

Confessions of a Cryptomaniac, Part 1

Jillian Godsil

Aoife Brennan is a divorced, middle-aged woman living in Dublin. This is a year in her life.

Copyright Jillian Godsil 2013

The right of Jillian Godsil to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be reproduced, re-sold or given away in any form, or by any means except in accordance with the terms of licenses issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters and events featured in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are entirely fictitious and any resemblance to any person living or dead, organisation or event, is purely coincidental. Any mistakes are the author's own. This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

No reproduction without permission. All rights reserved to Aoife Brennan

ISBN 9780956723369

|

For my children (and the rescue animals)

Introduction

Life has a way of creeping up unnoticed. Things change and the centre cannot hold. Sometimes change comes in increments, the gravitational force pulling face, skin and protrusions back whence they came. Sometimes it comes unannounced, like a death, a petit mort or a sudden leave-taking. Other times the door is just left open and the accoutrements of a life seep out, almost imperceptibly. But every now and then, life - armed with something as painful as divorce - comes in and whacks the woman in the face like a giant sledge-hammer, shattering confidence, looks, finance and respectability. Especially respectability. The hammer blow shatters the woman and separates her from the bedrock of the community. Now walking a path so narrow and crooked that progress may be backwards, with no maps to guide and no compass to say which is due north, the woman has to find her way back to herself. Where the end point is, no one really knows.

Chapter One

The clock ticked softly on the wall of the surgery alongside a shabby collection of peeling posters advertising various medical products. I sat on the chair, my legs crossed. There were five other people ahead of me in the waiting room. I picked up a battered and dated magazine, flicked through the pages and rested it back on my knees. I looked at the page as an illiterate might, my eyes flickering from picture to headline and back. My raincoat was buttoned up although it was not cold. I was sweating slightly. My make-up had the look of being well worn and it was. I had not removed or replaced it since eight o'clock the night before. The dark smudges under my eyes might have been sexy by candlelight but by morning the look was creased and oily.

Semen pooled in my damp panties. I, Aoife Brennan, was thirty-eight and in need of the morning after pill and the coil. This was how a marriage ended.

My mother and I put our heads together, drawing comfort from our proximity; as children colouring pictures might. We looked out the kitchen window into the garden. It was early morning and a light dew covered the grass. May had brought showers and cold weather. The pale green of the foliage belonging to an earlier, less

verdant month, and there were even straggling daffodils dotted along the edge of the lawn.

I held a mug of coffee in my hand, watching closely the scene outside. My mother had placed the hot mug into my hand as I arrived, the currency of thankfulness. We now looked out together in quiet worry. 'It's getting worse,' she said. I nodded. 'I know. It's the third time this month,' and followed my mother's gaze out to the far corner of the garden. There my father sat in the early morning dew on a battered sun lounger that had seen better days. His chair faced east to best catch the rising sun, if the clouds would ever part, and he concentrated as he read yesterday's paper, glasses on head and stark bollock naked except for a pair of leather slippers. He crossed his legs, the slipper dangling on a bobbing foot as he nodded to an unheard tune.

'He opened the door to the meter man last week,' sighed Mum. 'I didn't know at the time. I was in the garden and had missed the doorbell. I also didn't realise your father was having one of his turns. I'm not sure who was more embarrassed, the meter man or me. But Dad just welcomed him in, and made to lead him to the garage until I stopped him.'

'What does Dr Coleman say?' but even as I asked, I knew the answer. Dementia or Alzheimer's; the diagnosis was imprecise and premature. In all other matters Dad was the same as ever. He would not admit or acknowledge any cracks in his mental state and refused point blank to believe he had taken up naturalism. 'Never did in my youth, so why would I now in my dotage,' and he joked as if he

was far from his dotage, as only a sane man might demand. So why still did a frightened look cross his face? I wondered if he knew something, if he were just in denial, or did he even question what happened to those missing periods in his day?

‘I tried to bring him in,’ Mum said, ‘but he refused. Quite bluntly. Maybe you can persuade him?’ She looked sadly at me and I shifted uncomfortably. It was not just my father’s nakedness that disturbed me. In his distracted periods he thought I was his own mother, my grandmother: a familial likeness that upset me now. To be parent to the parent was not something that sat naturally with a child and I was no exception.

I took my father’s dressing gown off the back of the kitchen chair and walked slowly down the garden. As I approached, he shook the paper and rested it conveniently on his lap. Thank God for small mercies I muttered to myself. ‘Come now dad,’ I encouraged him brightly. ‘It’s too cold to sit out here with no clothes on. I’ve told you before. You can’t upset the neighbours and you’ll catch your death of cold.’ As I talked, I lifted him up, wrapping the dressing gown round the thin shoulders and resolutely avoiding looking at his shrivelled manhood. There are some things a daughter should never see and I shuddered, thanking God yet again that I had not followed nursing as a career. ‘Too many body parts to manage’ had been my stance in career advice classes and the stance held still. A vocation they called it at school, like joining the nuns. Neither appealed to me, then or now. He went in as unresisting as a lamb.

I finished my second cup of coffee and was about to leave when dad popped his head around the kitchen door, closely followed by the rest of his, by now, fully clothed body. 'Hello love,' he said. 'What has you here so early? No more trouble at home I hope?' and a frown creased his brow.

'No, all quiet at home,' I replied. 'Just kids working hard.'

Quiet at home was good. It was also rare. My two teenage boys did not do quiet. They left tracks across the house like rutting bucks; spilled school bags by the door, kitbags in the utility, coats flung on the banisters, keys, phones, actually I stand corrected, not phones, but every other piece of detritus from their pockets dashed on the hall stand and often following up the stairs to their respective bedrooms like the crumbs from Hansel and Gretel. Of course, I knew better than to follow those crumbs. My entry to their rooms was limited and only out of necessity. Laundry bags collected and cups and dishes gathered up, but I rarely upset the bedding, except to shake or smooth it. I never looked under the bed, under the mattress. I didn't want to know what lurked beneath.

Once a fortnight the bed linen was chucked out into the hall and clean linen put by their doors. When Denis turned thirteen, his father had said to me that I was no longer to enter my son's room; that Denis was capable of keeping it clean and making his own bed. Two years later the same held for Andrew. Three months after that, Paul had left but the rule held strong four years on.

Today, the boys were gone when I returned home; Denis to soccer and Andrew to a friend's. Weekends were busy catching up, acting as a taxi mum, and trying to get the house back in order. By Sunday night, if I was lucky, peace might descend: the washing machine stilled, the ironing folded in baskets, the groceries put away and only the hum of the dish washer running its cycle after the Sunday dinner. The kids often played games in the den, a small room off the hallway, while I watched television in the living room. Old films, documentaries sometimes, the odd reality show when no one was watching. For some reason *Made in Chelsea* fascinated me; shades of my youth when living in London perhaps. Utter tosh of course but as watchable as a car crash, rubber-necking all the way.

I had also discovered the joys of a smartphone. And the possibility of online dating. The web-hosting company I worked for had banned Facebook and other social media sites, so naturally dating sites were also blocked. At home, I didn't dare look up dating sites on the laptop, even when I could delete the browsing histories or view sites incognito. It was too worrying in case I forgot to delete the history or missed something and the boys, blackhats in the making, caught me out. With my smartphone I felt safe enough, after all that never left my purse. I'd put up a bland profile on a popular dating site two days ago, with no picture and an obligatory five years shaved off my age, but already it was proving slightly addictive. I checked in with alarming regularity, just to see who might be there. Just lurking at the moment I thought, just lurking. One man, Firefox121, had caught my attention; or rather I had caught his. He was sending me regular messages. It was

slightly creepy thinking there was someone on the internet thinking about me. I wasn't sure if I liked it or not.

In the five years since Paul had left me, I'd been on three dates. The first one was with the local butcher. Trish still laughs so hard over that story and tells me that I missed a good thing there. Trish, who has been my best friend since primary school, is the only one allowed to tease me about men. Actually, she is one of the few friends whom I managed to hang on to since my separation. It is possibly her fearlessness and kindness - a good combination for a lifelong friendship especially when laced with a wicked sense of humour. 'Think of all the free meat you are missing,' Trish joked about the butcher, more than once, ignoring my pained expression. I wince every time I remember. Frank had been one of the first people outside the family to know I was separated. My purchasing patterns went from four steaks to three and then over the following months to less expensive cuts. He finally asked me quietly one day as I paid for three pork chops and stewing beef if I was on my own now. I, flustered, said yes and, still flustered, found myself accepting a date.

When I met Frank at the cinema, I half expected him to be dressed in his butcher's apron. Instead he wore a suit and no tie, but clumsily. His paunch was more noticeable and less welcoming when not covered with the familiar stripy cloth. His breath smelled and his large hands, so capable when carving up slabs of dead animals, looked strangely out of place as they emerged from the slightly short suit sleeves. Hairy and threatening they rested on his legs during the film, and I felt they might rise up and grasp me bodily as if I were a carcass to be butchered. I kept

watching them from the corner of my eye, willing them not to move in my direction.

We'd actually bumped teeth when he'd tried to kiss me at the end of a limp awkward evening. Of course, that meant I had to change my butchers afterwards too. Things your mother never told you, I said to Trish. The list of things had been growing at an alarming rate. Never date your butcher would be number one. Now I had to go to the less impressive butcher at the other end of the village, or use the supermarket. Neither really suited me and I fumed at my lack of forethought. Actually, I realised I hadn't given any thought at all to what it would be like to date again after marriage, full stop. I seemed to have all the necessary baggage to thwart successful attempts at dating. For a start there was my age. Now into my forties I am losing that edge that early maturity from the previous decade confers, at least in the aspect of entering into new sexual relations. Then there was the question of having two teenage children, two boys no less. The thought of arriving home with a man in tow other than their father was horrifying; and I am genuinely not sure who would find it more upsetting, my children or I. Finally, there was my own particular deviancy in which I initially accepted dates from men who not only lived too close but who also provided me with much needed local services. As a result my uncritical criteria for potential suitors resulted in the domino-like crashing of local services about me

Yes, for after the butcher, I went on a date with the manager of Tesco. Dandruff speckled his suit collar and he kept on sniffing without using a handkerchief. I met him for a drink first and Derek went on, at length, about his

'bitch of an ex-wife', the financial costs of rearing two ungrateful children and finally how lonely he had been. For lonely, I translated afterwards for Trish, read horny. This disastrous date ended up with Derek trying to find his way into my bra while parked in a quiet laneway. 'You can't come back to mine,' I'd told him earlier. 'The boys.' The sentence hung in the air like a loaded gun and we both backed away.

Instead Derek had driven around for a bit, whistling tunelessly, his hand on my knee, until he parked up the back of Tesco. The irony was not lost on me. Nor was the fact that as he tried to wrestle with the clasp on my bra, he encountered foundation garments that were having none of it, or rather none of him. He half squashed my left breast as he fumbled to release it. As he drew his mouth down to suck the nipple, I'd had enough. Pushing him back I demanded to be brought home, now. This he did in stony silence, all whistling stopped and with his eyes straight ahead. That put Tesco off limits, on Monday through Thursday anyway, and my boys thought me mad as I often travelled the half an hour journey to Dunnes Stores instead.

Trish had suggested I try dating a candlestick maker next. 'Make it a full set?' she said.

'You have no idea,' I said without laughing and went on a date with a sailor instead.

Well, he wasn't actually a sailor. He worked in the charity shop that raised money for the Lifeboat service. His mild manner had appealed to me when I had

occasionally dropped off unwanted clothes or books. Shane had invited me for coffee and so we sat in the weak sunshine by the café window. Shane proved to be a free spirit with three children by three different women. He was friendly with all and operated a pleasant lifestyle living with or at least visiting them by rotation. Of course he had no money, very little ambition other than to fish when he was not resting with his trinity of happy families, and enjoyed international film. I decided our relationship might extend to exploring film together but nothing else. Still, I was relieved when he didn't try to kiss me, other than on the cheek, and I could still visit the shop. This might come in handy I thought as my days of donating were rapidly changing to those of browsing in the charity shop.

It was Trish who pointed out the obvious. 'Those men are all too close to home. You are shitting on your own doorstep, Sweetie.' She smiled to soften the language. 'You need to branch out, take up a new hobby, meet new people who are not in a one-mile radius! There are plenty of fish in the sea.'

'I have used up all the available single men of my acquaintance already anyway,' I sighed.

That night I lay in bed watching television. I had hated having the TV in the bedroom when married, it had been too intrusive or maybe it was just that Paul watched endless sports programmes long after I wanted to go to sleep. Now it felt like an old friend, comfortable and companionable.

I prodded my belly through my soft cotton pyjamas. I squeezed my breasts. Gravity hadn't quite finished them off, yet. In fact, I looked better than I had towards the end of my marriage, when food had been a vindictive substitute for love. Pilates and no longer buying Paul's favourite biscuits had helped too. Now, I didn't really have the time to sit and eat and I didn't want to either. Of course, I wondered if I might be attractive to a man. Conversely I wondered if I might actually find a man attractive. The last time I had dated I had been in my twenties. My prospective dates then did not have beer bellies, paunches or varicose veins. They didn't have reddened cheeks, thinning hair and sagging bottoms. They didn't have coarse hairs growing in ears, out of noses or tufting in eyebrows.

I picked up my phone and tapped the dating app. There were three new messages, two from Firefox121 and one from Daemon. Yesterday Daemon had said hi, tonight he asked me if I moaned during sex, if I liked anal. I hastily blocked him. Firefox121 asked me about my kids, what age they were. In the next email he asked about my hobbies. I was warming to Firefox121.

'Ma,' Denis was standing at the bedroom door and I half-dropped the phone. He stood six feet tall, lanky and long with mad brush hair. He half hopped from one foot to the other. 'I've the school trip tomorrow. Do you have fifty euro?'

Money was increasingly a sore topic. Paul continued to pay the mortgage, but he expected me to pay all the rest. My job in support for a web-hosting company paid well but not enough to cover the extras. Denis wanted to get a part-time job. I was not in favour as he had his leaving certificate next year, but there

weren't any jobs anyway. His hobby of tinkering with cars also ate into any spare cash he might have had. How like his father in looks he was, I thought as I reached for the wallet beside my bed.

'The problem with dating is that I haven't for ages,' I said. Trish and I had grabbed our usual Friday lunch. During the summer we liked to buy sandwiches and sit in St Stephen's Green watching the world go by. 'I mean aside from my few abortive attempts I haven't dated a man in nearly twenty years. As for sex,' I raised my eyebrows. 'Well, that is the big bottleneck. How am I supposed to take my clothes off and be naked, I mean *naked*, in front of a stranger?'

Trish laughed, almost choking on her sandwich. 'With any luck, when you get to that bit, the man won't be a stranger!'

'You know what I mean. Sex with a stranger. How can I do it?'

'Same as you did it with Paul, I guess,' said Trish and a look of grim horror passed over my face. 'Ok, scrap that thought. With plenty of alcohol, lights out and romantic music in the background.'

'I just can't imagine it. Do people still do it the same way I wonder?'

'Don't look at me,' Trish laughed, 'I'm still married and therefore don't count.'

We sat for a bit in quiet. When I next spoke it was to remark upon a particularly pretty dress a young woman passing by was wearing. 'You don't fool me,' said Trish. 'You're still thinking about sex. I can tell.'

'I'm thinking that if I don't use it, do I lose it?'

'It, or rather you, don't have a 'best by' date.'

'I feel as though I do though,' I sighed. 'I feel horribly old. Just as I feel that maybe I'd like to start dating again, I wonder if anyone could possibly want me.'

When Paul first left and had been gone for just over three months, I still refused to believe my marriage was truly over. My first reaction was to remove my rings and bag up his clothes, CDs and other paraphernalia. The second was to come off the pill. Despite much arguing he'd refused to have the snip. I'd been advised not to have the operation, something complicated to do with my insides, and I balked at having a coil fitted. Throwing out the pill was like an act of freedom, of rebellion, but the freedom of the separation came at such a high price. I watched my boys hurting daily. Denis said nothing, but Andrew would say small throwaway things, inconsequential things that made me angry, upset and furious.

Paul's leaving had devastated me but I hadn't been happy in the marriage either. It was as if both of us were pulling apart with bungee ropes in opposite directions. The knock-over blow when we reached the end of the stretch was

catastrophic but not unwelcome if I was being honest. I had tired of Paul. Of his habits, his arrogance, his monotone when he lectured me about anything. But I looked at my boys and I wept. I thought I would give it one last throw of the dice.

Denis was in Cork for a match and so I arranged for Andrew to stay with my parents. It was three months to the day since Paul had left and he was coming by to collect his books. We hadn't spoken much since his departure. He had said he didn't love me anymore and that he had found someone else: bare facts that didn't need dressing up. It was very clinical and final.

Thinking of the single die in my hand I felt hollow and nervous but then I thought again of my children. I prepared one of my husband's favourite meals. I wore a low cut blouse. I opened wine. When Paul stopped by, he raised an eyebrow, but he drank the wine and he ate the food and he took the sex offered him on a plate by his wife. He even stayed the night. Afterwards I lay stiff beside him listening to his familiar breathing. I felt cold and defeated, like a reclaimed prisoner. I finally fell asleep, a patchy and unsatisfying sleep spiked with unremembered dreams. When I woke, he was in me again; a mechanical and silent coupling. A coupling that spoke of daily routines, fixing the washing machine, putting out the bins, and cold dinners reheated in the microwave. He grunted and came, no words, no kiss, no caress. He rolled off me, and sat at the edge of the bed. 'This makes no difference at all,' he said coldly. Then he dressed and left.

Dry-eyed, I went to the surgery for the morning after pill and to have a coil fitted. 'What happened?' my doctor asked in some confusion. 'The end of my marriage,' I said.

Chapter Two

Firefox121 definitely fancied me but that was without the benefit of a photograph, his or mine.. I wondered at the speed at which internet exchanges moved and the sincerity they promised. Three days into exchanging some of what I felt were preliminary and clarifying messages, he started to delve a little deeper into my physical rather than my emotional state. On Friday morning he had asked when I had last been intimate with a man. After lunch I got a message asking what particularly turned me on. I dithered for a bit over what answer to give, finally responding and saying a candle-lit dinner although I knew he was asking about sexual preferences. I began to laugh at such exchanges. What turned me on? I didn't even know where the start button was, let alone how to crank it up. I half groaned to myself. Even my terminology was old-fashioned. Crank it up? That's how they started automobiles in the 1940s.

Brian, the operations manager, passed my desk. 'Good joke?' he asked. I looked at him. 'Oh, just the weather Brian. It's glorious. Puts a smile on anyone's face.' He murmured assent and kept walking. I looked down at the phone in my hand. Was it true that men thought about sex every three minutes? I hadn't thought about sex for the best part of four years since Paul had left me, and, to be honest, not much before then either. After the initial shock of the separation Trish had bought me a rampant Rabbit. I had been horrified at the well-meaning but ill-timed present. It lay hidden in the deepest corner of my knicker-drawer still in its original

packaging. Recently, in the past month or so, sex had begun to dominate my thoughts like the proverbial elephant in the room. And just in the same way that that blasted stubborn elephant was all grey, wrinkly and cumbersome, the thoughts of sex were equally unsexy. It was like an obstacle to be got over or under or something. It's like losing my cherry all over again I'd said to Trish, only second time round it seemed more daunting.

Firefox121 came back. The app flashed on my phone to say I had a message. *Would I like to meet for a drink this weekend?* Before I had time to think, I answered yes. Damn it, yes I would.

Timing is everything. Too soon and you are kept waiting. Too late and you can miss your chance. The boys were both away on Saturday night. Denis was off to his girlfriend's family's holiday home in Rosslare; Andrew had a friend's birthday party and sleepover that night too. With my unexpected late pass, I had arranged to meet Firefox121 at Noggins Bar. Just far enough away from home not to bump into friends and not so far as to be a major trek. We still hadn't exchanged photographs which I was beginning to think might have been a mistake. Still, it was a date and whatever way it went, I consoled myself I wouldn't be jeopardising local services or shopping venues.

'Ma, Ma, Ma, MA' Andrew said in a crescendo as I drove him to his friend's house. 'We need to buy some sweets for the sleepover.'

'But you have the present. We don't need to buy sweets as well?' Apparently we did because Michael's mother, while happy about the sleepover, had banned sweets, believing them to be drugs for the very young. She was right I thought looking at the collection of brightly coloured sweets that Andrew was now cramming into his overnight bag.

'Remind me not to have a sleepover for your birthday,' I said.

'Not a chance,' said Andrew. 'The boys say you are a cougar.'

I nearly choked. 'What did you say?'

Andrew looked at me darkly but refused to expand on the topic. 'I'm not having a sleepover in my house,' he said.

I tried to hug my son at his friend's house but he resisted as Michael opened the door. I stepped back from the awkward, missed embrace 'Enjoy your party,' I said instead as brightly as I could. I wondered if Michael's grin was cheekier than I'd remembered but both boys scampered inside ignoring me. I waved good bye to the already closed door and put the nonsense out of my head; I'd more important things to worry about, such as what I would wear that evening.

'Oh my God,' I said out loud in frustration. I had by now at least six outfits on the bed, discarded like empty water bottles. I had tried on several sets of bras and knickers, at least one piece of foundation underwear and now was sweating hotly. I

knew exactly how I would dress if I was meeting Trish and Tom, but the thought of a date had made me rethink everything. Would he want to kiss me at the end of the night? Would he put his hand on my waist? If I wore Spanx, would he feel it? 'Oh my God,' I groaned out loud again.

Muttering through clenched teeth that it was just a date I climbed into my favourite short dress and leggings. No foundation underwear just in case. I had spent the previous hour de-foresting my body, applying creams, scrubbing at stubborn cellulite, painting my toenails, styling my hair and sucking in my belly. The finished product wasn't too bad I had to admit, so why did I feel so nervous? I really wished I'd seen a photograph of Firefox121 in advance. Stupidly, my hopes were oscillating like a ping pong ball. As I drove to the pub I had visions of Michael Fassbender alternating with Danny DeVito. Ironically neither thought gave me much comfort.

I'd told Trish at the last minute. It was best to be safe in case Firefox121 turned out to be an axe-wielding nutter, and I promised to ring Trish the minute I got home. 'What harm can happen?' I asked. 'We are meeting in a public place. I'm not drinking. He sounds nice. It's just two adults having a chat, that's all.'

Trish just wolf-whistled down the phone. It wasn't a good omen I felt.

Firefox121 was ten years older than claimed and at least two stone heavier. He did not have an athletic body unless you counted pie-eating a sport, and it was hard to confirm the blond hair colour claimed in his profile from the few strands that floated over his practically bald pate. He reminded me of Father Byrne except that he also had six children, another fact he had conveniently omitted in his profile.

There were so many reasons not to fancy him that I relaxed immediately. The nerves all went 'poof' and I listened with interest to his stories of his ex-wife, all sounding strangely familiar. I even found myself arguing the ex-wife's case on a couple of points much to his annoyance and I could sense him getting irate. Three Seven-Ups later, while he had three pints, I felt the leave-taking arrive and prepared to retreat with grace.

'Oh, you have the car,' said Roger. 'That's great. You can drop me home.'

My mouth opened and shut. It was as if he'd assumed the husband role and, even as I paused, I knew I was doomed. A short sharp 'No' would have done the trick but the pause hung me. 'That's great,' he said knocking back the last of his pint. 'But since you're driving, let's have one more.' Again a short sharp 'No' would have done the trick but his sheer audacity floored me. Three more pints later - I'd refused to imbibe any more sickly sweet drinks - Roger declared it a great night and grabbed his coat. 'I'm only over the road,' he said.

Over the road was not strictly accurate. Indeed, I wondered if accurate was a term he understood, let alone employed. Over several roads and twenty minutes

later, I pulled up beside a small row of shops. 'I'm above the bakery,' said Roger.

'The kids and ex are in the big house. I don't have much left over.'

I declined the offer of a nightcap, more Seven-Up, and parried a lunging attempt at a kiss. He must have known he'd used up his luck because his attempt to kiss me was half-hearted at best. 'Thank you for a lovely night, darling,' he said leaving the car and my life in a single, unsteady movement.

Chapter Three

'The trouble with men is that they are men,' said Trish. 'They don't *do* change. They need women to mind them and, if they lose their own, they are happy to move on to the next, regardless of who she is.'

I neither agreed nor disagreed. I felt flat. The effort of dating could be better spent cleaning the house, going to see a film or just watching *Made in Chelsea*. 'I don't think there are any suitable ones left. They all seem to be used up,' I sighed. 'Used up, bitter and saggy. Just like me,'

Trish held up her hand. 'Stop! You're a gorgeous creature. You've hardly a wrinkle on your face. Your figure is great and you are a fun person. What you need to do is take up a new hobby, go on a singles holiday or hire an escort!'

'I think the last option takes money. And I don't think the boys would appreciate my diverting funds for school trips to pay for sex.'

'I can see there might be an impediment to that. You need to be rich to buy men. Or...' a thoughtful look crossed Trish's face. 'Or you could be a MILF.'

'A what?'

'You know, a *Mummy I'd like to fuck*. There are loads of young men who would love to pair their energy with your experience. It's all the rage nowadays. Think of Demi Moore or Madonna.'

I could feel a look of horror passing over my face. 'Yes, and look at how their lives have turned out. I'm not that woman,' I said, 'I'm a separated woman in my forties with two boys and I'm never going to date again, let alone have sex.'

'That's the wrong approach,' said Trish. 'We need to adjust your thinking. It's time for a makeover.'

Which is how I came to be lying on the treatment table having my bits waxed. I'd refused the Vajazzling option but somehow was getting a Brazilian. My protests that I didn't need all my hair removed had been brushed aside by Trish and the very efficient beautician. 'Just a little landing strip,' the beautician said. 'It's very popular. Totally bare is going out of fashion. A small amount of hair is currently the fashion. It's easy to maintain too.'

I groaned again, a mixture of pain as the beautician tore away another strip of hair horribly close to my pink bits but also of sheer disbelief. 'Landing strips? Maintenance? Fashion statements down below? I couldn't decide if I sounded more like an aircraft carrier, a bijou garden or a lingerie model. 'Now turn over,' said the beautician, 'and hold your hand here.' I felt myself blush a deep red as the few rogue hairs around my anus were briskly removed. 'Now, you're ready for action,' she said. Oh dear Lord I thought. Action? There? Life was so much simpler when one was married and sex consigned to Saturday night and the strictly missionary position. What was I letting myself in for? Did everyone have action *there*?

Trish was not much help. 'Remember I'm married, Sweetie. Married people do things differently. Being single is a whole new country. And you're going to explore and report back!'

I squirmed on my chair. We were having a coffee afterwards and the new sensation down below was, I had to admit, different, pleasant and sort of free. 'But first we need a new look on the outside for you,' continued Trish. 'Hair, then make-up, then clothes.'

It was definitely a style. Before when I washed my hair, I tended to let it dry naturally. This was a style and would require tools to maintain it: a hairdryer and straightener and definitely a new brush. Mousse, hair gel and hairspray by the looks of things too. It did look good though. 'You look about thirty five now,' said Ian. He was tall, skinny and very gay. 'You look sexy too,' he added. 'Very have-able!'

I blushed for the second time that day, but I agreed. It did look good. I did look good.

The make-up department in Arnott's was impressive. Trish and I browsed the stands like tourists before stopping at the Benefit range. Then I was perched on a stool and had my skin analysed by a pretty blonde with a tool kit of brushes at her waist. My claims that I didn't really do make-up, just a touch of mascara, were firmly put to one side. In fact, I didn't realise there was so much to make-up. When had it got so complicated? I was given a lecture on exfoliating properly. 'That will get rid of your dead skin on your face, make you look younger and your skin

clearer,' I was told. Then there was primer and foundation and blusher and powder and brushes and eye-liner and shadow and mascara and finally a dusting of bronzer.

The bill for the make-up quite frankly shocked me. 'I've never spent so much on make-up before,' I said. I thought of Denis needing new trainers. That wasn't going to happen this month, at least not before I was paid. As if Trish could read my mind, she patted my arm. 'It's an investment,' she purred. 'In *you*. Because you're worth it!'

I drew the line at shopping for clothes in the same shop. Instead we detoured to TK Maxx. Trish fluttered around me presenting dresses and blouses like a professional shopper. Finally we settled on two outfits for me to try: an electric blue wraparound dress that gave me a nice cleavage and a slim waist, and a little black number, very short. 'You have the legs, so you gotta sweat your assets girl,' Trish murmured approvingly. 'Now all we need is the man!'

Chapter Four

'Aoife, can you come around now? I need your help.' My mother's voice sounded weak and tiny. It reminded me of a little bird. I frowned again. This was the second time this week. What had he done now?

I hurried around and found my mother in the kitchen trying to distract my dad. With my arrival, he stopped looking for his car keys and meekly went upstairs to get dressed, wrapping the dressing gown firmly around him. Mum waited until she heard him close the bedroom door before explaining what he had done. It transpired that he had driven to the shops to get his paper, naked. The Pakistani shop-keeper had managed to keep his cool and got dad, plus newspaper, back into his car in double quick time and then, leaving his flustered wife to man the shop, he'd driven dad home. Paper placed strategically on his lap. Mr Patel engaged dad in conversation, hoping he would not read the news until he got home. Mum thanked Mr Patel, wrapping dad in his dressing gown as he got out of the car. Fortunately his predilection for nakedness did not extend to footwear as his feet were firmly encased in his old leather slippers. 'He might have done himself a mischief,' Mr Patel had said. Mum had smiled weakly and offered to drive Mr Patel back, but he declined. He'd walk through the lanes and it would take only a few minutes on the return journey. 'I'm glad Trevor took the car really,' Mr Patel had observed. 'I'll enjoy the exercise, but I have to say it's a long walk without clothes.'

I drank a cup of tea with my mother. 'An alarm maybe? For when he leaves the house?' Mum shook her head. 'I can't imagine that working. The only pattern I can see is that he does it early in the morning. But this is the first time he has left the house with nothing on. Imagine if he had gone anywhere else, like the golf club?'

I groaned. 'Mum, you'll have to call the doctor. Maybe there is medication or something. Or is he allergic to anything? Is there some way of switching him out of it?. A pill or injection perhaps.'

'Who's ill?' said my father by the kitchen door and I jumped. I hadn't heard him coming down the stairs.

'How are you, Dad?' I said, looking at him closely.

'Fine, just fine.' He spotted the newspaper on the table. 'Oh, you brought me the paper - how kind, Aoife. I was just going to get it myself.'

'Well, I was passing the newsagents,' I said looking at my mother. We both realised that he hadn't a clue that he had been out gallivanting in the nip that morning, much less that he had brought the paper home himself.

My father picked up it up and went on through to the living room. 'Your hair is nice too love,' he said as he went. 'Makes you look younger. Fresher.'

Mum looked at me now too. 'Sorry dear, I didn't notice in all the commotion. It is nice. Suits you.'

I blushed thinking of the man-hunt plan. 'Yeah, Trish introduced me to her hairdresser. A nice guy called Ian. A new pair of hands makes all the difference.'

I prepared to leave. I put my cup in the sink and turned back to my mother.

'You know, Mum, maybe get the papers delivered. That might stop the early morning roaming.'

Chapter Five

'Mammy where are my shorts?'

Andrew's question was less of a request than a wail. Fridays were always chaotic. Rugby training, end of the week, sometimes not enough sandwich fillings left and a dearth of matching socks and clean shorts. I picked up the missing shorts from the utility room and waved them in front of Andrew.

'Come on, we're going to be late,' I said. Denis was already packing his school bag in the hall. He operated on the quiet principle. He rarely raised his voice, was consistently on time and just got on with it. Though when Paul left he had shouted that day. He almost hit his father and had not spoken to him since. I'd had tried talking to him without success. 'He's left us all,' was his final take on the subject. Time might help but the four years since had not changed his opinion. It was hard to deal with passive resistance I thought.

The hard part for me was not the end of the marriage but my failed attempt at reconciliationsex, three months into the initial separation. My skin crawled every time I thought of our final sex act. It was less lovemaking than prostitution and it killed me that I thought that that marital sex might put a sticking plaster over our relationship. In the space of that one night, Paul had killed any good feelings I may have held for him.

As for the marriage itself, it was a relief that Paul had called time on it. It had become a limp rag of a thing. There were only familiar patterns and routines that disguised themselves as a marriage. It was only the outer cloak, the mask. No, Paul walking out had been a really positive thing. Once something is finished - a party, a dance, a marriage - it is best walked away from very quickly. No point in eking out an existence or a half-life

Aside from the two boys, we had little in common. Then came the double whammy when I'd discovered that he had managed to set up a second home in the final year of our marriage. Surprised only as I didn't know how he could have maintained the two lives separately. The mousey little thing who was his girlfriend seemed a bad swap. I could genuinely say that I was envious of nothing. Strange that a man might leave his wife of fourteen years for a woman so lacking in all distinction, bar that of age of course. The only time such a lack can be perceived of as an advantage it would appear. My distinction was rapidly increasing and it wasn't helping me at all.

However, while the end of the marriage was to be welcomed, setting up the new life proved so much more difficult. The fact that Denis refused to talk to or see his father was one factor. It meant that Andrew also felt awkward and more or less copied his brother. In turn, this backfired on me as neither spent much or indeed any time with their father. I'd heard stories of separated women having the time of their lives. Every weekend or so, the joint children were packed off to their rehoused fathers and the wives could entertain at home, singly or with parties. The rumour mill spoke of weekends where the empty nests turned into love nests as

new lovers were entertained with gay abandon. Not on my watch. Not on my street. I had half hoped I might go back and rediscover myself once the dust had settled, but being a full time mother to two teenage boys with a full time job left very little time for navel gazing. Taking up Pilates had been my one concession to the new me. That and the makeover that Trish had organised at the weekend. Not much to show for four years I thought wryly. Even a mousey partner sounded nice now.

‘Absolutely not!’ said Trish. ‘You didn’t go through all that shit to settle for second best. We are going to find you a really nice guy with biceps, a six pack and a cheeky grin. Fear not!’

The house-warming was only getting going when I arrived with Trish and Tom. Our hosts were my new hairdresser Ian and his young beau. Both as gay as lords, they’d moved into a quiet estate on the outskirts of Clontarf and were causing all sorts of scandal in the quiet suburban landscape. ‘It’s just like *Desperate Housewives*,’ Trish had observed before. ‘And I bet the party will be mad. Come for the craic.’

I wondered if my new makeover might be wasted on this type of party but my friend waved aside my concerns. ‘This is just the right type of party for you to attend. It’s not boring couple-land and I’m sure there will be straight men there too. After all they invited Tom and me. It will be an adventure.’

Denis had suggested something similar when I'd left for the party. 'You look nice, Ma,' he said, raising his eyebrows. Denis was minding Andrew but had banished him to the games room. 'I'm watching the match in here,' he said. Andrew had huffed a bit, but knew he was on a hiding to nothing.

'Thanks,' I answered. I felt a bit self-conscious in my new clothes, hair and make-up. I felt good but obvious, as if there were a big neon sign flashing above my head with 'Available' written in bright orange.

Three drinks along and I'd begun to relax. Aside from Trish, Tom and Ian, I didn't know anyone, and I'd stayed close to Trish at the start. There was a small crowd of about twenty people and they all seemed to know each other. I had met a couple of very camp men and at least one woman who I swore was a lesbian, but I was enjoying myself as they were a sociable bunch. Returning from the kitchen with fresh ciders for Trish and me, I was greeted by my host, Ian. 'Come and mingle out here Aoife, show off the new style' he called, steering me by the shoulders out to the second living area, which would have been the dining room if there had been a table in it. Instead there were two large speakers and a man in earphones selecting the tracks. The music was very loud. The man, Chris, a DJ, shook my hand. 'Sadly this is my career,' he joked, 'but not for house parties. I dj on the islands.' The music was loud enough for me to nod and not have to ask which islands. Probably not the Aran Islands given Chris's deep tan I thought. He smiled and introduced me to Sam. 'We're both here for a holiday, a month chilling out,' he said.

Sam was short and friendly. He began asking me about my job - IT, my life - quiet, my partner - none, kids - two. During the polite inquisition I was trying to figure out if Sam was gay. At one point he mentioned a girlfriend but then that could just be a figure of speech. Chris kept returning at intervals and checking in on us both. 'Sam keeping your drink fresh?' he asked. I turned to look at him directly. He was very handsome in a cheeky chappie way. I liked his close cropped hair and the way he looked at me. I felt sexy and vulnerable at the same time. He had to be straight. I was enjoying his company and the attention both men were giving me. *This is what it is like to be single, I suddenly thought. It's just fun.*

Dancing later with Trish, she said the same thing. 'Yes, and I see you are enjoying Chris. He's hot, but just so you know he is a bit of a player. Oh, and about ten years younger than you!'

'No way,' I laughed. I looked over at Chris. Hot and young - what a dreadful combination - and yet how very, very attractive.

Later on I found myself talking with Chris and a few others in the conservatory; not by accident exactly but by innocent design, on whose part I wasn't sure. Ignoring the others slightly, we paired in conversation: 'Are you finished doing the music?' I asked.

'Yeah. Sam decided to play some trance shit and I'm not into that.'

'What are you into?'

'Talking to a beautiful woman towards the end of the night and hoping she might agree to take a walk with me.'

'It's a bit late and a bit cold,' I said laughing. 'We're not in the islands now!' I had learnt during my own return inquisition of Sam that they based the summer months in Mykonos. I was dying to google it when I got home. Hedonistic and heady I reckoned. Four ciders and I could do anything, imagine anything, be anything. I already saw myself dancing in a tiny beach bar, barefoot and seductive.

Chris smiled as if he could read my mind. 'Would you meet for a drink another time then?'

'I might.'

'You know I'm going over to Galway at the end of the week. I'm staying in a friend's house. It's a big country pile but he is away for the week and he said I could house sit. Why don't you come and join me. You can be lady of the manor for a few days.'

I opened my mouth. I was about to say I couldn't. Then I stopped. Why not? I was a single woman of sound mind and body. Why shouldn't I go away for a few nights? 'I'll think about it,' I said finally. A few seconds later: 'Actually, I've thought about it. Yes, I'll go.'

'I'd better have your number then,' Chris said. 'In case you change your mind!'

'Oh, I never change my mind,' I said.

'Fuck, what have I agreed to?!' I looked at Trish with wild eyes in the back of the taxi. Tom was in the front chatting away to the driver.

'Relax, it's a whole week away and who knows what will happen in between.'

I slumped back. I'd enjoyed the night hugely. I had flirted like mad with both Sam and Chris and I'd had more than my customary four ciders. I was officially tipsy. And I'd tripped the light fantastic without making a holy show of myself. Well, if I had, I didn't care. I'd strutted my stuff with aplomb.

'You're welcome love,' said Tom as he dropped me off at my house. 'Strange dance style though. Very,' and he paused. 'Very beach-like. Not like you at all! But looking good I have to say,' he added quickly.

Thank the Lord for Sunday I thought as I stretched in the bed. Sunday and no soccer training. The league was over and so Andrew did not need to be ferried anywhere. Denis was going to meet friends but he was cycling so again I did not need to move from my bed. Luxury! I felt slightly hung over - only a mild tiredness but the empty pint glass that had contained water beside my bed had done the trick. It was good to have little or nothing to do for the morning. I decided I would

make a nice roast dinner for later when Denis was back. I had a small pork joint in the fridge. That would go down well. I was rolling over preparing to go back to sleep again when my phone buzzed on the bedside. Had I left on the alarm? No. An unknown number signalled a text. A little frisson of excitement pulsed through me. I sat up in the bed and looked intently at the phone. I clicked the message and it opened. *Hi sexy, it's Chris here.*

I dropped the phone. Then I picked it up, almost nonchalantly, as if I were being watched. I looked at the text again. I bit my lip. In a delaying tactic, I saved the number as 'Chris' and not knowing his surname inserted 'Sex God' into the second field. What to reply? If in doubt, go for the simple path. *Hello Chris. It's Aoife.* I hit send. Fuck. Why did I write *It's Aoife*? Was I implying that he might be sending a number of good morning sexy texts?

Seconds later ping and another text. This time it read *Enjoyed meeting you last night sexy lady.*

I smiled. *Me too. It was fun!*

So what you doing now?

Nothing. I'm in the bed.

Maybe I could join you?

Not sure my children would approve! I stopped. Feck. I didn't want to come over all 'mumsy', but nor did I want to stray onto shaky ground. Thinking to balance my last text I quickly typed *You're very cheeky this morning!*

I'm always cheeky in the morning came the quick reply.

I gulped. This was faster than I wanted. Well, maybe because Chris was the first man I'd wanted to kiss in a long time I was getting flustered. It was also early on a Sunday morning and I was now tragically sober. I took a deep breath.

I like cheeky I replied. May as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, or was that like a lamb to the slaughter? I wasn't sure.

'The problem is, well the problem is just... sex,' I finished lamely. Chris and I had been exchanging some pretty fruity texts over the past two days. If I went to Galway, then there was no doubt that consensual adult behaviour would take place. 'But only after dark and with plenty of alcoholic lubrication. God, did I really say that?' I blurted out. 'He's about ten years younger too. I'll be all old and wrinkled by comparison.'

'By comparison to what?' asked Trish. 'Stop being so hard on yourself. It's not a blind date. You have met. He's attracted to you and you to him. Simple!'

That night Chris called. He was helping clean out the old stables at the house and it was a tough job. There were endless wheelbarrows of ancient horse dung to be

moved; the bedding was almost four feet deep and well compacted, and piled on top were rubbish, wood and broken machinery. The organic refuse was carted out to a dung-heap, the wood for burning and the old metal and farm equipment was to be stacked in a farm dump. As he spoke, I had images of Chris, tanned and shirtless, sweating slightly as his muscles rippled in the sunshine. The Diet Coke advert sprung to mind and I saw him cool his brow with a chilled can. When we'd danced at the party, I'd had put my hand on his belly. There was some joke about six packs and I remembered how firm his stomach had felt. At the time, I'd pulled my hand back quickly as if scalded. I rubbed my fingers and remembered again. His soft voice continued, 'I'm looking forward to taking a break with you Aoife,'

'We could get up to some fun.' His voice trailed away.

'Yes, there are some lovely walks in that neck of the woods,' I squeaked.

'And I'm sure there is a pilgrim's trail there too. You know, to follow churches in the area.'

'I wasn't really thinking of going on walks,' Chris said laughing. 'Unless you count maybe a stroll on the beach before dinner. Or, before breakfast.'

I could feel an unfamiliar ache in my lower belly. I was genuinely flirting with this gorgeous man. He had already said he wanted to kiss me and had been very unambiguous about where the kissing might lead or indeed what he might find to kiss. I squeezed my legs together. 'Oh you're an early bird,' I said. 'So am I!' Of course I realised it was more by habit than choice. It was rare for me not to have multiple chores to complete before leaving for work in the morning.

Chris laughed his earthy chuckle again. 'So you're up for catching the worm then!'

I blushed at my end of the phone. God it was like being a teenager again. All these innuendoes. The moment the thought of his worm made me sneeze and a little drop of moisture hit my panties. The rest of the conversation was lost in a frantic bid to remove my jeans and peer at my panties. Was I wet or was that urine? God, this was worse than being a teenager. I never worried about incontinence as a teenager. 'What did you say?' I gasped into the receiver.

'So when are you coming over -Friday night or Saturday morning?' said Chris.

'Friday, definitely Friday!' I said.

'Wouldn't it be easier to head off on Saturday morning? Take it easy,' Trish suggested.

'No, I want to get the sex bit over with as soon as I can. Or not. I just need to get past it,' I suddenly stopped. 'Oh my God.'

'What's the matter? Have you your period or something?'

'No. It's the worm.'

'The worm?'

'His penis.'

'His penis? What on earth about his penis? Is it very small like a worm?'

'No, no, it's just...' I covered my face with my hands. Through the muffled hands I said, 'Paul had a circumcised penis. What if Chris doesn't?'

'He probably doesn't but so what?'

'What does an uncircumcised penis look like? When erect I mean?' I took down my hands and held them out, palms upward, supplicatory. 'What happens to the skin bit? I don't know. I haven't seen one...'

Trish started to laugh and then taking a look at my panic-stricken face stopped. 'Ok, biology lesson number one. When a man is uncircumcised and flaccid, there is a hood of skin over the top. When wanking, or masturbating, moving the hood of skin over the top is very pleasurable and, as he grows erect, the head emerges from the skin - the familiar bit that you know. The one-eyed snake that we all love!!'

'Is Tom circumcised?'

'Yes, he got the old snip as a kid. Family tradition I understand, another weird Cauley family trait.'

'So how do you know what *un*-circumcised looks like?'

'Tom wasn't my first Aoife. There were a number of rather charming fumbblings and sexual encounters before I met him'

'To be honest, I don't recall being on first-name terms with many of my boyfriend's penises. And I don't like to think about Paul's at all.' I shuddered involuntarily.

'Well, don't! That is definitely ancient history.'

Brian had suggested The Pimpot for Friday lunch, the month-end catch-up for the office but I said I couldn't go. 'Hot date?' he leered at me.

'Oh, for God's sake give it a rest,' I snapped. My reason for not going was actually to do with my proposed jaunt to Galway that night. During the week, despite any number of keen texts – only reply, don't initiate, I told myself strictly – and another saucy phone conversation, I was not sleeping well. I'd picked out a killer dress for the evening and my favourite jeans and top for Saturday. I was hoping that come Saturday I would be relaxed enough to wear the jeans without sucking in my belly. It was very hard to talk with all those muscles engaged tautly. Hard to talk? Hard to breathe if the truth be told but the jeans were nice. Soft old denim that made my bum look good. And new fancy flip-flops that made me feel young. I just needed something borrowed and something blue. A garter could be blue; it had been for my wedding.

A garter! All I had was lingerie from my marriage and I couldn't wear that under my dress. I balked at the thought of wearing my black lace lingerie set with the red roses. I had of course worn it since the separation when going out. Old habits die hard and while I may have replaced the lacy underwear of my marriage with bright funky cotton knickers and bras, sometimes a littler decorum was required in the underwear department. Christmas parties, funerals and the very

odd wedding seemed to call for some more adult garments. But no way would I wear underwear that I had worn for my ex-husband for a new man. I paused. This way could lead to an expensive lingerie-buying habit if things went according to plan. Anyway, the operation today was to run into shops at lunch and buy something new, saucy and very sexy.

‘No, Brian, I have to run an errand for my mother’ I lied with a straight face. If Brian noticed, he didn’t say. ‘Suit yourself Aoife,’ he replied and went off to the coffee station.

‘That poor man has the hots for you,’ Sarah laughed, a little unkindly. She worked in sales and could be sharp. It was less the fact that she was slagging Brian, but more the fact that she seemed to resent the fact that he might fancy me. Sarah with her hair extensions, false nails and booty skirts resented the fact that any man might fancy anyone other herself I thought bitchily. ‘I doubt it,’ I replied firmly. ‘Enjoy the lunch and I’ll see you later.’

Red too saucy, pink too girly, black safe but maybe boring. Stockings or stay-ups? What about that nice bright green thong, luminous and fun. Mad but fun. Oh, I think I might get that one. It says something. I’m a real woman who is sexy and I know it. It’s got attitude! My thoughts tumbled as I looked at the different bras and knickers. French knickers or thongs, briefs or itsy bitsy teeny weeny? In the end I compromised. I’m not a female Attila the Hun so there is no point wearing *green*

light lingerie I decided. The black set with purple lacing was very pretty. French knickers are very forgiving too I thought and in a moment of daring bought a pair of seamed stay-ups.

Sarah was on the phone when I got back. 'Bad news,' she mouthed awkwardly. 'What?' I asked. After a brief conversation, Sarah hung up. 'Our Friday lunch was a warm up for pay-cuts. The budget didn't even stretch to dessert and that was our last company lunch too for a while.'

Fuck. I sank back into my chair. I could not afford a pay cut. Things were tight enough. 'What else?'

'There may be some redundancies. Last in, first out.'

I breathed a sigh of relief. I had been employee number ten and was well up the pecking order in that case. And support was always needed. Sarah, guessing the source of my relief said: 'They are talking about out-sourcing some functions, offshoring them. Support was mentioned. India and all that.'

Brian was not available that afternoon. He was holed up with management and accountants. I wondered when it had all got so bad. I'd been so busy fixing problems, sorting out connections and website domains and answering silly, silly questions that I hadn't noticed the growing signs. Support was a busy station: a mixture of bulletin boards, email and telephone work and I liked it. Sometimes the customers could be rude but that was down to a lack of knowledge and frustration. I knew that. Once I got speaking with the customer I could normally make them happy, sort out the niggles and send them on their way. It was a seasonal thing and

I rarely spoke with the same customer more than once a year when they renewed their hosting or perhaps changed their digital setups. But had sales slowed? The leader board showed the company growing at a steady pace. The largest wholly owned independent Irish hosting company was the company's claim to fame and things had seemed good. Perhaps it was the same old problem with product prices falling and operational costs rising, although I hadn't had a pay rise since the separation and I knew I wasn't alone.

The afternoon passed quickly but for all the wrong reasons. Customers were contrary as if they knew I was under pressure, or perhaps I was contrary and was short with them. Either way, there were some uncustomary peevish exchanges between myself and Mr Jones of Barrows and then Ms Flood of Wilkies and Co, with even Sarah raising her eyebrows at one stage. At the same time, the lingerie bag was humming by my feet, sending electric tingles up my legs every time I looked down at it. My brain was screaming body polish, paint my toenails, buff my bum, lather my nice cream all over, pluck my eyebrows, shave, shave and then shave around my nice waxed bits. Oh my God, my nice waxed bits. 'Well, just do it again,' I said crossly into the phone at a surprised customer who had absolutely no idea about my nice waxed bits.

Denis opened the door when I got home. 'You're early, Ma. Still going to head out to Deirdre's tonight?'

How easily we learn to deceive I thought. I'd discussed this at length with Trish since I'd accepted the invitation to Galway. There was no way I was telling

the boys about Chris unless I had to. He was only in Ireland for the month. He was a DJ in Greece for God's sake. What normal mother was going to go on a sex date with such a man? Certainly, no one of my age. Then I giggled. 'That's the ticket,' said Trish. 'You're doing this for the girls. Taking one for the girls.'

I giggled again. 'I was never hot enough to land a DJ in my youth,' I sighed. 'Age has some benefits.' And a frown clouded my face. 'At least when I get past the sex, then I'll know if age has benefits.'

'You make sex sound like a chore,' Trish laughed. 'Here you are going on a smoking hot weekend with a man who looks like an Adonis and who is lusting after you. I wish my chores were as sexy!' We'd agreed at that point and hung up laughing.

Now, instead of going back into the kitchen, Denis handed me an envelope. 'I had to sign for it,' he said. 'Is it important?'

Impatiently, I opened the envelope. The list of body treatments had grown in my head on the way home. I needed to start now if I was going to get to Galway this side of Christmas. And then I stopped. Then my world stopped. In the envelope were legal papers. Paul was divorcing me and was looking for a full legal separation and re visitation of all financial arrangements.

A noise, half-sob, half-laugh, broke out of me. Denis said, 'Ma?' before the flood gates of four years of lousy, inconclusive living burst open and I howled in pain and anger. 'Why now? Why now?' I keened. Denis looked genuinely upset. 'Ma,' he said again and tried to hug me.

'I'm not going to Galway,' I said through noisy sobs. 'I'm not.'

'Okay,' said Denis.

'Not okay,' said Trish, who'd rushed over to my house like an avenging angel when she heard. 'What the fuck are you doing? Do not let Paul take one more thing away from you. You have always been there, for the kids, taking everything on the chin. Don't let this spineless bastard do this to you.'

'Why didn't he ring? We could have discussed everything,' I sobbed. 'This is too important to be dealt with by a fucking solicitor's letter. This is wrong.'

'So fucking wrong. Dry your tears. You are going to fucking Galway if I have to drive you there myself.'

'No way,' I said. 'Look at me. I'm a wreck and in no mood. It's a fiasco. Where did I get the idea that I could shag a DJ. Me? I'm just a fucking separated mother with two kids and a job in limbo. Where the fuck did I get the idea I could be special?'

Trish looked at me. I did look a sight. My eyes were puffy and my mouth was crammed into an uncertain line, ready for tears again. 'I know. Tell Chris you had a family emergency and you'll come tomorrow, refreshed and well.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'And then that means no sex tonight. OMG the pressure.' Despite the situation, I laughed. 'My separation papers come through unannounced, my job is on the line and all I can think of is that I might not get laid tonight. After four years, you'd think I'd have something more profound to remember this day by.'

Chris was a little cold on the call. But he understood that my family commitment came first and he said he looked forward to seeing me the next day. 'What time?' he asked. 'By lunch. I'll be there by lunch.'

Chapter Six

Toothbrush? Check. Make-up? Check. Lingerie? Check. Well actually I was wearing it. After planning meticulously for the weekend starting on the Friday, I wasn't sure how to dress for the date starting on the Saturday lunchtime instead. So I compromised. I wore my jeans and blouse, with my new lingerie as well. At least I was prepared for all eventualities.

I popped into Mum and Dad on the way. I told them I was meeting an old school chum in Galway. Things were quiet at home. I wondered if it were the moon. Dad's turns were bunched together in groups once a month. Maybe there was a pill he could take. Or herbs. I would look into it when I returned. Right now, I had much more important things on my mind. Like sex.

I did broach the subject of the registered letter and Paul's bombshell. Both parents were aghast. 'And to revisit the maintenance? It's not as though he's going to up the support. Does he realise the daily costs that children incur. It's never simple.'

Dad looked stoical. 'We won't know until we get talking. Maybe he is looking at Denis. Maybe he thinks he doesn't need to support him when he finishes school?'

'As long as the boys are in full time education, Paul is responsible, no matter what his new woman says. Maybe they are planning a family or getting married.'

Dear Lord, just what we need, what the boys need.’ Mum shook her head. ‘Paul is just so selfish. He has little or no commitments, rarely sees the boys and leaves all the parenting to you. No wonder you have no time to find a companion. No wonder you’re lonely.’

I blushed. I wasn’t sure my mother would approve of the companionship I was going to enjoy today. Chris might be a sex god but he didn’t strike even me as companion material. Red hot sex yes; companion no. I closed my mind to that thought again. My father was now talking about solicitors. ‘Paul is tricky, so it’s important that we get a solid solicitor. There’s that chap, O’Brien? He’s the top dog in family law; definitely the best in his field. I’ll make some enquiries on Monday.’

I put the music up loud, my sunnies on and opened the sunroof. A weak sun peeped out and inside the car it felt warm. I felt young and carefree. At the traffic lights, I looked in the mirror, reapplied my lip gloss and smiled. A car horn woke me up as I realised the lights had changed, but the man hooting was also smiling. It was that kind of a morning.

A three-hour drive is a long time. Driving throughout the morning my initial euphoria began to pale. The weather changed too, as if reflecting my shifting mood, and clouds gathered rendering it positively dark as I approached the outskirts of Galway. The pleasant thoughts of lunch on a terrace in sunshine were obliterated by a sudden downpour. My stomach was starting to knot and the nearer I got to

my destination, the more I aged. God at this rate, I was going to be an old age pensioner when I arrived. I'd left Dublin a teenager but had been squeezed through an unkind inverse time machine, leaving me sad, old and tired. What had I been thinking? Back to the past in one car journey? As I turned into the village and the final directions to the house, I seriously contemplated going home. I had every excuse. Did I really want this hassle? My children needed me.

My phone rang. It was Chris. 'Are you lost?'

Yes. That would be a fair description of where I was. *Utterly lost. Abandoned.*

Ravaged. It was only an hour since I'd arrived and already I, Aoife Brennan, had had sex, twice. I had not needed alcohol, dark lights or dutch courage. I, Aoife Brennan, had had sex twice with sex god Chris, a man at least ten years my junior with a six pack and a dark tan that only faded at the base of his stomach. And his penis. I clamped my hand to my mouth. I had never seen such a thing of beauty. He had placed it inside my pussy and banged me like a porn star.

It all began when...I felt as though I was telling it to the judge. 'Aoife Brennan, forty two, did you knowingly have carnal knowledge with a young sex god without the benefit of alcohol and in daylight? Did you undress in front of him, in daylight? Did you have carnal relations not only on the sofa, but on the kitchen table? In broad daylight?'

My imagined judge was getting hot around the collar at this stage. And so he might I thought. Especially if he'd looked at the video footage.

'Are you lost?' Chris had asked and in that moment I decided to stay. 'No, I'm just here,' I replied and shortly turned into the long drive.

Headley House was impressive. A long straight avenue led to the main house. It was more like a hotel with a vast portico in the middle and two curving wings to each side. Unsure where to go, I parked out front. I half-expected a butler to emerge from the huge front door, in uniform, and ask to take my luggage. Instead, I opened the car door and got out, a little stiff and very, very nervous.

'Hello.' Chris was standing at small door to the right. 'The main door is stuck, locked and the key is missing but that's okay since no one uses the front door in the country.' He smiled at me, a half-smile that lit up his eyes and did something dark and warm to my belly.

'Only opened for weddings,' I said. 'Or funerals.'

'Time enough then.' He smiled again. 'Welcome to my humble abode!'

Chris took my bag and led me through a back hall to the kitchen. 'I can give you the grand tour later,' he said, 'but I expect you'd like a drink first. Was the drive okay?'

I momentarily considered asking for a double whiskey but Chris had already reached for the kettle. It seemed tea, not alcohol, was on offer. 'Now what was the family emergency,' he asked.

I drew in my breath. 'Oh, it's a long story,' I said. 'A combination of things, but my job may be under threat and then my ex decided to serve divorce papers on me without warning. He hadn't told me and is now looking to revise our financial arrangements. He's never there for the kids, only pays a minimum of maintenance and never does the ordinary, everyday things for them - you know, lifts, washing, fixing things, adjudicating their disputes.' My voice trailed off and to my horror I felt a welling of tears. Oh dear God no. But yes, my eyes filled up and two big drops spilled over and down my cheeks.

Chris took two paces over to where I stood. He pulled me into his arms and I buried my face in his shoulder. 'Poor babe,' he said, stroking my hair, 'you've had it rough.' He continued stroking my hair and I felt his lips brush against my temple. A mixture of emotions coursed through me. The original upset seemed secondary, now that I'd told Chris I didn't want to cry anymore. Instead I was just enjoying being held. It was a long time since a man had held me. It felt right. I half-hoped we could stay this way for a long time. Maybe for the weekend. I didn't feel the need to talk. We could just embrace for the day. It would make up for the years of loneliness. A hug was a lovely thing. I buried my face deeper into his shoulder and smelt the warm smell of him.

Chris said. 'Are you going to stay there all day? You've got to come up for air!'

I laughed nervously and leant back. Chris was looking at me intently. Our faces were very close. I felt rather than saw my eyes lose focus. Blinking I glanced

from eye to eye, every detail on his face blurry and yet vivid. My breathing was getting loud. I wanted to blow my nose. I wanted to go back into that buried state, to hide from Chris. I could see desire cloud his eyes, the lids half-hooded, and his smile widened. Again my stomach flipped and I held my breath now. Slowly, slowly, Chris bent his head to me and our lips touched. He stayed close and kissed me again, softly. I wanted to gasp. I had to breathe. I couldn't remember how to kiss and breathe at the same time. A funny noise escaped my lips and made me smile nervously. Chris did not appear to notice and continued kissing me and nibbling at my lip. He shifted his weight slightly and kissed me a little harder. His tongue slipped in and I marvelled at its shape and taste and found myself sucking it and kissing and biting his lip back. Oh this felt good. Before, I could have spent the day in a hug; now I wanted to spend the day kissing, like teenagers did.

Only we were not teenagers. Chris's hands began to rub my back through my blouse. He trailed a series of kisses down my neck and under my hairline, his hands pulled up my blouse and began to massage my bare back. I gasped and arched my back, sucking in my belly and started exploring with my hands, rubbing my fingers up and down his back, feeling the slim smooth contours of his muscles. Chris stepped back and in a single move pulled off his jumper. He was wearing a Hollister tee-shirt. I briefly thought of my boys and how Denis wanted one for his birthday. Chris reached for the edges of my blouse. He drew it over my head and I felt a shiver ran through me, cold or nerves I wasn't sure. I was getting naked with Chris and I was terrified. I wanted to go back to the kissing with clothes. As if guessing my reaction, Chris put his hands on my hips and drew me into him. He

kissed me again and then pulled back. He looked at me, looked at my breasts in their new bra. Oh thank the lord for the lingerie I thought.

'You have beautiful breasts,' Chris said touching my right one. He stroked it before reaching behind and undoing the clasp of my bra with one hand. I shrugged out of it. Chris reached down and began kissing, then sucking, my nipple. Oh my God. His hand stroked the other one, 'very beautiful,' he said. I could feel my stomach contract. I felt wet. I felt beautiful. I felt wanted. Chris squeezed my breasts and tugged harder. I began to moan. When had I last felt like this? When had I been touched like this? Never, I thought.

Now Chris was pulling at my jeans. He undid the button and zip and peeled them down my legs. God, this man was a clothes-removing expert. My French knickers proved no obstacle either. I was naked. I felt like Eve. I wanted to hide myself, to cover my modesty. Chris smiled again. He put his hand between my legs. His finger stroked me. 'You are very wet,' he said and knelt in front of me. Still rubbing with one finger, his other hand pushed my legs apart and then held my lips open. 'You are beautiful. Your pussy is very beautiful.' And he leant in and kissed me, pushing his tongue over my clitoris, lapping it as a cat might.

I looked for something to hold on to, to keep my balance. The kitchen table was behind me and I half-leant into it, opening my legs still further. Chris was licking me hard now, his tongue circling my clitoris and sucking at it. With his other hand, he pushed a finger into me, then a second and began rhythmically moving them in and out. I moaned and bucked a little. I could feel my excitement

rising. Maybe we could stay in this position all day. I reached out a hand and held his hair. I looked down at Chris and felt a surge of pleasure rise through me. I fondled one of my own breasts, pulling sharply at the nipple. Would I come? I didn't know. Pleasure spilled over my body in little waves, tugging in time with his sucking.

'You are so wet,' said Chris again and he stood up. He took off his tee-shirt and stepped out of his jeans. He was not wearing any underwear. I rested against the table. I was still holding my breast in one hand but now my attention was on his cock. It stood up proudly. It must have been eight inches. It was magnificent. All I wanted to do was hold it.

Chris looked at me. He moved in closer and holding his cock he rubbed it around my pussy. Up and down and then he pushed it in a little. Then back out and round my pussy again. He grabbed my hips and lifted me easily so I was sitting on the edge of the table. I reached back and balanced my body with my hands. Now Chris came in close again and pushed his hard cock in further. Just an inch. I looked down. It was a luscious sight. His long thick cock disappearing into my pussy. I wiggled my bottom and he pushed in some more. Then in a swift moment, he thrust it all the way in. I gasped. Chris bent over, bit my nipple and rammed his cock into my pussy like a jack hammer. I cried out loud; it hurt, it was pleasure, it seemed to cut me in half. With one hand I clasped Chris around his shoulder and he moved from my nipple to my mouth, kissing me in rasping jagged breaths. Maybe we could stay like *this* forever I thought as I greedily kissed him back, biting his lip and tightening my grasp on his shoulders. Chris pounded and

pounded. I began to feel dizzy. Just as I was beginning to feel tired, to feel well and truly fucked, Chris gasped and pulled out, before shooting a vast amount of cum across my belly and tits.

‘God that was amazing,’ he gasped, panting into my neck. He looked down. ‘Hmmm, you made me cum a lot,’ he said and he traced a finger across my belly. He put his finger to my mouth. ‘You like?’ he asked. I liked. I licked his finger. ‘Next time, I’ll make you cum too,’ he said.

What I didn’t realise was that the next time was only minutes away. I shivered and Chris glanced around the room before spotting a rug draped over a chair. ‘Here,’ he said and put it around my shoulders. ‘I’ll make you that drink.’ I felt cold and naked again now we were not kissing. I pulled the tartan rug around me and curled up on the sofa under the old-fashioned kitchen window. I also felt exhilarated. I watched Chris make a pot of tea with the same level of interest normally reserved for the latest episode of *Desperate Housewives*. His body was lean and muscled and darkly tanned. The beauty of it left me speechless. His ease of being naked was also wonderful. Where had I lost that ability? Was it age, children or an unhappy marriage? I remembered Chris had called me beautiful at least three times while lovemaking. I had not been called beautiful in a long time. Truly I had not felt beautiful in a long time. Shyness covered me again like a cloak but my body was glowing. My lingerie littered the kitchen floor, its performance brief yet satisfying. I felt utterly wanton and fabulous. I was having feelings inside and out that I had not experienced in what seemed like forever.

Chris padded over to me with two mugs of tea. I did my utmost not to stare at his belly, the dark hairs swirling around his now flaccid penis. His lean thighs and long legs were equally compelling. Instead I smiled brightly and fixed my gaze on the mug of tea. 'Perfect,' I murmured, taking a sip of the hot liquid. It gave me something to do and something to look at. It crossed my mind that I still didn't know if Chris was circumcised. I dared't glance once more. When I finally looked up again at Chris, he was watching me and smiling. I blushed and looked away. 'This is some house,' I said.

'And you are some woman,' he replied, taking my barely touched mug and putting both back on the table. I looked at his fully erect penis. How had that happened? 'See the effect you have on me,' he said. 'But this time is for you.'

Chris opened the tartan rug and spread it back over the sofa. Although he had already seen my body and indeed had kissed and licked most parts of it, I felt a rush of shyness and half-covered myself with my hands. Chris began by kissing my face again, little kisses that touched me lightly. He kissed my eyes, one by one, and I closed them. 'Yes, just relax,' he said gently, kissing my eyes again. Somehow, I felt less naked and more excited with my eyes closed. My arms relaxed and I stretched back. All the time Chris rained a pattern of kisses down my neck, while his hands stroked my arms and my thighs in gentle circles and light touches. Everywhere he touched felt alive and shivers ran through my body. He kissed the base of my throat and I felt his fingers tickle my nipples. Currents of desire flashed through my body. He teased my left nipple with his fingers and then his mouth descended on the right. At first his tongue traced a wet circle around the nipple. In

the cool kitchen air, it tightened and he blew on it, making it harder. Then his mouth engulfed it and sucked hard, his teeth nipping at the nipple. I moaned. I could feel my body start to tighten under his light pressure.

He moved to my left nipple and bit it gently. I arched my body. I was very wet and I wanted him to touch me between my legs. I could feel his erection against my leg. I wanted to touch him too. I opened my eyes but by now he had moved down and was blowing warm draughts of air on my belly. I closed my eyes again and breathed out through my mouth. My hands found my erect nipples and pulled at them. Chris placed his hands on my inner thighs and pushed my legs wider. He fondled my thighs and blew on my pussy. Just when I thought I could stand it no longer and had serious notions of pushing his head and tongue into me, I felt his tongue on my clitoris. He circled it and blew hot currents of air over it. Then he sucked it pulling it up. He inserted a finger into my pussy. 'Mmmm you're wet Aoife,' he said. He sucked and licked my clitoris, pushing two fingers in now. Firmly in and out, licking and sucking, flicking my bean. I could feel my stomach start to contract. I pulled harder at my nipples and put my other hand on my lower belly, pushing down as my hips bucked up. I was so wet, my pussy made loud slurping noises as he finger-fucked me. Harder now, but his tongue kept on the same firm pressure and I could feel the swelling feeling in my belly. I scrunched my eyes up tight - all concentration on my pussy and his tongue and fingers. My hands balled into fists, my body stiffened and then it came, I came, and I half- yelped, half-moaned and then relaxed.

'Nice,' said Chris. He came up and kissed me. I could taste my juices on him. He bit my lip and tugged it a bit. 'Now, I cum,' he said. In a swift movement, he rolled me over onto my belly and pulled my ass up in the air. I felt him part my lips again, swollen and wet and almost sore, and then the head of his cock slowly edged in until I could feel his balls up against my ass. 'You have a nice tight pussy,' Chris said. 'I'm going to fuck that hot little pussy of yours,' and he withdrew only to slide back in again to the hilt of his cock. He stayed still for a moment. He squeezed my bum cheeks and slapped them loudly. I rested my head on my arms. My pussy was full and engorged and about to be fucked. My entire being centred on my pussy and his cock. I waited and breathed and then he thrust into me. In this position, he felt bigger than before. As he thrust, it was almost painful. Each time his balls hit my clit I took a sharp involuntary intake of breath. 'Are you okay babe?' Chris asked. 'I'm not too deep?'

'No,' I gasped although I wasn't sure. In my orgasmic state, I couldn't tell where I ended and Chris began. His cock was pumping into me and all I could feel was it entering me very deep and his balls slapping against my ass. I pushed my ass up higher and Chris whistled. 'Oh babe, this is so fucking good.' He thrust harder and deeper and I moaned. He slapped my ass and I yelped. 'Oh fuck me, babe, this is so fucking hot,' Chris gasped. He thrust faster, holding my hips as balance, 'Fuck me babe, fuck me,' he yelled, pumping even faster. I felt rocked and pillaged and ravaged all at the same time. 'Oh, I'm fucking coming, babe,' he said and pulled out, emptying his cum all over my ass in noisy spurts. I could feel it

dripping down the sides of my bum cheeks. 'Oh, babe, you do such things to me,' said Chris. 'You are fucking amazing.'

I wondered what the post sex etiquette was. Should I stay in position or run and get some tissues. Chris provided the answer, getting up and returning with a kitchen towel which he gently wiped over my bottom. I turned around and laughed. 'That was so hot babe. More tea?' he asked.

Chapter Seven

'We're in the servants' quarters,' Chris said as he led me down the back corridor. He had pulled on his jeans and washed the two mugs as I had found my French knickers, under the sofa, my bra, hanging off a chair, my blouse, resting on the table, and my jeans, kicked across the kitchen floor. I looked at my watch. I had been in the house for a little under an hour, I'd had the most amazing sex, twice, and now I was being brought to my bedroom where I would sleep tonight with Chris. If sleep was in fact the verb in question.

How an hour could make a difference to a life. How could I have imagined a week ago that I would have had the most awesome sex with the most handsome man? If this was what breaking a duck was about, then bring it on. My legs shook slightly as I walked. It was a little surreal. I followed Chris into a pretty bedroom with floral curtains and an impressive wooden French-style bed in the centre, dominating the space and leaving little room for any other furniture. 'Looks like all the servants do around here is sleep,' I said.

'Yeah, right. My mate is getting a great deal out of my staying here. Some holiday!'

I put my case against the bed. 'Right, what's the plan?' I asked.

Chris looked thoughtful. 'I was going to suggest a walk in the woods first, seduce you in the foliage, but since you've already seduced me, twice,' and as I

started to protest, Chris tipped my face with his hand and kissed me, silencing my words. 'But since you have already seduced me, I think I should bring you out to lunch and show off this gorgeous creature to the fine citizens of Galway.'

It was hard to argue with such a plan I thought. Chris drove - a small banged up Polo belonging to his friend - and we went into Galway, parking near the city centre. Chris apparently spent a lot of time here, and he held my arm in a gentle but firm way, steering me through the crowds. 'Here,' he said triumphantly, entering a small fish restaurant. It was dark in the foyer, but as we were led through the first dining room, I realised the main attraction was a balcony dining area with dramatic views across Galway Bay. 'Oh,' I gasped. 'This is fantastic!'

We were shown to a table near the edge and once seated I gazed out across the water. The clouds had cleared and a bright blue sky dotted with clouds completed the vista. 'Ireland in the sunshine cannot be beaten,' I said conversationally.

'All for the lady's pleasure,' said Chris before adding sotto voce 'and for the gentleman's too!'

I could not help it and felt a deep flush rise from my chest up my neck and to my cheeks. Chris laughed and winked. The waiter approached with water, bread and menus. I hid with relief behind a large lobster shaped card. 'If you like, I'll order for us both, there are some great sharing dishes and platters,' said Chris. 'Is there anything you don't like?'

'No,' I squeaked from behind the safety of the menu. This blushing was getting out of hand. Please God let it not be premature menopause. That would be so unfair. To have been celibate for almost five years and then the first time a sex god appears, it was horrid to be smitten down with menopausal-like symptoms

'Are you ever going to come out from behind that menu?' Chris said. 'It's not as though you need to read it. I have a great lunch planned for you!'

I slowly put the menu down, a huge smile on my face. 'So what are we having then?'

Chris had ordered a platter of fresh anchovies, porchetta ham, sun dried tomatoes and bruschetta for a starter. Dips arrived with hummus and guacamole. It was served with a cold white wine. With the light dancing on the water, it could not have been more perfect. My blushes did not really subside but I didn't care. Each morsel of food tasted heaven-sent and I found myself laughing and joking and talking about the most inconsequential of things. Suddenly everything seemed endlessly interesting. Chris was an intent listener. He spoke too in an even manner. He was calm and charming. He spoke of himself gently: neither to boast or complain. He had no commitments, no kids, but he was sympathetic to my ties. He spoke about his life as DJ and it was as far from normal life as I could imagine. At the back of my mind, the still voice of reason told me that I would not be moving out to the islands with Chris any time soon. It clouded an otherwise perfect day but I resolutely shut out those thoughts. Live in the moment, Aoife Brennan, I scolded myself even as I laughed and flirted and chatted. Live in the fucking moment.

The main course was fresh sardines served with spindly French fries and a three leaf salad. Gorgeous! Then my mobile bleeped. 'Oh sorry, let me just check,' I said. It was from Trish. 'How are things? Getting ready for your big nite?' I laughed out loud. 'Let me just answer this quickly,' I said. 'My friend just wants to know I'm safe and have not been eaten by the big bad wolf.'

'But you have already,' he said. 'And I hope to do it again later.'

I wondered what to reply. Truth is always the best policy I reckoned. 'Safe and sound. Had sex TWICE already. Blissfully happy.' There was a reply, very quickly but I did not look. I had replaced the mobile in bag and was too busy chatting.

Afterwards Chris suggested we watch the international rugby match on that weekend. 'If you don't mind,' he added. I didn't. We wandered into a neighbouring pub. There was a crew there already in place. Chris found us seats to the side of the supporters. I accepted a gin and tonic. I wasn't mad on rugby but I didn't mind watching it. Chris was soon engrossed in the game and so I checked the Trish's reply. Only the text wasn't from Trish, it was from Denis. *Ma, Maybe you should come home. Dad was here and took the sit-on mower. He left behind a push one. Said his garden was bigger. I wasn't here at time.*

Fuck fuck fuck. My head was spinning. Was this part of the new financial rectification that Paul was on about? His garden was bigger so he gets the family mower? Where the fuck did he get off by going to my house and taking stuff. That was theft. That was wrong. I replied. *Are you ok? Is Andrew ok?* Moments later,

Denis replied. *Yeah, he's fine. Dad took the bbq too. Some stuff from the shed. The painting in the living room.*

Oh dear lord! I groaned weakly. For the first time in five years I managed to get away for a truly dirty weekend and my life was falling apart at the seams. My job was on the line, my father was sick and now my arsehole of an ex-husband was stealing from my home. What gave him the fucking right? I'd get a barring order. Did God hate me? I looked at Chris. He was watching the game and talking with someone on his left. I looked at the screen. Another five minutes to half time. I decided to wait until the match was over and then tell Chris I was going home to deal with my new crisis.

If the first hour of my arrival in Galway had passed in a flash, the next one dragged by like an eternity. I had never felt so rotten and so sick. I thought about Andrew letting Paul into my home and it cut at the very core of me. My poor son would have been clueless and bemused as to why Paul had turned up. He would have been happy to see him and I wondered what he said when Paul started to remove the possessions from their home. Thank the lord Denis was not there or there might have been a fisticuffs. I guessed Paul must have rung Andrew on the off chance and been delighted to hear that I was away in Galway with my old school chum. The only ray of light in the whole mess was that I had not mentioned it was a date to anyone other than Trish. Thank the lord that was not in contention. As if by association, my phone beeped again. This time it was Trish: *You dirty thing you. I'm glad you're taking it for the team.* It might have been funny half an hour before but now I was just sick. I texted Trish, glad to be able to vent my anger. The

reply was measured. *Don't come home till tomorrow. There isn't anything you can do.*

Time enough to look at it tomorrow when you are home.

Chris agreed. After the match I blurted out the story. This time I had no tears but I was shaking with anger. 'You've had alcohol,' he said gently. 'Go home tomorrow and sort out the mess but ring your son now and explain the worst is over. I doubt your ex will try that stunt again, even if you're away.'

I took a deep breath. Chris and Trish were both right. 'Give me a few minutes then,' I said to Chris and went outside to call Denis. My poor boy was also quivering with anger. Had he been home and not at training when his father called, there is no way Paul would have dared to take the stuff. As Denis talked it turned out that Paul had taken a long list of items, and there could be more missing. Denis wasn't sure exactly. He'd been through the house and questioned Andrew. The lawn mower and barbecue and the wedding present of the painting from Great Aunt Lucy from the front room were gone. Paul had taken tools from the shed, some of which Denis had been using for his project in restoring a very old mini. The compressor was gone and the power hose and many smaller tools. Inside, the Waterford crystal was gone as was the fancy delft. The small but ornate telephone table was gone, the prints from the study and the ballet dancer figurine given by my godmother for our wedding too. I could have cried in frustration but I listened in silence to the list. When Denis had finished, I said in a steady voice. 'Ok, Denis. He may have been entitled to some of those things. I am very angry that he came unannounced and took everything without consultation. I think we have to speak to a solicitor about this. Or rather *I do*. I'll be home tomorrow early, before lunch,

and we can talk about this further. For the record I don't think he'll be back again after this.'

Denis began to cry on the phone. 'Ma, come home now,' he cried in broken sobs.

'Oh Denis, I can't,' I cried, my resolve broken. 'I had wine at lunch. I can't drive three hours home now. Shall I get Granny to come over? I'll be home first thing.'

Denis said no, he just wanted his Mum. I gulped back my tears. 'Listen to me Denis. They are only possessions. I don't care about them and I can replace the tools if necessary. We didn't use the crystal anyway and, as for the china - when did I last get that out? It's really not important. You and Andrew are the important ones. That's all I want. I'll be home in no time.'

'Okay Ma. I just felt I let you down - let us down.'

'Oh Denis, my love, don't think that. He is your dad and some of those things were his. When he left five years ago, he took only some clothes and the car. We never did a divvy on the house stuff. How he did it was wrong, but when we get divorced there'll be a proper divide.'

When I finished my call with Denis, I rang my older brother George. He ran a motor bike shop in Ranelagh. Bearded and eccentric, he had never married. I sometimes wondered if he was gay but since he never volunteered any details, I didn't push for an answer. We were close but still might not talk for weeks. When I

explained the problem, he said he would spin out to the kids later that afternoon. In a moment of intuition, he asked. 'Why are you in Galway? It's not a 'friend', is it?' I spluttered and he laughed. 'Finally, little sis gets her knicks off!'

'Feck off, George,' was my eloquent reply but George just laughed.

Somehow George guessing and not judging lifted my spirits. I was glad he didn't know Chris was ten years younger than me, a DJ and only here for a month, of which at least a third was already gone. I went back inside the pub. 'I'm okay,' I said. 'Oh course, you are,' Chris replied. 'You're much better than okay.'

Which I was. We detoured to a supermarket and Chris picked up lettuce, wine and steaks. I realised this was the first time in five years I'd had been food shopping that was not family orientated. Chris then chose olives, vodka, tonic and crisps. Halfway through, I got a text from George. *All okay, little sis,* he wrote. *Be bad!* I felt a weight lifted from my shoulders. I'd be home tomorrow but tonight was okay for my boys and for me. Another text appeared from George. *Just staying the night, we're doing beer and movies. Andrew is so excited!* I grinned. *Andrew not allowed more than one glass of beer,* I wrote. *Boys night in, boys rules,* George replied. Touché, I thought.

We returned to Headley House. It really was an impressive pile. There were fifteen bedrooms Chris told me, five reception rooms and a tennis court. His friend

and his wife had only two kids. 'Bit of an overkill really,' Chris said. 'Still, it's nice for us don't you think?' I tried not to think that was. Was there an 'us'? I also didn't want to think about Chris with possibly other women here. I didn't want to think about my circumstances and Paul walking into my house and just taking stuff. I didn't want to think, full stop.

Chris was a minimalist chef. He poured vodka Martinis first. 'Cheers,' he said and kissed me. 'Mmmm,' I said. 'I've only ever had gin Martinis before. This is nice.'

'It's the lime,' said Chris. 'I like dirty Martinis too with olives, but lime is good.'

I watched as Chris washed the salad and cut up tomatoes. My offers of help were rejected. 'I'm just doing some easy stuff,' said Chris. 'Your job is to look pretty and talk to me!'

Chris cut potatoes into wedges and put them on to boil. He cut chillies and herbs, mixed them with butter and put them to one side, to be added to the potatoes when cooked. He crushed garlic, added butter and melted it. He mixed rocket and salad with a vinaigrette and put it on the table. He seasoned the steaks and put them on a griddle pan. All the while we talked. Chris was concerned about the 'laissez-faire' approach Paul had adopted to our possessions and to entering my house. 'Get a fucking solicitor,' he said. 'The bastard can't walk into your house and take stuff. You have to protect yourself and your children.' He had no axe to grind but he was shocked at Paul's behaviour. 'He's a fucking tosspot,' he repeated more than once.

The Martinis drunk, Chris opened the wine. A full bodied and warm Rioja, it went down like melted chocolate. Chris was now telling me battle stories of past DJ nights. The more I heard, the more I was glad I had met him in Ireland, and was with him in Galway. The sheer heady madness of the Greek islands was beyond my reach. I could not pretend to lap dance, pole dance, cage dance, or even beach dance. I did not do drugs; I had teenage kids who would be thinking about this stuff soon. I was too old to even comprehend the lifestyle. As I listened, I smiled and then asked. 'Why me, Chris? I'm not your average DJ bunny?'

Chris stopped and looked at me. 'You are gorgeous,' he said simply.

Dinner was fantastic. Maybe it was just because someone other than I had made it. Maybe it was because I was, as Chris said, gorgeous. Pushing back my empty plate, I smiled and thanked him again.

'I'm having a terrible time right now and I don't want to bore you with all my troubles, and I won't, but can I just say that I have had the most wonderful time. I just can't tell you.' I raised my hands palms upwards to express my delight. Chris reached over and took my hands. He leaned in and kissed them. 'It's just you and I tonight babe,' he said.

I lay across the large wooden bed naked. Chris had removed my clothes as I entered the bedroom, swiftly and gently. Then he undressed himself and his cock stood up proud. 'Lie down,' he said. He went and stood by my head. I moved over so I could reach him, but he pushed me back so that I was lying on my back with my head over the edge of the bed. 'This way, babe,' he said. My head was backwards and I opened my mouth. Chris gently pushed his cock in slowly and surely. I stuck out my tongue and opened wider. He was a long way in. I wanted to gag a little and he pulled back out. 'Oh babe,' he said. He pushed his cock in again. I fought my gag reflex, sticking my tongue out again. Chris moved gently in and out. 'Oh my God, babe, you are good,' he said.

I could feel my pussy getting wet. Chris pushed in again and out. He was gentle but persistent. Each time he went a little deeper. He was moaning now. He stepped back. 'You are one sexy bitch Aoife,' he said. Pulling me back on the bed, he mounted me and kissing me deeply began to thrust. I curved my legs, crossing them behind his back and pushed my hips up to meet his thrusts. He continued kissing me. 'You are one sexy bitch,' he panted pumping me harder and harder. 'Oh, I'm going to come. Where?'

I, wet and excited, said: 'On my face.'

'Oh you sexy bitch,' Chris gasped. He pulled out and straddled my shoulders. He pulled hard at his cock and I reached forward to suck his balls. I took them one at a time and licked and sucked as he pulled harder. 'Oh you are one sexy bitch,' he said again. 'Beautiful,' and shot a load of cum over my face and hair.

Later as Chris enveloped me in a bruising hug that would last all night, I silently laughed to myself. When had I decided that he should cum on my face? Oh my Lord, what a notion. I absolutely loved it though. As he squirted great globules of cum over my face, it felt primeval and sexy and wanton. What was that famous quote from Mae West. 'When I'm good , I'm good, but when I'm bad I'm better.' Oh, Aoife Brennan, you were very bad today I thought.

Chapter Eight

I stirred and rose towards consciousness. I had been in a very deep sleep and felt almost drugged as I woke. I was still encircled by Chris's arms and I don't think I'd moved much, if at all, during the night. His breathing was regular and I wondered if he was still asleep. I could not see a clock and had no idea of the time. To look at my watch on the dresser would have meant disturbing Chris and I wasn't prepared to leave the warmth of his arms, not yet.

I sighed and closed my eyes again. I was so angry over everything that Paul had done. Please God the boys had had a good night with George and I smiled again at his intervention. It was very early still if the thin grey light glimpsed coming through the curtains was any indicator. I would lie here for another few moments. Time enough to get up.

At that moment, I felt a movement by my bum. Early morning and Chris was getting an erection. I felt the hardness push against me. The erection bounced a little, springing back and forth. Chris breathed out and crushed me harder in his arms. His warm breath was by my neck and he nuzzled me now. I squirmed a little, pushing my bum back into him. His hand slipped over to my breast and tweaked my nipple. Then it moved lower and parted my legs, caressing my pussy, rubbing and fondling me. His fingers found my wetness and pushed in, stroking me in regular movements. My breath came in quick little gasps. He found my clitoris and stroked it firmly. I held my breath. My whole body was shivering with anticipation.

His hand pulled away and I grabbed it. 'Don't stop now,' I pleaded, 'keep stroking me.'

'Just let me in first,' he said thickly. 'We can cum together.'

He shifted his body, pulling me back so that his cock could enter me from behind. I felt tender, swollen and wet. His cock slipped in but I was sore. The first few pushes hurt a little. I bit my lip. From *use it or lose it* to *wear it out* in three easy stages I thought. Finally his entire thickness was inside me. He stopped and rested. I was full of his cock and it no longer hurt. 'Ok, babe?' he asked. 'Yes,' I whispered.

Chris put his hand back between my legs, he stroked my clitoris gently, making tight circles with his fingers. He brought his hand up to my mouth. 'See how good you taste,' he said. I licked his fingers and marvelled at my body. He moaned and moved his pelvis. His cock bounced inside me. It felt good and thick and hard. He pulled back and began thrusting into me, slow rhythmical strokes, almost pulling out completely each time. His fingers crept down to my clitoris again and rubbed hard at the same time. Thrust and rub - the combination was very good. I could feel the tell-tale build of desire in my body again. I pushed out my ass and revelled as his long cock thrust into me, all the way, filling me utterly.

'Oh babe, I've got to pump you harder,' Chris said. He pulled out and turned me over onto my stomach. He pushed my legs together, then mounted me from behind, squeezing his cock between my tightly closed legs. Straddling me, he began thrusting harder. I pushed my hand under my body and found my clit. My head

was buried in the pillow, my breathing sharp and ragged. Chris lent on me, his hands on my hips and he bucked into me. 'Fuck, fuck, fuck,' he half-shouted. I rubbed my clit faster. My body tightened and bucked and an orgasm like nothing before coursed through me. Chris felt me tightening. 'Oh Aoife, fuck, that is good,' he said thrusting even harder. He arched his back and slammed into me. I felt him and then the cum inside me. 'Oh,' he groaned and collapsed on top of me. His body was crushing me and I didn't care. I was spent. I could not move, pinned under Chris and his laboured breathing. Oh Aoife I thought, that was good.

Chris rolled off me and onto his back. He held his now flaccid penis in his hand. 'You have worn me out,' he said. I pushed up my head from the pillow and looked over. My hair was mangled and damp and half across my face. I saw now that he was clearly circumcised. I smiled. 'Ditto,' was all I had the energy to reply before collapsing back onto the pillow. I slept again.

When I awoke some time later, Chris had brought in two mugs of tea. 'Morning sleepy head,' he said sliding in beside me. I pushed the hair off my face. I pulled the sheet up to my neck, and clutched the mug as if it were a dear friend. I wondered if gamine was a look I could pull off at forty two, first thing in the morning and with sex hair. I wasn't sure and didn't want to find out to the contrary, not yet anyway.

'It's still early. It's only half eight. You can be on the road for nine and be home in plenty of time for the kids,' he said.

I looked at him. I didn't want to think about the kids or Paul right now. I had three hours of driving by myself to go through the whole sorry mess. Right now and right here I wanted to find out what would happen next. I realised I hadn't dated in two decades and had no idea of the rules of engagement. Chris was here for only another couple of weeks. Did that mean he would want to devote further time to me? Was this weekend a once-off? Did people become pen pals after such an experience? Would I ever have such mind-blowing sex again if Chris now said goodbye?

'Hmm, do we, do you, what sort of happens next. If there is a next?' I blurted out. 'I'm a bit of a novice at this.'

'Well, I'm here in Galway for the next two weeks and then a few days in Dublin before I fly out. Can you come back perhaps?'

Tears pushed at the back of my eyes. Of course there was no way I could escape to Galway again so soon. And I knew even, as I felt cheated, that it didn't really matter in the long run. But after a failed marriage and a further almost five years of enforced celibacy, I felt like a poor child shown a sweet shop only to be denied entry. 'In all practicality, I don't think I'll be able to return,' I said slowly. 'When are you back in Dublin? Maybe we can meet. Have dinner. I won't cook though.'

'I don't think your children would want to meet me,' agreed Chris. 'It's better we enjoy our time without adding any more confusion into their lives.'

Or mine I thought a little sadly.

Leaving Headley House I felt awkward although Chris seemed happy in his skin. He leaned in the car window and kissed me and wished me a good journey, saying he looked forward to seeing me in Dublin the week after next. 'Take care of yourself, babe,' he said, his dark eyes looking intently at me. 'You are one special lady. You deserve better.'

As I drove off, I wondered if deserving better included Chris. He didn't appear the settling type. He was actually only thirty I'd discovered during our lunch, and moreover he had broken up with a long term girlfriend last year and was in no hurry to settle down again. Not that I imagined he would look to me as his next model anyway. There had been no indication of that whatsoever. Had I just had a zipless fuck? I'd missed that first time around in my twenties where the boys I'd had sex with I could count on one hand. It had all been very innocent before I married. Truth be told, while married it had also been pretty innocent. Perhaps that is why the marriage hadn't lasted. When you marry young do you sometimes just not grow in the same direction I wondered? And then if sex doesn't grow, there is no hope. Of course, I'd never had sex quite like that before, married or single. Was it like dancing, does sex change with the times? From the foxtrot to the jive, to hip hop and trance, to the shuffle? I still wasn't sure I could keep up in a modern dance club, but the new sex was just wonderful.

I smiled to myself. The day before when I heard the awful news, I had felt my being away from home was the most rotten timing. But, on reflection, maybe it wasn't so bad. If Paul had intended scooping up half our possessions, it was only a matter of time before he found the house empty but for Andrew. The callous nature of what he had done shocked me in the cold light of day. I did not begrudge him half of our possessions but to take them like that. What a bastard!

And I was deeply upset for Denis and his feelings of powerlessness. Since Paul left, Denis had taken it upon himself to be the man in the family, which was tough even now he was seventeen, but he was still a school kid with all the problems of acne, girls and exams. He was doing fine but something like this would really upset him. I was glad that George was around. He hadn't been that close to the kids during the marriage, he and Paul didn't see eye to eye, so maybe his spending the night with my sons was a good thing. The boys could bond. Denis could talk man to man with George without feeling bad about not being able to protect the family home. Ironically my being away might have given the boys a chance to relax; to just be boys and not to have to worry about their mother.

My life was in tatters. I was approaching five years into my separation and I had achieved nothing. The first legal steps were only now being sorted, but at Paul's behest. My job was shaky, my father was not well and my mother was stressed to high degree.

But I thought, I have discovered new sex.

Chapter Nine

George had gone by the time I returned home. The boys were playing on the Xbox as I arrived. 'I'll be through in five,' Denis said. 'Let me just finish pulverising Andrew.' At which Andrew shouted back, punching his brother at the same time. 'I'm in the lead,' he said. 'Don't believe him.'

I smiled and put my bag upstairs. I unpacked my toiletries and put the dirty clothes in the laundry bag. I put the new lingerie under a towel that was already there. I didn't really want that purchase seen by mistake. I washed my face and looked in the mirror. Yes, I looked tired but not unhappy. I *felt* tired but not unhappy. The journey had given me time to think and I felt more purposeful now and less emotional. My phone beeped. It was Chris. *Did you get home safe? xx* he asked. I smiled. *Yes, all calm.* Then I added, *Thank you for a great time.*

It was an amazing time Chris wrote and I smiled. *Yes,* I replied *it was.*

I looked around my room. In a moment of panic I pulled out my jewellery box from my bedside locker. I looked inside but my discarded engagement and wedding rings were still there. That meant he hadn't been in my room. Nothing much had changed since Paul's departure. His clothes and things were gone of course, but I hadn't redecorated the room or changed the curtains. Even a lot of the bed linen was the same. Funny how I never thought to bin that. If Paul walked in here today it would look much as it did when he left. I really hadn't come on that much in five years. It was a depressing thought - except of course for the weekend.

Not that I could advertise that much to anyone other than Trish. Not really something to be shared at the normal coffee mornings. I wouldn't even know where to begin.

Ok, I said to myself. Let's go and look at the damage. I walked into the other bedrooms but nothing seemed to be altered. Then I spotted the painting over the blanket box on the landing, or rather its absence. It had belonged to my grandfather and was not valuable but it was from my side of the family. I could feel myself grow angry again. This was not a division of assets, this was pillage.

I went downstairs and into the double living and dining room. The stereo and TV were still there but the Abyssinian rug was gone, as were the candlesticks either side of the fireplace and a brass monkey hearth set holder. In my china cabinet, all the good Spode dishes were gone and so too was my little Lladro collection and the dancer from the top of the piano. It was the same in the kitchen: the cappuccino maker was gone, the Japanese sushi maker, the mandolin and my espresso maker. I was angry. Had he asked for much of this stuff, I would have given it gladly. Most of it was not important. It might have been given as wedding presents or bought together but I had not entertained much in five years. Working full time and being a full time parent did not lend itself to lavish dinner parties or even for that matter informal barbecues. Putting food on the table tended to be a very hit and miss affair, let alone trying to feed others.

I folded my arms. At least I had more room in the presses for stuff. Positive thinking I told myself. Denis came into the kitchen behind me. I turned and tried to

hug him but Denis was not big on hugs. He also looked a bit shamefaced after his tears yesterday. 'Tell me,' I said. 'Was it fun with George?'

Denis laughed. 'He is mad, Ma. Totally mad. We had a great time.'

'I'm glad. It was only possessions that your dad took. It was wrong how he did it but not that he took them.'

'George says he is a pillock!' replied Denis flatly.

'Well, those were the certainly the actions of a pillock,' I said grimly. 'I'm going to seek legal advice as soon as I can, for that and for the whole legal separation. It'll be clearer then. And better to get it sorted out. Your father and I can both move on properly then. It was wrong to let it drag on; it doesn't do anyone any good.'

'Maybe he wants to marry her,' I added.

'Maybe you might find someone Ma,' Denis said quietly. I shot him a look but he was looking out the window. I could not tell if it was a throwaway line or perhaps George had let the cat out of the bag. I laughed nervously. 'Chance would be a fine thing.'

'George mentioned that once you get divorced you might find someone.'

I was not sure if I should be cross with George or simply kill him here and now. What on earth was he doing putting such ideas into the boys' heads. Apart from anything else, meeting Chris again without sparking any suspicion was going

to be very hard to do. I rang George but his mobile rang out. 'Ring me please,' I hissed into the phone.

As it happened, he was on his way over. 'Twice in a weekend,' said Andrew happily as he opened the door. They exchanged playful punches while I looked on bemused. My anger dissipated as I watched their messing. Later when alone with George I asked him where all this bonding had come from.

'Ah, sis, you know Paul didn't like me so I stayed away. Then when you were coping with the separation, the boys didn't really know me, so I stayed away too. I didn't want to put my big size tens into stuff that wasn't any of my business.' George smiled at me. 'But I was glad I was here last night. If Paul had come back, Denis and I would have lynched him.'

'He's their dad, George, for better or worse. You can't go inciting Denis to violence.'

'If that prick had returned and tried another stunt like that, I'd have swung for him,' repeated George. 'But I don't think he'll have the cheek. We sent him a text to be sure anyway.'

'What,' I cried. 'What did you send him?'

'Oh, relax. It was perfectly polite. We did it from my phone. Just said I was a family friend and did he realise he was not only trespassing yesterday but guilty of theft and that we would be reporting it on Monday morning.'

'Oh George, I'm not going to the police on Monday. This is madness but I don't want to make it worse.'

'Well, please go find a solicitor then. I don't think you'll get the stuff back, even with a solicitor but he can't run rough shod all over you.'

'Yeah, Dad suggested O'Brien,' I said. 'He is getting me his details on Monday.'

'That little prick? He's as bad as your ex. He's not very popular in my circles.'

'Your circles? He's not gay?' I put my hand up to my mouth. It was the first time I'd ever mentioned that word. 'Oh,' I said. 'I didn't mean to.' I looked at George but he was laughing. 'It's only taken you forty odd years to say that little sis,' he said. 'Yes, I'm gay but I am also celibate, by choice. And I seem to think that you may have broken your celibacy seal this weekend, am I right?'

'This is so funny,' I said. 'Here we are having a sex conversation. In our forties. You are gay and celibate and I am separated and finally no longer celibate and doing it,' I paused and said with a flourish, 'with a toyboy!'

George threw back his head and laughed. 'Oh Aoife, trust you to go from bloody respectable marriage with the most daft idiot in the world to celibate for yonks and then when you finally get back in the saddle, it's with a toy boy. You are a ticket!'

'Well,' I started to say but stopped and just grinning. 'It is what it is!'

Chapter Ten

The exchange with Paul that night was terse.

George had stayed for dinner, a Chinese takeaway as his treat. It was a relaxed evening. The two boys joked and messed. The loss of the possessions was not remarked upon. Paul was not marked upon. He was, I thought, surplus to requirements. I wondered if this was what it might be like with a new boyfriend. I looked around the table at the happy smiling faces and wondered if there might be a new time when there would be four again. It was hard to imagine but right now this felt good. I also had an ally in George when the boys tried to gang up on me for ageist arguments such as the best of all time bands. It could flip as easily though when he joined the boys against the girl on braininess claims. The talk was silly, fun and harmless. When George left at nine o'clock I could feel my eyelids drooping. I wasn't sure Chris could have slotted in so well, in fact I was sure he wouldn't despite lingering and unsustainable romantic wishes. My body ached and I was bone tired.

When I finished clearing the kitchen, I rang Paul.

'I only took what was mine,' he whined down the phone.

'You came unannounced and took things without asking, without permission and without right,' I argued, my voice getting shrill.

'I was advised that I am allowed take my things,' Paul repeated.

Advised? The word swirled around my brain only making me crosser. The conversation carried on with no satisfaction. Paul was convinced of his rightness or at least sticking his ground. When he started to say I was lucky he had allowed me to use his possessions for the past four, almost five years, I saw red. The same way, I wanted to retort, you allowed me to mind your children I suppose. The same way I was allowed feed them and mind them, blow their noses and wipe up their sick when they were ill, scold them and clothe them. All by myself since you didn't really want them. Not really I thought bitterly. The million things that have to happen to make a household tick, from bins to shopping, from washing to feeding, from buying headlice powder, rash powder, washing powder, from arranging haircuts, football practice, dental appointments, party lifts, from meeting teachers, looking at reports, attending school nights, signing homework diaries, from doctor visits, physio visits, counsellor visits, from saying goodnight every night to saying good morning every morning. Yes Paul I thought angrily, thank you for letting me have the boys for the past four years without interference. Thank you very much!

But I said none of it. It would make no difference. I finished the call. I even said that I would get my solicitor to call his or something like that. If I hadn't been so angry it would have been funny. Bone tired and boned I went to bed.

Lunch with Trish could not wait for Friday. *1pm, Stephens Green, today*, came her imperious text. I laughed. There was too much to tell on the telephone.

'How many times?' Trish asked again, 'In less than 24 hours? Chris is a sex god.'

'Maybe I'm the sex goddess,' I retorted.

'Maybe you are,' said Trish looking at me with wide eyes. 'How did you go from nervous ninny to nymphomaniac in a few short hours?'

'It was Galway,' I said. 'I wasn't at home. I was the new Aoife.'

'You sure do stuff with style Aoife Brennan,' said Trish.

The name plate was discrete and polished: O'Brien and Crushe. I adjusted my skirt nervously and rang the bell. The solicitors' offices were on a tree-lined road in the business district of Dublin. I had parked nearby, putting three euro in the parking metre. I wasn't sure how long I was going to be. My father had pulled strings; Fergus O'Brien was a busy man. At the top of his profession, he didn't take on any clients he didn't want to. My father had worked with his uncle and had pushed me to the top of the queue. He had also paid a deposit of €5,000 to secure this place. 'Money talks,' he had said. 'I'm not having Paul mess you around anymore. This man, O'Brien will sort him out, you mark my word.' I just hugged my dad. He didn't get cross very often, but when pushed he pushed back. My mother looked worried, 'Let us know how you get on,' she said.

The buzzer sounded and I pushed open the door. The Georgian building had a narrow hall that barely accommodated the receptionist's cubicle. I explained that I was here to meet Fergus O'Brien and was shown to a grubby waiting area. The old fashioned cloth chairs had a rubbed look, an unpleasant suggestion of unhappy bums I thought, placing my own posterior gingerly at the edge of one in the far corner. There was no one else there which struck me as fortunate. For one, the narrow waiting room was more of a hall and it would be claustrophobic with more than one occupant. Secondly I thought it might be embarrassing to find oneself sitting with someone else. I imagined it must have the same cringe-worthy feel as sitting in an STD clinic waiting to be seen by the doctor.

Once, after the children were born and I had found it difficult to find work, I had investigated the local welfare office. I was reluctant but money was tight and Paul had suggested I basically shape up or ship out. He didn't regard looking after the children as a full time occupation. In desperation, I left the children with my mother and, dressed in a work suit, called to the local welfare office to discover if I was entitled to anything. Joining the queue outside the office in the bright morning sunshine, I'd been pleasantly surprised to discover that most of the other people were also in suits. The door finally opened and I followed the well-dressed queue inside only to discover I was in the motor tax line. Blushing, I changed to the other entrance. I felt an imposter in the dole office and did not have enough credits anyway. I felt the same way here in the solicitor's office. An imposter. This wasn't really happening to Aoife Brennan. Divorce didn't happen to nice girls. Mind you, I

grinned to myself, neither did dirty weekends with sex gods. Have to take the rough with the smooth I thought. Every cloud and all that.

Fergus O'Brien was short and had a way of putting his head to one side when he talked. He wore thin steel glasses that never stayed put on his nose. He took them off, put them on, dangled them by one arm, put them on his head and used them to point at documents. In short, the glasses spent more time in movement than actually in reading. I noticed the lenses were very thick so it was all the more surprising that he did not leave them in place.

It all seemed very simple. Divorce was based on a no fault principle in Ireland so there didn't need to be a reason if the marriage was broken down and both sides agreed. It was done in two parts, a legal separation followed by the actual divorce. It could be done by negotiation, or argued in court with a judge. Negotiation was best and cheapest and the agreement could be ratified later in court. A hearing in the circuit court to finalise legal separation would take the best part of two years, the high court was faster and could be concluded in eight months. As for fees, well it was best to allow a base line of €20,000 but if the fast route was selected, ie the high court, then fees could reach €100,000. The children's welfare, stressed O'Brien at the end of the monologue, was paramount. O'Brien also instructed me to write a history of the marriage and this was a task I did not relish, as well as an affidavit of means.

Giddy with this information, I left the office but not before signing a document which I felt was probably very important. It was a contract and fee

structure. I would read it later. My mind boggled at the information. Where was I going to get that kind of money? My father's deposit of €5000 didn't seem very much now. Money talks? Money walks more like I thought.

'What did he say about the things Paul took,' said Mum, her face creased with worry.

'They are gone pretty much but I'm to itemise the rest of the stuff in case we get to negotiations. We can then argue who gets what,' I replied. 'I'm to change the house keys and they will write to his solicitor saying he is not to take anything else without my permission.'

'It sounds as though this is going to be a complicated, protracted and expensive business,' remarked my father.

'Expensive for sure,' I said. 'Where do I get that kind of money?'

My parents exchanged looks. 'We'll find it,' said Dad. 'We can dip into our bond. It comes for renewal this year.'

'But that's your savings,' I said. 'I can't take that.'

'You can and will,' said Mum. 'You can either pay us back or it's your inheritance early.' She gave a weak smile. 'It's important you finish the separation and divorce and don't have to worry about the cost. It's a process Aoife.'

That night as I lay in bed I reflected on what O'Brien had said. It seemed such a long drawn out process. Two more years and this time arguing with Paul over who got what and who paid what. Then there was the issue of writing out the history of the marriage. It all seemed surreal. I was used to not being with Paul, but not quite the getting divorced from him. This step was very final. I would start that task of writing out the history of our marriage tomorrow and I shuddered at the idea. Another thought struck me: Was he doing the same? Was he already half way through his rendition? And would the two versions match or had the separation divided us as clearly as our memories?

I plugged in my phone to charge overnight and just then Chris rang. He had rung every evening since my return and I liked his quiet, slow way of talking. He'd been incensed when I told him quite how much Paul had taken, but he'd calmed down when I explained it would all be divvied up in the end. I wasn't actually sure this was the case but I didn't want him worrying about my stuff. Instead I told him about my visit to the solicitor.

'I'm never getting married,' he said when told of the expected fees. 'Twenty thousand for the wedding and five times that for the divorce? Are people mad?'

Perhaps he was right. He hung up saying only a week and he'd see me again. I couldn't wait. I checked my phone and noticed my dating app had a lot of messages building up on it. Since the fiasco with Firefox121 and the subsequent date with Chris, I hadn't looked at it. Twelve new messages and five winks. Not bad for a faceless profile. I swiftly scanned through them, noting I was getting a lot

of attention from younger men, one who looked the same age as Denis. I checked and his profile said 18. I giggled. Maybe dating wasn't as bad as I had first thought. There was one long message from a man in his fifties in Waterford. He was clearly looking for friendship and a wife. I decided against replying to any of them. Finally, one of the winks was from a blonde surfer. He had a cheeky smile. I winked back. I was only being friendly, after all.

Chapter Eleven

Work was tough. Brian had been pretty closed-mouthed since the company talk. He had stopped putting his head over the partition to tease me. Even Sarah noticed.

'He's gone off you,' she said spitefully. 'Not his type after all.'

I flinched. I liked Brian, because of or perhaps despite his stupid jokes. He was a good guy with a dreadful sense of humour. He made me laugh sometimes and at others, well I tended to groan. It was funny how I relied on his flirting, even as I swatted him away as you would a fly. I missed his attention and Sarah's barbed comment hurt me.

Stung into defence I turned to Sarah and said with a little bit of creativity, 'I'm seeing someone else as it happens.'

Sarah stopped dead in her tracks. It was worth the white lie as I told Trish afterwards. Sarah literally swivelled in her chair, placed both hands on her knees, bright blue varnish on her nails and said: 'Who?' with venom.

Sarah, who was as good at hiding her feelings as Bugs Bunny, dropped her mouth open as I sketched a few details. It wasn't an attractive sight I thought as I looked at the younger woman. Envy did it to some people. Her face twisted in an ugly grimace. I didn't go into detail but managed to include the sex four times in less than 24 hours, DJ in the islands and his age. Score one to me I thought.

Sarah could not have looked more scandalised than if I had said I shagged Justin Bieber. 'You,' she spluttered. 'But you are in your forties.'

'So,' I said. 'The older the fiddle, the sweeter the tune.'

As a final coup de grace, I produced my phone and showed Sarah a picture of Chris. I'd taken it when he was making tea the second time and he was naked, but the picture was only of his upper body of course. 'Fuck me,' said Sarah and I had to laugh.

Chris was to be in Dublin in less than a week so that meant I had to go lingerie shopping again. This time I thoroughly enjoyed myself. Before it had been a trial, now I imagined how Chris might look at me. I felt a flush rise up my face. He'd been able to undo my bra with one hand, always the sign of a misspent childhood, I thought with pleasure. I chose a pretty blue and pink set, so pretty it made me smile. I texted Chris to tell him. *Show me* came the reply. I took a picture and texted him back. *With you wearing them* came the fast response. I giggled. *I don't do naughty pictures. Just for me* texted Chris but I only replied, 'You'll see in person in less than six days...and counting' and finished with a big smiley face, just like the one on my own face.

Sarah looked at me with undisguised interest when I came back to the office. 'What did you buy?' she asked noting the shop label on the bag.

'Lingerie,' I said.

Brian appeared at the partition. He looked his normal self and grinned cheekily at me. 'Did I hear the magic word?'

'Yeah, I'd love a coffee,' I retorted.

'Go on, show us the sexy outfit?' teased Brian. 'You could model it for me.'

'I don't think so,' I said laughing but Sarah had already reached into the bag and pulled out my purchase. She held it up against her own ample bust. 'Pretty,' she said.

'Oh,' Brian's eyes widened. He whistled. 'Nice bra Aoife Brennan,' he said looking at me. 'I can imagine you in that, in fact I may just do that tonight.'

'You have a dirty mind Brian and I forbid you to do any such thing.'

'What do they say? A thing of beauty is a joy, but a dirty mind is a joy forever.'

'Yeah and a black eye can hurt if you keep this up,' I said. 'Anyway, what has you so jolly? Good news from headquarters?'

Brian looked serious again. 'Not yet, sadly all at loggerheads still. There are two options. Find a buyer but that will mean change, possibly rationalisation. Or cut costs locally and hope to ride out the storm, but that means rationalisation also. I think support will move to online and out of the country either way Aoife. We need to have a talk later on this. '

I sank back down in my chair. The earlier euphoria evaporated in a moment. 'Come to my office at four,' said Brian. 'It's not all bad.'

Sarah, for once, did not say anything. She became very engrossed in her computer and her studied avoidance was worse than any barbed comment she could have made. I wondered had she heard anything. Was my job gone already? I really didn't need this stress, not now.

'Either way, if the company survives or is bought, support is not going to be based in Dublin,' said Brian. It was four on the dot and I was in his office. His desk was empty but for a large computer screen. The screen saver was a sea of Morse Code dots. It hurt my eyes to look at it so I looked away.

'So that means you will have three choices,' continued Brian. 'The first would be to take redundancy but the company is only two years old so that wouldn't be a lot of money. The second is to find another job, but again support jobs are all moving to India or Eastern Europe, so you may have to move country if you want to stay in this sector.'

'Or,' and here he paused and rested back in the chair, his hands behind his head. 'Or you change jobs internally, become the marketing manager.'

I looked at him. 'What?'

'Support is gone, but marketing is needed and it's needed here. You understand the company better than most, you are good with customers, you write

well and I know you can do the job. If you need to take courses, that can be arranged too.

'I'd help you out too. I've a background in marketing so I know what's needed.'

I was flabbergasted, but my mind was thinking fast. 'Well, I already do the website and the e-zine.'

'Yeah, and if you notice, you actually write most of the stuff already,' added Brian. 'So it's a case of dropping the support for individual customers and generating materials for customers in general. It's fairly straightforward.'

'Look, go and think about it. It could be fun. There are a couple of digital marketing courses you could apply for as well, just to cover the media side of things. It's all pretty logical and I know you could do it. The company would pay for the courses as well. At the end of the day, the preference is to keep existing people and retrain rather than let go people.'

I walked back to my desk in a daze. It did seem a good idea. Sarah was packing up her stuff when I reached my desk. She gave me a pitying look but I decided now was not the time to lord it over her. I had a few days to consider the transition. The pay was not any better but my job was secure, as long as the company survived. It would give me a new skill set in any case which had to be good. From head of support to marketing manager, it sounded like a promotion I decided and it would be something new to learn.

Chris was delighted too.' So we are going to celebrate and I get to see your new lingerie on you,' he said. 'I'll be staying with a friend in Dublin,' he said. 'But he is away at the weekend, so it's just you and me on Friday night. You can get away, can't you?'

I sighed. It hadn't been easy. I had wracked my head trying to figure out why I might have another sleep over without raising any suspicion with the children. Chris, while wonderful for me, was not going to meet my children. In the end George had stepped up to the mark. 'I'll come and stay with the kids,' he said. 'You are going to meet a dear friend from college whom you haven't seen in ages. As you are going out to dinner, your lovely friend suggested you stay the night with her and catch up on all the gossip.'

If the boys suspected anything, they did not say. The distraction of having their uncle stay was enough. George said he would change the locks too, so that gave him a reason to be there. 'Of course, you are just as capable of ringing a locksmith as I am,' he laughed. 'But don't ask me to put out the bins. That would be a bridge too far!'

We met in college. Paul was doing a business degree, I was in computer studies. Paul was the year ahead of me. We began dating just after his finals. We became engaged when I did my finals and married the following year. We lived first in Rathmines before buying our house in Clontarf. It was fairly run down and all our available funds went into the

restoration of the house. I became pregnant with Denis that year also. Between the house and the early pregnancy I never really found a full time job after college, and I know this irked Paul. We used to fight over money and my staying at home. I planned on returning to work full time after Denis went to Montessori School, we had him booked in for when he was three years, but I fell pregnant again just on his second birthday. As a result, I needed to stay home again until Andrew reached Montessori school age. Paul and I hadn't talked about children and who would stay home and for how long, but I just assumed I would be at home for as long as they needed me. Paul, on the other hand, assumed I'd be back at the office six weeks later like a super mom or celebrity.

I paused. Should I put that bit in? Was it relevant? What about when he clipped his toenails in the bedroom, despite years of asking him to at least do it in the bathroom, out of sight and out of earshot. And worse still, was vacuuming the carpet and finding missing clippings stuck in the carpet pile. I shuddered. What was it about marriage and the familiarity that meant simple stuff went out the window. I decided this legal malarkey was worse than the actuality. Why did I have to drag up all the unpleasant things about Paul and how our marriage went off the rails? Why did O'Brien want to read about Paul's toenails? I turned off the laptop. Tomorrow I thought.

Bing, my mobile went again. It was surfer dude on the dating app. I looked. He had winked back. Gee, this was like table tennis. I ignored it; I had better things to do, like figure out what to wear on Friday night.

Chapter Twelve

The electric blue wrap around dress looked great. I walked up and down past my mirror more than once, checking out the dress from all angles. My dark shoulder length hair swung easily in its new style. Even my make-up looked well. I felt sexy too.

Chris had arranged to meet me in town. He'd suggested Café en Seine on Dawson Street and I eagerly agreed. 'Eight o'clock,' he said.

It was still early for a Friday night. The after work drinkers were peeling themselves off the bar stools in waves, leaving room for the more jittery evening crowd. Suits were being replaced by jeans, short skirts and lots of cologne. I got some interested glances as I walked down the long bar. I tried not to panic and walk as if I owned the place. I kept my gaze and stride even.

After walking down one side and up the other, I parked myself on a bar stool. It was a vast emporium and I decided against walking its full length. Let Chris find me. I ordered a vodka and tonic. No sooner had it arrived than a young man appeared beside me. 'Let me,' he said. 'No thank you,' I said. 'I'm meeting someone.'

'Well if you change your mind,' he laughed and moved on. I smiled. He could only have been in his twenties. What had happened in the twenty years since I'd left the singles game? It was a bit different to say the least. I don't remember being offered drinks in pubs, or perhaps it was only dirty old men that offered to buy me drinks when I was in my twenties, not dirty young men!

By drink number two I was almost in tears. I'd had exhausted my emails on my phone, I'd even sent surfer dude a message, I'd checked Facebook, but resisted tweeting my location since it was a little out of the ordinary and read several fascinating articles on the Journal.ie. Enough was enough. As I put the phone back into my bag, and prepared to leave, Chris appeared. He was panting and apologetic. 'Oh babe,' he said. 'I am so sorry. I got stuck on a call with my folks. Little sis had an accident and they were mad. Took me twenty minutes to calm them down. Another ten to get off the call. I'm sorry, I couldn't even call you 'cause they were on my mobile.'

'You look great,' he added and kissed me. A long deep kiss. He pulled back his head. 'Am I forgiven?'

I had to smile. If Chris were a brand I'd buy him. If he were a drug, I'd take him. If he were a drink, I'd down him in one. 'Well,' I said. 'I'm a bit cross.' Chris in response just smiled, bear hugged me, and said: 'You are the best.'

It turned out that the accident his little sis had was getting pregnant. Not married and not with the father. She was the sensible one of the family, an accountant and single. Her work always came first but a one night stand some months ago had resulted in her being up the duff. Chris was comical in describing his parents. Well-meaning but old-fashioned, they'd coped with him being the mad one in the family but were horrified by his sister's demise. 'She is the good child but gets penalised as a result,' he said. 'And it's not that my parents are bad, just they had expectations of her and not of me. A bit unfair really. Like the prodigal son, or daughter rather.'

We had drink number four before Chris led the way to the Thai restaurant across the road. I swayed a little on my heels. Chris held my arm again. The tiny restaurant was busy and we were led to a small table in the back.

It was dark. It was approximately four o'clock in the morning and my head felt like a mellow split in two. Chris was splayed out beside me. His body over the duvet and sprawled with the same ease of a child. He snored gently. I tried to raise my head from the pillow but the sharp pain of the early hangover and Chris's arm over my chest stopped me. I stayed still, closed my eyes and tried to piece together the events of the night.

I remembered dinner. I remembered drinking white wine. I remembered the Sambucas courtesy of the restaurant. I remembered the taxi. I wasn't sure what I remembered next but my eyes felt puffy. Dear Lord, I thought, don't say I had cried.

Wriggling out from under his arm, I made my way to a bathroom. The light had been left on and it hummed softly. It appeared to be a one bedroom flat. I opened the door of the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. I gasped. I looked awful, my hair was a rat's nest, but it was my eyes, puffy and horrible, they spoke volumes. I sank onto the toilet and peed, the sound noisy in the quiet flat. I wiped myself and looked again at my face. I dipped an edge of a towel into the cold water from the tap and dabbed my eyes. I squeezed them tight in memory, unfocused memory and opened them again. The look hadn't changed.

I crawled back under Chris's arm. I turned around and edged back into his body. My memory, as it surfaced, was not forgiving.

I was woken later by Chris's cock entering me. He had moved over and pushed his cock into me and slowly edged up inch by inch. He didn't speak, but kissed my neck and pulled my hair back. It hurt but then everything hurt. I arched my back into him, pushing my ass onto his cock. As it filled me, I swivelled round to him, and he looked at my swollen eyes. 'Oh babe,' he said not unkindly and kissed them, 'You are some mess.' I didn't care, I bucked into him and cried out. Chris fucked me harder; he grasped my hips and drawing his body up, thrust into

me hard. It hurt. He contorted and yelled, 'Fuck me Aoife, fuck me babe.' Fuck me I thought, I've nothing left. It was all about the fuck.

He came and collapsed. Then his arm crept around me and he pulled me close. 'Crying is not a good look for you,' he said. 'You know, I'm not the man for you.' He paused. He breathed on my neck, then he kissed me. 'We had this conversation last night but I'm not sure you remember babe.'

I half remembered and half filled in the gaps. I'd been very drunk and very morose. A case of 'why did everything happen to me?' In the end, Chris had poured two large brandies, not that I needed any, and downing his in one, went to bed, leaving me sitting in the oversized leather chair and crying. He'd kissed my head in passing. 'Come to bed babe,' he'd said. I don't remember how long I sat there. I remembered pouring another brandy, equally unneeded, before making my way unsteadily to bed. I undressed and half climbed, half fell into bed. I had notions of talking some more, but Chris was asleep and I was very drunk. I had notions of having sex but Chris was asleep and I was very drunk. My notions, like noxious alcoholic fumes, wafted up in a cloud and seeped out the window before I passed out.

Chris rang me before he flew out. 'If you need a break, come visit me,' he said. I thanked him but didn't say much else. The little web of self-deception had been torn. There was no way I would fly out, even if I needed a break. My dalliance had been sweet. I regretted that I had cried, not because it affected anything but because I'd wasted a night when I could have been laughing. 'There have been

enough nights when I cried myself to sleep,' I said to Trish. 'I didn't need to waste a perfectly good one with Chris on that.'

'Don't beat yourself up,' said Trish. 'Chris is a nice guy, you had some fun.' Here she paused. 'You had great sex with a sex god. You just need to find another. The seal is broken.'

I laughed. Maybe the seal was broken.

Chapter Thirteen

Work was a challenge. Brian reckoned all support would be migrated to off shore within three months. A suitable partner come investor had been found and management were just working out the details. Mostest's support would soon be in India. It also meant that I had to prepare a detailed handover for the Indian partner, in addition to my regular work load. On top of that, Brian wanted me to look at the marketing.

'For fuck's sake, let me do the handover first,' I swore, not quite under my breath. Brian shot me a look. 'Cursing, Aoife?' he said. 'Very unusual for you.'

'I'm under pressure,' I muttered. 'You have no idea.' My phone beeped. I refrained from looking but Sarah piped up. 'Is that your DJ sex god Aoife,' she said cattily.

I cursed fluently under my breath. Why oh why had I bothered to mention Chris to Sarah. The short lived pleasure of boasting was long since eradicated and I really felt like punching my work colleague. I'm not a violent woman I said to myself but I would like to slap that bitch. I swallowed. This was not me I thought. I am just overwrought and under pressure. Not a good combination.

I looked up at Sarah and Brian who were both watching me intently. 'I have no idea who has texted me,' I said. 'I'm at work so it is not important. However, it

is a lot for me to manage my full time job, prepare a handover for India and look at my new role all at the same time.

Sarah gasped. 'New job,' she said. 'But I thought you were being made redundant?'

Now it was the turn of Brian and I to look at Sarah. It crossed my mind this was like a sitcom- such was the switching of intent gazes. 'Really?' said Brian, getting in first.

Sarah had the good grace to look shamefaced. 'Oh, when I heard that support was going offshore I just presumed.' She shrugged her shoulders. 'It never occurred to me that Aoife might find a new job.' And here she looked at me directly. 'Would you be able to retrain? You've done support for so long,' and her voice trailed off.

And now I laughed. 'I'm not a pensioner Sarah. I do have a brain and qualities to offer Mostest. I'm going to move into marketing. Have you any objections?'

Sarah's face looked the same way as when I told her about Chris. I wished Sarah would stop reminding me about Chris. Christ, I had an overwhelming impulse to hit her. This was not good. I had never even slapped my children, preferring the bold step to physical punishment so why I wanted to hit out at another human being was quite beyond me. It was stress I knew. The loss of Chris too. I knew from day one it was never a runner but I so wished I had not mentioned him to Sarah. Just another stick for her to use.

Brian intervened. 'Aoife is a very talented woman with a lot to offer Mostest,' he said. 'There is no way the company would let her go. Talented women with her skills are hard to find.'

Sarah's jaw fell further but Brian just walked off. I felt a bit gobsmacked myself. I decided silence was best and buried my nose in my support screen. My phone beeped again and this time I looked. Bloody hell, fifteen new messages on the dating site. Ignoring Sarah and my earlier sanctimonious comment, I opened the app and glanced through the profiles. Surfer dude had sent me a message. *You sound hot* he said. *Have you got a pic?* Looking at his, I decided that I might load up a picture at the weekend. I looked through the other messages. Some without pics, two long messages, a couple of simple *hi's* and oh, I almost laughed out loud, someone had sent me a picture of his erect penis. I blocked him directly. Then went back and looked again and unblocked him. He might be a nice guy I said to myself.

'Maaaaa.' It was a long drawn out wail. Andrew had the knack. At thirteen he was half child half teenager. Some days he was brilliant and I marvelled at his homework, his attitude and his school work. Other days he was needy and it really upset me that my beautiful boy doubted himself. Since Paul's removal of his 'things' Andrew had been reserved and circumspect. I had been very careful not to criticise Andrew at all. I had downplayed the fiasco but I knew it hurt him. Denis had no relationship with Paul and with every move, this looked firmly set in stone,

but Andrew still visited Paul every so often. He stayed over. He had met Lynda, and even Andrew said she was mousey. There is nothing like a son to protect you I thought.

'What?' I replied.

'My cup final on Wednesday.'

'I know. What about it?'

'Dad is coming.'

Feck. Feck. Feck, Why on earth was he bothering? In the past five years he hadn't turned up for any sporting events, he had missed all parent teacher meetings, and celebrated the boys' birthdays in his own time, typically by sending an inappropriate present some weeks later. This year he'd sent Denis pocket binoculars and Andrew roller blades. Why? Only Paul knew or perhaps he had delegated present-buying to his mousey concubine. I didn't know and cared less. Paul away from the boys was actually better than Paul interfering, so why the fuck was he coming to Andrew's rugby final?

'Ma?' Andrew looked at me. 'Why are you cursing?'

Fuck I thought. Why am I cursing? I must have said that last sentence out loud. 'Sorry,' I said. 'I'm just under a bit of stress at work.' Then I added. 'But why is Paul coming to the match?'

'He's my dad,' said Andrew defensively. 'He's entitled to come.'

'Of course,' I said hurriedly. Fuck, he wasn't even here and he was causing waves. 'That will be nice for you,' I added. 'Does Denis know?'

'No,' said Andrew. 'Will you tell him?'

Denis was less than pleased. His face grew dark as thunder. 'Why now?' he said echoing my thoughts. I paused. 'For Andrew's sake please don't make it hard for him. You are big enough to choose what you do, or don't do, but let him enjoy Paul coming without mixed emotions. I've already put my foot in it, I cursed when I heard he was coming and now Andrew is in a sulk.'

'Cursing Ma?' Denis laughed. 'Gosh, you are changing. Next you'll be dating.'

I frowned. It must have been George putting ideas into his head. 'Chance would be a fine thing,' I muttered and exited stage left in a hurry.

In the end, my father intervened, by accident. As I was preparing to leave work early to go watch the school's final, my mother rang. Dad had collapsed and an ambulance had taken him to hospital. I made a few phone calls. Another mum promised to take the boys home and I left a message on Denis's phone explaining

what had happened. I said not to tell Andrew so he wouldn't be upset and that I may get there before the match was over anyway. It just depended on how my dad was.

I left work with mixed feelings. Mum hadn't been too specific about how Dad had collapsed but the hospital might be able to work out what was causing the dementia. It was so extreme and periodic that it didn't seem normal. I imagined that most people slipped into dementia, but it didn't happen quite so dramatically - especially the naked exhibitionism. George and I had laughed about it, but it surely wasn't funny when it did happen

Mum met me in the waiting room. Dad had been admitted and was unconscious. He had collapsed after lunch, went down like a dead man in the kitchen. Mum had watched helpless as he half rose from his chair and then keeled over, knocking plates and sending cups flying on his way down. He'd banged his head against the side of the table too, it had already turned a nasty bluish colour but the hospital staff was not worried about that. There was something else, something that had caused the collapse in the first place. The word tumour had been mentioned.

The consultant had not been to see mum yet. He would, they were promised, when he had completed his examination and run several tests, possibly a scan too. There was no point in seeing him earlier as he had no news. The nursing staff said dad was comfortable and in no discernible or immediate danger. I went in with Mum to look at him. He lay quietly in his bed, eyes closed and the bruise showing

horribly on his right temple. There wasn't much to say. He looked very still, I thought, and his skin looked grey, slack and papery. I looked at his left hand lying like a dead thing on the counter pane. I didn't want to touch it. It didn't look like my dad, a poor imitation perhaps, but not really him. I felt a slipping away and it frightened me. The naked stunts were upsetting but sort of comical. This was very different: grownup and unpleasant. Growing up was not easy. I often compared it to cleaning out the sink plug hole after washing up the dishes from a messy roast dinner. As a child I'd refused to even countenance it. As a grownup I didn't bat an eyelid. Looking at my father, I had the feeling I was watching the same detritus and aftermath of a meal and it scared me.

At that moment, an orderly arrived with a trolley. 'We're bringing Trevor down for a scan,' he said. Only in his early twenties, it struck me as odd that he should call my dad by his first name, as if he knew him. Another, slightly older, orderly appeared at the door as well and smiled at both of us. I bundled Mum out of the room. I didn't want to see them lifting my father's prone body onto the trolley.

Sitting in the waiting room, I texted Denis again. *I won't be home til late. Dad not great. I'll call you later.* My mum sat quietly. Hands folded in her lap, her face expressionless. I didn't really feel like talking much either. I got up and wandered to the vending machine. 'Do you want a coffee?' I asked her. 'Not at the moment, thanks love,' mum replied.

Hospital waiting rooms must be among the most wretched places in the world, I thought. Time has a different quality, slower and almost stalling. Each second creeps past as if in slow motion. The sounds in the corridor of nurses' soft shoes squeaking on the hard floors, their quiet voices murmuring medical advice or maybe gossiping about last weekend's activities. Their uniforms softly swishing as they walked. And the smell, that disinfected odourless smell that was unmistakable.

I read my mail, looked at Twitter, Facebooked, and looked at the new messages on the dating site. Everything seemed very unreal, as if a vast empty room separated me from the rest of the world. I could still see what was going on, but at a remove. Everyone's voices were echoed and distant and their faces blurry. Penis man, as I called him, had sent another message. *Did you like my cock?* he asked plaintively. I smiled. *Lovely* I wrote back. Poor man was either lacking in confidence or short of things to say. His reply was rapid. *Would you sit on it?* I sighed. Not now I thought and didn't bother replying. I turned to Surfer dude. His levels of conversation were considerably more advanced. *Hey babe, when am I getting that picture? Tell me more about you? Where would you go on a first date?* I thought about that. Heading off to Galway had been a pretty impressive first date. I wasn't sure that I could replicate that awesomeness the next time around. I wasn't sure I wanted to. Restlessly I flicked through the other messages. Everyone bored me. Nothing was of interest. All I could think of was my father's closed eyes and the swirling water going down the drain hole.

'Ah George,' mum said. I closed my phone and stood up. George was striding across the floor to us wearing full biker gear. He made the room seem very small and sterile. As he hugged first mum and then me, I smelt leather, road dust and petrol. It was a welcome relief from the disinfectant air. I noticed his eyes were wet. 'How's Da?' he asked. 'I came as soon as I heard.'

The consultant arrived at six o'clock. Dr Connelly was his name. He was very tall and stick thin. He leaned into mum when he spoke, like a crane. Dad was doing fine, under the circumstances. An inflammation had been identified which appeared to have grown sufficiently large to be of danger, hence the coma. Oh my God I thought. It's no longer just unconscious, it's a coma. I looked with big eyes at mum and George. I could see George had registered the term too, but mum just looked up at Dr Connelly with little change in her expression. An operation was out of the question, but Dr Connelly mentioned new radical drugs, drugs that could reduce the inflammation harmlessly. 'We would know in less than a week,' he said.

'Then,' said mum evenly. 'We try the drugs.'

George followed mum home. He would stay the night he said. I went onto the school. The match was in the closing minutes. I spotted Denis near the home goal. I pushed my way through the crowds. 'How are they doing?' I asked. Denis smiled. 'We're winning. Clear all the way. How is Grandad?'

'Not so hot,' I filled Denis in on the prognosis and the drugs. 'Wow,' he said. 'That's not good.'

'But, it might explain his other erratic behaviour,' he added. I nodded. Please God the drugs would work and my father would regain consciousness. His dementia seemed harmless now by comparison, but it might explain the sudden mood changes. Dr Connelly had been less impressed by dad's naked antics, he didn't draw a direct parallel between the two, but he hadn't ruled it out either. 'But first things first,' he said. 'Let's start the drug programme and reduce that swelling.'

The referee blew his final whistle and there was pandemonium in the home crowd. Kids swarmed onto the pitch and hugged the champions. I was jostled by the crowd but I smiled proudly trying to catch Andrew's eye. His face was bright red and he was grinning from ear to ear. Team mates were jumping up and down, hugging and punching each other in delight. The team had been the underdogs and not expected to win. I felt tears prickle at the back of my eyes. I was so proud of Andrew and so glad to have got here in time, even if it was only for the final minutes, but to see his face and happiness was priceless. I started to move forward onto the pitch to join the happy throng. Denis had wandered off to the far side line to chat with someone in his year. I looked at Andrew, he was smiling so hard. I was about to call out to him, when I saw Paul emerge from the crowd at the other side and embrace his son.

Chapter Fourteen

'You don't mind Ma, do you?' asked Andrew with big eyes.

'Of course not darling, if that's what you want,' I lied. I felt a heavy weight in my heart. I'd actually planned a celebratory dinner at home with the two boys. I had shopped at the weekend for the purpose and bought Andrew's favourite foods: prawns and steak, and a heavenly death by chocolate pudding from Aldi. Andrew looked a little torn himself. 'Well, I could do it another time,' he began. 'I know you have the dinner... ' and his voice trailed off.

'Don't be silly, it'll keep till tomorrow and we can have double celebrations.'

Denis was not impressed. 'You should have said no Ma,' he argued. 'You can't let dad just walk all over your plans. It wasn't as if you hadn't made those arrangements. You have to stand up to him.'

I sighed. 'Let it be, for Andrew's sake,' I said. I was tired. All I wanted was my bed. Why was it that Paul had seemed overly sanctimonious at the pitch? He'd said he wanted to take his son out for dinner, as if Andrew was only his son and not mine. As if I might try to contradict him. He intended to visit the new Indian. His didn't mention Denis and he didn't invite me. Andrew's face had first filled with elation and then conflict as he beamed at his father before looking at his mother.

Denis stomped around the house. I put on a pizza for the two of us and tidied the kitchen. My phone beeped. It was surfer dude. *Are you ready for our first date?* he said. I wrote back, *Yes but not this week'*

Not this week. I repeated the mantra more than once. Please, not this week when Brian asked me to finish the handover plans early. Not this week when O'Brien asked for my marriage summary. Not this week when Andrew returned from the meal with his father talking about spending more time with him. When had things got so difficult? After work each night, I visited my father. Mum's routine was to come to the hospital mid-afternoon and she welcomed my arrival. George came after he closed the shop, around eight by which stage I could return home to the boys. I didn't sleep. I felt like a robot, things got done but only by rote. When I closed my eyes I felt as though I was viewing the world from inside my father's closed eyelids. It was a creepy and horrible idea but it lodged fast in my brain, forcing me to open my eyes time and again.

By the end of the week dad's coma was still constant but the inflammation was smaller, only marginally, but it had definitely reduced. This was a positive said Dr Connelly. He believed the coma had been triggered by pressure exerted by the swelling. 'We've arrested the growth for now. The trick is to see if we can reverse it more aggressively. We should know in the next day or two.'

I changed my mantra to 'Please this week' for my Dad.

I returned to work when Andrew was in Montessori. Initially I found it hard to find work as I'd gone straight from college to being at home with the children. I picked up some contract work in Dublin but it tended to be a bit erratic. When both boys were in primary school I went back and completed a masters in digital studies. That was a tough year as I was working in the local supermarket during the mornings, attending college in a part time basis and also juggling home responsibilities. Paul did not like my doing the masters. At the time, I thought it was because he resented the extra pressure on the family unit. In hindsight I believe he didn't like my having a better qualification than him. He could be quite competitive and arrogant. For example, when the boys were small and still getting up during the night, Paul would insist I did all the night duties, regardless of if I'd been up many times that week or even that night. His was the main job supporting the family he said and he needed the sleep.

Paul then got a promotion at work which was great because it meant more money. With my masters under my belt I also landed a full time job and for the first time in our marriage, finances were not an issue. Ironically, Paul also began to travel more with work and we began to lead separate lives.

We had met and married young; a common circumstance. We had children early on in our marriage but that did not cement the relationship, if anything it divided us. Paul was not

very hands on when the kids were younger and then he became quite dictatorial as they got bigger. It was fine when they were young, but I could see problems as they got older and moved towards the teenager years. Paul and I did not agree on parenting techniques. We never discussed it prior to having kids and then we never got around to talking about it when we had kids. A Catch 22 situation I guess. We argued a lot about the children which didn't help.

I think we just grew apart in the final years of the marriage. Paul was busy with his job and I with mine. I continued to be the hands-on parent, the one who would take time off to go parent teacher meetings, to run the boys to their various activities and most weekends I was the taxi mum while Paul played golf. He was the main breadwinner in the family and he felt it gave him the right to use his spare time for him. I found the unequal sharing of family tasks upsetting but he did not agree. Ironically now that we are separated 100 percent of the boys' attention is down to me as they live with me. Denis, my elder child, does not talk to his father. The younger, Andrew only sees him every couple of months.

The marriage finally collapsed when it transpired that Paul had been having an affair. It had been going on for a year before he told me and moved out. I was shocked. It was dishonest.

We are not on good terms. He pays the mortgage still but nothing else.

Recently Paul entered the house when I was not here and removed a large number of items, some of them valuable. He did this without permission or consultation. This was very upsetting to both my children. It was very upsetting to me.

I yawned. I was tired of writing in measured tones. I was tired full stop. I remembered what my father had said. Divorce was just a process. It was just a process of agreeing a list of things; some of them very arbitrary. Tick them off the list one by one and eventually you reach the end, he'd said. Was it the same with life I worried? But how did you know you'd reached the end? Who said when the list was done?

Chapter Fifteen

'Oh my God,' I was crying and hugging my mother. I'd arrived ten minutes prior to the most wonderful news. My father had woken and blinked his eyes. He hadn't said anything, just looked at mum in a detached way. Then he'd yawned and closed his eyes again. Mum was crying too. Relief was palpable on her face. Dr Connelly had been summoned and by the time he arrived, dad was awake once more and asking for dinner. I shook with relief, laughing and crying at the same time. Colour flooded back in his cheeks and my dad was my dad again; warm and alive and hungry.

'Bring the boys next time,' he said as I left. 'I miss their bright faces.'

After dinner, I went back to the office. Denis and Andrew promised to come with me tomorrow night and I left them stacking the dishwasher. I needed to look at my handover plan. I was under huge pressure to have it finalised before the weekend. Sick father or no sick father, Mostest was moving offshore in the next week.

Once in the office, I poured coffee. I felt dead happy but dead tired. I sat at my desk and rested my head for a moment on my arms. I could have slept. Warily I raised myself up, took a large gulp of the warm coffee and turned on my computer. As it powered up, I opened the dating app on my phone, loaded up a blurry but acceptable picture and sent a wink to surfer dude. I put the phone back in my bag and turned my attention to work. For the next two hours I reviewed the handover plans, checking dates and tasks. I cross referenced links and procedures. I

reviewed steps and actions. By eleven o'clock I was satisfied that the manuals were complete and accurate. They would have to be as the partner company would be working outside Irish office hours and would have to make judgements on their own merit. A faulty operational support manual could be very costly to the company. I finally turned to the support escalation process, scoping the steps and points of contact. I hit save and closed the document. All I needed to do was review it in the morning and it was good to go.

My phone had not stopped beeping all evening. I finally looked at the dating app. Twenty messages? This was mad. Was there only one single woman on the site? I scanned down through the list. Surfer dude was there. *A sweet smile*, he said *you are pretty* and he asked how my father was. *Better* I replied. *You free for a date then?* he asked. *Yes* I said.

I acknowledged one or two other messages. Penis man had gone - he obviously needed lots of attention. There were some faceless men sending me notes. I started to write 'no pic no reply' on each but then stopped, instead deciding to alter my profile to say this.

Another beep, from MRM20, a faceless man I had just replied to. *Looks are not everything* he persisted. *I've read your profile and you seem very attractive. Would you look at mine perhaps?*

I sighed. Now that my picture was up I felt a bit impatient. If I could load up a picture then so too could other people. I stifled the thought that my ex might see the profile; that would be rotten and embarrassing. Or worse, if Denis saw it. Of

course, there was no reason for anyone connected to me to be on the site in the first place, but I was still a bit worried. I pushed thoughts of my sex god out of my mind. He wasn't *my* sex god anymore.

MRM20's profile was well written. He worked in accounts, was 46 and had two grown up children. His interests were history, reading and mountain walking. He enjoyed life and wanted to meet a fun woman. I stifled a yawn. I wasn't sure if it was just my tiredness or the profile. It was just too, well, boring if truth be told. Manners provoked me into replying once more. 'You have a nice profile but since this is a dating site I would prefer to see a picture of you.' I snapped closed my phone, turned off the computer and left the office. Enough was enough.

Chapter Sixteen

Surfer Dude was actually Steven Miller from Cork, now living in Dundrum. He also worked in IT, but in sales for a multinational. He was 31 years old but looked older, his hair wisper than in the picture. His surfing escapades were also in the past although he still liked to hit the water at the Forty Foot on Christmas day, his one concession to not getting old he said. I laughed. He was funny, if a little arrogant. 'I've always wondered about the Forty Foot,' I said. 'Isn't it freezing?'

'Yep, but it means Christmas dinner tastes fantastic,' he said. We'd been chatting on the phone ever since dad had woken up. It had taken another two weeks but now finally here we were on a Thursday evening sitting in a bar. I found it refreshing that he hadn't stormed into sexting. He'd made it clear that he found me very attractive. He'd asked me once if I liked kinky sex and I'd replied honestly I wasn't sure what he meant by that. Steven had just laughed and said he hoped I liked doing what I was told. I had blushed on the phone and wanted to ask more but felt incredibly naïve. He'd changed the subject and I hadn't found a way to bring it up again.

I was 'working' tonight. I wondered how I managed to invent such excuses so easily. Actually it wasn't that far from the truth. Management in Mostest had insisted that the first two weeks of handover had real time support. So I and four other Irish employees were deputised to run night shifts between them. All good so far. The only problem was while I got days off in lieu of nights, using one of my 'off

nights' to meet Steven meant I would be wrecked working through the next day and night. Oh, well, I'd have to resort to coffee and red bull and hoping nothing too bad could happen.

Steven had no children and was just out of a long term relationship. I wondered if the whole world, including myself, was just out of a long term relationship. It certainly provided a level playing field where hearts were unlikely to be broken, again. I didn't remember being so confident about my relationship status when younger. Before it was either you were single or you were *doing a line* with someone and if you kept on doing that line, typically you ended up getting married. Relationships were no longer so linear, it appeared. There were many starting points and some of them were stationary with no intention of moving anywhere, line or no line.

Right now, it suited me. I wanted some *me* time, some fun time. It had been tough worrying about my dad and mum. He should be home soon: his recovery had been impressive and the swelling was now only a dot on a scan. Dr Connelly conceded the naked antics may have been a result of pressure. He didn't state it categorically but there seemed empirical evidence. Dad was just keen to get home and so too was mum, especially if she got her husband back. 'I worried about the frequency of the turns,' she confessed to me one evening in the hospital. 'I worried that he might end up getting arrested for indecent exposure or something. I'll be so relieved if they go away.'

I hugged my mum. 'Of course, they will. They had to be connected. And, 'I added. 'I'm pretty relieved myself. Hopefully we can laugh about it soon.'

Steven suggested another round of pints and I agreed. I'd prepared dinner at home with the boys before I left, but didn't eat much with a combination of anticipation and nerves making my appetite vanish. 'Bring a sandwich to work with you Ma,' suggested Denis when he saw how little I had eaten.

'Oh, there is stuff in the canteen if I get hungry, don't worry,' I said. At that moment George arrived. He really was becoming the best big brother one could have, I decided. I had told him of course about the date and he looked slightly askance at me. 'Making up for lost time?' he said. 'Yes,' I said firmly. Trish had also teased me. 'Have you forgotten Chris so soon?' she asked.

'I've lots of frogs to kiss before I find my prince, and while he was charming, there is no future with Chris. He made that very clear and he never misled me. So, I'm in the mood for some long overdue fun,' I retorted.

'Very true,' smiled Trish. 'Enjoy your freedom before you are snaffled up again.'

'It'll be a long time before I give up my freedom again,' I said. 'Everything is bloody hard but I like being my own woman. I like making decisions that are right

for the boys and me. Anyway, who'd take me on, no money, two boys, ailing parents, and a dodgy line in jokes!

Steven was keen to take me on. When we met, he'd practically wolf whistled but managed to convert his involuntary whistle movement into a smile. 'You look great,' he said. And then repeated himself: 'Really great.'

Steven made me laugh, sometimes unintentionally. He kept on repeating stuff about getting older. I had to complain in the end though when he mentioned pensions and investments. 'Don't,' I said. 'Don't spoil the mood.'

Steven had the good grace to smile. 'You'd never guess you were 42,' he said. 'You look fabulous.'

'If you say that once more, I'll have to kill you,' I said. 'Leave the age card at home - pensions, my age, the pyramids.'

Steven looked puzzled. 'I didn't mention any smelly dead Egyptians and their palaces,' he said.

'Well don't.'

Later Steven asked if I would like to come back to his place for a nightcap. 'It's not very far,' he said. I agreed and we walked in companionable silence for a bit. Passing a park edged with wrought iron railings, Steven grabbed my arm. 'This way,' he said and pulled me into the dark side of the trees. He pushed me up against a tree trunk and began kissing me. For all his roughness in grabbing me, his lips were soft and yielding. He bit me gently and circled my lips with his tongue. 'You are one pretty woman,' He said. 'I've wanted to kiss you all night. You have the sexiest lips,' and he pushed his tongue into my mouth. I arched my back and lent into him. He continued kissing me gently, moving his fingers through my hair and gently but firmly twisting the roots through his fingers before pulling hard. I gasped. My head went back and Steven moved from my lips down my exposed throat. 'Oh, you have little red riding hood's neck,' he murmured. 'Sweet and white and very bite-able.'

I held my breath but he just kept on nibbling and kissing. I couldn't move my head and it felt vulnerable. 'What are you doing?' I asked. 'Just nibbling your pretty neck,' replied Steven. He straightened and released my hair. I looked at him and he smiled. 'You are so pretty.' He repeated.

He pulled me back up from the truck of the tree. 'My apartment is just through the park,' he said. 'I just couldn't wait to kiss you.' He put an arm around my shoulders and squeezed. 'You are the best kisser,' he said.

Steven poured two large vodkas and added lemonade, ice and lime. The ice clinked in the tall glasses as he walked across the apartment. We'd had to climb four sets of stairs to the 'penthouse' apartment as Steven called it. Both of us were slightly out of breath as he opened the door with a flourish. I have to admit it was dramatic. A low-ceiling room under the eaves but there was a picture postcard window overlooking the park. 'Wow,' I'd said admiringly.

Sitting now with my drink on a secretary's chair, I swivelled it backwards and forth, making the ice clink again. I took another sip. Steven was sitting on a large over-stuffed leather sofa which took up most of the narrow living room. He was watching me closely. Nothing was said. My ice clinked again as I took another sip. I looked at my glass as if surprised. I shook it gently and the ice made a dull tinkling sound. I wondered if I might comment on it. I looked up again at Steven and he was watching me still. He had sat back on the sofa and was sprawled in a relaxed position. I felt terribly stiff by comparison. I wanted to re-cross my legs or recline somehow. But my chair only had one position, upright. It backed onto a desk where Steven had his laptop.

Before mixing the drinks, he'd set up music on it. I wondered if I might swivel around and check out the music selection. I wondered if I might say something to break the ice, and thinking that thought I laughed. I looked at Steven but he wasn't laughing.

'I'd like you to do what I tell you,' he said quietly. I paused. My brain froze. My heart pounded. 'I...' I said and then I stopped. I wasn't sure. 'I'm not sure.' I looked at Steven and he smiled.

'You can say stop at any time but I'd like you to do what I tell you.'

I took a deep breath. 'Ok.'

'In that case, relax,' said Steven. 'You are going to have the best sex tonight if you do as I tell you.'

Which is how I had come to be standing stark naked wearing a blindfold in the middle of the room. Steven had told me to stand and piece by piece to remove my clothes. It was a strip tease only I wasn't dancing. When I got down to my bra and panties I hesitated. 'Remove your bra,' he repeated. Fuck I thought. In for a penny I thought and I unhooked my clasp and let the bra fall to the ground with the rest of my discarded clothes. Steven stood up and walked around me. 'Good girl,' he said. 'You are very sexy. Now take off your panties and I'm going to put a blindfold on.'

I sucked in my breath and reached down to pull down my panties. As I straightened, Steven stepped behind me and pulled the blindfold down over my eyes. I could only see immediately below, I could see his shoes as he moved away. With the blindfold on, I felt utterly isolated and hyper sensitive. I heard a clink of ice again and then flinched when I felt a cube rubbed up against my left nipple. He

pulled it away and then applied it to my right nipple. He rubbed it round in a circle and I felt my nipple contracting and tightening. 'Hmmm,' he said softly next to my ear and I felt his lips brushing my neck. My whole body shivered and contracted and I was suddenly wet. I then felt the ice cube rubbed along my pussy. It was nearly melted now and dripped as Steven pushed it back and forth between my lips. My whole being was focused on the ice and where it might go next. I wondered if the wetness was from the melted cube or me.

I sensed him reaching back to get another fresh ice cube. This time he drew a cold line down my back and round each buttock. He then brought the cold dripping cube between the top of my cheeks and rubbed me gently, easing it between them and down as far as my anus. He rubbed it and pushed the by-now diminished ice cube into my butt hole. I formed a silent O with my mouth.

Steven stepped back and I could see his shoes disappear out of sight. I strained my ears to listen and heard the sound of the fridge door opening, some packaging noises sounding loud to me and then I heard him return.

I shivered again. I felt truly naked, vulnerable and very much alive. 'Sit down,' commanded Steven. I obeyed feeling behind me for the chair. I perched at the edge and pulled my arms around me. I worried I might drip onto the chair.

'No,' commanded Steven. 'Put your arms by your sides and open your mouth.' I unwrapped my arms and they fell stiffly by my sides, my whole body rigid with anticipation. I opened my mouth a little. 'Wider,' said Steven and I did. Something cold and hard was in my mouth. I wasn't sure what to do. 'Bite,' said

Steven and I did. A cold sensation went through my teeth and sweetness surged in my mouth. I bit it again. It was a strawberry. I swallowed. 'Open, said Steven and I did. He pushed the remainder of the strawberry into my mouth and I ate that too. Some juice escaped and slid down my chin. Steven rubbed it with his finger and put his finger in my mouth. 'You missed some, lick this' he said and I did.

Steven fed me three more strawberries. They were juicy and sweet and sometimes as I bit into them the juice squirted down my chin. Each time, Steven used his finger to wipe the fruit spit back into my mouth. 'Good girl,' he said, 'but I think there is something missing.' I heard some more muffled noises. I wasn't sure but thought Steven had picked up something metallic. I heard a rustling noise and then quiet. My breathing was quick and sharp. I could hear his too.

'Open your mouth,' Steven said and I did. This time I heard a hissing noise and a frothy coolness filled my mouth. 'Wait,' said Steven and I did. Then I felt him push something thick into my mouth and I bit it.

That the police were not called was a miracle, I told Trish afterwards. Steven had been feeding me strawberries and decided to add cream. What he had not informed me was that he was adding his penis too. And he did not intend me to bite it. 'I didn't really bite that hard,' I said. 'It was a Pavlovian reaction. Three strawberries in and I thought I was on my fourth. They were really nice.' I sighed.

The real damage was done seconds later. Steven's scream had caused me to freeze and bite even harder. It was the fight or flight reaction. For what seemed like an eternity but possibly only lasting a couple of seconds, I bit down hard on the penis strawberry. My whole body froze and my arms stiffened. It was only when Steven slapped my face and called me a crazy bitch that I released my vicelike grip and fell backwards, ejecting the injured penis at the same time. Scrambling to my feet, I pulled off the blindfold and watched in horror as Steven knelt on the ground and cupped his cream covered penis moaning loudly. I half swallowed, half spat out the remained spray cream in my mouth. It didn't taste very good at that point, just sickly sweet and wet. 'Oh I'm so sorry,' I said, somewhat inadequately, but I was not sure what else to say.

There didn't seem much point in remaining after that. I dressed and Steven eventually stopped moaning. He had cursed a lot at me which, while I found it offensive. I could also understand. 'Very regrettable,' was the phrase that came to mind. As soon as I felt he was not in any medical danger, I ordered a taxi. It was time to go home. I did not suggest that we might meet again. Somehow accidentally biting a man's penis on the first date and causing visible harm did not seem a good basis for an ongoing relationship.

That night, as I crept into my bed, I giggled. Both George and the boys were asleep and I didn't want to wake them until morning to say I was home. Oh dear Lord dating was a bit more complicated than when I was a young thing. Dessert usually came after the main course and not complete with a penis. It was putting the horse before the cart, or the penis before the mouth. Not to be recommended.

However, I also thought about the excitement before the cream accident; that had been very heady indeed. A thought crossed my mind. I got up again and fumbling in my knicker drawer took out the unused rampant rabbit. Trish had thoughtfully included batteries. I unpacked the large pink vibrator, inserted batteries and switched it on. Oh my God. It hummed like an industrial generator and lights flashed as if it were a merry-go-round. This was anything but discrete. In the quiet of the night, I wondered if it might wake the boys or George in the room next door. Might he think there was a burglar breaking in and run in to tackle him. If the cream incident had not happened earlier, then I would have dismissed this as a freaky idea and not worth considering. But my life was now divided into pre cream accident and post. This was a world where mad things could and would happen. Hastily I turned the vibrator off. If the police were narrowly avoided earlier it would be the funny farm if George or the boys decided to attack the vibrating burglar. I giggled weakly. When had my world been turned on its head? I would make do with my fingers instead.

Chapter Seventeen

As it was, there was almost pandemonium in the morning. I'd woken up still laughing over the cream incident. I'd risen, put on a dressing gown and walked onto the landing straight into George who yelled almost as loudly as Steven had the night before. The only difference was once George had stopped yelling and cursing, he laughed. But then he didn't have an injured penis. The boys tumbled out of their rooms, sleepy and flustered. It took about five minutes before calm descended and I explained that I'd double booked the night shift and so I'd come home instead. Denis and Andrew both nodded their heads but George cocked his to one side. 'Later,' I promised,

Lunch with Trish that week was gold standard. 'I'm not letting you out alone again,' laughed Trish, tears running down her face. 'You need a chaperone at all times. Oh dear lord, biting his pecker,' and she broke off in helpless laughter again. I was laughing hard too. I had texted an apology the next day but Steven hadn't replied. I'd hurt more than his pride and there was no way to make amends. But I remembered the thrill of being blindfolded and all my other senses being heightened. I wondered if I could find someone else like that, kinky he'd said. Trish had just laughed when I'd asked her about kinky sex. 'If I see you wearing leather I'm calling the Sex Police,' she said.

'What are the Sex Police?'

'I don't know but I'm going to call them. You are doing my marriage no good whatsoever! Except I'd say after this incident Tom is glad he's married to me and not to you!'

I kept an eye on the dating app. I noticed that Steven was not online and wondered if he had retired from dating altogether. I wouldn't blame him. I got another reply from MPM20. He seemed nice but wanted to talk at length before he would show his photograph. I humoured him but was sceptical. I remembered my first date with Firefox121 and the rather large discrepancy between his descriptive self and the actual reality.

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, I thought. Only without beholding I can't tell if you are beauty or not.

The school term was rapidly pulling to a close. Matches played and won. Exams sat and results to come. I got notice of the parent teacher meetings for third and fifth years; a task I half dreaded. It wasn't that the boys misbehaved but more that it took so long, queuing up to meet the staff, talking with the other parents, and always joining the wrong the queue, the long queue. But on Tuesday evening during dinner Andrew announced that Dad was coming to his parent teacher

meetings. I nearly choked on my mouthful. Paul? Even when we'd been married Paul left all that to me. 'Why is he coming?' I asked.

'He's my Dad,' said Andrew defensively. 'He's allowed come to the parent teacher meetings.'

'Wow,' I said. 'Let me think about this.' I didn't want to talk any further without thinking about the implications. Denis fortunately was not home yet, some extra rugby training, for which I was very relieved. Then I realised that Andrew probably saved this news for me alone. A thought struck me. 'Does Paul want to do Denis's teacher meetings too?'

Andrew had the grace to look shamefaced. His earlier tone of aggression disappeared. 'No, at least I don't think so,' he said.

I rang my mother. Dad was home and doing fine and no more turns. The natural order of things was righting itself. I asked my mother what I should do. 'If you want my opinion, let Paul do the meetings. Don't go as well as you'll only find it impossible. But can you ring his year head and just explain the sensitivities? The last thing you want to do is embarrass Andrew.'

I rang Mr Smyth. I didn't know him that well. I found the conversation a little awkward. 'It's just he has never done these meetings before even when we were married,' I finished lamely.

'Don't worry Mrs Brennan,' said Mr Smyth. 'We deal with a lot of separated parents here and our ultimate concern is always for the children. Andrew is doing

fine and we'll be happy to accommodate his father. If you wish to have a separate meeting I can go through his school work with you, but at this stage I can assure you we are very happy with his work and progress in school.'

I declined a separate meeting. I knew Andrew was doing well. I saw his homework, looked at his results and comments from the teachers and I saw them at regular periods too, either at open days or concerts or matches. I thanked Mr Smyth and hung up the phone.

Two days later Mr Smyth rang me and asked, no demanded, a separate meeting.

'Your husband,' he began. I wanted to straight away correct him. He wasn't mine anymore. He was definitely someone else's, but the look of sheer anger on his face stopped me. 'Your husband came to the parent teacher meetings and he made one teacher cry and had a shouting match with another. He had the audacity to question Andrew's attendance, his results, his selection for various sporting teams. I have never met a parent who questioned everything that we had done for his son with such aggression. If he were so angry and upset with the education Andrew was receiving here at St Philips, why did he not mention it sooner?'

I opened my mouth and then shut it again. 'I have no idea,' I said. 'I have no idea. I send him on the results and school reports but he has never said anything to me before.'

'In fact,' I added, 'he has never once asked me about either child's academic performance since we split. He talks to the boys but has never asked me.'

I slumped in the chair. 'I have a bad feeling about this,' I said.

The bad feeling was compounded when I received a large brown envelope from O'Brien. It contained Paul's affidavit. As I read his sworn statement my blood boiled. It was not enough we were experiencing two very different divorces. It appears we had experienced two quite separate marriages too.

I vented my anger on the dishwasher, the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine. When the boys questioned my new found zeal for housework I told them to be quiet. Something in the tight way I spoke made them back off and they went to kick a ball outside in the warm evening. I emptied and re stacked the dishwasher, filled another load of washing and vacuumed the downstairs. I then tackled the skirting boards, the cobwebs lurking in corners, the piles of books cluttering the dining room table and sideboard. Sometime later, Denis put his head around the door to get a glass of water but just one look at his mother was enough to make him back out again. 'That's some mood,' he said to Andrew and they stayed outdoors until darkness fell.

By then I had stopped cleaning. I was sitting in the old rocking chair and reading Paul's affidavit again. I was calmer now but still my blood boiled. The boys trooped past me and said goodnight. I barely acknowledged them but kept on reading. As I explained later to Trish, it was just the injustice of what he had written. 'I mean, he said I had no desire to work despite agreeing to this and that I

was slovenly around the house. Who says that?' I questioned angrily. 'Who says their wife was slovenly around the house?'

'And to make matters worse, he says that the intimate side of our marriage died after the children were born and that I refused him his conjugal rights. For fuck's sake,' I spat. 'Does he live in the dark ages? He has rights? Where are my rights? This is just a farce.'

Trish just held up her hand. 'It doesn't matter Aoife, really. The marriage is over. If he wants to be an aggressive bastard, then let him. You're so well out of it.'

I was fit to be tied. I was just as angry as when I first read his statement. 'He claims I was inconsistent with the children in terms of discipline,' I repeated. 'But if he thinks I'm so bloody useless at bringing up the children, how come he has basically handed the responsibility to me. And I don't count going to a parent teacher evening and creating havoc as an improvement in his role.'

'Does Andrew know about the commotion?' Trish asked.

'No, not from the school, unless Paul decides to share his disgust at the state of his son's education with Andrew, and he hasn't so far.'

'It's a mess,' Trish said and I agreed.

'Basically you bit the wrong penis.'

MRM20 was persistent. He wrote several times. I kept on replying. Actually keeping up with my dating messages was like having a second job. I found people came and went. Some days I could chat for ages with one guy but then he'd disappear. Other days I'd check the phone and there would be silence. I got a lot of emails from young guys, a lot of emails from much older men but funnily enough not that many from men my own age. I also got a lot of emails from men that I wasn't that pushed on. They seemed nice but I didn't really gel with their pictures. 'Would it be worth meeting them even,' I asked Trish. 'I'm just so busy, do I really want to use up my brownie points with George.'

MRM20 finally deigned to send a picture. He was so not my type that I laughed. He had a beard, which did not do it for me, and he looked every inch his age and then some. It was hard to tell, but I reckoned he had a bit of a belly too. In short, I did not fancy him. So, with a heavy heart and in a very polite tone I wrote back terminating the conversation.

MRM20 was furious. How dare I be so vacuous, so shallow? How could I terminate a conversation based purely on looks when they had been getting on so well otherwise? His indignation had no bounds, he was disappointed in me; he felt I was letting myself down. He went on and on like a wounded poet. I sighed. This was the bad end of internet dating I decided, as opposed to biting a man's dick! I'm never going to chat without a picture again. I wrote back like a Victorian school teacher, phrasing my words carefully. *Thank you so much for your earlier pleasant conversation, I wrote. However, I do not appreciate your verbal abuse at this point. This is a dating a site. This is about physical as well as intellectual attraction. While I found you*

most courteous, prior to your last email, I do not fancy you which is the purpose of this discourse, not pen pals but dating.

I sighed. I was climbing the walls. Breaking the seal had its consequences. Most mornings I reached for my clitoris. My body woke up before the alarm, usually a well-judged ten minutes or so, and I automatically reached down between my legs. How had this happened? How had I spent most of my adult life in limbo, in innocence? Now it was crucial every morning. I took to closing my door every night, much to the bemused reaction of the boys. They thought I was closing it against them, against their testosterone. In fact, I was closing it for my own morning glory. Of course, the rabbit was not taken out much. It was just too noisy, showy and down-right cumbersome. Anyway, I liked feeling myself. I liked the feeling when I rubbed and my pussy got wet. If I were using the vibrator, I missed out on the circle feeling: fingers to clit to brain and back again.

Often waking in a sleep drenched mode, my hand crept down. I was asleep but awake and knew I had to get up shortly. I would pull my hand back to my mouth and wet my fingers, and then creep back to my clitoris. One finger would rub, the other hand pull at my nipple. I pulled hard, teasing it out until it was almost painful. My other hand and one, maybe two, fingers rubbing. As I rubbed, I'd push my finger into my pussy. Wet, wet, wet, I'd think and it wasn't the group. Pushing my fingers into my pussy, coating them with wetness, I'd then return to my clitoris and rub again, consistent and regular. The familiar feeling built in me each time. I'd feel the rising orgasm. I'd rub harder, feeling and hearing the wet

sounds. Oh it was double pleasure, hearing my wetness and feeling it too. My legs shook and I came, morning after morning.

Finally, finally, I had a possible date. 'It is so exhausting,' I told Trish. 'I speak to so many men. We talk, we chat, we converse... then they disappear off the edge of the planet and the next lot arrive. But this guy sounds like fun.'

Of course he did. Since the strawberry incident as I preferred to think of it, not the penis incident, I had been looking for someone who ticked all my boxes and who liked to be in charge. I'd googled kinky sex on my phone and of course I'd read that ridiculous 50shades book, but I was neither an innocent virgin and nor did I have too big eyes and perfect skin. Trish didn't really want to hear about BDSM and so I'd reluctantly broached the subject in work with Sarah. Sarah had read the book too, hadn't everyone, but she didn't volunteer if she'd engaged in any kinky sex herself. It wasn't really water cooler conversation I decided. 'I say, when where you last tied up and spanked?' wasn't on quite the same level as 'Dreadful weather again isn't it'

Having discovered the mercurial nature of dating conversations, I entered into multiple dialogues with a range of men. Some were one sided. One gentleman insisted on sending me jokes most days. It was a less a conversation than sitting in

on his personal stand-up gig; only the quality of the jokes ranged from the terrible to plain awful.

Another man, very young at 24, had decided to become my online stalker. Every day he sent me messages and cyber roses and begged to meet me. *You want to have phone sex with me* he kept on saying. No, I didn't, but that didn't deter him at all. In the end, I just stopped opening his daily missives.

Brendan however, showed some good promise. Again younger at only 36, he was tall, check, handsome as far as I could make out from his admittedly blurry picture check, and intelligent, check. He was also interested in being the master to a submissive. Oh, I hugged myself gleefully. All this new terminology. It was like going back to college or taking up a new course. I wasn't sure about the spanking bit, I didn't think it would be my cup of tea, but I remembered the vulnerable sensation before the strawberry incident and I shivered with delight.

I confessed to Brendan that I didn't really know much about it, but I thought it sounded fun. Brendan was very keen and he promised to teach me. Even the language made my stomach ache and my pussy tingle. Brendan said that when we were together, I must do everything he said. That he was in charge. After a pause I replied, saying I acquiesced. Trish thought I was plain mad. 'You are going to let a stranger tie you up? Are you out of your cotton-pickin' mind,' she said. 'He could invite in ten of his mates for God's sake.'

I swallowed. I hadn't considered that particular scenario. 'No,' I said quietly. 'We've been chatting for a while now. I know about his family, his job and his hobbies. We only strayed into kinky sex when I mentioned blindfolds.' I paused.

'Oh dear Lord, Aoife Brennan,' gasped Trish. 'It's all your fault so. Why not mention strawberries while you were at it. Does he know you are the phantom pecker biter of old London town?'

I laughed. 'I get a good feeling from Brendan. He is very courteous and a little bit kinky. It sounds like a good combination to me!' He was travelling with work for the next two weeks. We arranged to meet when he was back.

Chapter Eighteen

Trish suggested a girls' night out, which was a very good suggestion until the following morning and the alarm clock pierced a savage hangover at half past six. I reset the alarm for snooze several times but it made no difference to the pain that bracketed my skull like a clamp. On first getting up, I swung my legs to the ground and then leaned over to pull my slippers from under the bed. The pain that flexed in my head was so powerful that I cried out and put a hand to my forehead as if pressure could stop the pain. I noticed a full glass of water by my bed. Oh how clever of me to remember the water and how foolish to forget to drink it before going to sleep. I gulped it down now and tasted the fluoride tang of Dublin water: Liffey water gathered in Poolaphoca, seasoned with chemicals and flushed down ancient waterways. The water that did not leak, seep or drain from cracked pipes gathered flavours in the dark runs and the resulting smell floating over the water in the glass like mist and made me want to gag. Every sense in my body was spider sharp. I felt the nerves in my head prickle and travel down my neck. My eyes squinted in the morning sun climbing in at the window. My ears pricked and listened to Andrew's alarm. He set it long in advance of when he needed to rise, hitting the snooze in regular sleepy pushes. Now it was white light fuzzing through my head. I felt sick.

Whose idea had been the shots? I wasn't sure. I certainly didn't suggest them but then I didn't stop them either. Baby Guinness, Mickey Finns, and straight

vodka at one point. I remember laughing and asking Shirley if someone was getting married. It wasn't a girls' night out, it was a hen party without a bride and we all split the bill. I shouldn't have been surprised really, our drinking patterns as a nation had eagerly absorbed first this drinking culture, then that, until like one elaborate cocktail we arrived at drunkenness faster than any other race, the Scots perhaps excepted, but then they wear kilts too which is well documented to allow a faster absorption of alcohol. They invented the deep fried Mars bar for goodness sake.

At one point during the night I looked at the five of us with perfect clarity, as if we had been captured in amber, like flies, for posterity. I'd reached the tipping point of alcoholic consumption, if I but knew it, where the pinnacle had been reached and only the descent awaited. Not being a regular consumer of shots I had no more clue of my alcoholic geography than my position on a golf course - both would have left me lost and wandering aimlessly. But I recall the clarity of understanding that reached me at that moment: I counted the five of us and saw a separated woman; me, a married woman; Trish, our single friend; Pamela and then two other married friends; Shirley and Joan. Pamela had a moustache but was a gentle woman. She was dating a mechanic with a beard - enough said of the hirsute compatibility of that couple. I wondered as I looked at my three married friends: who would be next? It was not a question of *if* someone might be next, but *who* would be next. The English plague had firmly arrived in Ireland, although the English probably blamed the Americans and the Americans in turn laid the charge at the door of the Californians. I'm not sure who the Californians blamed.

Hollywood maybe? If I have been a betting woman I'd have placed a large sum of money on not being the only separated woman of our little group in two years from this night. Less, if Joan's bitchy comments had any basis in reality.

Of course clarity often precedes confusion, because it cannot be sustained, only triumphs because of the lack of obfuscation, or is doomed by the consumption of too much alcohol. I thought my observations of the previous night were a combination of all three, if thinking was an accurate description of my frazzled nerve endings and synapses twitching in my brain. As my thoughts crossed my cerebellum they exploded into mini firework showers rather than connected in articulate communications. The post partum effects of alcohol can be as painful as any birth. As I struggled to survive the pain, all I can say is that my thoughts were deep and terribly meaningful.

Two Solpadine and a large cup of coffee later my roving mind had ceased its quizzical journey and was firmly back in mothering land. Put on the rolls, call the boys, put on toast, boil the kettle, and make lunches. Shower, dress, and apply make-up. Chivvy the boys, who do not need it, and complain loudly as a result, and pack everyone into the car.

There are days when I am very glad that I work in an office. That I am allowed to drink coffee and that no overtly physical movements are required. I am sure if I was a road sweeper or construction worker I might reject my breakfast today in a most unpleasant manner. It is not a common occurrence but this

morning I thanked every god going that all I have to do was show up, log on and deal with email in a tight but consistent manner.

Of course, just as I thanked every god going, I must have missed one out, like the neglected crone at Sleeping Beauty's christening. For on arrival at work, on time but needing more coffee and gentle work, we were called into a corporate meeting. My brain was still hurting and I didn't really need this. I was sensible enough to grab a glass of water on the way into the meeting but I'd drunk it as soon as we'd assembled and waited to hear our fate.

Brian was not alone. There was another man with him whom I did not recognise. There was a shuffling of feet and muted conversation. I was afraid to talk in this cloistered gathering for fear of breathing alcohol fumes over my neighbour, Tom, from accounts. He has pimples on his neck and scratches them without shame. This morning my gag-counter was set at high and I avoided looking directly at him. Sarah sat beside me, and I was reminded of the adage. *Keep your friends close and your enemies closer still* or should that be *The best way to destroy your enemy is to make a friend of him*. I wished I had chewing gum or a mint and suddenly the gods did listen, for Sarah offered me one. I took it gratefully. At least the fumes might not be so obvious.

Henry Rolland, Jr, business development officer, with Makelin Enterprises, trading as US Register, greeted us. His accent was as American as his grin was wide. He used very long sentences and lots of polysyllabic words. He was all urbane affability, sensible appreciation and enthusiastic rhetoric. I felt like raising

my hand and asking what exactly did he mean. Could he explain the situation in a sentence, or even in an elevator pitch? It was obvious we were taken over, bought out or assimilated by Makelin Enterprises, trading as US Register, but what did it mean? Were we to be asset stripped, invested in or quietly side-lined to happy shores?

At the end of the talk I was not much clearer. Glancing around at my colleagues I could safely say they were also suffering from some level of confusion as we rose from our chairs like children at break. Tom was furiously scratching at his neck drawing red lines in his thin skin and tried to engage me in conversation. I looked into his eyes and begged my peripheral vision to cloud or else his fingers to stop. Neither happened, so I coughed an answer, anything to break the sight in my current fragile state. 'What does it mean for Dublin?' he asked me. I felt like answering 'How the fuck should I know?', but the desire to retch was too strong. I gave him what I hoped was a meaningful and caring look, shook my head in confused solidarity and backed away.

At the door to the conference room I had the misfortune to arrive at the same time as Brian and Mr Henry Rolland, Jr. I smiled my beatific best and before introductions could be attempted ran to the bathroom where I was horribly ill thereby ensuring any future list of 'undesirable employees' surely had my name on it.

Later it was confirmed that US Register was not a bad sort of company by which to be bought. Aside from the off-shoring of support, there would be small change and big opportunities. The sales team were to be flown into New York next month for training, much to Sarah's delight. Accounts were to be consolidated, but in Dublin so Tom not only got to keep his job, but got a promotion as Dublin would service the Europe and Middle East Area, or EMEA as Tom subsequently irritatingly called it. You'd think he was born with a Brussels sprout up his arse. And there was even a possible global marketing jaunt in the offing, timing as yet unspecified.

Of course such joy comes with a price. We were now part of an American company and must act accordingly. Brian was not demanding we change to mid-Atlantic drawls but we were being encouraged, and for encouraged, read mandated, to engage as a community outside of working hours. There was a company meeting to discuss this. I suggested we reinstate our monthly lunch date but that was seen as too retro. Tom suggested charity work, going to Haiti for example to build houses, but that was rejected too. Finally, Lois in accounts (how come all the creative ones were holed up in accounts? I wondered) suggested tag rugby which was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm and voted in.

I looked in astonishment at Lois; she was a tiny thing and sported long dangerous fingernails. How would she ever catch a rugby ball I thought? How for that matter would I? However, Brian brooked no resistance. It was all in, regardless of age, fitness or ability. We were instructed to buy boots, we would be provided with special tag shorts and finally we were advised to get fit. Our first

training session would begin in July and we were signed up in a league that played over the summer before culminating in a world record attempt in Carlow.

Chapter Nineteen

Brendan was courteous. He was tall and handsome. He held open the door when we walked into the restaurant. He was confident and friendly and he had me laughing from the very beginning. He was a smart dresser and had a good job in management consultancy. I relaxed and really enjoyed his company. I didn't bore him with the divorce stories and he didn't ask about the children, having none of his own I reckoned he had limited interest in mine. Brendan was single for some time now, he said: happily single and able to meet new and interesting people. Brendan's hair was very short and slightly greying at the sides. His mouth was full and sensual. I wanted to kiss it. I found myself touching my mouth often, half conscious of doing it but not really wanting to stop.

I declined dessert but agreed to a brandy. He joined me and we sat quietly sipping the liquor. It was the first time during the night that silence had descended. It wasn't really uncomfortable but all I could think about was sex. I blushed and wondered if my colour showed.

'Is that the brandy or your dirty mind?' asked Brendan. Obviously my blush was visible. I was thrown also by his reference to my dirty mind. We had not mentioned sex at all during the night. There had been no innuendoes, *double entendres*, or leading conversations. We could have invited maiden aunts to join our table without any fear of causing offence. Now, the simple use of the word dirty made me blush even harder.

'Oh the brandy,' was my first reply. 'No, actually it was my dirty mind,' I confessed a moment later.

'Good girl,' said Brendan and he smiled. 'That's what I like to hear.' My toes curled with excitement. I feared I would blush even more if it were possible. I could feel a slow and almost imperceptible trickle of sweat run down my back. I sat straighter and willed my body to stop its heat rush. I was blushing, sweating, and my pussy was wet. God, would that the things that were meant to be wet were and those that were not, desisted!

'Shall we get the bill?' asked Brendan. I nodded. I needed to stand, to change my position and to let the heat dissipate. I made my excuses and went to the bathroom. Standing at the mirror I looked at my bright eyes and red cheeks. God I was meant to look like this after sex, not in anticipation. I went to the toilet and grabbed handfuls of toilet paper. I dabbed at my face and even up the back of my dress. I was less sweaty now that I had left the table and Brendan's measured look. I was merely damp, not a good situation, an improvement but not ideal. I recalled a cousin's expression - 'horses sweat, men perspire and women glow a little'. If that was the case I was glowing like a nuclear power plant. I tried to focus the hand drier so that it blew up my dress but it was awkward and I was afraid someone would walk in. Instead, I fluffed the dress about and it felt a little better. I reapplied lipstick and dabbed powder on my face.

If Brendan noticed my lengthy departure, he said nothing. We had met at the restaurant in separate cars. I wasn't sure what the format now was. I hadn't asked.

It was rather strange since he had made it plain he wanted to have sex with me, for me to be his sub, but we hadn't actually talked about the practicalities. It really was putting the horse before the cart I decided, yet again.

'Shall we go for a little drive,' he asked as we left the restaurant. I nodded and climbed into his car. It smelt of polish and leather and did not have sweet papers, school books and rugby gear strewn about it. The inside of a car really speaks to the condition of the owner I thought. This was very much the car of a successful, childless, single man. Mine with the aforementioned debris spoke of a harassed single mum in a hurry. Always in a hurry. This was nice and restful and just a little bit exciting. I felt like a teenager again.

Brendan started the car and pulled out of the car park. We drove in silence for a minute or two. 'Open your legs,' he said quietly.

'What?' I asked in surprise.

'Don't worry, we are not going to have sex tonight,' said Brendan and he repeated. 'Open your legs.'

I swallowed hard. I did not fear an invasion of his mates as opined by Trish. But I wondered if I could follow his instruction. I swallowed hard again and slowly opened them.

'More,' said Brendan.

I pushed my legs open so that one knee was braced against the door, the other against the centre column. I felt myself flushing again.

'Good girl,' said Brendan and he placed his hand on my knee. It stayed there still for a moment then it left to change the gears. I automatically pulled my legs together again.

'Open them,' said Brendan. Reluctantly I complied.

'Does this make you nervous,' asked Brendan.

'Very,' I said breathing heavily. Even though he wasn't touching me, I was supremely conscious of my open legs. I wanted to close them.

'If you want to be with me, you have to do what I say,' said Brendan. 'But it will be worth it,' he promised.

I shuddered.

'Put your hand inside your dress and stroke your left tit,' he said. I hesitated. It was dark but there were street lights. I wondered if anyone might see me. 'Do it,' he said again.

I slipped my right hand in under my dress and bra. I felt my nipple and it was hard already. 'Pinch it,' he said and I did.

'Now,' he said. 'Take off your panties.'

I laughed nervously. 'Really?'

'Of course, take them off now.'

I thought for a moment. This was madness. What was I doing? Oh dear, I was taking off my panties in a moving car and holding them in my hands. Brendan

took them from me. He sniffed them and then threw into the back of the car. 'They are mine now,' he said.

I thought of the trouble of buying matching lingerie and now the hassle of having to replace the panties. Then I thought at the fact I was panty-less in Brendan's car with my legs open and having just fondled my left tit. I wondered how wet I was. As if he could read my mind, Brendan said: 'Put your hand between your legs and see how wet you are.'

I looked at Brendan but he was watching the road. My hand snuck down between my legs and I could feel the wetness. I rubbed my clit and my whole body groaned.

'This will do,' said Brendan and he pulled into a dark recess. He stopped the engine. He looked at me and I wondered if I should stop rubbing my clit. I expected him to reach down and join my hand but instead he held my face in one hand. He traced a line down my jaw. He put his finger into my mouth and I sucked it. 'Turn over,' he said.

I wasn't sure at first what he meant but he half pushed me so that I was facing out the passenger window with my knees on the seat and the dress pulled up around my waist. His hand crept around my buttocks and he stroked them. His hand then moved between my legs and I heard rather than felt the wetness. 'Mmm,' he said. 'I see Aoife is enjoying this.'

I did not know what to say. I could not see his face and could only hear his voice. His breathing was steady; it was mine that was ragged. Then suddenly he slapped my buttock. 'Oh!' I cried. 'That hurt.'

I wasn't sure if it had or not but the slap took me by surprise. He slapped me again. I whimpered. Again the pain was only transitory but sharp. He slapped me again a number of times. One hand held me down and the other slapped. I sensed my bum might be red but even if his hand was not holding me, I didn't want to move. Then he fondled me, caressing my cheeks. 'Good girl,' he said, moving his hand over my buttocks. He dipped his finger into my pussy and rubbed it in a circulatory motion. 'You are very wet,' he said. His finger moved to my clit and he rubbed it gently. I tensed against his hand. Then to my dismay he took it away.

'Your pussy is mine,' he said before moving back into his seat. 'Sit up,' he said. 'You are not to touch it again until we next meet.'

I sat back in the seat and pulled my dress over my bum again. I was very turned on and cross that we were not going to have sex. I wanted to cum, I wanted to cum now. I didn't care if Brendan wanted to spank me or finger-fuck me, I had been on the edge.

'When are we meeting again then?' I asked in an exasperated tone.

Brendan laughed. 'Oh, is Aoife cross?' he said. 'Well, you are only for my pleasure now, so no masturbation or touching until I say so.' And he licked his finger smiling. 'My pleasure only, Aoife Brennan,' he repeated.

Brendan drove back to the restaurant carpark. I was seething beside him. I refused to talk. What kind of a game was he playing? I wasn't sure if I felt insulted, humiliated or just plain dirty. I figured it must be the latter, because I had never felt hornier in all my life. It was like being a teenager again and I didn't like it. Or rather I did but I was a grownup and so I wanted to conclude it. Delayed gratification was well and good but I was horny *now* and wanted to cum *now*.

Brendan pulled up beside my Polo. 'I want to meet you on Thursday,' he said. 'Are you free?'

I pulled a half smile, half grimace. 'Yes, I can be free,' I said.

'I will want you all night, so will you make arrangements for that,' said Brendan.

I nodded. 'Right, home you go and remember your pussy belongs to me,' said Brendan. 'No touching till Thursday.'

I opened the door and walked around to my car. I felt the evening breeze play with my dress. I was very conscious of not wearing panties. I got into my car, pulling the skirt of the dress tight around me. I put my feet on the pedals and as I opened my legs to do so, I thought of Brendan's command. I looked over and waved. He returned the wave and pulled out of the carpark. I realised he had not kissed me. I started the engine but not before feeling my pussy. It was warm, wet and swollen. I wondered if I could come in the carpark but decided it was too risky. Late diners might spill out from the restaurant and catch me *in flagrante* all by

myself. No, I was not that sad. Sighing I reversed and made my way home. No touching? No way! The minute I got home I was getting out the rabbit.

Brendan was indeed very kinky.

Chapter Twenty

'San Francisco?' I gasped. 'What?'

Brian grinned like a lunatic over my divider.

'Yep, the next corporate marketing meeting is at the end of August. Can you go?'

Could I go? I hugged myself and said yes, yes, yes.

Of course the practicalities were harder to plan than first thought. George was away and could not mind the boys. I could not ask my parents. My dad was much better but not enough to decamp to my house plus I was still not certain that he would not have one of his turns. He hadn't so far but it wasn't a risk I could take either way.

I wracked my brains. There was no point asking Paul. Aside from the deepening of the cold war since formal legal hostilities had broken out, Denis wouldn't stand for it. I rang Trish. 'Do you know anyone that could house sit for a week?'

Trish didn't know anyone. I was getting desperate. It was still two months away but I had accepted the trip. Brian was going too so at least I didn't feel too intimidated. However, I did have to prepare a presentation of Mostest in Ireland. I had no idea what to do. I had no babysitter and I was meeting Brendan in two days to try and claim back my panties.

Ah, the panties. Brendan had texted me. *I've wanked into your panties, a number of times* he wrote. *Are you sure you want them back? Yes!* I wrote indignantly. *Straight into the washing machine!*

Straight into your mouth as a gag retorted Brendan. I widened my eyes when I read that. I wasn't too sure how I felt about that. *Conflicted* was possibly the best term. I decided not to share this piece of information with Trish. It was a bit too much I reckoned for chit chat. It ranked with the: *when were you last tied up?* question. *Did your lover ever stuff wank-crustled panties into your mouth for a gag?* It was not drawing room conversation let alone water cooler questions.

Thursday came very soon. How could it not? I lay writhing in bed every morning before the alarm furiously rubbing my orgasm and then rising and worrying if I was mad. I was hot to trot, permanently turned on. I only had to see a text from Brendan and I wet my knickers. Where before he had been courteous, now he was filthy. He called me his slut, his whore and he wanted to take me, mark me, make me his. My mind rebelled but my libido gushed. I didn't dare confess my urges to anyone, not even Trish.

Brendan texted me. *Come to my house at eight. When you enter the door you will be my slut.* I gulped. I played out every scenario in my mind. Good points: I'd enjoyed a lovely dinner with him. He was kind, amusing and intelligent. He'd been

a gentleman during dinner. Bad points: he had a very perverted view of sex and it was driving me crazy. I'd never been as turned on as I was now.

I also reasoned I was going to his house; hardly the plan of a serial killer to invite a potential victim to his house. I worried still and said as much in a reply text. *Babe* he replied. *I'm not going to do anything you don't want to do.*

But you said you were in charge I replied.

Yes, and you have to be obedient my little slut replied Brendan. *But* he added. *You can say 'stop' at any stage if you don't like it.*

Eight o'clock and I was parked outside Brendan's house. I'd dressed in lingerie, minus panties. I wore a long maxi dress and I was sick to my stomach and horny as hell. I took a deep breath and stepped out of the car.

I approached the house. It was normal suburban house; a well-kept estate in Dublin twelve with nothing to mark it as a den of iniquity. I walked up the drive and knocked at the door. As I waited I thought about turning tail and running fast away. Only an ache in my stomach kept me there. I felt as though I was quivering, radiating, spinning. Brendan opened the door with a large smile. 'Welcome slut,' he said and I entered.

I walked in and without ceremony Brendan told me to stand, face in, against the wall. I hesitated, laughed nervously and then did it. Something in me craved this treatment and I fell into his command like a drowning sailor. I leant against the

wall and waited. My breathing rose and I closed my eyes. 'Are you wearing panties?' asked Brendan behind me. 'No, because you have them,' I answered, my eyes closed. I waited.

'Pull up your dress,' said Brendan.

I pulled up my dress to my hips. I was wearing stay-ups and high heels but no panties. 'Part your legs,' commanded Brendan and I did. I then felt him pull my dress the rest of the way up and over my head. 'You are my slut tonight,' he said tossing the dress onto the ground. He unclipped my bra and it fell to the ground beside the dress. I shivered. I was in my high heels and stay-ups only and pressed against the wall. I waited. I heard him walk away and then back again. He pulled my arms behind me and I felt him put on handcuffs. Click and my arms were tied. His foot shifted my right leg out further. 'Pose for me slut,' he said. 'Bend over,' and he pushed me over. I was suspended over a telephone table, my legs were sprayed and naked. My hands in the cuffs gave no balance and I did not move for fear of falling over.

'I like the view, slut,' said Brendan.

I did not move. I even pushed my ass out a bit. I can do this I thought. I am sexy I thought. I am wet already I thought.

I did not expect it when the slap came. Whack! Brendan moved in and slapped me hard. 'Oh!' I cried. There was silence. I panted a little. Then it came again. 'Oh' I cried again. It was less that it hurt than it was a surprise. He slapped me again and again. I lost count. Maybe ten, maybe more. It hurt now. Ten slaps hurt. Then Brendan moved in and pulled me up. He turned me around to face him. 'You have the most slap-able ass,' he said and he kissed me. His mouth was soft and sensual. I remembered wanting to kiss him over dinner, and now he was kissing me, teasing my mouth and pushing his tongue into me. My hands were tied behind me and Brendan was fully dressed. I leaned into him. But he pushed me back laughing. 'On your knees slut,' he said.

I fell to my knees. Brendan cupped my head. 'Open your mouth slut,' he said. I looked up at him and I did. He pulled out his cock and he stuffed it in my mouth. 'Take it deep throat,' he said. I opened further and let the cock in. Then the gag reflex kicked in. I pulled out choking. I tried again but as soon as the head of his cock went near the back of my throat, I felt my body spasm. Spluttering, I pulled my head back. 'I can't deep throat,' I gasped.

Brendan paused. 'You'll be punished for that,' he said. Then he pushed his cock into my mouth again but pressed it into my cheek instead. I relaxed. Brendan held my head between his hands and guided his cock in deeper. This time I did not gag. He stayed still for a moment and then pulled it out again. I took a deep breath and Brendan pushed his cock in again. 'You are a fast learner,' he said smiling. 'My little cock sucker.'

With my mouth full of cock I could say nothing. It took all my powers of concentration not to gag. I pushed my tongue out and slowly he fed his cock deeper into my mouth. It was thick and hard and I knew I would not get it all in. I tried to tilt my head back but Brendan held me firm. 'Just a little more,' he said and pushed against the back of my throat. My body spasmed as I gagged. I felt as if I was going to chuck. Brendan pulled back and I coughed and spat onto the floor. A long trail of saliva fell from my mouth and hung there. My eyes misted and tears ran down my face. 'I don't think deep throating is for me,' I said.

Brendan looked at me. 'In time,' he said. 'You must practice at home with your rabbit. For now, that was a good try,' and he wiped the saliva over my face. 'You are a good little whore,' he said gently.

Brendan lifted me to my feet and led me into the living room. It occurred to me that I'd only made it a few feet into the house before being stripped and made to gag on his cock. I felt very daring and a bit mad and very horny again. Brendan stopped and turned me around. 'Stand,' he ordered and left the room. I looked around. It was a very masculine room; leather couches, flat screen TV, games consoles and nothing on the walls.

Brendan returned with a blindfold and he fastened it over my head. The room disappeared from view. This blindfold was tighter than the strawberry one and I could not see anything. 'You have great tits,' he said and he juggled them with one hand. He tweaked my nipple and I sucked in my breath. Then I felt his mouth on my left nipple. He tugged at it with his teeth. I could feel a direct line to

my pussy and my stomach contracted with pleasure. He moved over the other nipple and did the same there. I let out a little moan. Brendan stopped. 'No noises or talking unless I tell you, whore,' he said. He slapped the nipple he had been biting. I staggered back in surprise and he pulled me forward again. 'Stand,' he said. He bit my nipple again, licked it and nibbled, blowing on it until it grew hard and tender. I could not help it and let out another half moan of pleasure. Brendan stopped abruptly and slapped my breast with his hand. Between the sucking and biting and now the slaps, my pussy contracted and flooded.

'Here,' Brendan led me to the sofa. He made me climb onto the sofa and bend over one side. My arms were still tied and my ass was in the air. 'That's my little whore,' he said. He sat behind me and massaged my buttocks. Then he slapped them. Then stroked them. I could not tell what was coming next; a stroke or a slap. My ass tingled and my pussy was crying out to be touched. I panted softly with desire. I had never felt so vulnerable and excited before. Brendan pulled my buttocks apart and I felt his tongue lick my ass. I drew in my breath. It felt very good. His tongue ran little circles around the rim and then dipped into my anus. I squeaked. Brendan laughed. 'You like this, you little whore,' he said. 'I knew you were a dirty slut under all that politeness. Just wait until my cock goes in here.'

I thought rapidly. I closed my eyes even though open or shut I could not see anything. Did I want anal sex? I didn't know. A half-hearted attempt with Paul years ago had not been pursued after it hurt too much. Then I was afraid of what I euphemistically called chocolate drops. Oh God, what if that happened here. On the leather sofa. Dear Lord, my mind raced. His tongue dipped into my anus again

and he licked me. God, this felt so good. I breathed out and decided to go with the flow. Brendan laughed again. 'That's better slut,' he said. 'Relax and just enjoy. You've a pretty ass and I'm going to fuck it later.'

I groaned but could not decide if that was from fear or pleasure. Every nerve ending tingled, especially those in proximity to Brendan's tongue which was buried up my ass. I could barely breathe in excitement, terror and lust. I felt a finger in my pussy. I groaned again. Brendan stopped and he slapped my ass hard. 'No noises until I tell you,' he said. He squeezed my buttocks and pulled them apart before dipping his tongue into my ass again. He brought his hand around to my pussy and started to play with my clit. He rubbed it and pulled it. He circled it, all the time pushing his tongue deeper into my ass. I could feel every nerve ending in my body frizzle and concentrate in my pussy and ass. I was no longer a woman, I was reduced to a single nerve ending and I was going to explode any moment. I swore in my head. Oh My God I repeated. I stuck my ass out more and clenched my muscles. I was straining to come, I could feel the pressure building deep within. Don't stop I prayed silently. Don't Stop. He didn't and seconds later I came in a spilling orgasm. I practically yelled with relief and consequently felt a rain of slaps on my ass. I kept yelling not sure if I was coming still or hurting. It was all jumbled up in a series of shuddering waves. When I finally stopped yelling and Brendan stopped slapping the silence was immense. My buttocks were sore. My pussy was dripping and my asshole was wet. I had never come so hard. I panted softly.

'Well, it's nice to see your bum all red,' he remarked and stood up. Then I felt the head of his cock on my pussy. He rubbed it up and down. 'Nice and juicy

slut pussy,' he remarked. I panted softly but said nothing. He stroked my buttocks and I could feel their tenderness. He pulled them apart and in one sudden move thrust his cock into me. I yelped. Brendan slapped my ass again. It hurt. He stayed motionless inside me for a minute. Then he slowly pulled out. Wham, he slammed into me again, but this time I stayed quiet. I bit my lip and just gasped. I half expected it. He stayed still again before pulling out slowly. The third time I was ready. I braced myself against the slam and felt him all the way in. He was in so deep he could have tickled my tonsils.

Brendan began thrusting more rhythmically. I arched my back and took the full length of him. He grabbed my hips and moved faster. 'Oh you little slut,' he gasped. 'My little fucking whore. My fucking cum slut.' He thrust harder and battered me. His balls slapped against my clitoris with each thrust. He jerked and pulled out, splashing cum all over my bum cheeks. I felt it spurt and then felt the warmth spill down my buttocks and into the crack. For some reason the expression *at the crack of Dawn* jumped into my mind. I'd always thought that an unfortunate turn of phrase. At the crack of Aoife I thought and smiled.

Chapter Twenty One

I rested my head on the leather arm. It can't have been more than forty minutes since I arrived. At this rate, we'd have broken the Guinness World Record for the most perversions in a single night. Brendan stood up and walked around to the edge of the sofa. He pulled my head up. 'Clean my cock slut!' he ordered and pushed it into my mouth. I licked and sucked. I could taste my juices off him, a slightly salty taste that I was familiar with from my morning orgasms. His cock grew hard again. 'Ah slut, you do that very well,' he said. He held my head and thrust gently into my mouth. As his erection grew I fought the gag reflex. I opened my mouth wider, sticking out my tongue. At first, I abandoned any attempt at sucking. The head made noisy contact with the back of my throat. The wet sound echoed strangely in my ears. I gagged a little but he pulled back. However, he didn't give me any respite, thrusting in again gently but insistently. The cock made a wet noisy sound each time. 'Ah, my good little cock sucker,' he said thrusting faster. I concentrated on relaxing. I felt each thrust but forced myself not to become rigid. I breathed as he left my mouth and sucked as he came in. His cock was covered in saliva now and it slid in and out easily, if noisily. Brendan groaned. 'That's good, slut,' he said. 'Very good.'

'Your mouth is mine, slut,' he said. 'Your pussy is mine and your ass is mine.' He continued thrusting into my mouth and my eyes watered behind my blindfold. The gurgling sounds were louder and I felt saliva dripping out of my

mouth. My jaw was starting to hurt now. I tried to say something. I wanted to say, let's have a break, a Kitkat, anything. All that came out was a muffled noise but Brendan withdrew immediately and slapped me across the face. Oh. I froze.

I felt his fingers touch my cheek where he had hit me. 'Oh, slave doesn't like that,' he said quietly. I shook my head. My mind was reeling. I didn't know what to say. The slap had been too ready, too quick, too hostile. It didn't feel like sex. It didn't feel like the other slaps. This felt personal. 'I think we've just reached your boundary,' said Brendan. 'I won't do that again,' and he helped me into a sitting position and removed my blindfold. I looked at him. I was still handcuffed, still naked except for my stay-ups and high heels. Brendan was fully dressed, his cock peeking out the only clue to his recent sexual activity.

He touched my cheek again gently. I flinched. It wasn't that it hurt but I was afraid he might slap me again. 'I won't slut,' he said. 'Your face is off bounds.'

I nodded. 'I didn't like that,' I said. 'It felt harsh. It wasn't sex.'

'You're too pretty to mark your face,' said Brendan. He fondled my left tit and then my right. He pinched my nipples and rolled them between his fingers. 'You've great nipples for a slut,' he said. 'I think you deserve a drink.'

I watched as he opened a bottle of white wine. He poured two glasses and came and sat beside me on the sofa. 'How can I drink it?' I said.

'I'll do the honours,' said Brendan and he held the glass to my mouth. It was awkward but I managed to drink some without spilling too much. A little wine ran

down my chin and Brendan leant over and sucked it up. 'Everything tastes good off you slut,' he said.

He drank his own wine and then helped me again. This time he deliberately spilled some down my chest. He put both glasses down and followed the wine down my breasts and down to my pussy. He pushed me back on the sofa and his hands fondled my breasts and waist. He knelt over and licked my pussy. 'I think it's time for the bedroom,' he said. He helped me up and pushed me in front of him up the stairs. I entered the bedroom ahead of him and noticed at once the iron bedstead. I looked back at him. 'Yep,' he smiled. 'I didn't buy it by accident.' I laughed. He was like a school boy in his delight. Only the new toy he was excited over was me and not a bike or a game. He undid my handcuffs but immediately retied them in front. 'Can't have you getting used to freedom slut,' he said. He kissed me forehead gently. 'Sit,' he said.

He left the bedroom, returning with the blindfold and wine. I had sat and thought about the sex and what might happen next. Conflicted was a good way to describe how I felt, but then I'd never come as hard with a man before. I wiggled a little. I rubbed my jaw which still ached a little. Brendan came in as I was touching my face. 'Did it hurt that much?' he asked.

'No, but my jaw is sore,' I said. 'That's what I wanted to say, before,' and here I stopped. I wasn't sure what to say. 'Before you hit me' was accurate but it raised every feminist hackle in my body. I wasn't sure being tied up and obeying a

master fitted into feminist ideology either, even in the pursuit of mutual sexual gratification. It was all a bit complicated.

In answer Brendan passed me a wine glass. I held it in my two hands awkwardly but was at least able to drink unaided. The wine was chilled and dry. I realised I was thirsty and I drank again. 'Have you tied up many women in here?' I asked.

Brendan nodded. 'Quite a few,' he said. 'It's a very compelling lifestyle.'

'Once you've popped, you just can't stop,' I laughed.

'Something like that, yes.'

I drank again. I wasn't sure what to say. It seemed very nose-y asking about his previous conquests while sitting handcuffed on his bed. Then again, the prospect of talking about the Olympics or the weather didn't seem likely either. I wondered what conversational topics were appropriate when handcuffed. I didn't think books on etiquette gave much advice on this conundrum.

As it turned out, conversation was not on the cards, at least not of the lengthy, in-depth variety. 'Drink up,' Brendan commanded and I did so before handing the empty glass back to him. 'Put your hands above your head,' he said and he pushed me back on the bed, tying the cuffs to the iron headboard. He pulled on the blindfold again. I was back in darkness and I squirmed, putting my legs together. 'Ah, no you don't slut,' Brendan said and he tied first one and then the

other to opposite sides of the bed. I was now spread eagled on the bed and very horny again. 'What now?' I asked.

'No noises slut,' he said. 'No talking until I permit you.'

I tried to relax. I kept my breathing even. I listened to my heart beat. Brendan moved around the room. He put on music, but I didn't recognise it. It sounded like trance or electro-pop. I heard things being moved, a sound as if he were undressing and the swish of clothes being put on a chair. I heard cupboards opening. I heard boxes and papers rustling. Then silence.

After a long while he spoke. 'I'm sitting here watching your pretty body, slut. It pleases me very much, especially the way it responded to my tongue and fingers. I'm going to enjoy myself now.'

I shivered. I heard him get up and then felt something run down my face. It was soft and it tickled. It must have been a feather or soft piece of cloth. Brendan ran it over my face and then down my neck. He traced circles across my body, across my erect nipples, down my thighs. He came back up to my left nipple and circled it faster. Then he suddenly slapped my nipple. My body contorted in surprise. He circled the feather again. I breathed out. He went to the other nipple. He circled again and I tensed waiting for the slap but it did not come. Instead he moved back to the first nipple and circled there instead. I felt his weight move onto the bed and sensed him above me. I then felt him bite my nipple. He licked it and blew on it. Then he bit again, harder this time. 'Ouch,' I said without thinking and he slapped my nipple in return. 'No noises,' he said.

He moved to the other nipple and bit on that one too. It hurt a little but I said nothing, only breathing out in relief when he stopped. He licked it and my whole body tingled. My nipples were taut and pointed and incredibly sensitive.

Brendan moved off the bed and I heard more noises. Then a familiar buzzing sound. I wondered if his vibrator was a rabbit. I felt the draught created by the vibration before I felt it on my cheek. He rolled the throbbing vibrator across my face before stopping at my lips. 'Open,' he commanded. I did and he fed the vibrator into my mouth.

'You're a good little slut,' said Brendan. He kept the vibrator in my mouth but moved again onto the bed. I felt him straddle me. He pulled the vibrator out of my mouth and pushed in his cock instead. It was fully hard and I struggled to take it all. He sat across my chest and I could not back off any. He pushed it in further and I felt the by now familiar gag reflex. He pulled back and out. 'Suck my balls,' he said and he squeezed them into my mouth. I opened wide and sucked them. I licked each one in turn, drawing them into my hot mouth. Brendan groaned. 'Oh, fuck me that is good, slut,' he said. He shifted his weight and moved his ass over my mouth. Time to return the favour I thought before going for gold. He rubbed his ass across my face and I licked him. He positioned his asshole over my tongue and I licked harder. I summoned up my courage and stuck my tongue into his asshole. To my surprise I liked it. I felt a flush of wetness in my pussy. This is so decadent I thought briefly, licking for all I was worth.

Brendan groaned again and climbed off me and off the bed. I was panting now and so was he. I wondered what next. Next was the vibrator on my thighs, moving slowly towards my pussy. I thrashed my legs, willing the vibrator to my pussy. As if by magic Brendan acceded to my wish and holding open my lips, put the vibrator directly onto my clit. I bucked in surprise, my clit was so tender and full. Brendan just placed a hand on my stomach to keep me still and reapplied the vibrator. This was unbelievable. The pressure was intense. He rolled the vibrator a little, making it even more intense. A spasm and my whole body contorted. My legs stretched, stiffened and cramped, but Brendan kept the vibrator in place. It seemed like an eternity and maybe it was, but when I finally came, I cried with relief.

Not that there was any relief, as the last wave of the orgasm washed over me, Brendan was on the bed and inside me. He pumped me hard and fast. He grabbed my tits and he rocked my body. The vibrator lay buzzing unheeded beside my head and this time it was Brendan that yelled as he came. 'Fuck me whore, fuck me,' he repeated, and he spat on my face and came.

Another boundary. My whole body contracted and shrank from the spit. Its thick viscous trail hit my cheek and slid into my mouth. I tried to avoid it but as I twisted my head the warm spit mixed with mine. I felt sick. I said nothing. Brendan had collapsed across me and was breathing heavily. So too was I. But I was angry as well.

Chapter Twenty Two

I waited until Brendan moved off me. My body was rigid and I was surprised he hadn't noticed. Finally, I ventured. 'I'm not happy Brendan,' in a tight voice.

'What slut?' he asked. 'You had another rip roaring orgasm, what's your problem now?'

I blinked under my blindfold. His tone was impatient and dismissive.

'What?' I demanded.

Brendan slapped me, hard on my face. I cried out.

There was silence and I heard Brendan leave the room. I tried not to panic. The Brendan I knew from dinner and up until now had been courteous. I was not in any danger. I pulled at my hands and feet but I knew it was hopeless. I was not in danger, I knew that, but I was also not staying. Regardless of when he returned, I was leaving. Why was sex so complicated? I thought. The fine line that divided me from the slut had been crossed and it wasn't pleasant.

Was it worth the orgasms? I wasn't sure. Right now, it was a bit of a disaster and might even be worse if Brendan didn't come back and untie me. I heard him at the door and he quickly crossed over to the bed. 'Untie me,' I said only I didn't get the words out. Brendan shoved something in my mouth. I realised with horror it was my panties. I twisted my head but he held me in a vicelike grip, stuffing them all the way in. I could hardly breathe let alone speak. I was furious and upset.

He backed out of the room again, leaving me helpless on the bed, tears streaming down my face in vexation.

It was another hour before Brendan returned. During that time, I had passed through every emotion known to man and some I'd never even guessed at. Mostly I was angry at myself. Mostly I wished I could turn back the clock, to have run away before I even rang the doorbell. I would have traded all my orgasms for a time machine, no doubt about that at all.

When finally I heard his footsteps again, I stiffened. He entered the room and stood beside the bed. I turned my face from him in anger. 'I'm sorry,' he said quietly. He pulled the panties out of my mouth and I coughed, almost retching. He pulled off my blindfold. He was dressed again but I didn't want to even look at him. He reached above me and undid the handcuffs and then went to the base of the bed and untied my ankles. I was still wearing my high heels and wanted to kick him in the face as he bent over to untie the scarves. I was so angry I could not speak.

I sat up. I rubbed my wrists. Brendan had brought up my bra and dress from downstairs. I put them on. I looked at my panties curled up in a ball. I grabbed them. I wasn't putting them on but I wasn't leaving them behind.

'I won't be staying and you won't hear from me again,' I said.

'I didn't expect you to,' he said. 'For what it's worth I am sorry. You were amazing before I lost the run of myself. I've never been with a slut that came so hard.'

'I don't think that title is appropriate anymore,' said I coldly. I stood up and walked past him. In the hall downstairs, my car keys were where I had left them. Clutching my panties in one hand and the keys in the other, I left the house and walked to my car. Echoing a movement executed some days earlier, I chucked the soiled panties into the back seat and drove off.

A filtered story was shared with Trish some days later. 'God, that is mad and potentially very dangerous,' said Trish. 'You really have to be more careful.'

I had considered long and hard my experience. 'If a man is going to cross boundaries, then he may do it regardless of my inability to run away,' I said slowly. 'Many a woman has been raped with sheer force; it's not the presence of handcuffs that makes the excuse: it's the presence of the rapist or abuser in the first instance.'

I continued: 'In this case, it was less what he did and more the disregard for my feelings that was wrong. After all, we'd had some great sex, I just did not relish being spat on for a conclusion.'

'That and he refused to untie you directly,' said Trish. I hadn't mentioned the panties and how long he had left me tied up. 'Yes, that too,' I agreed. 'It goes to show he had lost control of himself. He believed the fantasy.'

Chapter Twenty Three

Brian was also believing the fantasy. He was cock a hoop over the trip. He made it clear that I had to do the presentation, but he would help. He gave me a deadline of the end of the week for a first draft. The audience was North American, the new parent company. He was keen to sell Ireland as a European hub, closest to the US, same language and a natural launch pad for the rest of Europe. 'We have to sell Ireland as a real place,' he said. 'But I want the US heads to feel a connection. There are a dozen Irish surnames on the attendance list. Can we sell Ireland to the Irish Americans? Yes we can!'

'You've turned into Bob the Builder,' I said shaking my head. 'Anyway, where am I going to get a sitter for the week? I can't find anyone.'

It was Pilates that provided the answer. I normally went on a Thursday evening. With the recent support handover and then some disastrous dating, I had missed a number of classes. I went on Thursday night and afterwards spoke to Melanie, the instructor and old school pal about my problem.

'Well,' said Melanie. 'I could do it if you like. My kitchen is being refitted and perhaps I could arrange it for that week.'

'I'd have to bring Bingo though,' she added.

I laughed. Bingo was Melanie's large bouncy black lab. 'You can get the boys to walk him,' I suggested.

'Deal,' said Melanie.

Denis and Andrew were less than impressed. 'You get to swan around San Francisco while we get to eat vegan food and walk her mad dog,' grumbled Denis. Melanie was well known but not particularly well liked in the Brennan household. It stemmed from when I was still married. Melanie had been an infrequent visitor who had been slagged unmercifully by Paul following each visit. Paul's natural antipathy to my school friends was not helped by Melanie's hippy countenance. Her visits dwindled over the years and I had missed my scatter-brained friend. It was only post separation that I reached out to Melanie again. A chance meeting in Tesco, while I was still able to shop there, had led to a cup of coffee and ultimately to my joining her Pilates classes. I laughed more than was helpful during the stretching but I enjoyed the classes and often had a natter afterwards.

'I can leave two menus in the freezer,' I suggested to Denis. 'Meat for you and beans for Mel.' Denis shrugged. He didn't have his car licence and he knew he and Andrew needed someone if only to drive them around. 'I guess,' he said reluctantly.

I turned my attention to the presentation. I wrote notes, planned slides and wracked my brains to think of clever but sexy commentary. I canvassed the office. What made Ireland great? Everyone had something different to offer. I had an idea. I set up a backdrop of the Mostest logo in the boardroom, then I invited everyone in one after the other, to repeat on camera why they thought Ireland was great. I got some great quotes. Sarah's was particularly crass. 'Because we look great,' she said in all sincerity to the camera. 'Possibly,' I said under my breath. Still, it was a quote. Tom asserted we had clever analytic minds that appreciated beauty in logic and that the Book of Kells was a testament to our love of learning and our dedication to style. It would have been a very lovely quote and was interesting and well said, only he plucked at his neck as he spoke. I wanted to slap his hand away but I knew that wasn't allowed to chastise other people's grownup children. Sighing, I finished filming but with no real belief that I could use it in the final footage.

I took my camera and tripod out at lunchtime and stood at the corner of Stephen's Green. I stopped passers-by and hailed them down like taxis. Of the people who would stop, I canvassed them on the same question. I got a mixture of local workers and tourists. I laughed out loud at young man who repeated the post-Olympic boast. 'Because we are good at fighting and riding,' he said. 'Go Katie Taylor, Go Cian O'Connor.' That was definitely staying in. Others said: because we were green; because we were the best sporting fans in the world; because we wrote the best books; had the best craic; and tolerated fraudulent bankers and politicians. That last claim was said by an angry young woman. Very true I thought but maybe

she wouldn't survive the cuts either. I wanted a picture of a brave, new Ireland, not a sad, corrupt one.

Returning to the office I looked at my handiwork. Yes, I liked. It would take some snazzy editing but the overall theme was good. I wandered over to Brian to tell him about my progress so far. 'Will you do a quote for me too,' I asked.

'Let me think of a good one,' he said. 'Maybe when I have looked at the others I can do a closing quote. Right, training tonight: are you ready?'

'Are you sure this is mandatory?'

'Yes, who knows Aoife Brennan, you might even enjoy it!'

We were issued with regulation tag shorts which had been purchased previously by Marie in human resources. I had a vague notion of the modern rugby gear worn by internationals in The Six Nations Championships. Tight fitting gear, bulging biceps and powerful legs all sprang to mind. However, this was not the Six Nations and we did not possess a bulging bicep between the lot of us. Fortunately the shorts were not tight, quite the opposite. I looked down at mine and they strained in a way that only emphasised my belly. My white legs emerging from the billowing shorts disappointingly did not look correspondingly slim. As for the red tee-shirts with the Mostest logo, these were floppy and draped fatly over the shorts. 'Tuck them in everyone,' said Marie briskly. 'You must keep your tags clear.'

That look was even worse. I now looked like a pregnant, starkly white, office worker forced to play corporate sports, which is exactly what I was, minus the pregnancy of course. I looked around; my colleagues-in-arms were not looking so hot either. I saw with some horror Tom's pustules continued down his neck and spread across his back. Office clothing obscured this red trail which the sloppy, ill-fitting tee-shirts did nothing to disguise. If anything the red brought out their vibrancy. Lois, I had to admit in a rare fit of envy, did look good. Then being a size zero meant the shorts added welcome weight. Sarah, flustered, looked top heavy like a jolly barmaid sequestered on a village team, but her frown let her down. At that moment, Brian rocked up. He looked trim and comfortable in his shorts. I remarked upon their relative normality, how they sat down on his form and did not protrude like tented monstrosities. 'Last year's,' he said. 'Washing and wearing diminishes the puffy exuberance of the creases.'

Brian told us we were to practice for half an hour and then we had our first match. Most of the men looked equitably about them but the women, myself included, were shocked. Play a match? How on earth, since we didn't even know the rules and had not been on a playing field since school.

I contemplated walking off, doing a John McEnroe. I knew it was the wrong sport and the wrong response, but really, I felt this was unfair. Growing up my brother and I had not bonded playing rugby in the back garden. At school, hockey was the sport for girls and my post education fitness attempts had been confined to the gym, and not messing about with rugby balls. I felt stupid and unhappy. I

wanted to be a good sport but I could not see myself catching or throwing or running with a rugby ball.

Funnily enough it was Tom that intervened. 'Ladies,' he said. 'You look like mutineering sailors, except fatter!'

I wanted to hit him at that moment, but he smiled and said: 'It's just the new shorts, I know that. Wash them for next week but for now we all look like newbies. Let's throw a few balls and maybe we'll have beginner's luck!'

At that moment Tom nodded at me and threw a ball in my direction. To my utter surprise I caught it. By now we'd formed a ragged circle and so I turned to my left and threw it at Marie who caught it too and expertly flicked it onto Brian. The sequence continued and by the time it returned to me, I was able to catch it again. Throw it again. This was not so bad. 'Let's try it moving,' said Tom. This was considerably harder. I wanted to run ahead of my line partner and then when he did throw the ball I caught like Phoebe from *Friends* which was to say, I did not catch the ball but bounced it harmlessly between my missing hands onto the ground, creating a free from the knock-on if we had been in a game.

I grimaced. This was going to be much tougher than originally expected. Sarah grimaced too. I found an unexpected ally. We started to laugh and to complain at the same time. 'Look,' said Brian. 'Just try and keep up with the lads. If you score a try it's worth three points. It's only one for the men. And it's meant to be fun, really.'

The game was fun, which really surprised me. The other team were slightly more experienced, we could tell this from their flatter shorts, but were not much more expert than us. Four men and three women were playing at any given time. Substitutions could be made at any time, and frequently were. Tired players would unstick their tags and hold them up, looking for a team mate to run in and replace them. I noticed the women on the other team were very good at tagging, the process of snatching the Velcro tag which halted progress. Five tags and the next one was a turnover. As the game played on, we began to understand the rules better. I found myself shouting at once stage when the referee appeared to miss a tag. It turned out, the tag had been pulled by Lois after the ball had been passed, rendering her action 'after the fact'. Brian, who was also on the side-line with me at the same time, mentioned that shouting at the ref possibly wasn't that sportsmanlike. I laughed. 'It's the emotion. It's all very exciting.'

At that moment, Tom waved his tags at Brian and he ran in to take his place. Tom arrived panting at my side. 'You did well tagging that chap,' he said referring to my solo tag in the game. I smiled brightly. I had tagged someone in my first game and it felt pretty good. Just then Tom began to pull at his neck again, old habits not forgotten. I swallowed and decided I could be the bigger person.

'You know your piece to camera today,' I said. Tom nodded. 'I'm really sorry but I messed up the focus. Would you mind doing it again tomorrow?'

'No problem.'

I grinned and went back to watching the final minutes. For a mixed bag of players we hadn't done so badly. I watched as Brian raced up the far side with Lois in hot pursuit. She had played this before and was a fast runner. She kept pace with him as he weaved and dodged the opposition, until reaching the line he slipped her the ball and she scored. Three points and our first win. What a result!

In the bar afterwards for celebratory drink we all spoke excitedly. For a moment I blessed American corporate insistence. Wild horses would not have dragged me here voluntarily. Sarah and I compared notes about what we would do next time, how we would tag the centre with attitude. If speed was not our thing, which was obvious, then we could face down the opposition and tag them in their tracks. Lois was sweet and helpful in her advice. I replayed the few little rallies I had run and in my mind, the outcome would be very different the next time.

And I decided too to reshoot Tom's piece with a little careful directorial instruction. I planned on asking him to fold his arms, telling him it looked stronger as he was speaking about beauty, but in fact to stop him involuntary picking at his neck. Sport was a great thing I decided. And I would be better next time I decided too.

Chapter Twenty Four

I went home flushed with happiness and elation from the tag rugby. I was positively glowing as I opened the front door, but as I put my keys on the hall stand, I saw another brown envelope from O'Brien and felt my mood flatten like a depressed WhoopeeCushion. I wondered if that was where the term *brown* envelope originated from - I'd received nothing but brown envelopes from my divorce lawyers. An arm and a leg this divorce was going to cost. I knew that now. I also didn't like the change in Paul's behaviour: it didn't bode well. He'd gone from distantly responsible to hands-on disruptive. It wasn't nice. It made me feel very uncomfortable.

I opened the letter. O'Brien had now received a letter from Paul's solicitors. In a nutshell he was planning on reducing his maintenance to a more reasonable level as set by Irish standards rather than the generous monthly allowance he had so far given his ex-wife. He suggested the family home be sold and the proceeds split fifty-fifty and he wanted shared custody of the children.

I sat down with a thud. What on earth was he doing? Denis didn't want to be near him and I was sure Andrew did not want to spend half his time with Paul. Was he just prevaricating or trying to upset me. Is that what had prompted all this recent interaction with Andrew and the complaints at the school. Was he trying to suggest, again, that I was an unfit mother? And as for selling the house, that wasn't fair to the boys and in this market it would only make a small profit, if at all. Where

would we move to? The boys went to school locally but rent was high in the area. If I made no money from the house sale and he reduced the children's allowance (not mine, I cursed, the children's) then how could I afford to find a place nearby. I put head in my hands and I wept.

Chapter Twenty Five

Dropping off Andrew at Ryan's house, I declined going in to say hello. His parents, Peter and Julie, had been great pre-separation friends. They clung on as joint best friends for a while afterwards. They had then limped along for a bit, seeing both of us separately but increasingly I could feel the tension. At first I'd been surprised, then very hurt and then very angry as they slipped over the county line to join Paul's fan club. I hadn't done anything wrong, if anything Paul's list of actions were culpable in the extreme. I gaily figured I didn't have to say anything, just keep on going as I did with the children and the rights would be declared along the way. However, over time, I'd witnessed their closing down on my friendship while maintaining his and was utterly perplexed.

I'd discovered that Paul had continued drinking with Peter, while I had diminished to mere 'mother with children' status. I did not seek out Julie alone - ours had been very much a couple's relationship - but in my role of single mother I did see Julie, and Peter for that matter, a lot on the side of the football field or passing them dropping off the boys to training. When Paul left, everything fell to me.

But being a good mother and carrying on with the minutiae of everyday life was not good enough apparently. I should have stepped into the social shoes and met Julie for coffee or drinks. Then I could have slagged off Paul to the same extent he had been chipping away at my character. However, I was busy trying to run the

home, be the full time parent to my boys and holding down my job; I did not have time to do my own PR. I foolishly thought that deeds spoke louder than words, apparently again not. No matter what Paul did, or rather didn't do, in raising the boys, it was not seen as a black mark. He was paying the mortgage and that was very generous of him. Even now that he was trying to wriggle out of this one financial constant, I could see that financial exit would be justified. After all, wasn't I living in the house free of mortgage? *Aoife Brennan had it very lucky; she was being kept like a queen. That poor man ensuring a roof was kept over the boys heads and wasn't she lucky to benefit too?*

I no longer cared. I had got past the point where the loss of this couple's friendship could hurt anymore. 'We were once friends in that coupledness place,' I reconciled. 'But we are just not friends in the individual.'

It was not just Peter and Julie who fell out in the aftermath of the separation. It was like a domino effect I thought. One by one the pillars of my social life came crashing down. Sometimes, like Peter and Julie, couples retired to be friends with only Paul, others were too scared to look failure in the face, as if they too might risk contamination just by keeping in contact. Yet other couples, well, I smiled only it wasn't funny. It had been shocking at first as how the women distrusted me and the men, married men, made passes at me. It was as if I'd stepped into a parallel universe where all the rules were reversed. Once the separation became public knowledge, the invitations began to drop off. Sometimes this made sense as the events, dinners and the like, tended to be couple driven. But others, such as parties or drinks, should not have denied me an invite. It all came home to me at one such

party that I had been invited to; Paul was away so it was a no brainer for the host. However, the host's husband had different ideas as to why I was there. He was terribly solicitous. He made sure my glass was filled, he asked kindly about the children, he enquired about my health on more than one occasion. Then later in the evening, he noticed my glass was empty, again. 'Oh,' he said. 'That has to be remedied. This way Aoife,' and he led me to the utility room where he had saved a bottle of my favourite wine.

Even at the time I thought this a little over-zealous, especially since I was definitely jarred and would have drunk sweet Liebfraumilch without complaint if poured into my glass, but it didn't register until he had closed the door of the utility room and was rummaging around inside my blouse like a toddler looking for his toys. It took me all of ten seconds to realise he was making a pass, a very big one, as he sought to slip his wet tongue into my mouth, before I pushed him back and told him to fuck off in no uncertain terms. That was not the end of the matter. Joe did not believe me. He felt my reluctance (reluctance I screamed later at Trish, reluctance?) was more of a positive *yes come here darling*. He advanced again, hands outstretched to grab inside my blouse again.

I slapped him across the head. His head was down lunging for my tits and so it caught him across the ear. Joe staggered back, surprised and then angry. 'You little bitch,' he said rubbing his head.

'Fuck off,' I said. 'What the fuck do you think you are doing?'

'Don't give me the innocent eye,' cursed Joe. 'I saw you flirting like the little tart you are. missing the companionship are you? Worried for the kids are you? Fuck off, you just want a bit of action to keep your parts oiled.'

Perhaps it was the sheer indignity of it, or the mention of getting my parts oiled, or the fact I would not touch Joe with a barge pole if he were the last man left on earth, or perhaps it was the just the wine, but I threw up. It wasn't planned and once the horror passed, it was class. I threw up all over Joe's striped shirt, down his cream chinos and splashed thickly over his moccasins. I put my hand to my mouth but it didn't stop the stream of wine-inspired sick that flooded out. I was sick and I wasn't going to stop. Joe cursed loudly enough for his wife, Margaret, to appear. She took one look at the scene and was perhaps more cognisant of the truth than might be expected. She told Joe to fuck off and get some clean clothes on. She pulled a towel from the press and mopped me up and then instructed her sister who had arrived at the scene to *for god's sake clean that up*. She ordered a taxi and I was gone from their house in minutes. I apologised profusely to Margaret but while not angry, she was also not overly sympathetic. I did a walk of shame to the front door once the taxi arrived and other guests nodded or looked away. No one spoke with me. I was not invited back to that house again and not to quite a few others.

Trish made me laugh afterwards. 'That'll teach him to attack a woman again,' she said. 'Especially when he's tried to make her drunk in the first place.'

'I know he deserved it, and I'll never forget his face, but it's not very good for my ego to be called Pukey-Aoifey.'

'I don't think anyone would have their doubts about Joe. They all saw him fill your glass time and again that night. It was obvious to everyone there what he was up to.'

'I know, but I didn't have to drink it, and then to puke it up.'

'Well, it was easy to feel you were being minded, rather than groomed,' said Trish. 'And you don't have a nickname, he does. The lads all slag him for making you sick. You're in the clear.'

'I'm just not on the invite list of polite society anymore,' I sighed.

'Well, that comes with the territory of being a separated woman, not the puking. Although the puking wouldn't help.'

I agreed. I could see it in the eyes of the married women when I was out. Once I became separated, I became the enemy, the scarlet woman. I noticed women claimed their partners when I was around. They watched me out of the corner of their eyes. I was rarely left for long in a husband's company before either they were whisked away or the wives came and joined the conversation. I wanted to scream at them, that if I didn't fancy their husband when I was married, I was unlikely to do so now I was single. Why go back to a fuddy-duddy when I could date a toy boy? I mean, come on!

Of course that wasn't greeted with any joy either. I could not understand how I could upset so many people without doing anything. If the married women feared for their husbands, then they scorned with equal venom my dalliance with

Chris. God help me if anyone found out about my other bedroom explorations. It was enough that Sam had blabbed to all and sundry about Chris. I hadn't helped when I had mentioned him, well, boasted about him, to Sarah in work. But the reaction I got was very mixed. Trish and Melanie laughed and hooted and said well done. I felt as though I'd passed a grownup test when they admired me for pulling a sex god. I felt rather good myself that I'd had the balls to do this and lapped up their approbation.

But then I'd overheard Sarah talking about me in the work canteen. I had stopped at the canteen door and was undecided whether or not to get a coffee. I was not eavesdropping, I swore as much to Trish, but when I hesitated in the hall, I heard my name and froze. Then I heard Sarah give out yards about me, saying what kind of a mother, a mother with teenage boys, had sex with a man half her age. I wanted to cruise in and say he was only ten years younger actually, but stopped. The reference to my being a mother stopped me in my tracks.

Sarah went on to say it was disgusting, and how could I do it, and what would my boys think and why didn't I go and find a man my own age or older for god's sake?

Afterwards Trish confessed that she had been forced to listen to similar tripe from other so called joint friends. 'You can't win,' she said. 'If you are not leering after husbands, you are leering after young men and both occupations are equally reprehensible. You have to be a nun to survive the judgements.'

Chapter Twenty Six

Sitting in the shabby solicitor's waiting room, George and I chatted. I hadn't seen him properly since the strawberry incident and I filled him in. I decided not to share Brendan's story, that was a little close to the bone and I still flinched when I thought about it: it was not a happy memory. The strawberry incident, however, was funny. George winced when I told him and I blushed. 'It was all terribly involuntary,' I said. 'Just one of those things.'

'I don't think I've ever heard an actual real life story of blindfolds gone wrong,' laughed George. 'It would take my little sister to buck the trend.' I swallowed down the memory of my other blindfold story again. I cringed every time I thought of it. Was it terribly abnormal then, I thought, to have two disastrous blindfold stories? Obviously BDSM was not for me. I remembered the Oscar Wilde quote. To have lost one parent might be considered unfortunate, but to lose two was positively careless. Was that the same for my kinky experiences?

We were still laughing when O'Brien popped his head around the corner. 'Come, come,' he said. 'Haven't got all day,' he added peevishly as he led us up to the stairs to his office. George looked at me as we followed him. He pointed to his watch. We had been waiting more than forty minutes for the solicitor. He shook his head sadly and pulled a face.

Everything was in hand, apparently. When O'Brien had first met me, he'd intimated that my financial arrangements were unlikely to be affected and if

anything I could expect more. Now, Paul's wishes seemed to have been given greater precedence. It appeared that his request for greater custodial rights would prevail and the house sale, since the market value was likely to cover the cost of the mortgage, would be ruled positively by a judge if it reached court. I sat dumbfounded. In a few months, it looked as though my living arrangements were going to be totally overturned and I would be broke, homeless and only seeing my children every second week. 'This seems contrary to what you explained the first time we met?' I said.

O'Brien raised a hand. 'You are confused' he said arrogantly. 'I explained that the nature of a legal separation was to ensure the fair division of assets and to protect the children. Your husband has expressed his concern over his ability to continue to repay the mortgage and would prefer to safeguard the children by removing the large debt of the mortgage. Also, he is informed you have received a promotion at work and will be better able to financially support yourself.'

I spluttered. 'My promotion is to avoid redundancy and there is no pay rise. The kids need their home. What about their needs?'

'If your husband is concerned he may not be able to pay the mortgage going forward, then it is prudent that the asset is disposed of and the risk removed,' continued O'Brien without missing a beat.

Afterwards George commented the house sale would also cover O'Brien's fees. 'He knows you don't have any savings but he's taken you on, so he may be looking to his fees.'

I was utterly exhausted. 'I just don't know. Maybe I was confused.'

'No, he has moved the goal posts. He's seen your affidavit of means and you don't have any money, except what is tied up in the house. Where else will he get his money from,' said George. 'Mark my words; he's changed his tack based on that.'

Chapter Twenty Seven

I canvassed the boys on their views. Neither wanted to move obviously or change schools. I agreed. The family home was just that; our family home. Seventeen years of living here meant it fitted us, like an old boot or glove. The garden was a bit shabbier than when Paul was here. Traditionally his area of expertise, the boys had taken up the grass cutting but no one had been that interested in the borders or shrubs. I weeded occasionally but had not planted or moved anything. I used to tease Paul on his annual rearrangement of the garden; moving plants, digging up the vegetable patch and planting new hanging baskets. Once the garden was done, it was done in my mind, but I could see the deterioration that came when his particular brand of horticultural scalpel was missing. I wondered if I should pay someone to come and assess things, maybe prune overgrown areas or suggest replanting where plants had died off, or perhaps there were only annuals. I wasn't really sure and wasn't really interested.

It was the same inside the house. I wasn't terribly practical. Andrew changed light bulbs and investigated new gadgets. Denis put out the bins. Laundry and cleaning continued week after week, but I was only treading water. The thin layer of dust that coated the tops of the kitchen units grew in silent clumps. It was only when retrieving forgotten items stowed above that the dust would be apparent. I did not have the heart to spring clean those areas needing attention. Under the sofa suffered the same treatment, as did under the beds and deep in the back of the

wardrobes. If things found their way into a cupboard or press, and lay quiet, then they might not be touched again. To empty the cupboards might also empty the memories of a shared life. Seventeen years was a long time in which to accumulate possessions and artefacts. The ticket stub to a concert; the single cufflink from his dress suit; the menu from a favourite takeaway. Once these things had a meaning and now they just had a memory. I preferred to ignore their presence, to pretend they did not exist. The thought of having to sort through the debris of the marriage was too much for me. The thought of having to empty the house to sell it nearly killed me, so I shut down that line of thinking. I could not physically bear it.

As for custody, Denis stated outright that he would not spend a moment in his father's company, let alone live with him. 'It's out the question, Ma,' he said bluntly. I agreed. Andrew was more compliant. 'I prefer living here,' he said slowly, 'but I don't mind spending more time with Dad. Not school nights but maybe at weekends.' I looked at my son with some astonishment. He had never expressed a desire to spend more time with his father prior to the legal interruptions. Where had this new change of heart arrived from? 'When I'm with Dad, I don't really like you,' he said quietly. 'And when I'm home here, I don't really like Dad. But when I'm with either of you, I'm content.' I blinked, hard. 'Ok,' I said. 'That's ok.'

I wasn't sure whether to share the news with my parents but mum had left several messages and so I called over after work. Dad was dressed and sitting at the dinner table. It was the first time he'd eaten downstairs since his departure from the hospital. 'Room service was getting a bit dodgy,' he joked. Mum looked tired but

smiled. My heart bucked a little. My parents seemed to have aged before my eyes. It was like the day of my marriage, I suddenly saw them as the next generation. The same when I gave birth to Denis, I saw them as grandparents and not just parents. Now, I saw them as vulnerable and aging and it frightened me.

I explained about the new terms on the table and the fact that O'Brien seemed to have jumped ship. 'I thought the family home was inviolable, especially when there were children involved,' said my father slowly.

'George seems to think O'Brien is thinking of his fees,' I said. 'Especially since he started off with a very different position.'

Both mum and dad were very unhappy with the developments. 'What happens next?' they asked.

'O'Brien is going to write back to ask Paul to clarify why he feels the house is at risk and hence the need for the sale,' I said. 'I wish I'd asked him just to refuse. To play hardball. But he didn't agree with me, he agreed with Paul.'

'Not the healthiest position to have your divorce solicitor agreeing with your spouse,' said dad. 'It smacks of that chumminess you hear about in court. After all, the legal teams work together the whole time, it's the clients that come and go, so they have more in common with supposed opposing counsel than you. You are just the meal ticket; the other solicitor is the work colleague. After you are gone, they'll still be working and drinking with their legal chums.'

I returned home. That thought really depressed me but I could feel its sincerity. O'Brien didn't care about me. He didn't care if I was a slovenly wretch or that Paul had a lover. Our human predicament meant nothing to him. It may be the most important crisis I was facing in my life but it was just a job for him. He would want the most efficient and elegant solution to our messy conundrum, and the rights and wrongs that went before were immaterial. I rang George and he agreed with dad's summation. George had heard too about O'Brien's avarice. 'He is notorious for it,' he said. 'Amongst other things.' I tried to press him on what other things but George refused to be drawn. 'Watch the bills,' he said. 'He charges more than anyone else and takes no prisoners. He doesn't care about you; he just wants to do the job and get paid, and if that means agreeing to sell the house in favour of fighting to keep it just so a solution can be reached, then he will.

'Because he knows fighting to keep the house means tying up whatever equity you may have in it so you will not be in a position to pay him. Trust me, that house is as good as gone.'

I hung up the phone and cried. I opened a bottle of wine and poured a large glass. I drank that. I poured a second glass and drank that too. And a third. The glasses were large and the bottle almost empty. Really, they didn't make bottles as full as they used to, I thought as I tipped the remaining wine into my glass. I was a little tipsy, very tired and utterly exhausted. I couldn't afford to lose the house; it

was the one thing that kept me centred. I went to bed and did not even bother to get out the rabbit.

Chapter Twenty Eight

It was all about the rugby. Every conversation in work was dominated by it. Brian even remarked it was having a counter-productive effect to that imagined by the US parent. Bonding? Good, yes. Productivity? Down, yes. All everyone wanted to talk about was tactics, training and how to make the damn shorts stand down.

‘I’ve washed mine after each match and it doesn’t make a blind bit of difference,’ said Sarah.

Mine were exhibiting similarly inflating defiance despite multiple washes. ‘I may just have to resign myself to looking pregnant playing rugby,’ I moaned. It was less the way the creases on the legs stuck out and more how they continued that trajectory up to the waist line. It didn’t help that the oversized logoed tee-shirts had to be tucked in so that the tags were clear. I’d also resorted to buying self-tanning cream to try and remove the extreme whiteness of my legs. Ireland’s quota of summer sunshine was in low supplies and foreign holidays were a thing of the past, I’d just have to resign myself to either remaining pearly white or else smelling like a strange flower and hoping the cream would take off the edge to my whiteness. In some regards it didn’t matter as every Thursday night it poured down with rain. I had to buy a raincoat to try and stay dry while waiting on the side-lines. The only positive thing was the rain was warm and the running soon took the edge off the coolness of the wet weather. I became the top team scorer, but only by virtue of the fact that I preferred to stay on the pitch and keep warm. I was like an elephant, slow to run but once I got going, it was hard to stop me. I’d scored

several tries through sheer bumbling force as opposed to skill. That did not stop me from lording it over everyone, Brian included.

‘For God’s sake Aoife, put a sock in it,’ he cried after I’d dropped it idly into the conversation again. We were having a post-match drink and I had scored a pretty impressive try, landing into nettles that edged the pitch. Stopping wasn’t my forte but the try was good and as a result we’d won. I took another sip of my drink and looked around the club house. Some of the other women had changed into jeans and tops. The ‘Mostest with the Mostest’ (our catchy team name) had not changed. We were in our scruffy gear, a bit damp and with hair sticking up a badly as our shorts. I grinned. I liked the *bonhomie* of the team and there was very little bitching between us. ‘Roll on Carlow,’ I said. ‘We’ll be in good form for that, winning form.’ Brian grinned back.

‘It’ll be a good stepping stone for San Francisco,’ he said.

‘Yes, because playing tag rugby is just like marketing? Eh, how?’

‘Because Carlow Rugby Club is going for the world record and we are going there to win. It’s all about taking part and winning.’

‘In that case, it’s all about the craic.’

Lois had set up a Facebook page for the team and added pictures and scores, to be viewed outside work of course. I found myself spending more time on the site and on an idle moment looked up Chris’s details. The shock when I saw his smiling, tanned face was palpable. Bang! My mouse hovered over the Add Friend button. I

wondered and then in a moment of madness, clicked it. I cursed. Shit. Then I thought, relax. He is in Greece and I am in Ireland. There is no harm in Facebooking him. Or maybe there was, as I trawled through his photo galleries. Endless leggy blondes on his arm. I felt physically sick. I regretted sending the friend invite. Still, it was done. And a few days later, he accepted, even commenting on a tag rugby shot. *Nice shorts Aoife.* I went all *Simpson-ite* and replied, *Eat my shorts!* Chris replied. *Nice shorts Bart, tasty!* Oh well, we could still enjoy a long distance joke.

Editing the clips took longer than I originally guessed but the result was fantastic. Brian had looked at the outtakes and decided on his slogan. He went for a quirky line, 'The Irish understand technology,' he said. 'We are a creative people fuelled by curiosity and humour. We like to understand what goes on under the bonnet as well admire the car.'

I stopped the camera. I was laughing. 'What on earth does that mean?' I asked.

'Nothing, but it doesn't matter,' said Brian. 'It'll be part of the mix.'

I signed, it was definitely an eclectic mix of opinions but when sliced and diced together the result was pretty hot. Even Sarah was impressed. 'Nice work Aoife,' she said and I nearly fell over in surprise. 'Thanks,' I said getting up off the metaphorical floor. 'Yeah, thanks.' Tag Rugby really was good for the company!

I went through my presentation. The slides were okay. I only had ten minutes in total and my video was three minutes, leaving only seven minutes to fill. I had five slides, two talking about Ireland, two about the customers and one about future plans with Ireland at the heart. I planned on rehearsing the slides later on: in the boardroom and by myself. I'd even set up the camera so that I could review what I had done afterwards. I was feeling pretty stressed.

My phone beeped, again. It never stopped, that app. Flattered as I might be, I knew it was a numbers game. Eight new messages since lunch: this was mad. I flicked through them. At the beginning I was polite and replied to everyone, but after a while it just became a chore. Also, even when I refused people, they kept on talking. It was as near to bar-room behaviour as I could imagine, the drunk still talking long after any pretence of politeness by the recipient of the attention had been abandoned. Only these people were sober, well I imagined they were as it was during the day.

There was one message that stood out. A handsome man, Peter in his thirties, who asked if I liked massage. Oh, I groaned inwardly. Just what I needed and I replied in the same vein. *Had I had yoni massage?* was the next question. I said *No, what was it? An ancient form of Indian massage*, I was informed. *Very relaxing and therapeutic*, he said. He was Indian and had spent a long time training to be able to give these massages. *Would I like one?*

I wondered if it was like an Indian head massage and googled *yonni massage*. I laughed out loud. *Yoni* was a sacred temple or space and to be crude, it was a pussy

massage, only with deep breathing and respect. Tantric massage. It sounded divine. I replied that I would definitely think about it. I did a lot that day and had to dip into the bathroom around 4pm. No one else was there and I furiously rubbed out an orgasm in one of the stalls. God I thought, this is madness but I kept on rubbing until I came a few minutes later. Breathless and red in the face I washed my hands. I peered into my reflection. Was this the new Aoife Brennan, I thought. Was it an improvement on the old? I genuinely wasn't sure and wished my colour would go down. My neck and chest were red too, as if I'd been running or else had a rash. Maybe it wasn't so obvious to others. At that moment, Sarah arrived in the bathroom. She glanced at me, then glanced back again. 'Are you okay?' she said.

'Yes, yes, bit stressed,' I said. 'I'm going back to practice this bloody presentation.' And I scurried out of the bathroom, practically colliding with Brian in the corridor in my haste. He too looked at me quizzically. 'You been running?' he asked.

I shook my head, 'Stress,' I muttered and hurried off to the boardroom. God couldn't anyone have an orgasm without the sex police conducting an interrogation. It took less than the time to smoke a cigarette after all, was healthy and was no one else's business.

Brian had followed me into the boardroom. 'Show me your stuff,' he said. I could feel myself blushing. Dear lord, blushing on top of a sex flush. Not fair, I thought bitterly but it didn't stop. I could feel my body, still quivering from the post orgasmic glow, hot up again. My upper lip felt damp and I touched it

unconsciously. The back of my neck felt damp too and so too was between my shoulder blades.

'I'll get you a glass of water, shall I,' said Brian smiling. 'You look all hot and bothered.'

Christ did he guess? I was mortified. I walked up and down the boardroom, fanning myself. By the time Brian returned I had regained some of my composure.

'Right,' he repeated. 'Let's see your stuff,' pulling up a chair.

'I'm playing the video first,' I said. 'This is the scene setting,' and I hit the play button. The sound of uilleann pipes filled the room as the camera panned over the crowds on Grafton Street, before moving up to the Green. Then the first of the talking heads spoke to camera in a broad Dublin accent.

I watched Brian as the video played. He was watching intently and did not notice my attention until the end when he switched his gaze and caught mine. He smiled, widely and slowly. 'Aoife, that is fucking top notch, first rate, the bees knees,' he said.

I smiled back. 'Thank the Lord.'

'I knew I'd picked a good 'un,' said Brian. 'You were wasted in support; this is definitely your calling. So run through the slides now, what are you saying next. Not that you need to say anything after that video,' he said. 'It's fucking class.'

Brian sat back in his chair, putting his hands above his head in a relaxed pose. I pulled up the slides in place of the video and turned to the first one. I felt a

little shy, as if I was there for his pleasure rather than learning. It didn't help when he then crossed one leg over, putting the ankle onto his knee and was now leaning forward. I wondered if my flush had gone. I couldn't remember exactly what I'd planned on saying. 'Well of course,' I began, 'I'll talk about what makes Ireland special, not mentioning the motor mechanics you spoke about,' and I laughed.

'No, do it properly,' said Brian. 'I want to hear what you will say.'

I groaned. 'I feel like a sissy doing that,' I complained.

'Come on Aoife.'

Come on Eileen, that song from Dixies Midnight Runners, played in my head and I coughed to gain time. I fumbled the papers on the table, checked the slides, and finally looked up. 'Ok, here I come,' I said in ironic parallel to my earlier occupation. And for the second time that day, I did.

Chapter Twenty Nine

The boys were complaining I was never at home. They had a point. Since the takeover at work, I had been working later, not including the genuine night shifts and the couple of stolen dates, I played tag rugby on Thursday, had Pilates on Tuesday and sometimes went for a drink after work with the 'Mostest with the Mostest' crew. I was rebuilding my social life again, with new friends, new activities and new fun. Of course I saw Trish and Tom too, mostly at the weekends, but I felt I was beginning my world anew. To top it all we were going to Carlow for the Tag Festival the weekend before I left for the States. They felt very neglected and told me in no uncertain terms. How I would ever find the time to insert a boyfriend into my busy schedule I had no idea, not that anyone was volunteering for the post currently.

Trish pacified me. 'Look Aoife, you are a full time mum and the boys always come first. You do their runs and lifts when they need them. You are allowed time off for yourself and of course the States is work so that doesn't count. Carlow will be fun I bet, just behave - remember it's a work outing so don't get carried away.'

Carried away? Oh the joys. We were belting out *The Fields of Athenry* in a steamy beer tent into the middle of the countryside outside Carlow town. The host rugby club had set up great hospitality; a celebrity rugby match, great music and a bucking bronco in the middle of the dance floor. Don't you even think of getting on that bull I told myself at the start of the night. Of course, by the time we were

singing, Sarah and I were fighting over who would get on it first. She won and clambered on the bull lasting some fifteen seconds before being thrown off. I did not last much longer and felt decidedly queasy afterwards. Sense kicked in and I refused a rematch, gracefully giving into Sarah who really did not know when to stop. She tried three more times before she excused herself, red in the face, to be loudly sick outside the tent. I hoped that did not form part of a pitch for tomorrow's festival or at least the ever present summer rain might wash it away overnight.

Brian tried next and lasted a few seconds longer. I noticed the chap manning the controls simply twiddled them faster for the men. I sidled up to him. 'If I buy you a pint, will it make it go very slowly for me?'

'Darling, for you I'd do anything, especially with a pint. Who can resist a woman with a pint? Perfection!'

I went to the bar and purchased a pint before returning to deliver it to the operator. 'Really gently now,' I said.

'No worries.'

'Or, I'll puke over your bull!'

'No need for that!'

'Just warning you!'

I rejoined the gang but no one had noticed my absence. Brian was boasting that he had been on the longest. 'Let's put your money where your mouth is' I

challenged him. He looked at me. 'Top try scorer, prepare to be decimated!' I just grinned.

The rodeo match went down in Carlow rugby club history, or least it did in our history. It was a three match bout. Brian went first and managed a good 24 seconds. I thought the operator was easier than he might have been and looked crossly at him as I got up. I only lasted a dismal 17 seconds, even with my new friend's connivance. Brian was off faster on his second turn, the operator turned up the heat a little, and I managed a passable 20 seconds. The final gong and Brian managed 26 seconds despite some pretty mean jerks from the bull. I swallowed hard, glowered at the operator who grinned back cheekily, and climbed on board. Even I knew it was going too slow, there were boos from the sides and so I put a big show of leaning back and 'yee-hawing' as in the cowboy movies to distract from the fact that the bull was hardly moving. It was the longest 30 seconds I'd ever put in but once I reached that figure I bowed and climbed down, not waiting to be thrown off. Brian looked at me and then at the operator. 'You little cheat,' he said and grabbing me around the middle, threw me back in the saddle and climbed up behind. 'Let's ride this bull together,' he yelled jerking his head at the operator. Larks alive, the bull bucked into action and plunged with vigour and so a mere five seconds later Brian and I were tossed into an unceremonious heap on the ground. We were laughing so hard. 'You little cheat,' he repeated and kissed my neck. I stopped laughing and looked at Brian. At that moment he released me and we both got up, much to the amusement of everyone on the team. I don't think anyone had noticed and I decided Carlow was way too close to home.

We drank late into the night, the bar only closing at three am, and finally found our fuzzy way to the camping site. I was sharing with Sarah in a tiny two-man tent. It certainly wasn't big enough for two women. Somehow, we shrugged our way into damp sleeping bags and full as ticks, slept despite the cold, damp and the hard ground.

The morning was a different story altogether. Every bone in my body ached. My hangover had a hangover and my eyes refused to open. Tom popped his head in the tent opening. 'Boy, women are worse than men,' he said. 'Hair of the dog anyone?' and he flashed a vodka bottle in front of us.

'Get out you fucking idiot,' swore Sarah.

'I don't think so,' I said through gritted teeth. How were we going to play tag rugby today?

Badly was the answer. I kept breakfast down but it took some effort. A classy chipper van dispensed greasy breakfast rolls and I ordered the works. As a dribble of egg yolk ran down my chin I caught Brian's eye. 'A rematch tonight?' he joked.

'I'm going home after the matches,' I said. 'I have children and responsibilities. Anyway, I have to go home and pack for San Francisco.'

For an answer Brian grinned. Tom joined us and I was glad to see the vodka bottle had disappeared. 'Did you drink some?' I asked in curiosity.

'Just enough, just enough,' he said and winked. 'Tactics.' He touched his nose. I laughed. 'Yeah, just don't get sick running with the ball.'

We played a total of five games on Saturday and lost every one of them, with style. Actually with no style whatsoever. It had been amusing at the start to lose, we didn't really care, but as the day wore on and we kept on losing and the hangovers didn't really shift and the legs felt like dead weights, we stopped laughing quite so much. 'Do or die!' was Brian's rallying call into the final match but it didn't make a blind bit of difference. We lost. 'Feck!' he said, panting and hands on his knees. 'I'm fucked. Let's go get a drink.'

I stopped for a soft drink only. I was not staying the second night. Sarah smiled cheesily at Brian. 'We can do the bull together tonight,' she cooed.

'I'm not getting on that fucking metal contraption again,' said Brian and everyone laughed, including me.

I walked away from the tent shortly afterwards. Everyone else was staying for the second night. It would have been fun and I felt quite depressed as I left. Sarah would have the two man tent all to herself tonight, or not as the case might be. I wondered if my place might be taken, and if so, by whom.

Chapter Thirty

Melanie arrived the following night before I was to leave for the States. While Carlow itself had been fun, the preceding week had been manic. I had double-shopped for food and crammed the freezer and fridge full. I'd cleaned the kitchen and whirled around the living room like a whirlwind, before making up a fresh bed in the spare room. I had done multiple loads of washing to ensure endless supplies of clean uniforms, kit and ordinary wear. The house had resembled a Chinese laundry at one point with the boys complaining they could not sit anywhere for fear of knocking over damp washing. I'd left extra money on the side for emergencies. When Melanie arrived, she took one look around the house and laughed. 'It's me, Aoife,' she said, 'not the bloody queen of England.'

I laughed too. 'Well, the house needed a bit of a spruce up,' I said. 'I found a lot of money behind the back of the sofa. We can all go on holiday now.'

'Really,' Andrew's ears pricked up.

'I'm kidding love,' I said gently. 'There were some toy soldiers, chewing gum fortunately not as yet chewed and tissues, sadly used. Nothing else of any merit I'm afraid.'

'Are you packed?' said Melanie. I said not yet and we both ascended the stairs to check out my capsule wardrobe. 'Capsule? Does that mean you are packing pills?'

I had one shirt and one pair of trousers, both tailored and plain navy. I had three blouses to match, a mixture of bold prints, geometric designs and formal stripes. I had one plain jacket and two pairs of court shoes, one navy, one polka dot. 'Those are fun,' said Melanie admiringly.

'I think I'm a little formal, but otherwise it's good,' I said. 'And for the *coup de grace*...' and I held up a dark green dress, a body tube of crushed velvet and a plunging neckline. In my other hand I dangled a pair of five inch heels.

'Those aren't shoes,' said Melanie. 'They are weapons: weapons of mass destruction. That's some pulling gear. Where did you get those shoes?'

'I bought the shoes the week Paul left but never wore them. It was supposed to be a symbol of my independence and freedom but I put them away in the wardrobe and promptly forgot I had them. The dress is from years ago. It's from before Denis. It's only because I've lost some weight that it fits again. I'm re-launching the Titanic that was me!'

'The dress that launched a thousand ships, or one,' said Melanie. 'Just steer clear of icebergs.'

We went downstairs to where Denis and Andrew were playing with Bingo. He bounced and barked and ran around the room, his tail knocking into chairs and threatening to clear the occasional tables of their assorted paraphernalia. I removed

a couple of fragile pieces to a higher address. 'Gosh, he has loads of energy,' I said wondering if the dog had been a good if temporary addition to the household.

'He is a great guard dog too,' said Melanie oblivious to the uncertainty in my voice. 'And I'm sure the lads will enjoy walking him. He is great fun in the park - he just loves playing Frisbee too. You should see him jump when catching it. He's a wonder dog!'

The boys were laughing and making plans for an excursion that weekend. I smiled. It was such a relief to know they were happy.

'Right, I'm going to bed,' I said. 'My taxi is booked for four in the morning and I'm going to try and get some sleep. Denis, bed shortly. Andrew, bed now. Melanie, bed whenever you like.' I reached down to the remote control on the table beside her. 'This is now officially yours Melanie, you are in charge,' I said.

'I don't really watch telly,' said Melanie to a combined whoop from the boys. 'It's all yours lads.'

Four in the morning came earlier than expected. I had only struggled out of bed half an hour before, had the briefest shower and climbed into my sweats for travelling. I was just coming down the stairs when I heard the taxi pull up outside. For a moment I'd forgotten about Bingo and nearly had a heart attack when roused from sleep he let out an excited bark. 'Hush,' I said after calming myself. I grabbed

my coat from the cloakroom and ordered Bingo back to his bed in the kitchen. Then I slunk out the door so as to prevent him from following as he had not paid the slightest attention to my whispered command.

Brian was already at the airport. He looked a little groggy. 'San Francisco here we come. My favourite city in the world,' he said.

I wondered how we would spend the next seven hours together but was pleasantly surprised. Brian outside the office and off the rugby pitch was even more relaxed and jokey. I wondered if he was actually flirting with me. He always teased me in the office but sitting side by side on the airplane seemed a whole lot more intimate than even the boardroom. Then I remembered the kiss in Carlow and I wondered if I had imagined it. I'd heard no gossip back from the second night in Carlow but that might not mean anything, after all I hadn't been back in the office anyway.

I had brought my Kindle, Brian his iPod. We both had our iPads. There were several decent films being shown. The food was okay and we both had wine with lunch and it loosened our tongues. I filled Brian in on my recent legal issues. He told me about the hassles of purchasing a flat in Temple Bar. He liked to live in the city centre. He liked to party too. In fact he was a bit of a party animal it turned out. He was also single too which I knew but I didn't know he had split from a long term partner the previous year. His parents were both dead. He had no pets and he was pretty happy. I turned to look at him directly when he said that. 'Now, that's

an interesting point,' I said. 'Pretty happy? I wonder how many people can say that.'

'Aren't you, Aoife?' he answered.

'Good question. I think I am, I just haven't stopped to think recently. I've been so busy surviving that I haven't really considered my happiness quota and if I have sufficient.'

'Do an audit of your life,' said Brian. 'What are the good bits, the blessings, and what are the downsides. The trick is to count the blessings as the saying goes and think of the bad things as a process to get through, temporary blips if you like.'

'Hmm, I see your point. Some blips are more painful than others. This stupid divorce stuff is very stressful. My parent's aging is very worrying. Oh.' I stopped suddenly recalling Brian's lack of parents.

Brian smiled at me. 'I loved my Ma and Da,' he said, 'and naturally I was devastated when they died, especially so close to each other. But I can't change life or death for that matter. They are still on my blessing list.'

'Yes, I see what you mean, glass half full and all that.'

It was my first trip to San Francisco but Brian's third. He hadn't been here since he was single though and it was the first time with work. We caught a taxi to the hotel

and arranged to meet in the lobby in an hour to walk to the office where an afternoon of orientation was planned at US Register.

I looked out my hotel bedroom. The sun was shining and the city was laid out before me like a painting. I put on the kettle and made myself a coffee. I hung up my clothes and placed the shoes of mass destruction carefully in my closet. I hummed tunelessly, then switched on the giant flat screen television and skipped through the various channels. I loved the States and I was going to love San Francisco. I thought for a moment about the islands. I pushed the thought from my head. I had to live in the moment and Chris wasn't coming back.

The orientation meeting in US Register was very relaxed. There were twenty in total from all over Europe and North America. Everyone got a name badge and had to introduce themselves. My flushes returned with a vengeance. Brian looked at me. 'All you have to do is give your name, rank and serial number,' he said. 'You have gone very red, again.' I darted him a quick look. Was he mocking me? And why the bloody hell was I blushing all the time, excepting the last time in the boardroom back in Dublin of course as I knew very well why I was red in the face then.

When I stood to introduce myself, I decided to take the bull by the horns. My heart beat was up and I was a little breathless. I smiled down the boardroom table. Everyone was smiling back. I took a deep breath. 'I'm Aoife but every time I have to do this type of introduction to a group of strangers, I find I get very nervous. It's utterly mad as I do know my name, I know what I do and I know where I come

from. Later on, I'll be telling you all about it in my presentation, but it won't be as nerve-wracking as this first hello. I wonder am I alone in this burst of nerves?'

As I sat down there were some giggles. My neighbouring executive, Matt from Germany, kindly acquiesced. 'Yes, there is a definite rush to the head at this type of introduction,' he said looking at me. 'I too know my name so I've no idea why I should be so worried about telling you.' And one by one, the remaining executives bobbed up and echoed my sentiments. I looked smugly at Brian who merely raised an eyebrow, a trick he'd perfected in boarding school which nugget of information he'd shared on the plane. 'I wasn't nervous,' he confided in a stage whisper. I kicked him under the table.

Over a coffee break, I chatted with Merle from Spain and Antonia from Italy. Brian was chatting with Matt. There was a dinner planned for the evening, just an informal one at the local pizzeria. Of course this being San Francisco the pizzas were nothing like those at home. We went straight from the offices and walked downtown to the busy restaurant. I opted for an organic wild salmon and dill creation. It was heaven. I was seated between Merle and Antonia again and really enjoyed their company. They were mad for going onto a club but I was shattered. Brian agreed. 'I can't believe the Irish are not going to party,' chivvied Merle. 'Tomorrow,' promised Brian.

Walking back to the hotel, we fell into a companionable pattern. Our steps were in sync and our breathing even. Crossing the main road in front of the hotel,

Brian held my elbow. It felt kind of natural. 'Do you fancy a night cap,' he asked as we entered the foyer. I looked at him. 'Yes, that would be nice,' I said.

Several night caps later, Brian and I were roaring with laughter. His sense of humour was very wicked and poor Matt had received a terrible ribbing in his absence. I dreaded looking at him in the morning. In the spirit of the new world I also confessed my recent dates, and gave an edited but highly amusing account of my disastrous BDSM experiences. Brian laughed until the tears rolled down his face. 'Only could happen to you Aoife - although I must confess I thought you were a paragon of virtue.'

'So did I.' I laughed. 'They just sort of happened, by accident if you like.'

'Sex by accident,' said Brian. 'Now that's a great title for a book. You should write it.'

'Yeah, just what my kids would like.'

Finally, I looked at my watch. 'It's late, well it's only nine thirty, but it's the early hours in Ireland and I need to sleep,'

'Do you?' asked Brian touching my knee. I stiffened and then relaxed. I looked intently at Brian. 'Do you think that is a good idea?' I asked.

Brian smiled. 'I am a great believer in what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.'

'That's arse-ways,' I laughed. 'It's what goes on tour, stays on tour and we are in San Francisco anyway.'

'All the more reason for it to stay in Vegas,' said Brian.

'So, you would like to have sex by accident with me,' I said.

'Very much,' said Brian. 'You can call it research for your book.'

'How kind, except I'm not writing any book,' I laughed.

We went to my room giggling as we walked along the corridor. We passed a guest and it was all I could do not to burst out laughing. 'Oh, now we'll be found out,' said Brian in my ear. 'Why did you have to laugh?!'

Falling against the door, I tried to insert my card. It took several attempts and Brian had begun nuzzling my ear now. I giggled harder and as the door opened, we both fell in. 'I think I'm a bit tipsy,' I said.

'I think you are too,' said Brian, 'and I like it. Drop your knickers Aoife Brennan, now!'

'Feck off Brian. I'm done with all that BDSM crap,' I said. 'If I want to be tied up again, I'll be, I'll be, I'll become a parcel.'

'A what?'

'You know, tied up like a parcel. Oh feck it, you know what I mean.'

'You are the funniest thing, Aoife Brennan,' said Brian and began pulling down my knickers.

'Stop calling me by my full name. I'll think I'm in trouble.'

'You are. I'm the big bad wolf and I'm going to eat you up,' said Brian who had also managed to remove my blouse and bra. I looked at him. 'What happens in Vegas?'

'Yes, stays in Vegas.' Brian nodded seriously and began kissing me. He pushed me back on the bed and I fell giggling. 'How come I'm naked and you are not?'

'Easily remedied,' said Brian and undid his trousers, let them fall and kicked them off with a flourish. Then as I watched, still giggling, he pulled his shirt over his head, swung it around and chucked it flying through the air. He hooked a finger on each side of his boxers and pulled them down and up again just before his cock could be seen. He did this several times until in a fit of giggles I demanded he ...'Ger' em off!'

'For you my sweet,' he said and pulled them down in a single movement. He stood naked with a large erection and his socks. I pointed at the socks, 'Off!'. Brian growled and jumped on the bed on top of me. 'My saucy wench wants to the give the orders now,' he barked. 'If I want to wear my socks, then I shall. It's safe sex after all.'

I giggled even more. 'So you're going to put your socks on your cock?' I said. 'That'll make it pretty safe alright!'

In answer Brian started kissing me. He stopped my giggles with his tongue and by slowly rubbed his erection against my leg. I pulled my arms around him, feeling his shoulders and rubbing my hands down his back. I came to his buttocks

and squeezed. 'Oh,' moaned Brian into my mouth. He kissed down my neck and reached for my right breast. 'Oh my god, your nipples are divine Ms Brennan,' he said and bit them.

'Oh Mr Wolf,' I said panting, 'Eat me, eat me!'

Brian obliged, moving down my belly, kissing and nibbling until he reached between my legs. With one hand, he pulled my lips apart and moved in to suck my clit. I let out a long sigh. His tongue went in and out very deep, licking me out before returning to my clit and sucking and pulling. He put one finger in my pussy and began to pulse it in a rhythmical beat. Then he put two fingers in and moved them in a 'come hither' motion. I gasped. This was very good. Brian put three fingers inside and stopped sucking, concentrated instead on thrusting his fingers into me. I could feel a building urge. 'Yes Aoife, come on,' he said never varying the rhythm. I could feel something very different inside me, I could feel something building, his fingers pulled steadily deep and strong. 'Yes, Aoife, you can do it,' he said. I cried out and suddenly felt a release. I squirted all over Brian. 'Oh my God, what have I done?' I said in horror as Brian was drenched in my liquid. Brian laughed. 'Oh, is that a first?' he said. 'You have just squirted Aoife Brennan and I love it.'

I half cried, half laughed. 'Is that normal? I'm so sorry,' I said horrified and fascinated all in one. 'That is fantastic,' said Brian. 'Now for the safe sex.'

I looked at him half expecting the socks to make an appearance, but he drew a condom from his trouser pocket. 'You brought one with you,' I said. 'Were you always going to have sex with me?'

'I'm a boy scout,' said Brian, tearing the wrapper and putting the condom on in a swift move. 'Now, prepare to be boarded, Ms Brennan.' He fell on top of me and pushed his cock into me. 'Oh, you have the tightest pussy,' he said and began thrusting into me. I was still groggy from the unexpected squirting, but arched up into him and held him. He kissed me and began going faster. Brian was still damp and he moved slickly on top of me. He pulled me up into him and bent his head onto my shoulder. His breathing quickened and his thrusting became more urgent. Our bodies moved in unison as he cradled me to him. 'I'm coming,' he said and he did. I could feel his cock vibrating and quiver inside. He collapsed on top of me and breathed heavily. I stuck a tongue out to lick his shoulder. It tasted of me. I marvelled at the sensation and the wetness. I had never, ever done that before. Wow, another first, I thought. Then I remembered the socks.

'We had sex and you never removed your socks,' I said in mock indignation.

Chapter Thirty One

I woke with a start. Brian was still lying across me and I couldn't see the clock. I wriggled my way out of his arms and looked at my phone. Oh my God it was eight thirty already. 'Brian, Brian,' I cried shaking him. 'We're late.'

Brian woke with a start and cursing loudly jumped out of bed, gathering his clothes. 'Ok, I'll meet you in the foyer in fifteen minutes,' he said. 'We'll be in Register by nine. It'll be alright.' He kissed me awkwardly on the side of the head and buttoning his shirt, left the hotel bedroom. I ran into the bathroom and looked at my hair. God, it would have to do, I didn't have time to wash and dry it. If I pulled it into a ponytail, it would be okay. I turned on the shower and was just glad I didn't have to think about clothes.

It was just after nine when we walked into Register. Everyone else was there and they all looked refreshed and well dressed. I imagined that it was very obvious what we had done and blushed a deep crimson. Fuck I thought. It must be the bloody menopause. That or all the sex I thought. However, we were saved by the clubbing party. Merle and Antonia held court and they told everyone about the club they'd visited with Matt, Ollie and Richie, the latter two from Holland and owners of tattoos, spiked hair and multiple piercings. The club was a hoot, with caged dancers and the obligatory foam party.

It was my turn to do my presentation first thing. I really wished I'd had breakfast as I could feel my stomach begin to churn with nerves, hunger and the

effects of the drink the night before. It wasn't a very good combination. I set up my slides and Brian stood beside me. 'Are you okay?' he asked quietly. 'I don't feel great,' I confessed. 'I need some soakage.'

'I'm on it,' said Brian and left the room. He returned moments later with a pastry and a glass of water. I sighed my delight and took a bite. I felt a bit sick but the pastry was at least going into my stomach. I hoped it would ease the rumbling liquids swishing around. I took a second bite but by now everyone was seated and waiting for my talk. I couldn't really continue my belated breakfast and nor could I speak with my mouth full. I took a drink of water and began my talk. Of course, after the first minute, I turned on the video and was able to sit and finish the pastry as it played. To my delight, pastry finished, everyone laughed at the video and even clapped at the end. I moved into my talk, happy to speak to a friendly audience.

Presentation done I sat down with relief. That was the hard part over. Now, all I had to do was listen to everyone else. And also figure out Brian. I thought of the squirting again with embarrassment. I'd apologised several times until he'd told me to be quiet. Then I thought of the socks. I grinned to myself. I looked at Brian and he was looking at me and grinning too. Larks alive, grinning was catching.

It was a long day. Lots of stuff to listen to, lots of marketing and messaging and underneath it all I felt a bit tingly. I wondered if Vegas was going to be a one night stay or a total vacation stay. We hadn't any time to engage this morning and during the day he neither sought me out nor ignored me, but acted just as he had the day before. I wondered if I had imagined it. Then I remembered the squirting and the socks.

As the day drew to a close, Peter Jones, the head of marketing, called for a vote and it was decided to go to the Sushi bar for dinner. 'Yum yum, I love sushi,' said Brian and winked at me. I clenched my hands into fists and willed my face not to go red. I dug my nails into the palms and it hurt, but the blush did not come. Hallelujah I said with relief. I was beating the blush.

The Sushi bar was a conveyor belt which meant everyone was sitting in a long straggled line. It didn't work so well for group dynamics and I found myself between Matt and Peter, not the liveliest characters. Both talked work which, while easy to follow, was deadly boring. Then Matt asked me about bitcoin. 'What coin?' I replied. 'Oh,' said Matt with a glint in his eye. He started to tell me about Satoshi and digital gold and making the world a better place. I was only half listening. It sounded interesting but I had more important fish to fry, which irony was not lost on me where the food was largely raw.

I glanced over at Brian sandwiched between the party girls Merle and Antonia and felt a little twang of jealousy. They were laughing a lot and I bet they

were not talking about work. As I looked, Brian looked in my direction and winked. I blushed. Fuck. And looked away.

When I go home, I thought privately, I'm going to the doctor. Either I'm pre-menopausal or I've something the matter with me. I cannot blush the whole time. It's like getting spots when no longer a teenager. It's just not on.

'The only bonus with that Sushi, aside from the flavour,' observed the public me to Peter, 'is the speed.' He nodded.

'It's fast food with none of the processed crap,' I said taking another plate of tuna from the belt. I already had a frightening array of plates stacked up beside me. I noted that neither Merle nor Antonia had appeared to have eaten very much. Peter was too busy being the main host to eat much either. Matt, on the other hand, had stoically attacked the conveyor belt in silent concentration. His stack was thankfully almost twice the size of mine but he hadn't spoken much and he was a very large man. I looked over at Brian's plates and he caught me looking again and winked again. I refused to blush. Actually with all the Saki I'd drunk I wasn't sure if I was blushing or just red from the wine. His stack was pretty impressive too. That thought make me laugh out loud. Peter looked at me enquiringly.

'I'm just admiring the stacks,' I said disingenuously. 'Some are very big.' Peter started to say something about how Register was happy to look after its staff but I cut across him, realising I might have sounded rude, especially about Matt's marathon eating effort beside me. 'Oh, I just meant this sushi is fantastic,' I said. 'I'm really enjoying it. Thank you.'

Finally, the meal dragged to a close. Once I had eaten my fill, I really wanted to quit the restaurant. I wanted to sidle up close to Brian and see how he felt about Vegas. All this winking was all very well and good, but I wanted more.

It seemed Merle and Antonia were the team leaders when it came to where next. I tried to quash my growing dislike for them. They were skinny, pretty and had great accents, but more importantly they had annexed Brian and linked arms either side of him. I was forced to walk with Matt as Peter was now looking after the Dutch team. Pissed on Saki, they wanted to smoke some weed and Peter was doing his utmost to persuade them to wait until back in their hotel.

Matt continued the conversation on bitcoin. It was less a conversation than a monologue. I might have agreed with him in another life but right now I was hard pressed to overhear the conversation ahead of us. I nodded and said 'yes' at convenient points to Matt but walked just fast enough to stay on Brian's heels. Matt, by default, was forced to stay pace. It was not that he was a slow walker, but by now we were both unnaturally close to Brian and the two girls in front of us, whose proximity provided a comic effect at the club. The trio, deep in conversation, had almost missed the entrance, and stopped with the suddenness of an emergency braking.

Accordingly Matt and I ploughed into them and almost sent all three flying. Fortunately, no one was cross. Everyone laughed but Brian raised his eyebrow at me. I glared back.

Inside the club, I had to admit it was indeed out of this world. It was of course also outside of any normal decibel level and conversation was superfluous. Any chance I might have had of talking to Brian was out of the question. The Dutch twins arrived now with Peter. Everyone was laughing. I wondered if they had wandered down a side street and shared a spliff there on the way. Peter seemed much jollier than when I last saw him and very friendly with the twins.

Since conversation was out of the question and dancing was the only sport in town, I rose to the occasion. The Dutch twins helped, taking a shine to me and dancing with me. They were hilarious, clutching me from both sides and dancing as if they were shagging me. I felt a rush of adrenalin and hoped Brian was looking. I didn't have much of a chance to check since the twins were pulling me backwards and forwards. If not high, they were very drunk but very happy drunks. I laughed genuinely and fell into their antics. At one stage, Ollie had me bent over Richie and was dry humping me. The song was called Make me Sweat, and I was with the exertion. Above me in gilded cages naked women and men danced in turns. I looked up and saw the foam cannons about to burst. Dear Lord I thought before being engulfed in foam.

I was not sure how long the foam lasted. I'd stopped dancing with the weed twins as I now thought of them. I spotted a free couch and practically ran to it, trying to dodge the great waves of foam, cold too, that flooded the dance floor. I was wrecked and wet and tired. I was also a bit peeved, miffed and cross. I closed my eyes.

'Hello Ms Brennan,' said Brian. I jerked awake. Had I slept? I blinked my eyes. Nothing had changed except the foam was gone. Brian was beside me and he held out a hand. 'Time for home,' he said. I wanted to complain but I felt bone tired. 'Yes,' I said.

Outside the club, Brian hailed a taxi and we crawled in. 'Where are the party girls?' I asked.

'Where are the sex twins?' retorted Brian.

We went to my room but we didn't laugh this night. I wanted to give out to him; to chastise him for flirting with Merle and Antonia. But what had happened to them? Had they left already or had he sent them home. Falling asleep on the sofa was not a good idea, although I was very grateful that he had rescued me. I did not relish waking the next morning or being kicked out when the club eventually closed. We were silent as we walked down the corridor. This time I opened the door without effort or falling. We both entered silently.

I turned to Brian. I struggled over what to say to him. Good manners won out in the end. 'Thank you for coming back for me,' I said. Then my crossness got the better of me. 'Despite all that flirting with the girls!'

For an answer Brian just kissed me. Then he pulled back. 'So, you and the Dutch guys, you fancy a threesome?' I stared back at him defiantly. 'Yes,' I said, 'hot, hot, hot.'

Brian jerked my head back and kissed me harder. 'You may regret what you wish for,' he said. And he fucked me hard.

Chapter Thirty Two

I woke with Brian on top of me. I was lying on my stomach and he'd pulled my arms up and held them together at the wrists with one hand. With his other hand, he was guiding his cock inside me. 'Don't worry, I've my socks on,' he whispered in my ear. I thought guiltily of my new sex before and the lack of condoms. Time for a change I thought. He put a hand under my pelvis and pulled it up so my ass stuck out. He pushed slowly and firmly until he was all the way in. I clenched him tightly and he whistled. 'Nice Ms Brennan,' he said before pulling out again. He pulsed a slow rhythm in and out. Not getting faster or slower. I wiggled a little in response. It was lazy like a Sunday morning. Still holding me prisoner, his other hand reached across to the bedside locker. There was a tube of lube there. 'Where did that come from?' I asked.

'I told you, I'm a boy scout,' said Brian. He dextrously undid the top with one hand and squirted some lube onto my anus. He rubbed it in. then pushed his finger into my ass. I could feel his finger and his cock filling my two holes. Wow. He pushed a second finger in and I gasped. It was maddeningly slow and very seductive. Now he moved his fingers in time with his cock. I began to pant. He widened his fingers and I gasped. Next I felt him pull all the way out of my pussy and push his hard cock up my anus. I held my breath. He was all the way up. He stopped. 'Are you alright, Aoife,' he asked.

I nodded. 'Yes,' I whispered.

Brian moaned and his hips rose and fell with rigor. The thick cock pumped my ass. I whimpered. It hurt but Brian held me down and I couldn't move. His breathing was ragged and he moaned loudly. His free hand pushed down on my back. I was pinned down and held tight. I held my breath at first against the pain but then began to breathe. I panted like in childbirth. I forced my body to relax. It stopped hurting. It started feeling good. It felt thick and dirty and hot. Every time his cock slid in, balls deep, I moaned in return. I could feel him filling me, more filled than in my pussy. My entire insides clenched around his cock. God this was the most amazing sensation. How had I never done this before? I could feel myself coming, this had never happened before either. I tottered on the edge of orgasm but he came first, pumping into me in a last frenzy of sweat and fury. He left go my hands and fell on his back panting. I quickly fingered my clit and began rubbing. Brian looked at me. 'Oh, sorry I couldn't stop,' he panted. He found my anus again and pushed his two fingers up here, sliding them in and out as I rubbed my very wet clit. The sensation was out of this world. I rubbed faster and came in a sweaty mess.

'I like Vegas,' I said lying back and cooling off.

'You ain't seen nothing yet,' said Brian, sniffing his fingers.

The group had definitely bonded this morning. The Dutch twins were all over me like a rash. Merle and Antonia made a bee line for Brian and even Matt was more

loquacious than normal. 'It's going to change the world,' he explained to whoever would listen. 'It's not just the cryptocurrency, it's the technology. It's called blockchain and this is like the start of the internet, only more important.'

Peter found it hard to keep the group concentrated on work. Merle and Antonia were cross with Brian. He'd left them with Matt to rescue me and hadn't said goodbye. The twins claimed to have scored with a very sexy Canadian woman and her Swedish friend. 'That sounds like the UN,' I giggled. Merle looked at me sharply when I said that. 'What happened to you Aoife,' she asked in her sexy accent.

'Oh, I went straight back to my room and bed,' I said airily. 'I was wrecked.'

'You look a little tired,' admitted Merle. 'Maybe you have an early night tonight.'

Brian overheard this comment and said 'Not too early, we're meeting a friend for dinner tonight.'

I looked at Brian in surprise. He hadn't mentioned anything before. 'Oh?' I said.

Merle said she hoped that the Irish could join the rest of the group afterwards. She didn't say it very happily.

At least tonight I was able to go back to the hotel and get changed. Brian said he had arranged to meet Ted at a bar downtown and after they were going back to his for dinner. He lived in the hills overlooking the city and it was very pretty. It was worth visiting his house for the view alone, although he was also a very good cook. I pressed him on who Ted was but Brian just said he knew him from college and he had moved here about six years ago. I would like Ted he said.

Ok, time for the shoes of mass destruction and the velvet dress I decided. Every other night, we'd gone straight from work and I hadn't a chance to get dressed up. Tonight was knock-'em-dead night.

Brian blinked when he saw me walking across the foyer. He did a mock double take. 'My God, Ms Brennan, you do scrub up well,' he said appreciatively. 'And I see you are wearing fuck-me shoes, nice.'

'They are actually shoes of mass destruction,' I retorted.

'Whatever,' said Brian. 'They are doing it for me,' and he shifted uncomfortably to indicate he had an erection.

'Put that away,' I said. 'We are in polite society now.'

Brian just grinned wolfishly. 'We'll see about that,' he said.

We caught a taxi down town to Little Mo's. 'This is real San Francisco,' said Brian as he led me into the bar. I looked around. It was quietly lit and very full. There was a buzz to the place. 'There,' said Brian and moved towards a tall blond at the bar. Wowsers, I thought. Ted wouldn't have looked out of place on the Swedish

swimming team. He smiled broadly at Brian and they hugged. Brian stepped back to introduce me and I shook his hand. He held it and said in a soft American accent, 'It is very good to meet you.' He said it so sincerely I dropped my eyes. When I looked up again both the men were exchanging glances.

'What will you have to drink?' said Brian. Ted suggested a Mojito. 'When in Vegas,' I said. Ted raised his eyebrows. 'Oh, it's an in-joke,' said Brian. 'Not funny once explained. A location joke.'

'Sure is,' I said, 'of course when in Rome is not the same as when in Vegas!'

'How confusing,' said Ted. 'I feel as though I'm in a geography lecture or drinking with Phileas Fogg. Here's to Rome and Vegas. Let's do what the Romans do and then leave it in Vegas.'

Ted and Brian had a lot of catching up to do. I sat drinking my cocktail. I glanced around the bar. My dress wasn't out of place. There were some very natty dressers hanging out in Little Mo's. In particular the men were very handsome. I reckoned there were more handsome men per square foot in Little Mo's than any pub in Ireland. How did San Francisco have the monopoly on handsome men? Then my reality check clicked in. I looked around again. Yes, it was definitely a gay bar. Very few women and some of the men were standing very close together, much closer than heterosexual rules would allow. I looked back at Ted. Ah, no wonder. But why were all the good looking men gay. I took a large drink of my cocktail and felt overall very sophisticated to be drinking in a gay bar in downtown San Francisco. Another thing ticked on my bucket list.

Ted had studied in Dublin for two years and he'd shared a flat with a friend of Brian's in Portobello. From Boston originally, he'd moved to the West Coast for work. While the two men caught up on news, Ted didn't neglect me, making sure I'd a ready supply of Mojitos. They really did go down very nicely I thought, swinging in my chair.

'Right, dinner,' said Ted. 'It's all prepared but I need to light the barbecue.'

I took the opportunity to nip to the bathroom before they left. The cocktails were definitely going to my head. I forced myself to walk steadily to the ladies. Step one, step two, step three, I counted in my head. I felt as if I was floating but also recognised this kind of floating could as easily lead to falling. As I neared the bar, a small man turned towards me, almost knocking his cocktail over me. The first thing I noticed was his rescued fancy cocktail complete with naff umbrellas. The second was his Irish accent when he told me to fucking look where I was going. The last thing I noticed was it was my divorce solicitor, Mr Fergus O'Brien, complete with toyboy in tow.

I said nothing. My mouth fell open and then it shut again. He looked at me, I looked at him. He sized me up, I sized up him. And then he said: 'Why don't you run, cos I see you ain't got any gun.' Actually he didn't say anything but after the mutual sizing up, he turned tail and disappeared into the crowds still clutching his cocktail and hotly followed by the tousle haired young man. All that ran through my head was an old Girl Guide Song about meeting a bear in the wood. I sang it often to my boys to sing them to sleep; I sang it on long car journeys to keep them

amused; I sang it when drunk in lieu of a rebel song. I sang it now in my head and I looked after Mr O'Brien going, going, 'Fergus,' I called before he was gone. He turned to look at me, in that movement the toy boy grabbed his arm more closely and locked in beside him. I raised my phone, clicked the camera app and said: 'Cheese,' and then he was gone.

I joined Brian and Ted and said nothing. I wanted to mull over this piece of formation in my head as it might prove important. I certainly hoped so.

Outside Ted hailed a taxi and gave his address. The taxi wound its way up the hills outside the city. We arrived at a hacienda tucked into the hillside. As Brian predicted the views were stunning. I sat on the balcony sipping a cold white wine and looking down over the twinkling lights. Ted was lighting the barbecue and Brian fetched a table outside so we could dine alfresco. Ted had prepared a plate of cheeses as a starter and I nibbled them, realising I was starving. He then put a green salad on the table and flat garlic bread from the oven. 'You like steak, don't you?' asked Ted.

Before I could answer, Brian butted in. 'Oh, our Aoife likes meat alright.'

I half spluttered into my wine but Ted carried on as if Brian had said nothing. 'Why did you say that?' I asked mortified and under my breath to Brian but he just grinned and replenished my glass.

Dinner was incredible. I couldn't decide it if was the fresh air, the wine, the food, the ambience, the everything. There was a lot of laughing and joking. I could not believe I ate such a huge steak. 'Now for pudding,' said Ted. He cleared up the

dishes in an elegant motion and went into the kitchen. Brian went inside to use the bathroom and Ted reappeared with a curved globe of homemade ice cream topped with sparklers lit and fizzing in the dark night air. I clapped my hands with delight. 'What a pudding!' I cried.

Ted set the ice cream in front of me. 'We must first see if you approve,' he said taking a spoon with a flourish from his back pocket. He dipped it into the icecream and indicating I open my mouth, fed me a spoonful. I closed my eyes. It was heavenly. 'More?' asked Ted.

'Yes, please,' I said opening my eyes. Ted reached down and scooped another spoon and brought it to my mouth. This time, instead of feeding me, he deliberately dropped the ice cream onto my cleavage. I looked at him surprised. In slow motion, Ted dropped his head and moved his mouth down to my cleavage. He licked up the ice cream and then moved his head back in line with mine. 'You are very pretty,' he said. I started to speak but he put his fingers to my mouth. 'It's okay,' he said. 'We are going to make you very happy,'

We? I thought, but then Brian appeared at the other side of Ted. He reached out a hand to me. 'Come,' he said. Then looking at Ted, said, 'She's very pretty, isn't she?'

I moved as if mesmerised. I stood up, still holding Brian's hand. He kissed me. I could feel Ted moving in behind me. His hands fondled my ass. I was still kissing Brian but could feel Ted run a series of kisses across the back of my neck. My whole body shivered despite the heat of the night. Ted had found the zip at the

back of my dress and slowly ran it down to the small of my back. He gathered the skirt and pulled it up and over my arms and head. Brian reached around and undid my bra. Ted pulled my panties down and I stepped out of them. I was only wearing my fuck me shoes.

Brian fondled my breasts, kissing them and playing with the nipples. Ted went down on his knees and kneading my buttocks pulled them apart and licked my ass. Brian pulled me over the chair so Ted could lick deeper. He quickly undressed and presented his erect cock to me. Oh, I licked it and pulled it. This was sensational. I was so turned on. I spat on Brian's cock and sucked it harder. 'Hmmm, nice,' said Brian. He looked over at Ted. 'Wanna swap?' he said.

The men quickly changed positions. I looked up at Ted. It was a strange thought that this sexy man had been licking my ass only moments before. He pulled off his jeans and I marvelled at his cock. It was very thick and very long. Brian attacked my ass. He put two fingers up it and pushed in and out. Then he licked again making a wet noise. I looked at Ted's cock and ran my tongue around the tip. He jerked it into my mouth and suddenly filled it; my eyes watered. I ran my tongue around the shaft in my mouth and using my hands rubbed hard up and down. I heard a foil wrapper and then felt Brian entering my ass. I stopped sucking Ted's cock until Brian was all the way in, then I relaxed and began sucking Ted again in time to Brian's thrusts. Brian lent over me and grabbing my breasts, thrust harder. I could feel my orgasm coming. I licked the tip of Ted's cock but I had to breathe. I could feel my orgasm coming. Oh my God. I clutched Ted's cock and

hung on for dear life as wave after wave of orgasm wrenched across my body.

Brian came shortly afterwards. He collapsed on top of me, panting.

There was only Ted left but it was Brian that reached across and took his cock from my hand. He pulled his cock with reverence before putting it in his mouth and sucking. Ted held Brian's head tenderly and I realised with a start this was not the first time this had happened. I watched in detached lust as my lover sucked another man's cock. When Ted came he splashed over Brian and me. That about summed up my night, I reckoned.

Afterwards, and with edited highlights, I sat with Trish and tried to reconcile everything that had happened in San Francisco. 'I think I have ticked pretty much everything on my bucket list,' I said. 'There isn't much more that I can do to experiment with sex. God knows I can't think of anything else. But it was galling that someone that I had a strong connection with had too many gay genes for me.'

Trish nodded. 'Good job it all happened beyond the Pale and indeed outside the country.'

I laughed. 'Do you really think that could have happened inside the country? No way.'

Getting dressed afterwards had been awkward for me, but not for the two men. I'd thanked Ted for dinner and wasn't sure of the etiquette regarding the threesome. Should I mention it or just pretend it hadn't happened. I stood on the balcony in the still warm night air. Ted had ordered a taxi and we were waiting for it to arrive. Ted and Brian were talking about another friend as if nothing strange had happened earlier. I realised I was very drunk, quietly so. When the taxi arrived I went to kiss Ted on the cheek but he kissed me full on the lips instead. 'You are beautiful,' he said, but he didn't mention seeing me again. I wondered if he recognised my reluctance or my swayed feelings for Brian. Ted kissed Brian full on the lips too. We climbed into the taxi and were silent for much of the journey down the hill.

'Do you want to meet the others?' asked Brian finally.

'I don't think so, not tonight,' I answered. I wanted to be alone, to think about what happened.

'I wanted you to see the other side of me,' said Brian. 'It's who I am.'

I looked at him in the dark cab. 'I know,' I said. 'I'm glad you showed me but I have to figure out if I can deal with it. Not here I mean, anywhere outside of Vegas I mean.'

'Ah Vegas,' said Brian. 'What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.'

'I think it may just do that,' I said sadly.

Chapter Thirty Three

The long flight home was less companionable than on the way out. It was an overnight flight which meant we could sleep for most of the journey, but I wondered that intimacy had not lent itself to greater ease. I didn't want to continue the relationship back in Dublin, but then I thought he probably didn't either. It was hard to know where to begin, what to say. Brian had headed out with the rest of the group after he dropped me off at the hotel. I didn't want to face anyone and really just wanted my bed, preferably without anyone in it. I curled myself up in a ball and fell asleep crying. I wasn't sure why or what I was crying for. There was no real reason. It wasn't as if I was in love with Brian and a work relationship would have been hard to continue. But, but, there was always a but. I liked Brian and felt sad that our dalliance had been terminated prematurely.

Dinner was served on the plane. We both had wine. 'Never so much fun on the way back as on the way out,' remarked Brian. I nodded. I felt inextricably lonely, even with Brian beside me. I felt like crying again and wondered if it was my hormones. A single tear squeezed its way out of my right eye, the eye next to Brian, and wandered slowly down my cheek. I froze. I wondered if he might see it. Or if I should brush it away. Would that just bring attention to it. Was crying the next phase of my benighted bodily reactions to life. First blushing, now crying, what next? A combination of the two? A blubbering flushing mess? I groaned despite my good intentions and another flurry of tears fell down my face, both

sides, tracing tracks that were shiny and glossy. They reached the end of my chin on either side and dropped like suicidal jumpers. Brian said nothing. I sniffed and another volley of tears stormed down my face. I needed a hanky now and began searching the pocket on the seat before me, then my jeans and finally fumbling under the seat for my bag, although I felt sure there were no tissues in that. Silently Brian fished a cloth hanky from his jeans pocket and handed it to me. I blew into it and then stopped horrified. I held the hanky away from me, as if it were the guilty article. 'Oh,' I said through muffled sobs, 'I'll wash it,' and cried some more.

When I had finished, I blew my nose again into the hanky. Brian had not said anything. Finally I looked at him.

'Are you finished Aoife?'

'Yes.'

'Do you know why you were crying?'

'No.'

His tone was quiet and his face was gentle. He put out a hand and pushed a strand of hair off my face, off my tear tracks. 'Vegas can do that sometimes,' he said.

'Don't try and act all grown-up with me,' I snorted and had to resort to the hanky again, my sudden laughter surprising both of us.

Brian laughed too. 'That's better.'

I gave him a long look. 'You are a dark horse.'

'I guess I am.'

'Are you a dark horse when not in Vegas?'

'Yes, actually I am,' said Brian. 'My last partner, about whom you never asked by the way, some friend you are, was Geoffrey.'

'Oh,' I was not sure what to say. 'I think,' I began slowly, 'that would be too much for me. To have to fend off other men and women. I'm not the jealous type but really, that would take a lot of work.'

'Not really,' said Brian. 'If I'm committed I'm committed. I do believe in monogamy and all that shit. Right now though, I guess I'm just treading water. My previous partner before that,' he added, 'was a Jenny.'

'Oh,' now I was even more confused. 'How come then you didn't see me as potential partner material?'

'Well, do you view me as potential partner material?'

'I might have,' I began. 'Well, not while in Dublin I guess and not really while away. Oh, I'm a bit confused. I didn't before we left. I did for a bit while away. I didn't when you, when you did you know what. But now I'm upset because there can't be a partnering in Dublin, even if I wanted it.'

'If you want a sex buddy, then I'm your man.'

'No, I don't think I want that. Great sex but it's too complicated at work. Don't you agree?'

'Yeah, super sex. Mind-blowing. But I agree about work. I'd rather have you as my friend than my ex.'

'We'll never know if we could have got that far - I mean to be together and then to part.'

'Aoife, stop complicating stuff. I fancy you like fuck. I will fuck you any time you want. But we're not meant to be an item, it would have happened before we left the country if that were truly on the cards.'

'Yes, I know, I know.'

We both slept and it was only when the familiar noises of cabin crew moving around preparing the breakfast service that we woke. I stretched and eagerly accepted a tray from the steward trolley. We slipped into work mode automatically the closer we got to Ireland. I found it hard to imagine that I had slept with Brian, let alone had a threesome with him. Suddenly I remembered Fergus O'Brien in Little Mo's. It seemed as fuzzy as everything else but as I told him, and showed him the picture, Brian laughed. 'Oh yes,' he said, 'he's quite well known in that pub and in certain circles downtown.'

'Really,' I said surprised. 'You'd think he'd be more discrete given his high profile here.'

'What happens in Vegas,' began Brian only I thumped him.

'Seriously,' he said. 'He is a rather unpleasant arrogant man who has not won many friends and so he pays for his pleasures. I've seen him there regularly, but I didn't realise he was your divorce lawyer.'

'Did you know the chap he was with?'

'Well, I don't but Ted does,' said Brian. 'Ted sort of looks after him. It's a small community after all.'

'Could I have Ted's email do you think?' I said slowly. 'It might be handy to have the other chap's details too.'

'What are you hatching?'

'I don't know, but I feel a cunning plan coming on.'

Chapter Thirty Four

I arrived home but the boys were already in school. 'They were great,' said Melanie. 'They loved Bingo, really loved him. You should consider getting a dog for them.'

'If I can hang onto my house, that would be a start,' I groaned. 'I can't so much as get a goldfish at the moment. Paul might accuse me of spending money foolishly, money that could go towards, say, a mortgage payment.'

Melanie pursed her lips. 'Oh, feck Aoife, get some sleep. You've just had a great trip and you must be wrecked. Did you get up to anything much?'

I decided against divulging the gory details. It all seemed a bit unreal anyway. 'Great city,' I said instead. 'Great nightlife, clubs, restaurants and the other marketing teams were really good fun. Great holiday and, er, work trip.'

'Good.'

I unpacked and despite sleeping for a number of hours on the plane, crawled into bed. It was noon and it felt very decadent. It also felt great and simple and the right place to be. Melanie had made dinner for that night and I just had to get up at four to put the dinner in the oven. I decided that I deserved it. I slept.

The boys woke me with their racket in the hall. My alarm had not gone off and I had slept for five hours non-stop. Sometimes the body knows its master better than the mind I thought pulling on a tracksuit and went down to greet my sons.

'You are not going away again,' said Denis darkly.

I laughed. 'It wasn't that bad, was it?'

'No, but we have eaten a lot of vegetables this week.'

'And played with Bingo a lot,' added Andrew happily. 'But Melanie does talk during television, a lot.'

'I've no plans to go away in the near future,' I said. 'I've got too much to sort out at home.'

Later I rang George. 'Can you pop over?' I asked.

When he arrived I filled George in on trip, again neglecting to mention the sex and the threesome and the madness. 'Look here, 'I said getting out my phone, 'our favourite man.'

George whooped with delight. 'How did you manage to get that picture, Aoife?' he said.

'I just snapped it. I told him to say cheese but he didn't oblige.'

'Who is his young friend?'

'I don't know, but I know a man who does,' I said.

'Get his details and I have an idea,' said George.

Work the next day was better than I could have hoped for. Brian was dead right: I didn't want to date him. I always liked Brian but I didn't fancy him in work, just in Vegas. I smiled broadly when I saw him arrive at work and he grinned back. Sarah, always on the prowl for gossip, looked from one to the other. 'Had a good time in San Francisco?' she said.

'Yes, fantastic,' said Brian and promised a full debrief for the office later that week. I giggled. Maybe not a full disclosure I thought, now that would be funny. I sat at my desk and had funny thoughts of Brian using PowerPoint to explain the sex during the trip. I wandered into his office later that afternoon. 'I wondered if Ted would mind giving me that young chap's details?' I said.

'I'm sure he'd be happy to. I'll email his details to you now.'

I sat for a while in front of my computer. How to phrase such an email? I took a deep breath.

Hi Ted, I wrote. Then *Aoife here from,* and I paused: *Vegas! Thank you for the great dinner on our trip. I shall never forget it.* I paused again. I needed to segue into the reason for writing. How could I phrase it so as not to cause offence?

I wrote again. *I have a matter of some delicacy I need your help in (and not how to locate men for threesomes I thought) with regard to my divorce. I bumped into*

Fergus O'Brien in that bar with a young man that I think you know. Would it be possible to get his details? If you don't think it would be impinging on his privacy?

I sucked my pen thoughtfully after the email had been sent. Time will tell I thought.

Back in Ireland too I had a rather large backlog of dating mails. I only had access to office computers for email and had not tried to log onto any non-corporate sites, especially not dating sites – why would I anyway, with so much going on? Also, data roaming was too expensive so I didn't use my phone for much other than taking pictures, hence my ease of selecting the camera option while in the bar.

So, opening the cyber dating app once home and I saw I had thirty messages. Oh my God I thought and went delete, delete, delete. I stopped at Peter and remembered the offer of a *yoni* massage. I did not delete that message. Goodness knows I was stressed and it might be a relief.

'Ping' you've got mail I thought and saw a reply from Ted. *Pleasure was all mine*, he wrote and I could feel a tingle down below. *Young man's name is Sam Seavers and I've told him you might be in contact. His details are below. I hope to see you again. Love and kisses, Ted.*

I texted the details to George. About an hour later he replied. *Set up a meeting with Mr O'Brien.* Something felt very right in the State of Denmark.

George had refused to discuss tactics with me in advance of the meeting. I had called the solicitor's office and was told Mr O'Brien was busy. I said I needed to see him. There were some developments I added. I was told he was on annual leave. 'He can't be both busy and on annual leave,' I argued crossly down the phone. The secretary said she would call back. I waited.

And I waited. Another week passed and nothing, so I called again. This time I was told he was attending a conference in South Africa. He would not be back for a fortnight. I said in terse tones that I wanted an appointment as soon as he was back in the country. This was promised.

Still, I had to ring the solicitor's again at the end of the month. This time it appeared Mr O'Brien was back from his holidays and his lecture tour. He was available to see me on Tuesday week at eleven in the morning.

I also had an important appointment prior to that, on Monday night at eight. This was with masseur-Peter in his apartment in Phibsboro. I pleaded an aerobics class to my boys and promised not to be late home. I had sworn off all men until after Christmas. I'd made this pledge to Trish after returning from the States. I'd said the same to Brian, who only nodded and made no comment. But damn-it, Janet, a woman had needs. My rabbit was practically worn out, I thought about buying other products but really did not know where to begin. I also knew I was tired and stressed and feeling a little bit low. There was no one on my radar that appealed to me. I even thought about meeting my sailor for a film date, but chucked that in as a bad idea. I had no interest in him and so, why bother? The

'why bother' actually bothered me and I worried that I was going beyond sex; that I might never be able to put the two things I wanted most in this world together – sex and intimacy. It was turning out surprisingly hard to marry the two.

So, Peter and his *yoni* massage had gathered strength and currency and attraction. He was gentle in his messages. He was polite in his conversations and he had never been so blunt as to ask for a picture of my *yoni*. By comparison to the vast rank and file of men lurking on the dating site, this marked him out as a gentleman. Oh how the goal posts are moved I thought. Little by little our sensitivities are blunted and what once appeared monstrous is now the norm. No wonder dictators are grown and atrocities blossom from little acts of hate, bulbous from the addition of the many added together.

Peter was tall and he bowed as he opened the door. He was dressed in a gown tied at the centre with a belt. 'Welcome Aoife,' he said.

I followed him through a narrow hall and into his sitting room. In the middle was a treatment table with cushions and a towel. The room was dimly lit with candles and there was a strong smell of incense. I looked at him. As if sensing my worry, he smiled. 'I take my massage very seriously, Aoife,' he said. 'This will be a beautiful experience for you. It will awaken the soul through your *yoni*.'

The cynical me said 'whatever', but the soulful one stepped forward. 'Okay,' I said and began removing my clothes. Peter had left the room as I undressed and I was still standing nervously, although now naked, by the table when he returned.

'Lie on your stomach,' he said and I did, while he covered my bare bottom with a towel. He put on music and it filled the air. I took in a deep breath. I told myself to breathe. The room was warm and I heard a tinkling of bells. I closed my eyes and relaxed. I felt the first drops of warm oil on my shoulders and neck. His warm hands followed denting a pattern across my shoulder and neck. He reached up my neck and drew his long fingers through my hair, working a rhythm of movements across my head and stroking the bones in my cranium. It felt very good and I breathed in and out, listening to his quiet breathing and following suit. It was the same as if I had booked into a spa, I reasoned, only no money had changed hands.

He dropped oil down my back, following with his warm hands and massaged me on both sides, sliding his hands round my waist and across the side of my breasts. Up and down the smooth movement put me into a trance-like feeling. He pulled out each arm and oiled the soft muscles, tensing the flesh so it felt elongated and tender. He then bent my arm in two and softly worked my joints backwards and forwards until each arm felt loose and relaxed.

He pulled the towel off my bottom and dropped warm oil into a line down between my buttocks. He squeezed my cheeks, he pulled his fingers down between the buttocks, oiling as he went and tipping over my anus and down towards my *yoni*. He stroked long movements, sensuous and slow. I swallowed and kept my eyes tight closed. He massaged this crease for some time until I could feel a swelling in my groin and a pulsing tick on my forehead.

After some time, he moved back to the crease under my buttocks and began to pull long strokes down my legs, massaging my thighs and calves. He rubbed the ligaments either side of my ankles, before cupping my heels in each hand and rubbing and massaging the soles of my feet. The ache in my groin subsided and I relaxed again, enjoying the smooth concentration of his hands on my body.

'Turn over,' he said and I did so, keeping my eyes closed. I was quite happy and did not want to look around the room or at Peter. I wanted to stay in my wonderland and simply be.

This time Peter began at my feet. He continued rubbing between my toes and bending the feet gently, rolling them between his hands. Then he dropped oil up my legs and built a steady pressure up towards my knees, pushing and rubbing his hands on my flesh, then over my knees and up my thighs. His fingers creased shapes into my thighs, drawing the flesh into circles and edging closer to my *yoni*.

He moved again and this time I felt oil dropping across my chest. His hands massaged my collar bone and my shoulders and then smoothed a way down between my breasts and around them and circled them, squeezing and moulding them into finger-marked shapes. He rubbed across my nipples which were hard and erect. He rubbed over and back, catching them between his fingers and pinging them gently. I could not help myself and let out a little moan, a gasp at the back of my throat.

At this moan, his hands moved down to my belly, massaging rolls of flesh which made me first stiffen and then relax. His hands drew a picture from the

curves of my belly down to the 'y' of my legs. Then he stopped. He placed his palm on my *mons veneris* and held it there without movement. He pressed a little and then stopped. He cupped my mound and moved his palm so it slid south. Then he shimmied it a little, rotating his palm in small circles. He wiped his hand down further and with his free hand opened my lips and rotated a single finger around my clitoris. Now, I felt his long fingers rubbing up and down in long soft movements, curving around the entrance to my *yoni* and then moving inside, sliding in and out and massaging me from the inside. I suspended belief and thoughts and any matters mundane. I held my breath and felt from the inside out. His fingers created perfect swirls of feeling which echoed across my insides and out towards my groin and in again to my centre. He pulsed me gently, taking his time. I had never felt such patience, such love before. It felt as though I might stay there all day, languishing in his touch. My feeling grew and then waned, but in a satisfying way. His touch was deep and cool and gentle. I felt as if I were floating several inches above the table, quietly shedding angst and worry and just feeling. My whole world lay in my *yoni* and his touch. I felt tears flowing from my eyes but I wasn't crying. They made no noise, just streamed down my face in quiet warm rivulets. I was fluid and oil; not flesh and bone. I was back in the womb, wetly floating with skin no barrier and weightless. When he stopped, I didn't even notice. My suspension was complete and I lay in the warm room with a towel again over my body and absorbed the music through my corporal body by osmosis not through my ears, for everything was connected and nothing had a voice or function on its own.

I woke when Peter came back into the room. I wasn't sure how long I had slept but Peter was now dressed and smiling. He brought me a cup of green tea. He set it down beside me, saying I might be thirsty and left me so I could dress.

I shivered. I felt cold but very serene. My very core felt peaceful, as if its manic spinning had been slowed to an uneven but gentle roll. I pulled on my tracksuit and drank the tea in gulps. Peter returned again. 'Will you come again?' he asked.

'Yes.'

As I drove home I shivered again with relief and secret glee. I was like the man from *DelMonte*: I was definitely saying yes and coming back.

Chapter Thirty Five

Tuesday at ten forty five saw George and me back in the stuffy waiting room. We were the only two present again. George still wouldn't tell me what he was planning. 'It's better I do the talking,' he said, 'but just make sure the other solicitor is kicked out of the meeting at the start.'

At eleven thirty we were eventually invited to ascend the stairs to Mr O'Brien's chambers. He was engrossed in a newspaper when we arrived. He made a great show of beating the paper flat, folding it and then leaving it on the table beside them. I looked in puzzlement at the paper until I realised it was a large article on family law featuring O'Brien as the main expert. I declined to comment. Another solicitor entered the room, pulled up a chair and made as if he were going to take notes. I said in a very clear voice. 'I only want to meet with you for this consultation, Ivan, can you please ask this man to leave?' O'Brien and his solicitor exchanged looks, O'Brien nodded and the other solicitor left the room.

O'Brien left his large desk and joined us in a low chair next to ours. He began to hold forth. 'I've received a letter back from Hobson and Hobson,' he said. 'They have pointed out that their client is in fear of losing his job and as a result does not want to put the family house in jeopardy. As there is some equity still in the house, they are in favour of selling the house and removing the boys and mother to a smaller house with a small rent so that their client will be able to ensure he can provide for them. The equity in the house can be split in two at this time.'

He paused and he looked at me, ignoring George. I could feel my blood boil. Paul was a director in the company and the only person who could fire him was he, himself. It was an outright lie. Moreover, finding a house in the area would be next to impossible. I could feel my stomach cramp but said nothing. George had asked me just to be present and to follow his lead. O'Brien continued to look at me. 'It would appear sound advice,' he said. 'Common sense is always a valuable commodity so often overlooked in the drama of a divorce.' I could feel my fingers curl into fists. I wanted to smash him in the face. All of the drama of the divorce was vested in my feelings for this man, and they weren't nice.

George coughed. O'Brien looked at him briefly as if he were a piece of dirt and then looked back at me. 'In my opinion,' he began but George coughed again.

O'Brien looked but went on talking to me. 'In my opinion,' he said but George coughed again.

'Are you sick?' he asked impatiently. 'I hope not. The last thing we need this coming winter is more germs.'

'I would like to clarify some points, of your opinion,' said George.

O'Brien turned to George as if he were a particularly irritating type of child. 'What would you like to clarify?' he said.

'When my sister first sought your professional advice, you said that the family home was sacrosanct at least until the children left full time education and that it would be expected that Paul would continue to pay the mortgage.'

'At the time,' said O'Brien, 'that seemed reasonable but I was not aware of the potential inability of Aoife's husband to continue to pay the mortgage, rendering the family home at risk.'

George interrupted him: 'I would rather say that you were not aware of my sister's inability to pay any serious fees until she presented you with her affidavit of means. And when combined with a potentially litigious and combative nature of her ex-husband, this posed a threat for your payment if successful in your first opinion.'

O'Brien raised his hand and started to override George. 'I do not have to sit here and take opinions such as yours. I am here representing my client, and you are not my client.'

George ignored O'Brien and continued in a low voice: 'and moreover, I wish to revisit your fee structure, which I have reviewed since my sister first engaged you.'

At this stage, O'Brien stood up, enraged. 'You are not my client, you did not have any business being here and I will ask you to leave.' He spluttered in rage and looked around, as if I thought, for a weapon. I imagined him with a whip in his hand ready to strike the ungodly and the wretched.

Neither George nor I moved. My blood was coursing through my veins. I guessed that I was just about to change divorce lawyer and sadly thought my father's deposit was lost. I had a mad urge to jump up and knock him over. To punch him in the face. I really was getting emotional these days I thought.

George just smiled. 'Please sit down and listen to what I have to say,' he said quietly.

'I have no desire to listen to anything you might want to say,' he bellowed. 'I would like you to leave now.'

'I think you will want to listen,' repeated George. 'I think Sam Seavers would like you to listen to what I have to say.'

O'Brien stopped in his tracks. He blinked rapidly. He looked at me accusingly, as if I had been a friend turned enemy. 'You,' he said. 'What did you do with that picture?' His eyes narrowed and he advanced towards me as if he would like to confiscate my phone.

'Sit down,' half shouted George. 'I'm tired of trying to talk to you. If you don't sit down now I shall go straight from this office to the papers. You'll be all over the news at one.'

O'Brien turned back to George and sat down. He looked at him and sneered. 'I think you'll find libel a tough bedfellow,' he said. 'I'll have you tied up in court and out of pocket so fast you'll be selling your bodily organs on the internet to pay your fees.'

'Listen to me,' repeated George. 'I'm getting very tired of your opinions, your threats and your way of doing business. Frankly, you are even more of a shark than your reputation would suggest.' He held up a hand as O'Brien opened his

mouth again but seeing George's expression, he closed it again without saying any more.

'I want to realign your advice and your fees and then I shall tell you why you will follow my instructions,' he said.

'First of all, I wish you to reinstate your original advice. The family home stays put until the youngest child is 23 or finished with full time education. At that time, it can go on the market and the equity split or my sister will have an option to buy Paul out. Very civilised and it protects the children. Paul will continue to be responsible for the mortgage. My sister pays for everything else and only seeks the family home to be safe.

'Secondly, your fees. I have looked at them and compared them to the rest of your profession. You charge a premium for your time which I suppose rests on your experience. However, I note you also double charge, when there is an attendant solicitor present he is also charged out at a senior level. So far, each time my sister has consulted with you, it has cost her €1000 plus for the pleasure. I do not wish to devalue your service but I will not allow you to charge double.

Therefore, you will amend previous bills. In addition, as you know, my sister does not have any access to equity excepting that which is tied up in the family home.

Therefore, once this separation is concluded, she will enter into a repayment plan which will take into account her ability to meet the fees. I will review this and we can agree a fair plan. I do not wish to abuse your fees or penalise my sister for

having the misfortune to not only having married a fool but also to get into debt in order to divorce him.'

Here he paused and O'Brien looked at him. 'And just why do you think I would follow your instructions?' he said. He half smiled.

George smiled back, a big smile. O'Brien starred back at him but something in the confidence of George's expression worried him. The smile slowly slipped off O'Brien's face.

'I have a sworn statement from Sam Seaver that you paid him for sex,' said George, 'on more than one occasion. I have photographs of the two of you together, no not on Aoife's phone, on Sam's,' said George as O'Brien once more gave me a dirty look.

'Moreover, I have photographs that you sent Sam of, shall we say, your genitals. Several of an erect penis to be exact. A very small erect penis as it happens. I think in a court of law it should be easy enough to compare the two - the picture and the real McCoy'

O'Brien stood up and walked up to the window. He laughed. 'Oh, how funny you are playing the great detective. Sam and I are, yes,' and he paused, 'friends. We've known each other for some time and yes we are intimate. There is no law against that, nor is my penis size in question here. Also, I have never paid for sexual favours. If I have given gifts, then that is my prerogative. I have never paid for sex.'

'Moreover if you breathe a word of this allegation outside this office I shall have you hauled up in front of a judge faster than you can say- '

'Rentboy,' interrupted George.

'What, I tell you,' began O'Brien angrily again but he wasn't allowed to finish his sentence.

'No, I tell you,' said George. 'Sam Seavers is only fifteen. I think that constitutes a breach of the law in pretty much every jurisdiction in the world.'

As we left the building, we exploded with laughter. 'Oh My God!' I screeched.

'What did you say?'

'Nothing but the truth, my Lord,' said George grinning from ear to ear. 'That little shit can say what he likes but sex with a minor? It's hard to argue with that.'

My face fell. I remembered the tousle haired young boy. 'Oh, what about him?'

'He is okay Aoife. He is sixteen this month and so he will be legal. I also emailed Ted and he looks out for him, really. He is the younger brother of a good friend of his. So, despite some of his less than wise choices, he is not out on his own. He does have a network of people there for him.'

'I'm just thinking of Andrew,' I said quietly.

Chapter Thirty Six

George advised me that they needed to attack from both sides. 'We also have to make sure that Paul sees the light. It is not unreasonable but it looks as though there was some connivance, so let's try and keep everyone's legal bills down.'

I agreed to speak with Paul. When he was next over to pick up Andrew the week following, I told Andrew to wait in the house for a moment. I went out to the car where Paul was waiting. He jumped in surprise as he had not expected me to come out. He also looked a little shame-faced, as well he might I thought with sudden anger.

'Just a quick word,' I began.

'Yes, make it quick, I'm in a hurry,' said Paul obviously unwilling to talk with me.

'Do you want to come into the house and talk there?'

'No, I've no time. What is it?'

I took a deep breath. 'With regard to the home,' I said.

'Oh, leave that to the solicitors,' said Paul.

'I don't think we should,' I continued. 'It's our business, not theirs.'

'Leave things to those that know about such things,' said Paul nastily.

'Paul, for God's sake,' I cried. 'We need to talk. This is the boys' home. We need to have a simple and fair way of protecting the boys while they are young. My solicitor is going to explain that to yours.'

Paul laughed. 'Oh Aoife,' he said. 'You don't know how these things work, do you? The two legal teams are in agreement over this, the house will be sold and you will have to find something,' and he paused. 'smaller and more suited to your current income.'

'I don't think so Paul. I've spoken with O'Brien and he is very keen to maintain the status quo, for the sake of the boys.'

'Think what you like, Aoife,' said Paul. 'That's not how things work. Now, where is Andrew, I'm late,' and he basically terminated the conversation.

I sighed. We'd only shored up one side of the argument. If Paul continued to argue this case, the fees in fighting the sale would suck up any possible spare equity. I hoped that O'Brien was flustered enough to motivate not only his side but to persuade the other. I hoped all I had heard about the legal professional was in this case true. I wanted cronyism to be alive and thriving in the family law courts.

It took a week but it appeared my hopes were in the ascendancy. I got a call from Paul. This was very unusual. He never called me, preferring to converse

through Andrew or more recently his legal team. 'What the fuck have you done?' he shouted down the line at me. 'What the fuck have you done you stupid bitch?'

I held the phone away from my ear as he continued to shout profanities at me. Eventually there was a pause. 'Paul,' I ventured into the small silence and he went off again. This time I just smiled. Sticks and stones I thought. Again when he seemed to have quietened down I spoke quietly into the mouthpiece. 'Paul, can I suggest you sit down with George. Let's try and keep the lawyers to a minimum. Will you at least consider it,' I said but he was off again shouting at me and asking how I had queered his legal team. I wanted to reply, the same way you did mine, but knew better than to add fuel. When he didn't have anything coherent to say, I finally hung up the phone and went back to watching television.

Another week passed and this time Paul called to the house to pick up Andrew. Another first I thought. 'Okay,' he said. 'I'll sit down with George. Neither my lawyer nor yours are keen to get involved until the families attempt a reconciliation first. So can you get George to call me?'

With pleasure I thought. I rang George later and he laughed on the phone. 'This is now a hot potato,' he said. 'O'Brien wants to get rid of you as fast as possible, but doesn't want to run up time in the case. He has obviously advised Hobson to do the same. It's a race to the bottom with both lawyers going hands-off.'

It took more than one meeting with Paul to hammer through issues. In fact, the first two meetings consisted of Paul giving off yards and criticising me on all

fronts. Finally, George lent forward and put his hand over Paul's. 'That is my sister you are slagging off,' he said quietly. 'I think it's time we stopped complaining and got to negotiating.'

Paul started back, snatching back his hand, but something in George's manner made him shut up. By the end of their conversation they had a draft agreement on all matters to do with the boys and their one joint asset, the family home. 'The boys will thank you for this,' said George. 'You are their dad and you are jointly responsible for their well-being. Paying the mortgage is one thing you can do, especially considering Aoife pays for everything else, food, heating, clothes etc as well as looking after them twenty-four seven. You've got to man up and stop trying to make things hard for Aoife. Make it easy for the boys and you'll be grateful you did in the long run.'

Paul smarted at the 'man up' reference but he did not argue. It was as if the fight had gone out of him, George said to me afterwards. The reason only emerged after Halloween when Andrew had spent the weekend with his dad. Lynda was pregnant. Paul was starting family number two. I wanted to laugh out loud but stopped myself in time. Rather him than me, I thought. God help Lynda, I thought. He'd better stay with her, I thought.

'In fact, I feel quite protective of poor old Lynda,' I said to Trish when all the excitement had died down. 'You know how men stray and cheat on their first wife, do they repeat history the second time around?'

'Let's hope not,' said Trish. 'Yours is a growing family. Much as you might not like to think it, that new baby will be a half sister or brother to your children. Hard thought to stomach. Welcome to the post-modern nuclear family.'

Chapter Thirty Seven

I checked my diary again. It was the first of November which was why the Christmas planning freaked me. It was like during the summer when they began the 'back-to-school' ads in August, way too soon. I hated how Christmas reared its ugly head even before Halloween had been celebrated.

All the adverts on the television said Christmas was fast approaching and there was already bunting in the shops. I hated this time of year most since the separation. The forced happiness for the Christmas period nearly did my head in. Sharing Andrew with Paul was difficult, especially as Denis refused to cooperate. My parents had again said we could come to them for Christmas dinner and I was relieved. It gave a focus for the family celebrations, not that the boys would go to Mass in the morning but I liked the feeling of being at home while my parents went to say their prayers. The house would be fantastically decorated with the remnants of forty plus Christmases, and normally a large tree dominated the sitting room. My father loved putting up decorations but had no taste at all, so he mixed up quality ornaments with cheap fillers from Moore Street, tasteful white lights with garish coloured lights, expensive baubles with tacky home-made ones, the latter having seen better days. The more the merrier was his philosophy and he really went at it with gusto. Last year we spent Christmas day there too and I loved the quiet in the morning: the turkey sizzling in the oven, the vegetables prepared on top and the table laid complete with crackers and balloons. My parents had gone to

eleven o'clock mass and Denis was still in the bed. Andrew had been with Paul and was due to be dropped off just before noon.

Paul had managed to cause a problem last year, of course. He was delayed he said and only appeared with Andrew nearer two o'clock with mum worrying about the turkey: funny how Christmas was all about the turkey, even in the middle of a potential domestic crisis. I hoped the fracas would not be repeated this year. I was just glad I would have my own home to return to after the festivities.

'Right, Aoife, you and Tom are to organise the Christmas party,' said Brian in passing. I gave him a dirty look and he just shrugged his shoulders. 'Marketing always does the party and Tom holds the chequebook. Best planned together.'

I grumbled under my breath. I did not relish the thought of planning the Christmas party. I really did not like Christmas much at all. I was turning into a regular scrooge. Tom was much more upbeat. 'Right, let's chat at lunchtime and run through some ideas,' he said popping his head over my partition.

The budget was modest so it was more a question of prioritising our spend. I suggested we skip dinner. 'We are not going to buy a good meal with this money, so why fritter it on a crap meal? I think the staff would prefer booze and entertainment.' Tom agreed. The average Mostest employee was in their late twenties. I was definitely one of the oldest, not that I acted it. We chatted in a

desultory way over the merits of different venues. We figured that the gang would want to move into a night club afterwards, so the venue was definitely city centre. Also, as there was only twenty six staff, we needed to be in a happening bar with other people to add buzz. There was no point in booking a room and hoping we'd all have a laugh amongst ourselves. 'That would be the kiss of death,' agreed Tom picking at his neck.

I wasn't in favour of joining the more formal big top parties - that was too distracting. 'We wouldn't bond at all as a group,' I said. 'I mean the tag rugby was brilliant for the company so I fancy something similar.'

'What? Play tag for Christmas?'

'No, but you know what I mean. Some venue or activity that bonds us, but there has to be other people and a buzz around too. A mixture.'

We didn't come up with any definite plan but said we'd canvass others and maybe revisit the idea next week. Even though we did not plan on booking a meal, and even in a recession, we reckoned we needed to book something sooner rather than later.

Lunch with Trish was interesting. I told her of my new job, well I complained about my new job, and she said: 'You want to book The Dargles. They are brilliant. The craic is mighty and you are guaranteed a great night.'

The Dargles were a kilted band of two guys who sang and told jokes. I looked at Trish. 'You're kidding me? Kilts? Comedy? That will never work.'

‘Trust me. In fact, even better let’s find out where they are playing and go see them.’

I persuaded Tom at work to join us. It was a bit of a joke, the two Toms together. It wasn’t a natural four-some but ever since tag rugby I was much fonder of Tom, pimple scratching excepted. Trish had discovered that The Dargles were playing in a small pub out in Greystones. It was a bit of a trek coming from the North side. I checked with Brian if we could have expenses. He laughed out loud. ‘Who do you think you are? Politicians getting paid to go south of the Liffey? I don’t think so. But maybe I’ll come too and buy you a drink.’

‘You are more than welcome,’ I said. ‘But it’s only south of the Liffey, it’s not Vegas!’

Brian had smiled. In the end, he had not been able to make it. I wasn’t sure if he did have a clashing engagement or if he had wanted to go to Vegas. Either way our little group counted only four, the two Toms and Trish and I. I travelled with Tom and Trish and we arranged to meet Tom there. We arrived the same time as Tom. The Dargles were only setting up and so we found a corner with a good vantage in the pub. The men argued over who should buy the first drink and Trish and I checked out the band. It didn’t look that promising, although they did wear kilts. ‘I love a man in a skirt,’ I said. ‘Especially when you watch them walk up stairs, the way the skirt moves and shows a bit of thigh.’

Trish laughed and both Toms looked a little shocked. ‘Isn’t that why men like skirts on women,’ I said with wide eyes. It was true and they knew it.

The Dargles were out of this world. We half listened at the start, talking over the music, but as the evening went on, it was impossible to ignore them. The humour was very funny too, raucous and irreverent. At the end, we were up dancing and waving our hands in the air, clapping, singing and jumping around like idiots. And so was everyone else in the pub, it was a heaving, sweaty crowd and the atmosphere was just electric. When they finished, Tom and I went to interrogate them.

‘Where are you playing, and can we book you?’ Tom asked after introductions were made.

‘We’re pretty much booked up now until Christmas,’ said the lead singer but as he saw our faces fall, he added. ‘Why not come to one of the open venues in town? Maybe even book a corner of a pub so you can make sure there is room.’

‘Great idea,’ said Tom. ‘I’ll check your website. Now one last thing. The ladies wanted to know what an Irishman wore under his kilt.’

Before I could thump Tom, and yes indeed Trish and I had been discussing it, the lead singer reached down and grasping the edge of his kilt, and pulled it up to his chin. It appears that Irish men wear nothing under their kilts. I shrieked involuntarily and put my hand to my mouth but he was not bothered and turned away to continue packing up the kit. The sight of his naked penis, however, remained etched on my retina.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Being pregnant suited Paul. At first I was surprised and then I remembered how he was with Denis and Andrew. At first he had panicked madly, worrying about college funds and legacies; ironic really. Then once the pregnancies advanced he'd warmed to the idea of babies and relaxed about the money. He was an attentive father for both boys, only work meant he was not around as much as he would have liked. This time around it was going to be different he told me when he stopped off for coffee. I was not sure what shocked me more, his coming to the door and accepting a coffee which I'd been forced to offer as he stood there, almost like an awkward suitor, or his divulging this kind of happy-clappy, daddy stuff. I picked my chin up off the floor and just smiled at him.

Of course it never occurred to him that I might find his second time round happiness difficult. I didn't but the thought, I could see, never crossed his mind. Men, I thought, simple, I thought.

Now that Paul was stopping for coffee every fortnight, he began bumping into Denis. It wasn't the most successful of encounters but they would nod hello in a distant way which was an improvement. Denis afterward grumbled to me about the amount of time Dad spent in our house, but I was pleased that he was grumbling in the same way a teenager grumbles about a parent and not in an overtly hostile manner. Of course as I confided to Trish, once the baby was born,

Paul was as likely to return to his grumpy self again. Calm before the storm, I predicted. 'Unless, it's a girl,' said Trish. 'That might be different.'

Tom had checked the website and it turned out that The Dargles were playing in O'Shea's around the corner on December 13th. It was a Thursday night which wasn't too bad, most people would be able to crawl in for Friday, and it was one of the favourite watering holes for the employees anyway. I was deputised to go and talk to the manager. A pleasant man, he confirmed the engagement and suggested he cordon off a section of the bar. He also had a cheap bar menu and so I was able to book pigs in a basket and other healthy sounding food options at €10 a head. I returned to the office as excited as Chamberlain although a lot more successful. 'Peace in our budget,' I said excitedly. Everyone was pleased except for Sarah. 'O'Sheas?' she said. 'Not many pulling options there, only old men supping their stout.'

'Afterwards we can trip the light fantastic,' said Tom, which did little to excite her. Brian passed by and joined in. 'I fancy a little fantastic,' he said, winking at me. Sarah didn't notice as she was too busy preening herself. I reckoned Sarah had the hots for Brian ever since the Festival in Carlow. She was on a hiding to nothing I thought. I couldn't say for sure, but I thought Brian had hooked up with someone. There was a certain twinkle in his eye and a lightness in his step. I

reckoned he was getting it somewhere and whoever it was, male or female, was making him happy.

The other positive was that since we only had to pay for bar food and the entertainment was free, the budget stretched to drink, quite a lot I reckoned. 'Result all round,' I said and Brian just winked. Oh, he was definitely getting it somewhere.

One cold night at the beginning of December, I looked into the burning embers of the fire. Christmas was confirmed at my parents and since Paul was bringing Lynda away for some sunshine over Christmas, there was no fear of any last minute ransom demands or tardiness. I felt the urge to celebrate. I decided to host a small drinks party for Christmas. I hadn't entertained much, actually at all, since the separation but a lot had happened in the past year. Some good, some funny and some plain weird! I'd gotten into a habit of counting my blessings and overall I felt things were going in the right direction.

In the spirit of Christmas I decided to invite Paul and Lynda. Trish's comment about the new baby being a half sister or brother to my boys had struck a chord and I could not hold a grudge against a baby. I didn't want to be too friendly with Paul but a civilised drink before Christmas could not hurt. The last thing I wanted was the boys hating their half sibling, much better they felt relaxed and unconcerned about it. The age gap was too big to pose a real threat but it would be

nice if they could look forward to their new half brother or sister without guilt. I felt pleased with myself and very grownup.

My parents were less than sanguine about the invitation. I pacified them. 'Please Mum and Dad,' I begged. 'Just don't pick a fight. Say hello and then go and talk to someone else.'

Actually, I was worried I might not have enough people. Separation had decimated my little black book. In the end, I invited my neighbours, my tag team, my Pilates class, and begged Trish and Melanie to bring their friends. I even invited Ian and his gay partner whose name I'd forgotten and Shane my sailor friend plus partner. I wondered if he might come and if he might bring all three or just one. I told my boys too they could invite friends.

Thursday 13th December was a hoot. I think the staff was happy at the thought of a free bar, always a good incentive, and some of them had heard of the band, The Dargles. For the rest, I knew it was going to be a treat. We shuffled into O'Shea's at six o'clock and the band was not due on until nine. There was some serious drinking time in between and as for the pigs in baskets, they were consumed with gusto. The whole pub was rocking and rolling by the time the kilted duo arrived. The lead singer nodded at me but I don't think he remembered. I still could not erase the image of his penis. Tom was up talking to them both and they got going shortly afterwards. If they were good in Greystones, they were

downright powerful here. It wasn't just us, it was even the old geezers at the bar, Guinness ignored, they were singing away at full throttle. Brian checked in with me. 'You okay?' he said.

'Yes, I'm good.'

'You look well.'

'Thank you. So do you.'

'Thank you.'

'So?'

'So what?'

'I think you're getting a little Vegas from someone,' I said.

Brian grinned. 'I might be.'

Sarah appeared at my elbow. 'Aren't they great,' she said but more to Brian than to me. Sugar. This was not going to end well. 'That lead singer is hot, hot, hot,' I said. Sarah looked from Brian to the singer. 'Yeah,' she said. 'He's funny too.' Brian moved over to another group, leaving us alone. At that moment, Tom appeared. 'How are you ladies for drinks?' he asked. I used his appearance as an excuse to join the HR group while Tom chatted up Sarah. I wondered if he would be successful.

As The Dargles finished, I saw Sarah approach the lead singer and within a few moments, he lifted his kilt again, confirming my vision from the previous

month. Strange how a penis can embed itself on one's retina. It was more brightly burned than any of the sexual partners I'd had over the past year. Perhaps it was the surprise. I also wondered if that meant Tom had been unsuccessful. Had he teased Sarah or hoped to distract her. Either way, it appeared to backfire for Sarah kept talking to the lead singer. When they left, so did she.

I did not intend hitting the night club after the pub. Tom tried to persuade me but I pleaded fatigue. I'd had enough to drink and I'd seen a penis by default. In my state, that was quite enough for one night. I called a taxi and left, happy at least the night had been a success.

I got home after midnight and the house was quiet. Denis had been in babysitting mode, but even he was in bed. I checked my phone and there was a message from Matt. Perplexed I opened my mail. It wasn't work, it was bitcoin. I laughed again. He had insisted I open a wallet when in San Francisco and now I see he has sent me a bitcoin. I blinked. It was worth \$201. 'Happy Christmas' he wrote. 'Hang on to this - it might be worth more in time.' It was already worth a week's shopping in the discount supermarket. I thanked him and promised I would HODL - or hold on for dear life - another crazy expression taught to me by Matt.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Oh dear lord! If I had worried about lack of friends, my overcompensation of invitations meant I was hosting the equivalent of a student party. The house was bulging at the seams. I didn't know half the people and hoped they had all brought some booze. Given that the average age was thirty plus I supposed this to be the case and then I worried about not having enough glasses or food. Finally, Trish had pulled me out of the kitchen and laughing said. 'Relax Aoife Brennan, this is a mad party, successful and fun. Just chill and let people look after themselves.'

I smiled weakly. This was my first proper entertainment and it was fun, if scary, and mad and oh dear lord there was Paul and Lynda. I looked at Trish and then went over to greet them.

'We can't stay long,' said Paul and he handed me a bottle of wine. I smiled at Lynda and asked her if she would like a glass. Then I clapped my hand to my mouth and squeaked 'Oh, no of course, how are you?' and then added, 'That is great news of course, and a glass is fine if you like' then stopped. Lynda looked at me nicely but as if I was mad, which I definitely felt I might be at this stage. I mean I thought to myself, what mad ex-wife congratulates the new girlfriend on her pregnancy. Except perhaps, I thought, the ex-wife who is so over the ex-husband as to want some other poor woman to take him on; to ease the pressure. At that moment, my phone beeped with a text. It was on the shelf beside us, plugged in to charge as I'd forgotten during the day and as it beeped, I picked it up. It lay in my

hand, innocent as a new born, and the name flashed up, Chris Sex God. I wasn't fast enough. Paul saw the name and he smirked. Lynda saw it too but she just smiled. Before Paul could make a comment, I turned tail to get Lynda a glass of wine whether she wanted it or not.

I found Trish in the kitchen and blurted out what had happened. Trish was more concerned about what Chris has said, which I didn't know, than the impact on Paul. 'Oh don't worry about him,' she said. I tottered out minutes later with a glass for each. However, Paul was gone and only Lynda was there with Andrew. 'Sex god?' said Andrew but his eyes were laughing. Lynda shrugged her shoulders. 'Paul is bit too quick to share,' she said evenly, looking at Andrew. Then she took the wine. 'Thank you for inviting us,' she said and smiled. I took to her instantly. If only I could warn her against Paul, but I guessed that was a bit too late. I smiled back, warmly. 'It's a bit mad, but maybe we might be friends of a sort,' I said. 'Especially because of the children,' and I reached out a hand to her belly, but did not touch her. 'If we can be kind to our children that would be good,' I finished lamely. 'Mine and yours.'

Lynda smiled back. 'I'd like that,' she said. 'I already like yours!' and she punched Andrew in the arm playfully. He pretended to be hurt and grabbed his arm. I felt a piercing pang of jealousy but I reined it in. If I took a deep breath, I could be glad there were more people in this world that loved my children than did not. 'I have two children,' I said after a pause. Lynda nodded, 'I know,' she said, 'I'm very conscious of that.'

I smiled. 'You know,' I said. 'If we could try and be friends for our children, that might work very well.'

Lynda smiled, 'I agree,' she said, 'Now why don't you see what your sex god has texted you?'

Oh, oh oh. I felt as though I was falling. I picked up the phone and went into the bathroom. Fortunately it was empty. I sat on the toilet and opened the text. *Hello*, he'd written. I wanted to throw the phone down the loo, out the window, or crush it underfoot. What the fuck? He'd written hello and caused me potential grief with Andrew: I wasn't sure how he would react after the party. All for a fucking 'hello'? If I wanted a *Hello* I could buy a magazine for that. I paused and looked again at the phone as if looking could change the message.

Hello I spat back wondering if he could sense the venom in my reply. Obviously not for the next text smelt of honeysuckle as sure as if it were wrapped in it. *Hi Aoife*, he wrote, *I'm not sure how but you've got under my skin*.

I paused and texted nothing, melting in the moment. I waited and he texted again.

I don't rightly know how, he continued *but I'd like to start again. To get to know you again. And to see where we might go. Would you like that? Aoife?*

Yes I wrote without hesitation. Yes.

THE END