What’s the big deal?’ Margaret asked. ‘You’ve met someone else. You and Quin are solid.’ Then she had a think. ‘But why won’t you move in with him?’

‘Because . . . if I moved in and things went bad I’d have to move out again.’

‘Why would it go bad? You’re punishing Quin for what Luke did.’ Sometimes Margaret could cut to the heart of a messy situation with sharp insight. ‘You’re stuck.’

At times, that was something Nola also said.

‘Have you anything for a headache?’ Helen asked.

‘A good, hard whack in the skull with my stick,’ Mum replied, and they both creased with laughter. Then, ‘Margaret, go out to the fruit bowl and get your sister some tablets.’

A question had been playing on my mind. ‘Do you think Joey told me about the funeral out of the goodness of his heart?’

This caused a spirited and united response. ‘Narky Joey? Joey *Armstrong*? He isn’t a goodness-of-his-heart person! He’s one of the most terrible men I’ve ever met!’ (Said by Helen. With admiration.)

‘Maybe Luke asked him to tell you?’ Claire said.

In which case . . . ‘I might go. Don’t judge me but it might be good to be back in touch. The way it ended was horrible –’ ‘That’s all on him,’ Helen interjected.

‘But we *were* happy for such a long time . . . Shouldn’t we at least be civil?’

Margaret had returned, carrying the fruit bowl, which bristled with boxes of tablets, pipette-bottles of drops, tubes of ointment, three blackened bananas and a wizened mandarin orange. ‘You’ve *everything*. Can I have this tube of Fucibet? There are three here.’

‘Work away.’

‘Headache,’ Helen reminded her.

‘Tablet, caplet or soluble? Aspirin-based or ibuprofen? Codeine –’

‘Surprise me.’

‘If Rachel’s going to the funeral,’ Claire announced, ‘we need a plan.’ She was a great strategist, a big high-up in a charity – which often confused people into thinking she was kind-hearted. Giant mistake. Claire could fire people without having to go to bed for a week with guilt and she got really pissed off if the Crimson Ribbon Day collection was disappointing. (‘Lazy bastard volunteers! All they had to do was

stand in the rain, shaking a bucket in people's faces, it's hardly rocket science.')

After subjecting me to a dispassionate appraisal, Claire was thoughtful. 'You look good. That weight you lost, I thought you might put it back on now that you're happy again, but fair play, you haven't.'

Only Claire could turn the greatest trauma of my life into a positive.

'Could she get Botox?' Mum asked.

'I *have* Botox!' While I'm nowhere near as bad as Claire, I too have my pride.

'Where?' Mum lunged at my face. 'But you can move your eyebrows!'

'Botox has improved. Frozen foreheads are a thing of the past.'

'But then how are people to know you've got it?!'

'Hey!' Claire exclaimed. 'Nice earrings!'

It had taken her a while. Granted my hair was long and loose enough to act as camouflage but Claire had an instinct for fancy things. At first glance they were just triangles of orange Perspex. What made them special was that each sported a not insignificant diamond.

'Give me a look.' Claire was tucking my hair behind my ears and coming in for a close-up. 'Christ,' she breathed. 'Quin?'

Of *course*, Quin.

Helen and Margaret were also on top of me, trying to see.

I twisted my face from side to side so they all got a look, then I was told to take the earrings off, so they could be examined at closer quarters.

'Are the diamonds . . . real?' Helen's tone was sceptical.

'But why would you put a diamond in a cheap piece of orange plastic?' Margaret sounded confused enough to cry. 'I don't get Quin's taste *at all*.'

There were times I agreed with her. Quin was *gas*. He didn't

really care that gifts were supposed to be what the person on the receiving end liked. If something appealed to *him* – and his taste was nuanced and niche, not for everyone – that was usually enough for him to reach for his credit card.

‘They’re horrible,’ Mum said.

‘They’re so not.’ Claire was adamant. ‘Quin is really cool. What’s the name of the jeweller? Text me when you know, so I can find out the price.’

‘Oh, do!’ the other three exclaimed.

Sometimes Quin got it *so* right – a fifties bracelet in chunky, blue Lucite was one of my favourite things. These orange PerispeX earrings, though? Diamonds or no diamonds, I’d never have picked them. But because I cared about him, I wore them.

‘So this is what you do,’ Claire said. ‘Go with Quin. Waltz into the church with him.’

‘It’s a funeral,’ Mum snapped. ‘No one’s waltzing anywhere. *Don’t* go with Quin.’

‘Don’t,’ Margaret agreed. ‘It would be inappropriate.’

‘Luke left her!’ Helen exclaimed. ‘She can do what she likes!’

‘Anyway, Quin’s in New Mexico,’ I said. ‘He’s not back till Sunday.’

‘Do you want me to go with you?’ Mum asked.

The answer was no. But how did I tell her?

‘Girls,’ she said with sudden anxiety, ‘go easy on the rouge while I’m reposing in my coffin.’

‘I’m sorry but I can’t come,’ Margaret said. ‘I’ve no more holiday leave left, not until July.’

‘Nor can I,’ Claire said. ‘Big meeting. Sorry.’

We all turned to Helen who looked uncomfortable and said, ‘I’ve a thing.’

‘*What* thing? You work for yourself!’

‘Not a work thing.’ Helen gave Mum a cool stare. ‘And not something I can reschedule.’

This was like dropping a lit match into a can of petrol.

Instantly everyone was agog. We were far too enmeshed in each other's lives, my sisters, Mum and me.

'You're up in court?' Mum asked. 'For assault? For stalking? For trespassing?'

'Nope. Nope. Nope. And nope. You can keep on asking, but you're wasting your breath.'

'You're getting married?' Mum asked hopefully. 'Artie's finally making an honest woman out of you?'

I was *so* interested in her answer to this. You know the way you sometimes can't figure relationships out? Well, that was Helen and Artie. To me, they seemed bafflingly ill matched. Helen courted trouble: she spoke her mind, changed it frequently and was prone to sudden, passionate grudges. Artie – an intensely clever man who worked in financial policing – was cool, calm and impossible to ruffle. He barely spoke, which Helen said suited her because she wasn't with him for his conversational skills but for his expertise between the sheets.

You could see her point: Artie was phenomenally handsome – huge and broad-shouldered, with the flaxen, blue-eyed, unkempt appeal of a Viking.

From one or two things Helen had let slip, I gathered that Artie took no nonsense from her. Well, not much. You couldn't say he'd tamed her because he hadn't, but he was probably the first of her boyfriends who hadn't been destroyed by her tendency to break nice things.

Helen smirked. 'I'm not getting married. Like, *ever*.'

'Whatever it is,' Margaret said, her tone kind, 'you'll tell us when you're ready.'

'Yeah. I will.' And Helen actually blushed.

In wonder, we watched the flush creep its way up her pretty, cat-like face.

'Something to do with Your Best Friend, Bella Devlin?' Claire pounced.

Bella Devlin was Artie's youngest daughter and had been Helen's best friend since Bella was nine and Helen thirty-three. (Bella was now fifteen.) Such unorthodox behaviour was typical of Helen but it was a relief that she had a friend at all.

'Leave Bella Devlin, My Best Friend, out of this,' Helen said.

'Tell us!' Claire commanded.

'Nope.'

'Flowers.' Mum had lost interest. 'I want lots of flowers. I want a wreath that says "GRANNY" from my grandchildren. Shiny pink nail varnish and I want my good rosary beads, the mother-of-pearl ones that Father Fergus brought me back from Fátima, threaded through my fingers –'

Claire was clicking on her phone. 'Rachel. Kate's not rostered to work in Blossom Hall on Friday, she could go with you.'

Unless . . . I looked at Helen. 'Is she working for *you* on Friday?'

'Let's seeeeee.' Helen had a think. 'Go on then, yeah, she can have the morning off.'

'You better not be giving her all the dodgy jobs,' Claire told Helen.

Helen had another think. 'Ah, she's grand. Nothing too . . . dangerous.'

'Actually, I really should go to this funeral,' Mum said. 'To show respect. She was my opposite number in the Walsh–Costello marriage.'

But almost from the word go, Mum had taken against poor Marjorie Costello.

She'd never have admitted it, but back in the day Mum had decided that because Luke's dad, Brian, was a mere electrician – contrasting with Daddy Walsh, the accountant – the Walshes were somehow better than the Costellos.

It made no difference that both Mum and Daddy Walsh

had come from humble backgrounds and that Daddy Walsh had gained his qualifications via a correspondence course instead of spending four free-and-easy, duffle-coated years swaggering about Trinity College like an entitled young buck.

For once in her anxious, status-obsessed life Mum had relished her position as top dog.

Until the Costellos had extended an invitation to tea. Poor Mum had swanked along, prepared to be generous about their mean little abode – and then Dad had parked the car outside.

‘This?’ she’d asked, staring in green-tinged shock at the well-kempt, handsome house. Yes, it was a suburban semi-d, but it boasted double glazing, up-to-the-minute gutter work and a fibre-glass front door.

Once inside, the square-footage appalled her. A large extension into the spacious back garden had resulted in an attractive conservatory and an enormous, light-filled kitchen. The converted attic yielded up two extra bedrooms, both boasting built-in wardrobes and en-suites.

Worse still, the workmanship everywhere was excellent: doors hung straight, they shut easily and silently, the light switches didn’t deliver mild electric shocks and you could run your hand along the banisters without your skin being torn to bits by stray splinters.

Mum kept swallowing and swallowing. When Mrs Costello produced an array of pretty cakes and mini-tarts she stuttered something about how they must have spent the day baking.

Mrs Costello had a good laugh at that. ‘Life’s too short for making quiche. The Laden Table did all this.’

The Laden Table! Mum was borderline obsessed with the place. How she yearned to be like her friends, who could casually pick up the phone and place an impromptu order for beef stroganoff for ten. But Mum was held back by shame – certain that buying from the Laden Table was the same as

paying for a series of Facebook ads, confessing to being an appalling cook.

It had been a tough eighty minutes. In fairness, it often is when two random sets of parents are brought together because their respective children have fallen in love. Luke and I churned out most of the chat and even Dad made a stab at it, but because he spoke so rarely it was hard for him to gear up.

Mum managed the occasional strangled sentence. 'That rug . . . it looks like a Gooch luxury hand-tufted Berber. Oh, it is? Eighty per cent off, well . . . lovely.'

On the way home, Mum remained silent for most of the journey. As we crossed the Liffey, back into the southside, she murmured, in the tiniest of voices, 'It was like a small hotel.' Then, 'How did they get eighty per cent off the rug? I never see anything but rubbish in the sales.'

Back in the present, I said, 'Mum, no need for you to come to the funeral. You'd lost contact with her.'

And I needed to be free to leave at a moment's notice, without being told I was being disrespectful.

'Now that's settled, I need some advice.' Claire got to her feet and began removing her fashion-forward flares.

'What's going on!' Mum cried. She was terrified of naked skin.

'Francesca says my kneecaps look like the faces of two old Russian women wearing headscarves. Do they?'

Francesca was Claire's seventeen-year-old and shaping up to be a handful. But she could be very funny *and* on the money. Interested, I focused on Claire's kneecaps. They were bumpy, certainly, but I wasn't seeing actual old women.

'I don't know,' Mum said. 'If you stare at anything long enough, it starts looking funny.'

'Like the man who saw Michael Bubl  in a slice of toast,' Margaret said.

‘I *do* see old women in headscarves, yeah,’ Helen said. ‘But I don’t know if they’re Russian.’

‘D’you know what’s a gas thing to do?’ Mum exclaimed, obviously bored of Claire’s knees. ‘If you stare at your own face in the mirror for long enough, you start to look like the devil.’

‘Ah, never mind.’ Claire was also bored. ‘It’s not going to stop me wearing short dresses.’

‘Put your trousers on again, good girl,’ Mum said.

4

Crunchie launched herself at me in ecstatic welcome and Kate declared, ‘Rachel, hey, you’re home!’

‘Hello. Hel-*lo*, who’s a good dog?’ As Crunchie danced around, I rubbed her ears. ‘*Who’s* a good dog? You are!’

In the living room, Kate pointed at her paused screen. ‘Korean series. *Completely* insane. But I love it. Maybe you should give it a go. So would you like some tea? Camomile and rose.’ She’d clambered off the couch and was already in the kitchen, getting me a cup. ‘Helps with sleep.’

‘What about you, my clean-living little niece! How’d your surveillance go today?’

‘Good! Your man turned up; I got lots of photos.’

‘Can I ask a question? Theoretical at this stage? Would you mind missing work on Friday morning?’ Quickly, I added, ‘Helen says you can have the time off. But not if you need the money.’

‘What’s going on?’

‘You know Luke? My ex-husband? His mum died, funeral’s on Friday –’

‘– Quin’s away and you need a wingman? On it.’

‘You sure? You don’t mind missing work? Maybe Helen will pay you anyway.’

That was our cue for hollow laughter, which turned into the real thing.

‘When did you last see him?’ Kate asked.

‘Twenty twelve,’ I said. ‘Six years ago. The day he left.’ Even remembering it – me crying and begging him to stay – made me feel nauseous.

‘Wow! That’s . . .’ Twenty-somethings usually think people like me, a woman in my forties, have evolved past all painful feelings, but Kate was better than most. ‘So how was the legal stuff done? Your divorce?’

‘Lawyers, mostly. Sometimes his mate Joey was the go-between. But Luke and I haven’t exchanged a single word.’

Thousands of times I’d ached to talk to him but he had blocked my number, email, everything.

‘And you never bumped into him?’

‘He sold his business and moved to Denver, Colorado. Got a new job, had friends living there. That’s all I know.’

‘. . . Social media, though?’

‘No.’ I had to laugh at her shock. ‘He was on Facebook for a while, back in the day, but *barely*, you know?’

He’d even blocked me on that. But, according to Anna, he hadn’t posted anything in literal years. And I’d never found him on anything else. For two or three years after he’d left, I’d done regular, obsessive checks on Instagram and Twitter but always came back empty-handed.

‘This could be hard for you.’ Kate considered. ‘After breaking up with Isaac, I was good until Chloe’s kid’s naming ceremony. Soon as I knew I’d see him there, I was in bits.’

‘Yeah. I’m still not sure I’ll go.’ For a long time I’d felt I’d never forgive Luke. The whole business had been horrendous and I was very grateful it was in the past. Maybe the past was where it should stay.

I wondered about calling Quin. Dublin to Taos, New Mexico, would have involved at least three flights if he’d been going under his own steam. But as the client had flown both him and the architect on a private jet, he might have arrived already.

‘Rach?’

‘Quin.’ I felt a rush of warmth at the sound of his voice. ‘How are you? You got there okay?’

‘God, yeah.’ He groaned. ‘Private jets are just so great. But also so terrible. Whenever I travel on one, it takes me months to readjust to normal class.’

Quin designed bespoke audio-visual systems for the homes of very rich people. He was regarded as having a magic touch, which periodically bumped him up against great wealth.

‘It’s amazing here,’ he said. ‘We’re outside of town, in the desert. I’ve put some shots on Insta, if you want to take a look.’

I clicked on his grid and found images of a high desert plain. In the distance, a sudden eruption of jagged granite exploded from the flat nothingness, looking like a cathedral made of raw stone.

‘Oh, Quin, it’s *beautiful*. So, listen, can you talk for a minute?’

‘Sure.’ His voice was instantly alert. ‘Let me just go into another . . .’ There came the rustles of movement and the sound of a door closing. Then, ‘Okay, I’m here. What’s up?’

‘I got a call today. From a friend of my ex-husband’s.’

Quin’s sharp inhale was audible.

‘His . . . Luke, I mean, his mother has died. The funeral’s on Friday morning. I don’t know whether to go or not.’

‘Right.’ A pause. ‘Rach . . .’ Another pause.

Quin knew everything about me and Luke.

Well, *nearly* everything.

One of the great things about having met on a weekend where our very presence was an admission that we were struggling with life, was that, right from the start, Quin and I were admirably straight with each other. In our early days I’d felt okay to say to him, ‘I could never love another man the way I loved Luke.’

‘Ow!’ Quin had been visibly pained. ‘Radical honesty can go and fuck itself.’

But we’d been able to laugh about it.

For a moment the connection to New Mexico went loud

and crackly. When I could hear Quin again, he was asking, 'What's your "inner voice" telling you?'

'Nothing at the moment. But, like, would you mind if I went?'

'If I did, that's my stuff. Right?'

'Haha.'

'Sleep on it. See how you feel tomorrow. But', he growled, 'you'd better not fall for him again.'

'I won't.'

I turned out the light and hoped for sleep. But behind my eyelids, my eyes were wide open. I was cast back in time, to over twenty years ago, when Brigit and I were living in Manhattan.

There had been a gang of Irish lads we used to see around. All of them about six feet tall, with mad-long hair, tight, *tight* jeans and an abundance of neck and wrist accoutrements, they'd looked like they belonged in a hard-living rock band from the early seventies.

They drank Jack Daniel's, which they called JD, were no strangers to leather waistcoats or a denim jacket worn over a bare chest and were always accessorized by skinny blonde girls in groupie chic.

Dying of embarrassment that they were Irish, *terrified* we'd be lumped in with them by the cool New York types whose approval we craved, Brigit and I had, oozing irony, named them the Real Men.

But when, inevitably, we got talking to them, they were actually lovely. It was a relief to talk to men who were funny and halfway normal.

Those were the days when Brigit and I were scouring New York City for boyfriends. I was hoping for someone chiselled, hot, well paid and worthy of respect. In fact, *so* great at generating respect that simply by being his girlfriend, I would also engender some.

What it came down to was, I was waiting for a saviour. But my saviour had been unaccountably delayed. So while I was killing time, I'd ended up having a passionate but messy sort of a thing with one of the Real Men – Luke Costello.

The mess was entirely my fault. With his long hair, as glossy as a blackbird's wing, and his hard, fit body, Luke was an utter *ride*. I was happy to spend time – lots of it – in his bed but not to be seen with him in public (seriously, I was awful). He finally ran out of patience with me at the same time as I crashed, burned and ended up in rehab in Ireland.

Almost a year and a half later, when a new, clean-and-sober me returned to New York to make amends to Luke, it quickly became clear that the connection we'd once had was still there.

And we were so happy, *all* about Doing Things Right This Time. Even though we had full-time jobs we both started evening classes – neither of us had been to third-level but now we were keen to 'better ourselves'.

Then shit got *really* real when I instigated the 'kids conversation'.

'Luke, do you want to have babies? Children?'

He paused. 'Not right now.'

'How strongly do you feel about it?'

Another pause. 'I see my brothers and, like, they're wrecked the whole time. And they live in Ireland, close to family, who help out. We're here and we don't have anyone to pick up the slack. What do you think?'

'Same. I think I want them but it's safer to get a career sorted, steady income, maybe even a mortgage and all that, first.'

'Cool!'

So we were agreed that there was to be no rushing, no crazy impromptu decisions, nothing like the way I used to live. I had become one of those women with a five-year plan. Worse, I was proud of it.

The only worry was that my GP had said that we – and she mostly meant me – might be already on the decline, fertility-wise.

'So,' I remember saying to Luke, 'in case we need a contingency plan, we're getting checked out next Tuesday.'

‘Oh yeah? How does that go down?’

‘I have a scan to count my eggs and your sperm would get tested, to see if it’s . . . healthy?’ Was that the word? ‘Enough of it? Good at swimming?’

‘But how would it be tested?’ He seemed a little anxious. ‘Where would they get it?’

‘At the clinic. You’d, aaaah, do it there.’

‘You mean, I’d have to . . .?’ He went pale. ‘Oh God, *Rachel*. I’d have to . . . do it, right *there*?’

‘In a cubicle, I guess. Not, like, in the waiting area.’

I wasn’t wild about the idea either. Luke in a small, bare room with a load of pre-used porn made me feel squeamish, jealous and oddly turned on.

He put his face in his hands and groaned. ‘*Rachel* . . .’ Then, ‘This is important to you?’

‘If everything is okay, we can park that issue while we get the rest of our lives in place.’ I added, ‘It will give us peace of mind.’

‘You sound like a dodgy insurance salesperson.’ He exhaled, long and loud. ‘Okay. On one condition. That you never use the word “sperm” again.’

‘Done. Do you think I *like* being this person?’

The afternoon of our appointment, as we arrived at the building in midtown, I was surprisingly nervous. All medical stuff was anxious-making, even if it was just a precautionary check. What if I was infertile? Or Luke was?

But we’d cope. It would be a shock, but we’d weather it. My faith in us was strong.

As we waited for the elevator to the doctor’s suite, Luke cut his eyes to me. ‘Peace of mind, you say?’

‘Peace of mind,’ I intoned. ‘For you and your family.’

After ringing the clinic’s bell, the door buzzed and we pushed it open – and the receptionist half rose behind her

desk. Her glance flickered from Luke, to me, then back to Luke, his long hair, his leather jacket, his woven wristbands, the silver chain around his neck. For a moment I think she was considering calling security.

Who could blame her – the waiting room bristled with neatly pregnant women in bland Michael Kors dresses and Ferragamo flats, their accompanying menfolk in thousand-dollar suits.

Luke saw the receptionist's concern. 'It's okay.' His voice was gentle. 'We have an appointment. And,' he added, 'insurance.'

I watched him smile at her; she stared, gave an abrupt half-giggle, then slowly flushed a deep red.

Clipboards and pens appeared for us to input our information. After a lengthy wait, we were ushered into the presence of Dr Solomon, a tiny woman with lots of curly hair.

'You don't plan to get pregnant just yet?' She speed-read our forms.

'Not right now.' I sat up straight. 'But if there were any issues, that might change things.'

She flicked back to my form. 'You're, hmmm . . . almost thirty-one? And Luke . . . ?'

'Same,' he said.

'We're late starters.' Defensively I wanted to blurt out our convoluted story and to reassure her that Luke and I were *very* together. *We just moved in with each other. In twenty months he'll be a Certified Public Accountant – I know, you wouldn't think it to look at him, but a steady heart beats inside that sexy exterior. I'm doing a degree in Addiction Counselling, plus both of us are working full time. Once we're qualified, our student loans must be repaid, then we want to buy a place to live. All of that needs to be tidied away before we can even think about having a baby.*

'It's okay,' Dr Solomon said. 'Thirty-one is not old, not these days. If everything is in order, you've got plenty of time. So!' She clapped her hands and a nurse entered the room. 'Rachel,

while you have your scan, Tomaka will take Luke for his semen extraction.’

Luke shot me an anguished WTF look.

‘You’ll be alone,’ Dr Solomon added. But there was a wry turn to her tone that made me wonder if she’d alarmed poor Luke on purpose.

As he stood, Dr Solomon gave him a good, long look. ‘I’m not saying you’ll have motility issues. However, in that eventuality, you should know that tight jeans are frequently a contra-indication.’

And on that note, Tomaka took him away.

Fifteen or twenty minutes later, we were reunited in reception. Luke – clearly mortified – kept his eyes downcast. In the elevator that returned us to ground level, he remained silent. Only once we were out of the building and onto the teeming streets of midtown did it feel okay to speak.

‘Luke? Was it . . . bad?’ I asked. ‘Magazines with the pages stuck together?’

‘What?’ He seemed startled. ‘No, babe.’ He slung his arm around my neck and pulled me closer, out of the path of the crowds. ‘No.’ Our foreheads touching, his dark eyes held mine. ‘There was no need for any of that. I just thought about you.’