

Copyrighted Material

I

Laura

I turn my wrists upwards under the taps, letting cool water trickle over them, hoping this will magically get rid of the flush on my cheeks. Straightening up, I check the mirror to see if it's worked. Nope. No such luck. I dry my hands. It'll have to be make-up. I begin rummaging in my handbag, looking for foundation – did I remember to bring it? I could dab some over the worst of it, maybe – blend it in. No. Of course not. I picture it spilled out on the bathroom windowsill at home, the garish guts of my make-up bag – eye pencils, mascara, concealer – the arsenal I haven't used in months. Probably crawling with bacteria.

Stop panicking, I tell myself. This is an assessment, not an exam. She won't be trying to trip me up. Jackie called it a chat. 'Come in for your chat,' she'd said. 'Allow yourself an hour or so – we'll take it handy.'

Neither of us referred to the formal name for this chat – Fitness for Duty Evaluation. Or the fact that Jackie's appointed by the Garda Occupational Health Service.

It's a chat, Laura. A chat. Don't think of it as an evaluation. You're just stressed because you like to be the one asking the questions. Niamb's right. You're a control freak. I smooth my hair back – so long now that I've to put it in a ponytail – and turn to look at myself in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of the door. I'm wearing the charcoal trouser suit with a loose silk shirt. Mum would have approved. She always was a fan of

tailoring. *Hides a multitude*, she'd say. And there's no doubt it's smart. I last wore it for months six and seven of pregnancy on Noah, and I'm not back in shape. The pleats on the shirt hide rock-hard boobs full of milk and about three kilos of post-baby belly.

A mummy looks back at me – edges blunted. Physically, that'll be the extra kilos. What stresses me is the fear that mentally I might be kind of blunted as well. Will I be up to this? What if she wants to go over the Cullen case? I feel my heart racing and I breathe, trying to control my thoughts. *You acted to preserve life, Laura*. If she brings it up, just keep saying that. *And don't forget to listen – pause before you answer, take your time*.

The bathroom is small and cosy, decorated in a beach theme – all faded blond wood, shells and smooth pebbles. Outside the door is a waiting room with a two-seater couch, a high-backed chair for the more on-edge client and the coffee table, on which sits a pile of *National Geographic* magazines. I could stay here for days – moving from bathroom to waiting room, reading the magazines, washing my hands in the creamy handwash. Since Noah was born nine months ago, this is the longest amount of time I've spent in the quietest space. It's warm. Vanilla-scented. I want to move in. At home, I can't even get five minutes in the loo on my own. *Noah needs you, Mummy! He's crying! Katie berates me like a mini desk sergeant. He's stinky! Are you doing a wee? Why are you taking so long?*

In the distance, I hear a door close. My watch reads a minute to 2 p.m. Here we go.

Laura

‘How are you?’ Jackie says, motioning for me to take the seat opposite her. Hard-backed chair for me; padded one for her.

‘Great – good, thanks.’ I smile, perching on the seat edge.

‘There are no medals for suffering alone,’ she says, looking up from my file. ‘I think it’s safe to say you learned that the hard way, yes?’

Jackie is a girlish-looking fifty-something, her large blue eyes and casual clothing – she’s wearing a pair of jeans and a zipped hoody – belying an astute mind and a no-nonsense attitude. She would have no hesitation whatsoever in declaring someone unfit for duty. I can think of at least two from our unit who had to turn over their badges and head uphill to pasture following one of Jackie’s sessions.

She takes off her glasses and begins polishing them slowly with a wipe, in a move I reckon she learned on a training course. It has the desired effect all right. I find myself kind of mesmerized by the action.

‘I’ll rephrase that as a question,’ she says, her jaw tightening, and I’m reminded that I’m not her client here – An Garda Síochána is. ‘What have you learned from the Cullen case, Laura? What would you do differently were it to happen now?’

The GSOC inquiry looms large and lumpen between us. Why did I think she wouldn’t go there? Idiot.

I answer too quickly – gushing.

‘Everything,’ I say. ‘There isn’t a single aspect of – of, you know, what I did – that was okay – justifiable – on any level. I understand that now.’

She moves on to polishing the second lens and I try to slow myself down.

‘And – I – even though I know it can’t be justified – what I did – I was acting to preserve life, you see.’

The phrase comes out all wrong – with a pleading upward inflection. *Preserve life?* I sound like a child. From LA.

‘Even so,’ she swoops in, ‘there’s no tolerance for emotional or behavioural dysfunction when you’re working as a detective. An armed detective –’

Those blue eyes lock with mine. She doesn’t blink. *She doesn’t know about the gun. No one does,* I reassure myself. *She can’t bear your thoughts.*

She folds the wipe into a small square and puts the glasses back on. ‘I don’t have to tell you that the lives of others depend on you being fully functional.’

I hear the underlines on ‘fully’ and ‘functional’.

‘And if you have poor impulse control or an anxiety disorder that’s running unchecked –’

My head is nearly falling off with the nodding and, in my mind, I’m doing the chant: *She can’t hurt you. She can’t hurt you.*

‘Absolutely,’ I say. ‘I understand – I – well, you probably have it on file there? I did a three-month course of CBT and – I only stopped recently when I had Noah.’

‘I see that.’ She nods. ‘That’s good – Cognitive Behaviour Therapy can be very helpful.’ She runs her pen down along the page and turns over to the next sheet.

‘And what about medication? There are excellent long-term and short-term solutions for managing anxiety.’

‘I’m still breastfeeding,’ I say, shaking my head. ‘So, I didn’t want to –’

‘Some of which can be taken when breastfeeding,’ she continues. I say nothing, forcing myself to wait. *This is not an attack, Laura. It’s just a suggestion.* Jackie sits back.

‘Look, the bottom line is – well, let’s face it. You’d be perfectly entitled – and it might do you no harm – to take some extended leave. Not a career break at your own expense, you understand what I’m saying? You were involved in a difficult case which brought up – your own issues. PTSD, anxiety. There’s post-natal depression to think about, yes? After all, you’ve just given birth – recently given birth, rather. It’s now March – I could write you off until Christmas – or the New Year? It’s not weakness, Laura. Looking after yourself is your responsibility, no?’

I try to frame a response, but no words come. If she writes me off – so *I’m not a detective – working – a working detective, if I’m not that, who am I? Detective Garda Laura Shaw – or just Laura, mummy of Katie and Noah. Wife of Matt. The years of training, the years in the DDU –*

‘You’re long enough at this to understand the risks,’ she’s saying. ‘And you do have insight into your –’ She pauses, and we both run through the wordsearch – *illness/ condition/ weakness/ issues/ past trauma* – shimmering in the air between us. Her chair is higher than mine, and the desk rises like a wall between us. How I wish I was the one holding the file and asking the questions.

I make myself sit quiet, remembering that night – how I discharged a traumatized fourteen-year-old from the psych ward and basically brought her to the scene of her worst nightmares – the risks I took with her life, and my own. I still can’t quite believe it. It’s like it was a different time and a different me. Only for Niamh keeping quiet about the worst of it – the fact that Jenny got hold of my gun – the fact that she was intent on harming herself, or me, or both of us – only

for Niamh's silence and for her watchful presence at the scene, it could have been a very different outcome. By rights, I should be out of a job. Disgraced. That's the very least I deserve. *You're a disaster. A liability.*

'GSOC were satisfied that you committed no offence and did not recommend that proceedings be instituted against you,' she reads, 'and you've demonstrated that you understand the seriousness of your behaviour.' She pauses again.

'And do you?'

My mouth opens, but she carries on before a sound emerges.

'Do you understand that, irrespective of the outcome – the fact that you saved a life, that you closed the case – none of that matters a jot, Laura?'

She flips back a page, looks at me.

'Your Commissioner's Medal can't help you here, not if you don't accept that you made a mistake – a grave error of judgement.'

A beat. I nod a slow nod.

'None of it. Because nothing justifies your reckless behaviour. Does it?'

I switch from nodding to shaking my head.

'No. Of course not. Absolutely.'

She waits another few seconds. I will myself to hold her gaze.

'How's the sleeping?'

'Oh, great,' I lie. 'Apart from the night feeds, of course. But – yeah – no problems there.'

She reads through more of my file, the only sound in the room the crinkling of the pages as she turns them. From outside, a gentle hum of traffic on the M50 overpass. As she reads, I have an insane worry that, somehow, she'll know I lied about the sleep too – that they could have

access to my receipts from the chemist, where I've bought every over-the-counter remedy ever made in an effort to get some sleep. I've a path worn to their locked cabinet and the nice man jangling the keys. And at home, boxes and bottles in shades of navy and purple line the top shelf of the bathroom, all promising – but not delivering – calm, restful sleep. She reads on. I force myself to wait, trying to still my racing thoughts.

'Fine,' she says at last, leaning forward and taking off her glasses, folding them and placing them on to my now closed file.

'You're good at what you do, Laura. And from what I read here, you've got great support from your partner –'

'I do – yes. Niamh is brilliant to work with. She's –'

Another pause and a questioning frown. She tilts her head.

'At home?' she says. 'Your husband is most supportive, you've said?'

'Oh! Yes – sorry.' I feel myself flush. Idiot.

'Absolutely. Matt is great. I'm very lucky there.'

I hold the smile, my teeth clamped firmly on my lower lip to stop myself saying another word. Poor Matt, I think. The hell I put him through. His endless offers of help – the fresh start he longs for – he'd be second only to the director if he accepts the New York posting. And I know he'd love it. I think of the silence that yawns between us when we make eye contact, the things we both want to say drifting to the floor like ash from a bonfire.

'Right,' she says, breaking the spell. 'You'll get the go-ahead from me if you do decide to come back, but I'd strongly recommend –'

I exhale, adjusting my right hand infinitesimally – enough to hide the raw flesh on my thumb. A surge of adrenalin courses in my veins. I can come back! I'm good to go.

‘What I mean is that you should also consider the career break option.’

I shake my head.

‘I’m still discussing it, um, at home and – I –’ I come to a stop, unsure what I want to say. The truth is, I hadn’t envisaged this. I think I must have been expecting the decision to be taken out of my hands. Maybe I was expecting to fail this evaluation, and that would be that.

‘Interesting,’ she continues. ‘I note you say “*I*m discussing”, as opposed to “*We*’re discussing”. Surely a discussion takes at least two?’

Her smile is tight. She leans towards me. ‘Look – I say this as a working mum of three, you get me – as opposed to my professional opinion –’

I wait.

‘I think a career break could be just the thing. Or – what about a step sideways – going for sergeant? More of a desk job, regular hours. Less risk?’

‘You and Matt must be on the same team.’ I laugh. ‘And thanks – I’m – we – we’re considering everything. Nothing’s off the table. Career break, back to the unit, whatever. It’s all up in the air. I’ve till Monday to decide.’

‘Well, as long as you know – we’ve got to be certain that you’ll ask for help if you need it,’ she finishes. ‘I’ll be checking in with you, and I expect you to keep in touch. Yes?’

I fumble with the door handle on my way out, managing to lock myself in. Her face creases into a smile.

‘Other way,’ she says, laughing.

Niamb

‘Jush ring the bell already!’ Amber’s voice peals like a little bell in the chilly night air, rising over the constant hum of Ranelagh traffic. I have the key against the lock, but with Amber hanging out of me, her movements made clumsy by the rake of vodka and slimline followed by a ridiculous number of espresso martinis, I keep on missing the keyhole.

‘Drothery – Dror – Dor-oh-thee – Dorotheeee wone mind,’ she giggles, tilting her head back to gaze up the three storeys to where the black-slatted roof meets the navy night sky. Spying a square of light at the very top of the house, Amber inhales, ready to shout.

‘Sssh! Don’t yell – don’t – Amber!’

Amber has had years of vocal training – she has to, for her job – and I don’t doubt that she could easily make herself heard by Dorothy, my landlady – or indeed by half of south bloody Dublin. She could probably get them to hold the Luas for her from here.

‘Sssh! Sssh!’ I pull her closer against my shoulder and try once more and – thanks be to Jaysus – I finally get the key in the lock and shove the door open, shuffling the pair of us inside my basement flat.

I prop her against the wall, holding her steady with one hand while I shove the door closed with the other. She rests her head on the exposed brick, her blonde tresses fanning out so that she somehow manages to look like something

from a fashion shoot, rather than a twenty-eight-year-old wannabe actor, too drunk to stand. On the wall beside her head – a bit too close to her face, actually – hangs the gift she gave me when she slept over for the first weekend. Her phrase – *our first sleepover*. It's a key-holder made to look like a rabbit hutch with two little front doors side by side. Two rabbit keyrings came with it. I hang up mine, noting that one hutch is empty. Yeah. In theory, Amber lives in the nice apartment her daddy bought her in Sandymount but, in practice, she's been more or less permanently living here for the past five months.

A heavy truck trundles by – Dorothy's house is right on the main street of Ranelagh, opposite the pharmacy she owns and still runs, though she's in her eighties – and all the front doors rattle – ours and the rabbits'.

Amber's eyes fly open. In the dim hallway, she looks like a teenager, her eyes enormous and dark against her pale skin. She's wearing a grey blazer coat thing, with a silky white shirt dress underneath and a ridiculous pair of black thigh-high boots. The effect is as if she's wearing her big brother's school uniform – or half of it.

'So, does – does –' She frowns, closing her eyes momentarily, then tries again. 'Do – do you think your friends like me, Nimmi? 'Simportant.'

She opens one eye, blinks, then with tremendous effort opens them both.

'I wan them to like me. Laura, too. I wan her to like me.'

She nods, then with a lurch moves to a standing position and begins tottering along the corridor towards the bedroom, steadying herself with her fingertips on either side of the wall. She attempts a strut – bless her.

'I wan them to like me,' she says, 'even though we have *nothing* in common – you know, and I –'

‘They do like you,’ I say, following behind her, my hands poised either side of her tiny waist, ready to catch her if she falls. ‘I know they do. They like you a lot.’

‘Laura doesn’t,’ she says. ‘And don’ say I’m wrong because I know – I know she doesn’t like me.’

I open my mouth, about to speak – but there’s no way I’m going there at this hour, when she’s like this. Laura only met her for about two minutes, when we called up with a present for the baby. And Laura was up to high doh.

‘Laura doesn’t know you yet,’ I say soothingly. ‘But we’ll go out some night – like tonight – like we did just now – and we’ll have fun and they’ll – she’ll definitely love you.’

She sways.

‘They all loved you,’ I add.

‘Yeah, and – I made them laugh, didn’t I? When I was telling them about the kissing –’

‘Haha, you surely did.’

She’d had them in stitches, in fairness, describing the woe-ful kissing technique of one of our upcoming leading men. They’d been filming a trailer for a short movie – it might be her big break. Amber told them he licked her face first, *Like a spaniel, I swear! Just like a spaniel*. Liath, Shauna, Ruth – the whole lot of them – were falling around laughing, and Amber was in her element.

She staggers towards the edge of the bed, turns and flops dramatically back on to it, only just missing cracking her head against her jewellery box she left there earlier. There’d been much debate about what and how much to wear of everything – make-up, clothes, jewellery.

‘Are they *all* camogie girls?’ she’d whined. ‘Like, will they be wearing jerseys and stuff?’ This was before we left the house. Before any drink. Before Amber with a capital ‘A’, theatre Amber, movie-star Amber, showed up. She was nervous.

I'd told her that camogie girls were just like other girls – and that, no, they wouldn't be wearing their jerseys.

'Shauna's a doctor, and Liath works in Google, for God's sake! And they're going to love you.'

Encouraged and pacified, she'd settled on the white dress and long boots.

Now, the silky dress is being pulled up to expose her tanned, flat stomach, and higher, so I get a glimpse of the lace bra. She reaches up her arms, blinking at me as though trying to focus.

I've been kind of blinded by Amber since we first hooked up, to be honest. She's sort of – she's pure dazzling. I've never been with anyone so – so ridiculously good-looking, I suppose. And I'm not imagining it. Sometimes when we meet people together, I see them look at us – comparing. And I come up short.

I smile, watching her try to blink me into focus. She points at me, her finger swaying from side to side.

'You – you know you're a ride, don' you?' she slurs.

'Is that so? And which of us do you want to ride?' I grin, sitting down on the bed beside her and getting to work on the boots. They sort of roll down, like mad leather socks. Her hands flop to the bed and she wriggles.

'Me or the other me?'

'Bothayouse,' she mumbles.

'You're wasted, Amber,' I say. 'I'd be taking advantage.'

'Nimmi! I am not! I just want – do you – what's wrong with me?' There's a catch in her voice. Christ.

'Here,' I say, finally getting the second boot off, then whooshing her properly into the bed and pulling up the duvet. 'There's nothing wrong with you. You're –'

She's hiccupping. I have about thirty seconds. I sprint into

the bathroom, grabbing the basin from under the sink, then into the kitchen for a pint glass of water and the kitchen roll. I tie her hair back and kneel on the floor beside the bed, waiting.

‘You’re beautiful,’ I say, as she starts retching.

The secret is not to be greedy and not to leave a mess – to wear gloves and to clean up after yourself. The secret is to spread it out by hundreds of miles, so there's no danger of the police making the connection. The secret is to deny yourself for months and keep up your regular routine at work and home – looking forward to it the way some men look forward to their annual ski holiday. They'd like to be indulging their pleasures more often, and so would I – but needs must.

What is one life worth? What value do you put on your own life?

In my line of work, I see so many different types of people – the ones who cling to the world and their place in it. They're fierce. They've got the last space on a lifeboat and they're going to prise the fingers off anyone who tries to scramble aboard. These people feast on life, sucking the marrow from its bones. They'll trample over bodies – living or dead – if they have to. Whatever it takes to survive. Mother was like that. Greedily gorging on being alive.

And then there are the others. Floating about like thistledown on the wind. Dotting their 'i's and crossing their 't's, blending in, seeking permission, cringing, and smiling – a speck in your glass of wine, nothing more. They don't deserve life. The most useful thing they could do is die and let someone have the use of their organs. They're nothing.

I like the ones that fight. I respect that. And yet it's intriguing – interesting – to take a life from someone who doesn't care, someone who, through terror or despair, has given up. I'm doing them a favour.

Yes. Both interest me.

But one is far easier to kill.

Thursday

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Laura

Go and check on them. You should go. Katie could be crying right now – maybe she had a nightmare and she’s crying, too scared to come in, in case you give out to her like you did earlier. You snapped the head off her. And what about the baby? Why hasn’t he woken yet for a feed? Are you sure you put him lying on his back? You need to raise the end of the cot. You were going to do that, weren’t you? Why haven’t you? Go and check on them.

I know about these thoughts. I know what they are, and I know what you have to do. They’re not real. Beside me, Matt sleeps on. He’s no idea about this ritual – the nightly orgy of evaluation, recrimination and self-flagellation that has to happen before I can sleep.

I try to summon Sam, the counsellor I went to see in my early twenties after the assault, when the panic attacks started. I think about his study – the muffled silence of that room, like a carpeted vault. Green light splintered by the old chestnut tree by the window. The distant clang of Cora clattering things in the kitchen.

Challenge them, Sam tells me. Sit with the thoughts. They’re not real. You don’t need to check them because this is not real. The kids are fast asleep. They’re asleep. Do not give in to the compulsion to check them.

I move my arms away from my chest. My breasts are heavy, and part of me wishes Noah would actually wake looking for a feed. Christ! And I could check Katie when I go in to get

him. The chant starts. Maybe if I just do four of them. Four times: *Nothing will hurt them. Nothing will hurt them. Nothing will hurt them. Nothing will hurt them.*

How's the sleep? Jackie had asked. *Oh, grand.* Yeah. I'm kicking myself – why didn't I answer truthfully? I could have got help – she could have arranged counselling hours or a psych referral. Hell, I know this isn't right, and it seems so much worse in the small hours of the morning. Why am I putting myself through this? Why wasn't I honest with her? I could be off on paid leave – never mind a career break. But instead, I'd laughed and lied. Habit of a lifetime. Laugh. Lie.

I sigh, opening my eyes, automatically scanning the room. That's another one my warped brainwaves give me – the night assassin. He's a hunched figure wielding a knife who dispatches the kids first, severing the arteries inside their little throats – the blade plunging into pillows of flesh – then he comes for us. Or, in the worst scenario – he doesn't take us both. He kills the kids. He kills Matt. And I'm left alive. Why would I think like this? How can I stop myself?

I sigh and turn over on to my back, clasping my hands together to still them. What do I want? What should I do? When I told Matt about Jackie advising the break, he was ecstatic.

Well, first he was pissed off that I hadn't told him anything about the meeting in the first place.

'Jesus! Why are you so bloody secretive, Laura? Seriously! I'm your husband, not your boss. But as usual, I'm shut out!'

But after that. Afterwards, he was delighted.

'So, she can sign you off for a career break? Two years? You can take up to two years, can't you? We could go to New York and make a go of it – a proper go of it.'

He'd taken a step closer and, yeah, for a split second I'd

thought he was going to kiss me. The full-on cradling my face, like he used to –

‘So, you’ll take the break?’

His hands fell away, one reaching to the back of his head to fiddle with his hair, in that gesture he does. It’s a self-comforting thing. That’s my curse – to understand the psychology but still not be able to influence or change my behaviour. In the silence between us, he’d dialled it down.

‘Okay – not New York. Just the break, then. That’s what we decided – we – both of us, we decided, didn’t we?’

He’s right. We had talked about it, and it makes sense for me to take a break. I told him I’d no intention of going for sergeant. It would mean a transfer and more training, and a year back in uniform in another district.

‘So, take a career break,’ he’d coaxed. ‘We can do it – and the kids –’

I’d shushed him then. Not wanting to hear how happy it would make the kids to have me home, how happy it would make him, knowing I was with them.

‘And it would be better for you,’ he’d urged. ‘With your – the anxiety? You said yourself that stress makes it worse. Well, this way, you’d be home with them. They’d be with you all the time, so you wouldn’t be worrying about them. And with the –’

The pause told me what he wouldn’t say. We’re still trying to negotiate our way around the assault – the rape, Laura. It was rape. After Jenny’s case, I’d finally spoken to him about it and, initially, there was this huge sense of relief. I’d felt seen – naked and vulnerable – but understood. But there’s a massive problem when you finally face the elephant in the room, and it’s this – once you’ve seen it, you can’t see past it. ‘*Can’t go over it, can’t go under it, can’t go around it* –’ the refrain of Katie’s storybook, *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*, chants in my

brain. The jagged, dense shadow of that night when I was nineteen, when time fractured into Before and After, when everything that I was going to be was ripped apart and thrown back at me in tatters – that shadow looms between us, blocking the light, so we can't see our path towards each other.

'It doesn't work like that, Matt.'

'*Gotta go through it,*' that's the next line.

How do I tell him that I feel like an imposter in my life at home? That the only place I feel real is in work – grilling someone in an interview or blue-lighting it in the car with Niamh on the way to a callout. Work – the adrenalin, the risk, the urgency – or maybe it's the brutality; I don't know what it is – but I know it distracts me from the compulsions; and I'm not sitting at home, trying to be a perfect mum, sorting feeds and fights and picking up Lego. I didn't tell him that the only reason I'd gone for the assessment in the first place was based on the need to know where I stood from the work point of view. If I wanted to go back, would they take me?

I don't know – no one tells you what to expect when you have kids. Not really. It's all about how exhausting it is and the knowing smiles about how tired you'll be and how you'll never have a minute to yourself. Nobody tells you that you will now live in terror of something happening to your child. That the world is no longer sunny and bright, it's filled with risk; with rapists, abusers, paedophiles, murderers. And nobody tells you about the loneliness. Nobody tells you that a thousand times a day you're faced with the worst aspects of yourself. Your flaws and failings magnified a thousand per cent. How in the name of God I thought I'd be able to manage when I'm tapping and counting and shredding the skin of my fingers till they bleed, with my lists and my imperatives and my overthinking.

And the daily terror you live with – the risk of injury and

death. It feels like you're a hair's breadth from fatality all the time, like we're running through a hailstorm of shards of glass. Anything could happen. They could fall; they could choke. I could crash the car with them in it. They could suffocate on a sofa cushion or a stray plastic bag. Katie could hurt him without meaning to. He could ingest one of her Sylvanians and die from a bowel obstruction. The buggy could roll out into the road. Katie could shove the buggy on to the road. I could shove it. I could – what if I'm the biggest danger in their lives? The daily terror of being alone with them – responsibility, risk, harm. On and on and on. It's so ludicrous, it should be funny. Except it's not.

Light from the landing outlines the chest of drawers, the dressing table on which Matt has left a teetering pile of holiday brochures, even though I've told him I don't want to go anywhere. More risk. Swimming pools. Planes. Airborne diseases. Snakes. Venomous spiders. But for Matt it's so simple. A family holiday followed by Mummy taking a career break. Then off to New York for a Fabulous Adventure. His suit jacket is hung neatly on its hanger in readiness for the morning, the trousers over the bannisters to keep their creases sharp. This is how Matt lives.

There's complete stillness in the room. In the silence, I can hear the distant plunging of water over the weir. That's another one – the buggy being tipped into the weir – or yeah, let's honestly admit what I see. I see me tipping it in. I watch it sink. I watch the little hand stretch up and up until it's gone. Why am I like this?

It's 4.40 a.m. Christ. I've got to get some sleep or I'll be useless tomorrow. My body is seized by a yawn, which turns into one of those double and triple yawns. I'm exhausted.

The silence in the house roars on in time with the rolling water. Matt twitches and then sighs. I must have had some

sleep – mustn't I? Could I have been lying awake since eleven, or whenever it was I went to bed?

I must have slept. But what woke me? I heard something – a click or a rap on the door – something. I rewind mentally. Yes – it was a click. The lock on the front door clicks like that.

It was the front door closing softly – as though someone guided it gently into the frame and held on to the snib as it clicked. And, while I've been lying here, they could have crept up the stairs and into the baby's room – or Katie's room. They – he – it's a 'he' – it's not the assassin. It's the guy who – the kidnapper for the paedophile ring. He's lifting Katie out of her bed, his hand over her mouth so she can't make a sound, the other hand scooped underneath her sleep-slack body, her bare feet bobbing in time with his steps and now – now he's taking the stairs two at a time with Katie in his arms and he'll be outside and into his car in a matter of seconds.

I know this is nonsense. I know I must check.

Niamb

The Irish coffee was a mistake, I think, rolling over, trying not to snag Amber's hair, fumbling for my phone. Laura might be up – last reports of Noah were that he was still demanding night feeds. I stalk her 'last seen at' on WhatsApp. Yes! Last seen at 4.30 a.m.

Well? The dots appear after a few seconds.

Feeling

Feeling what? I text back, settling myself against the pillows, my body angled away from Amber in case the light from the screen wakes her. Which is unlikely, seeing as how there were tears following the puking, then more puking. Then I got her to drink a glass of water and, mercifully, she fell asleep. The basin is still on the floor by the bed, just in case. Espresso-scented snores waft towards me. I stroke her hair while I wait for Laura to reply.

Feeding abd texting leftjsand, Laura texts. Then there's a pause before she hits me with my own version of 'how are you?' . . .

Well?

Ab, nothing really, I text. *Had a late one with A. Off tomorrow. All good. You go on with the feed. Kiss the babas from me. Can't wait to see you Monday.*

I wait, but no dots appear.

I click out of the app and settle down to sleep, jaded but still wired from the coffee.

No work tomorrow, so no need to set the alarm. Through

the blinds, I can just make out the blackness of tree branches against the slatted pieces of night sky. The soft hum of traffic – and the occasional truck.

It's so different from home, where the silence is as thick and heavy as treacle. There's a timeless quality too, from the ancient red bricks and the brass doorknobs. From the wrought-iron gates and from Dorothy herself. I'm mad about her. She's like something you'd grow in a lab to go with the house. The day I moved in, she gave me the quick tour like a sergeant major, all clipped sentences and no nonsense.

'Rather plain decor – agent's suggestion. For professional types,' she'd said, studying me, as if my outfit held clues to what decorating style I might like. 'Not very much in the way of – ah – cushions and suchlike –'

I'd cut her off, assuring her that it was absolutely perfect. Dorothy – tall, spare and practical herself – awkward as anything but eager to do the right thing by her new tenant. One thing I knew for sure after I first clapped eyes on her was that the flat would be spotless. She had that scrubbed-clean look and she smelt of old-fashioned soap – Imperial Leather or something like that. Later, she'd insisted on bringing me upstairs to her part of the house – the sparse, high-ceilinged sitting room at the front – where she tried to stuff me full of her home-made biscuits.

I'm glad I'm the one renting from her, though. She's a pet. What if she'd got some dickhead student and his ten pals crashing on the sofa bed and the floor? Partying all night. It's near town and a short walk to the Luas. And Dorothy's happy for me to park the car in the tiny space in the front.

We left it that I was delighted with the flat as it is – that I won't be needing any cushions or a man to come and paint the dark furniture, and that I'm to go upstairs once a month or so and she's going to teach me how to bake. Tomorrow – today,

I suppose – the first lesson is lined up for my day off. Bake-well slices. ‘Easiest thing in the world,’ Dorothy says. I asked her if Amber could stay over a few nights a week, reckoning she had a right to know who’s in her property, and she was grand about it.

‘Nice for you to have company,’ was all she said. ‘Lovely girl.’

The ‘lovely girl’ rolls over, muttering something in her sleep, and I’m on high alert in case she’s about to throw up again. But she’s just trying to get comfortable. Once again, she looks like something from an ad – the tousled hair, the thick eyelashes shadowing that heart-shaped face. Face it, I think. I’m still playing catch-up. I’ve watched her in plays and ads, I’ve dried tears after auditions and helped neck the champagne after triumphs. I’ve even met her platinum mum – a tinier, more silver version of Amber, who lives in a mansion on the Vico Road in Killiney. I’ve never been with anyone remotely like her, and I can’t help feeling that, any minute, it could all fall apart.

Finally, I feel my shoulders relax and I take a deep breath, luxuriating in the silence, the house, the calm. It feels like the end of a perfect day – well, apart from the puking. We’ll go to Brother Hubbard’s tomorrow, I think, get some great hangover food.

I’ve had what feels like about an hour’s sleep when my work phone rings. I nearly jump out of my skin trying to get it before it wakes Amber. McArsey’s tone is formal as ever.

‘Good morning, Darmody,’ he says, ‘the inspector was looking for you. He wants us both. Can you meet me up at the Military Road? I’ve sent you the location.’

On cue, my phone pings.

‘There’s been a fatality. Or, rather, a murder.’

He hangs up.

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6

Niamb

The clock on the dash reads 7.32 when the flashing blue lights strobing the bend in the narrow mountain road let me know I've arrived. Three squad cars are parked in the layby beside a blue 18 D Passat which I presume is the hillwalkers' car. The tech unit van is further up, mounted on a hillock of grass. I pull in behind it and park. Crime-scene tape flickering in the breeze tells me that the scene has been cordoned off, and I spot two uniformed officers who will have been logging every visit to the scene since the first responders arrived. One of the tech guys – Byrne, I think, by the height of him – is taking photos with a drone. That's good, I think, spotting Senan – how the actual fuck is he here already? – *marshalling the troops*, as he likes to call it. He checks his watch before nodding in my direction. Typical.

Ignoring him, I sign the scene log and show my credentials, then go straight to Byrne, stepping carefully on the foot plates, so as not to disturb anything.

'Morning, Byrne.'

He nods without taking his eyes off the drone.

'Did you get shots of the layby – before half the force parked on top of the tyre tracks?'

He moves the control stick and the sound of the drone changes as it drops lower.

'I did,' he says. 'Good to see you, Darmody – although this is bloody grim. She looks about fifteen.'

I look towards the body, not wanting to get closer until Byrne is finished. From here, I can see a pair of bare feet poking out from a covering of branches and leaves. My stomach lurches – her feet are destroyed – the bare skin is torn and scraped raw.

‘Christ! Did he make her do a barefoot pilgrimage before he killed her?’

Byrne makes a *tsék* sound between his teeth, concentrating. ‘Sorry.’

He rotates the lever again, causing the drone to circle and rise up above the body.

‘You’re grand. I’m nearly finished with this anyway,’ he says, ‘but, yeah – her feet are in bits.’

‘Detective Darmody?’ says Senan, marching over towards us, his North Face puffa zipped up to his little chinny-chin-chin. Senan McArsey – human version of one of those swimming-pool noodles – and just as insubstantial, makes up for his lack of heft with a muscular devotion to the rule book. Jaysus, I don’t know why he annoys me so much – is it the rules? The fast-tracking through the ranks? Maybe it’s the priestly air, or maybe I’m just jealous of his foot on the property ladder and the way he’s tipped for promotion. He’s from home as well – not that you’d ever know it. It’s like he’s ashamed of his roots; he never mentions it. Oh yeah – and I’m a bitch – so it’s probably that.

‘Well.’ I nod, turning away from Byrne and walking to meet McArsey, aware that I’m breathing in deeply in preparation. Only a couple more days of this. Suck it up and smile, bitch. He doesn’t outrank you – he only thinks he does.

‘Morning, Senan.’ He winces at the familiarity, and I prepare myself for the rebuke, but he’s got other things on his mind.

‘The team from Rathfarnham was on. It’s possible this is the missing au pair.’ He makes a little beckoning motion right under my nose – another one of his priestlike habits that make me want to punch him – indicating that I’m to follow.

‘She was reported missing from the Clonchapel area yesterday – went to pick up the child from playschool, didn’t return.’

The wind is whipping my hair all over the place, so I stop to tie it back. Senan waits, a look of long-suffering patience stamped on his pale pink features. He nods his approval when I finish. I want to punch him again. What is *wrong* with me? I’ve managed nearly ten months – I can manage the last few days.

‘Dr Parminter is on his way – should be here any minute.’

He picks his way over the tufts of grass and heather in his hiking boots. How the hell did he know to wear hiking boots when he got up this morning? We stop some metres away from the girl, waiting as she’s photographed by another tech guy.

Most of the body is covered by branches; only the girl’s shoulders and her poor feet are bare. It’s almost as if he was trying to cover her modesty. A killer with opinions about nakedness? A religious zealot? I step a bit closer – her dark hair is smoothed – maybe even slicked back; it looks wet. From here it’s hard to tell if her darkened lips are oxygen-deprived, or if she’s wearing heavy lipstick.

‘Not your average look for an au pair,’ I say. ‘Are you sure it’s her?’

‘Clearly, we won’t know for sure until a formal identification’s been made,’ says Senan, as though I’m a complete idiot. I take a step away from him, not trusting myself.

‘I’ll go and have a word with the couple who found her,’ I say, indicating the shook-looking pair – her still clutching her

walking poles – talking to one of the uniformed gardaí who is taking notes.

‘Good idea,’ says Senan.

Jaysus!

Before I reach them, the garda breaks away from the hikers and starts making her way towards me. She’s tiny, and her stride is too short for the foot plates, so she has to gather herself and leap forwards at each step, as though she’s playing hopscotch. Eventually, she arrives. I check her shoulder number – one of ours. She must be new.

‘Hi – Detective, eh, Darmody – I’m Wilson, I’m new in the unit.’

She blinks rapidly – tears from the wind, or –

‘They’re wondering if they can go. Like – not hiking – they were meant to be hiking.’

‘In the dark?’ God! The things people do when they could be home in bed.

‘Yes – they – they wanted to see the sunrise. From the top, and – I think they’re in shock, actually. Do we let them go home or what?’

She blinks again, adding an anxious throat clear, and I remember the first murder scene I attended. I was terrified.

Her hair is pretty much nailed into the proper regulation bun and tucked under the cap, but I can tell by the freckles standing out against her pale skin that she’s a redhead. She reminds me of a squirrel – the darting movements.

‘Hell, no, Wilson!’ I snap, ‘Of course not! You’ll have to take them in for questioning – they could be suspects. Go and cuff them.’

Her mouth opens.

‘What? Sorry –’

I wait a beat, then I grin. She almost wets herself in relief. Her whole body relaxes.