

Prologue

Forty-eight years ago...

The sun began to empty its rays across the bay earlier each morning now. Finally, it seemed Ballycove was drifting towards the summer months. May had been clement, and it looked as if June could surge, blazing into summer with long hot days reminding them all how lucky they really were to have the Irish Sea wash cool spray onto the doorstep of their little village. It was confirmed when day tourists from Dublin arrived, half-baked already from the twenty-minute train journey south to escape the dusty city. Tess Cuffe listened to their voices, sing-songing across the little village streets and cast like stray nets, fragments of sentences, on the sea breeze. With a bit of luck, she would be one of them, one day. She imagined herself, joining a tribe and returning for short holidays with worldly eyes to find a picturesque village. And, even as a youngster, Tess could see that Ballycove was quaint, but she was ready to leave it behind. She was already tired of its narrow streets and blinkered people. She craved the anonymity of the city, where you weren't known as the headmaster's daughter, or just the girl who sang in church each week, the second sister who was nothing like her mother.

Her parents, Harold and Maureen Cuffe, lived in Ballycove all their lives. Quietly, perhaps a little oddly, their cottage set apart, just enough to let the neighbours know that they were somehow better than the rest. Harold was a man who had an education; it would surely be marked on his headstone, one day: *Harold Cuffe, B.A. National Teacher and Headmaster*. It was unlikely there'd be room for much more, *sadly missed*, and *pray for his soul* would have to be taken as agreed. Maureen, well, unless she died first, it would be on the toss of a coin as to whether she would even get a mention, beyond being the wife of Harold Cuffe. It was good enough in life; she might have to settle for the same in death as well.

Tess could think of nothing worse than being like her mother. It wasn't that she didn't love her. Maureen was kind, giving and stoic in her faith in Harold, but it seemed to Tess that she had no passion and so that made her into a diluted version of what she might have otherwise been. Whereas Tess, from the first moment she realised she could sing, had been lost to a different world. Every amateur show in the village, every party, wedding or funeral wake, Tess would make a stand and sing until her father told her that it was time to stop. She was at

the front of every choir and knew the words to any song that managed to make it onto the top of the pops or the weekly hymn sheets. If there were words and music, Tess would sing along.

This morning, Tess was first up, waiting for the familiar squeak of the letter box. Nancy still slept soundly in her twin bed, unaware her sister had tiptoed across the threadbare circular rug that bled a colour wheel of faded purples, wines and reds across their tiny bedroom. Sometimes, Tess wondered if Nancy ever dreamed. Tess's sleep crowded with dreams of lyrics and music and her voice carrying to the rooftops of some unknown city, where even the pigeons craned taller on their roosts to hear her sing. Tess didn't just dream about singing, she breathed it with every cell in her body, and the letter that she so longed to hold was as dear to her as a king's pardon. In many ways, she had always felt her life would properly begin once she shook the dust of Ballycove from her awkward schoolgirl shoes.

Tess stood before the mirror for a moment. In the dim light it was hard to make out her reflection, but the sleep was long gone from her eyes and her lips and cheeks were plump from a good night's rest. She smoothed down her soft chestnut hair, straightened up her blouse so the collar sat high on her neck. She loved this blouse, cobalt blue, it brought out the colour of her eyes, which were dark-ringed with eyelashes long and heavy. She looked back once more at Nancy, perhaps she dreamed of baking cakes, or typing letters or... it was beyond Tess. Nancy was a full year older than Tess and she seemed to have no desire to go anywhere or do anything. The boys in the village would never be good enough for Harold Cuffe's daughter, so maybe going to Dublin with Tess was the best option for her. It was hardly the most exciting prospect, a secretarial course and then perhaps the chance to gain entry to the civil service for a few years. Was it very bad to feel sorry for your older sister? Perhaps the bonds between them were all the stronger because of this affection that cloaked over Tess when she thought of how differently their futures seemed mapped out before them.

Tess sighed; they were just so different, close as peas in a shell, but poles apart. She waited now for that whisper of envelope as it glided onto the tiled floor her mother fretted over with polish for as long as Tess could remember. Maureen Cuffe was a mouse of a woman, forever playing small to augment her husband's supremacy. Tess had decided long ago that she would be different, even if her older sister Nancy was happy to fall into that spiritless mould.

It was six days now. Six days since she'd attended the interview in the prestigious College of Music, in Dublin's Trinity College. That was the most exhilarating day of her life. The college itself was as old as any building in the city and hushed with the reverence of a church. It was like nowhere she'd ever been before and yet, it was exactly as she expected. The grandeur intimidated as much as it impressed. The rooms were imposing, tall and echoing so her voice sprang back at her with unexpected vigorous fluency. Even that, just attending for her audition, it tasted like the start of where she was meant to be. She walked through halls lined with heavy oak, beneath the glare of past teachers and students of that selective school.

It was all she'd ever wanted and she was too keyed up to care about pretending it didn't matter. That audition was all she thought of. All her work, her hopes and her future were pinned on just less than eight minutes. She'd sang her best, timed every single note, waited, buttoned up her soul so she could unleash it as her voice ascended to heights she'd only hoped for. The panel, a bunch of stuffy, whiskered men and a woman who hardly greeted her, had been entranced before she finished. She knew it, from the moment she paced into the aria – pens were suspended, words only half written and smiles, fighting against muscles determined not to let them escape, drew half-expressions across otherwise weary faces and now, all she could do was wait.

The cottage was silent this morning, apart from the continuing marking of time; the Swiss carriage clock wore seconds across rooms that no longer paid any heed. Although the village children were on holidays for weeks on end, her father would walk down to the schoolhouse this morning. Sometimes, she wondered what he did there, each day. She suspected he just went because he didn't know what else to do with his time – her mother talked of his impending retirement with a sense of doom worthy of an undertaker. 'Not long now,' she would say when he left the house. Everything about their family was tied up in that school. Even this cottage, 'the Master's house', long ago gifted to the family. Her father would have his ties cut in two years' time, three if they were lucky. Finding a replacement who'd want to settle in a little village like Ballycove might not be easy. As for her father, a pillar of the community, he would have to find some other way of being proper or drift into old age with only the past to buoy him towards the end.

Then, Tess heard it. A creak that meant she was not alone. She skipped into the little hallway, the sunlight reaching dusty rays down to dance upon the silky blue envelope that lay composed on the floor. Tess picked it up, her parents' names in flowing font gave nothing away. The stamp, measured into the corner, seemed to wink at her, impish in all that hid within. She rushed into the kitchen, placed it carefully in the centre of the table and went about making as much noise as she could. First, she boiled the kettle and set about emptying the stove that burned in all weather, it worked harder than her mother did, but it seemed to get more care.

'It's here,' Nancy carolled her words so they filled the kitchen, she was still in her night clothes, wakened perhaps by Tess's soft movements or the early morning birds intent on starting a new day before anyone else. 'I can't believe you've waited, it's...' Nancy inspected the envelope in her hand. 'Are you nervous?' Almost identical eyes found each other and Tess realised that this affected Nancy as much as it affected her. If she got a place in Trinity, Nancy would be uprooted too. Nancy was older by just eleven months, it gave her the advantage when it came to being the one her parents credited with having 'sense and moral fibre.'

'I...'

Everyone knew it was all she wanted, but the fear of failure drove Tess back from saying the words aloud. 'No, of course not, as they say, que sera, sera?' Then she laughed a nervous tickle that stretched into tight silence between them. She couldn't fool Nancy.

'Oh, come on. I don't believe you for a minute; let's get mamma and father up here.'

Nancy skipped down to the door that led into her parents' room. 'Mamma, Tess's letter has arrived.' Her voice bubbled with a lighter version of the nerves playing at the back of Tess's throat. In the kitchen, Nancy came over to Tess now, reached towards her arm and squeezed it because maybe, she could feel the longing too. It had always been that way for them. Tess thought, they knew each other inside out. Of course, the similarities were only on the surface, but a deeper connection skirted about the everyday; a connection that went beyond sisterhood. Their mother believed it came from long before they were born. Nancy said it would be there long after they died – wherever life took them on the way and, somehow, this made Tess feel warm inside.

'Right,' her mother said as she took the last hairclip from her lips and slid it into hair that grew greyer with every passing day. She patted back the stray ribs that no longer settled with a comb. By the time her parents arrived in the kitchen, nerves had almost gotten the better of Tess, what if they didn't want her after all? 'Let's see what they have to say.' She handed the envelope to her husband with a reverence that came as much from respect as expectation.

Tess passed him one of the ivory-handled knives that she'd placed on the table earlier.

'I dare say, this'll be the end of having the table set before we all start our day,' their mother smiled. Tess would not be quite so earnest tomorrow morning if this letter contained the invitation she'd worked so hard to get. Maureen peered across her husband's shoulder, narrowed her eyes to read the embellished font. 'Now that you're going to be a...' she didn't get to finish off the sentence. They wanted her in the college of music and as her father read out the letter, Tess and Nancy started to dance around the kitchen – Tess had never been so happy.

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Tess wound her way up the steep little road to Aunt Beatrice's house as soon as it was respectable to call. Beatrice lived in a little cottage; on a ledge that overhung the Irish Sea. Strictly speaking, Aunt Beatrice wasn't her aunt at all. She was a cousin of her mother's. No one was entirely sure how they were related, but as with many connections in the village, they were wrought with time and affection as much as any blood ties. Tess loved this cottage. She'd come here for years, marking out the hours before she had to return to the austerity of her father's overbearing appropriateness. Aunt Beatrice said she was far too old to think about what was proper any more. Tess wasn't sure when Aunt Beatrice had become old, it was something that had stealthily overtaken them at some point. Tess could imagine her being

very young and vibrant, a darker-haired version of herself. There was no picturing her in that middle ground between youth and old age, making that steady journey to this point through mildly greying hair and soft discrepancy between what was and what would be. Perhaps she'd always been young, until once when they'd looked away for a moment too long and time had stolen its place without any word of warning. 'You get to a stage in life, when really, you have to take your happiness as it is. I'd be a very disappointed old lady now if I waited for everything to come along in the packaging that I'd wished for.' Beatrice spoke of her love affairs with the honesty of one who cared little for the po-faced propriety of her peers and less for the double standards of the Sunday pulpit. She was thrilled with the news of the letter.

'I will miss you of course, but oh, Tess, think of all that lies ahead of you. I'm so pleased for you.'

'I will miss you too, and our little heart-to-hearts,' Tess looked around the cottage, feeling nostalgic already for its cosy homeliness.

'Ach, go on with you,' Beatrice smiled and Tess knew that for all that she'd enjoyed Beatrice's unfailing love and support over the years, soon the time would come when Beatrice would no longer be here. This little cottage would be half a world without her, but it was the most important connection she had with Ballycove. Tess put the thought from her mind quickly.

'I will come and visit, as often as I can,' Tess said then, touching Beatrice's feathery-skinned hand.

'You've always been a good girl, Tess, but I'm happy to see you go and chase your dreams. I'll always be here, long after you think I'm gone, looking out over the water, perhaps dancing on the waves with some handsome young officer that I've kept a secret all these years.' Beatrice smiled now and reached for the dresser at her back. 'Come on, we should have some cake while you tell me all about your plans until you finally go.'

There was very little to tell. She would have to find a place to live, but Beatrice said that perhaps she could help there. 'And Nancy. How's Nancy with all of this good news?'

'Well, she's thrilled, of course she is,' Tess said, but she found the uncertainty in her words that excitement had concealed before.

'She won't want to leave Maureen,' Beatrice whispered.

'We can't stay home forever, though Mum wouldn't want that.'

'No, it's not what your mother wants; it's what Nancy feels she needs. She's afraid to leave...' Beatrice shook her head. The words silently tacked between them. Nancy wanted nothing more than a husband to look after her and a house to mind. The idea of holding her own in the city was probably as much to be endured as enjoyed. 'Of course, you must both go to Dublin, your mother wants that more than anything, I think.'

'It's only for a year, but maybe...' Tess smiled, she didn't need to fill in any blanks. They both hoped that Nancy would find some kind of work that might put her in the way of a nice young man. Tess on the other hand wanted adventure. She wanted to leave behind the little village where respectability pinned you into holes that smothered. She wanted to sing and feel

her voice soar high and far as the seagulls threading stitches across the vista of her world. Nancy wanted to be here, not here in this cottage – this was Tess’s refuge. She wanted to be here, in Ballycove, with someone who would keep her safe, make her feel matchless, assure the world edged out into the perimeters of her life. Nancy wanted to be taken care of, to live a life that didn’t punish her for being less. She wanted everything their mother had and none of it. ‘Nancy doesn’t have to come, you know.’ The words were defensive, but the truth was, Tess was looking forward to it being just the two of them.

‘She doesn’t get to choose, she feels your happiness depends upon her.’ Beatrice spoke softly. It wasn’t a reprimand, just a reminder that Nancy was giving up a year to go and live in Dublin, just to pacify their father. It was out of the question, as far as he was concerned, that Tess would live in the city on her own, or worse, with strangers. ‘She has no interest in pursuing any secretarial work, we both know that,’ Beatrice said. ‘But you’re right, it’s exactly what she needs the most.’

‘It will be good for her – you see that too.’ Tess shook her head. ‘She might find that there’s more to life than Ballycove and living like my mother for the rest of her days.’ Tess fidgeted with a ball of wool that lay unravelled across the table between them. She offered to roll it up, but still it lay, unfurled lazily on the lacy cloth that soaked up the midday sun searing through the little windows.

‘Hmm. Well, don’t forget, it’s just a year – you’ll be taking care of her probably more than she’ll be taking care of you.’ Beatrice smiled across her half-moon glasses and they both knew that whatever her parents believed, it had always been that way. Nancy would always need minding. She was similar to their mother: pliant, self-deprecating, the people-pleaser of the pair. Tess only hoped that didn’t mean she took after her father. Tess could see no happiness for someone as proud as Harold Cuffe, he was far too tied up with the importance of being right to understand the meaning of being loved.

Tess did not answer. Instead, she looked out onto the glassy black water below, biting and shifting glints upon unending waves. It seemed to Tess that the waves below them could not mark out the time quickly enough to enter this new world that beckoned so forcefully.

Chapter 1

December 29 – Monday

Coffee with the girls just wore Amanda King out these days. She pulled up onto the Italian pebble drive of her home, exhausted, which of course was ridiculous – it was just coffee after all. First-world problems, that's what Richard called it, and he must be right.

Richard was always right, he was a banker, her successful husband of twenty-two years; the love of her life. Richard fell in love with her when she was a flighty art student with notions probably far beyond her talent. She could thank him for saving her from the delusions of herself. He fell in love with her in spite of her permanently charcoaled fingernails. Sometimes it seemed like a lifetime ago, but it was twenty-two years in a few weeks' time. Life had been generous to them, giving them a perfect family – Casper and Robyn – well, they were teenagers now, in that awkward phase of no man's land between rebellion, tears and needing her. She could thank Richard too for their lovely home, a three-storey over basement Georgian townhouse; after all, he had paid for it. They had been captivated by it together, perhaps for different reasons. Richard liked the address – you don't get more exclusive in Dublin than an intact Georgian square, with a private shared park in the centre, on the right side of town. Amanda adored everything about it, from the intricate cornicing and ceiling roses, to the buttery windowpanes that rattled in their frames. She loved the light that shone through every inch of the house at the precise moment when you needed it. Their breakfast bar faced east, their dining room benefited from the western evening sun. She threw herself headlong into a sympathetic restoration project that managed to extend beyond the house to the communal square and more. Amanda spent almost a year researching the history of the square, from the first stone laid on a grey Dublin day in 1798 to each mistress of the house, before she arrived to steer it into its third century.

She sighed now, as much from exhaustion as the notion of all those women who went before. They suffered on through famine, land wars, world wars and countless other ups and downs; she had not yet lost the grace to feel a little prickly when she complained about her trifling niggles.

What was she doing? She was complaining about going for coffee in one of Dublin's smartest hotels, with some of the most glamorous women in the city? She had fallen into this charmed, if somewhat vacuous life. Coffee morning was a ritual at this stage, two hours spent

dissecting the lives of everyone outside their circle – people of interest, who hadn't quite managed to make it in yet. They sat at the same table each week, Amanda and the other wives, feasting on the morsels of gossip gleaned from husbands who only cared in an offhand way.

Amanda opened the button of her pants and groaned her disappointment. Once again, she had tucked into the plate of sweet biscuits, croissants and scones. Single-handedly, she was a one-woman scoffing machine; she'd cleared the lot. She never remembered eating them, but, as usual, she had found herself reaching for something to nibble and before she knew it, the tiered plate was empty. Ah, well, no point crying over spilled milk or eaten pastries, she thought regretfully.

Amanda sat for a moment, looking up at her beautiful home. If she only looked up, past the granite steps, the glossy black handrails, she could convince herself that everything was perfect. It was her dream home, her lovely Georgian house, with its original fanlight and reconstructed glossy front door, brasses glinting in the afternoon unseasonable sunshine. It still made her so proud that she had pulled this place back from the brink. Well, she had refurbished it thanks to Richard's money and an army of specialist builders and advisors. Unfortunately, it took just a glimpse to the lower left to catch sight of the only blight on the vista of their lovely mansion. A sturdy little porch jutted out of what they called the basement, although the windows and door appeared to be at ground level. Tess Cuffe, their sitting tenant, had hung a line of washing out again.

Amanda tried to block it out of view, but it was hard to ignore an orange clothes line clipped with neat green pegs, a sail of freshly washed, if very worn linen flapping on the icy afternoon breeze. Indeed, you had to wonder, when you looked at those almost threadbare sheets, if they might not be considered vintage at this point. On the end of the line, a couple of blouses fluttered mournfully, their flowers long faded by hot washes and too much cheap detergent. My God, but they probably didn't even sell blouses like those anymore. They were truly ancient, outmoded – collectibles that no one would ever want to collect. Amanda wondered who wore them in this day and age. The answer of course was Tess Cuffe – she was the only person Amanda had ever known to wear clothes that might have fallen off a shelf in Woolworths forty years before. Presumably, they were her work clothes, although, for the life of her Amanda couldn't fathom who would want to employ a woman like Tess Cuffe.

Oh, God. Amanda could feel the familiar swell of dread in her stomach. Richard would be incandescent if he arrived home to see Tess was hanging out her washing again. They all knew she only did it because Amanda had expressly written it in their residents' association code of conduct. It was clear as day, residents were not to lower the tone of Swift Square by embarking on any activity more suited to the rear of their properties. It went for barbecues as much as pottering about and, certainly, it went for drying clothes. She made the mistake of

mentioning it to Tess, just once, years before, and ever since, as soon as the sun shone, lines of washing were pegged out with spiteful haste at the front of number 4, Swift Square.

It annoyed Richard more than anyone; it was like a rebellious one finger to all the money he had wasted over the years trying to get Tess out. Amanda hated to use the word *evicted*, it was all too messy and unthinkable, even now. Still, after all these years, Richard could spend an entire evening whining and complaining about Tess. Funny, but in the beginning, Amanda believed it would pass. After all, Tess Cuffe was the reason they picked this place up at a bargain price. Tess knew that too and perhaps resented them all the more for it. Richard did everything he could think of to induce her to leave. When bullying her did not work, he tried money. He offered her enough to put a down payment on a nice cosy flat. She could have her own place in a neighbourhood where her underwear would not be the only washing hanging on clotheslines along a veranda designed for that purpose. Tess had been unyielding. It seemed to Amanda, the more Richard made it plain he wanted her out, the more Tess dug herself in to stay. There had been so many small squabbles over the years, but then in a moment of fury, Richard instigated legal proceedings. He wanted her gone and he could call it anything the judges preferred to hear, but in the end, they lost. Tess was still here; still paying her legally agreed ten bob a week rent. It was a covenant agreement, based on some old law that Tess managed to unearth with free legal aid. The amount meant nothing in terms of financial gain for the Kings but gave immense satisfaction to Tess, who left the old coins on the doorstep each Friday afternoon, just at the end of the working week.

For her ten bob or, in new money, less than two euros a week, Tess had the entire basement of the house. It consisted of a two-bedroom flat, which although it hadn't been modernised, was very generous by today's rental proportions in the city. A separate entrance squeezed within a small add-on porch just left of the impressive granite steps to Amanda's imposing front door. The judge held firm when Richard went back with the second case to increase the rent. Amanda knew there was no repairing the damage the courts had wreaked on what should have been a neighbourly relationship.

Still, Amanda adored Swift Square; it was one of only five intact Georgian squares dotted about Dublin. Sometimes, when the square was silent, she loved to stand on the doorstep and look about. Four storeys of preserved history surrounded them on all sides. Each building had a unique history of its own, and yet the fact that they stood shoulder to shoulder for almost three hundred years connected them in an enduring way that added so much to the square that was greater than the sum of all its parts. At its heart, the garden she had set her sights on when she first arrived. It had been a labour of love and at times back-breaking work, but she and a fiery old Italian called Antonio had undertaken a complete restoration of the shared garden. It was worth it. Now, on any given day, it was dotted with flowering shrubs each blooming and giving way for the next colour of the season.

For the last month, standing taller and prouder than any other time of the year, they had decorated the huge conifer that stood in the northernmost point. The decorating had become a square tradition. Some of Amanda's happiest memories with Casper and Robyn were around the dressing of that tree. It dripped with glinting sepia white lights and oversized wooden trinkets depicting the twelve days of Christmas rising up its furry branches to a superb silvery star on top.

In the centre of the garden, there was ample space for kids to kick about a ball or throw Frisbees on a summer's day. There were plenty of dark-stained garden chairs for tired au pairs or gossiping young mothers to watch their little darlings as they played. They kept it locked at night, but even now, looking across at the light frosty haze gathered about it, she felt proud.

The square was home mainly to smart offices these days, but there were a handful of private homes and quite a few basement flats too. Not that Amanda knew all the renters by name, but everyone smiled and acknowledged each other. She felt it was important, so the square held onto that small town feeling that Celtic tiger greed and overzealous development had sucked out of the big city.

Amanda cleared her throat as though she might be getting ready to say something important to the emptiness before her. Perhaps she could say something, about the washing. Amanda peered towards the little flat. The windows at ground level opposite, she knew, were high within the flat. She took a step towards them, gingerly; it was so hard to know what to do, most of the time. If only Richard hadn't insisted on having the court case.

Amanda stood for a moment; perhaps she could get someone in to put up a rotary line in a small corner of the garden. Of course, she'd have to say it to Richard, and really, she already knew what he'd think of that idea.

She wouldn't do it, of course. Not just because she couldn't listen to Richard's tirade. No. Rather, she wouldn't do it, because she knew, that letting Tess into the garden was just giving her another opportunity to bleed her dislike of them even further into their lives. The truth was that she was in the slow lane if it came to a game of tit for tat. Tess Cuffe had all the time in the world to plan a tactical campaign to drive Amanda to sheer distraction, whereas Amanda was a busy woman. She had coffee to drink, lunches to attend, committees to organise, magazines to read, hairdressing appointments and, of course, a husband and family to keep happy.

She was just turning towards the steps to her front door when she heard the porch door open in the basement flat opposite. The sound of it splintered a sneer behind her.

'Measuring up for curtains, are you?' Tess Cuffe cackled as she fingered the washing on her line. She looked towards the grey sky and sighed, as though confirming what she already knew – it was not a day for drying clothes outside. 'Ah, sure, that's lovely for you.'

'No, of course not, I was just...' Amanda didn't look at the woman, eye contact always led to more wrath, but she couldn't help noticing a hard plaster on her hand. If it was anyone but

Tess Cuffe, she would have enquired what had happened, but with Tess, such concern could go either way. Honestly, it was more likely to go the wrong way.

‘Well, you better put your measuring tape away for a while yet.’ She pulled the belt of her unfashionable coat tighter around her middle – everything about Tess seemed bitter to Amanda, from the way her mouth turned sourly down, to her bitten voice; she was irritated by a life she chose only to drift through. Tess was probably pretty, once. She still had the features to whisper that she might have been a stunner in her day. She was tall and graceful and if her anger pushed aside a sunny nature, it couldn’t hide the striking colour of her eyes.

‘I had no intention of...’ Amanda cast her eyes about the square uncertainly. The last thing she wanted was to have Tess Cuffe scorning at her again; you never knew quite what she was thinking of you. Perhaps that was the most unsettling thing of all. They’d lived as neighbours for over two decades and Amanda knew so little of this proud and private spinster who still managed to get the better of them, even with all that money could buy on their sides.

‘Not content with taking a poor old woman to court, now you’re just going to have to wait for me to die, I suppose,’ Tess sighed in mock resignation; she enjoyed making Amanda squirm, that much was certain.

‘Look here,’ Amanda straightened up to her full half-pint size, her voice rising an octave higher than she promised herself it would. ‘I’ll have you know...’ she was eyeballing her now, but of course, there was nothing she could say. Sometimes, Amanda wondered if they could roll back time and start again. Could doing things differently have made things any better? Of course, she’d never mention that to another living soul, it was too late now. She was never going to say that the court case was Richard’s idea, or that she would quite happily have let things lie after they had offered to buy her out. She had a feeling Tess would see her wifely support as just more evidence of her not having a brain or backbone of her own. In that way, when Amanda thought about it, they were total opposites – Tess had enough backbone for both of them and plenty to spare. Amanda often wondered if being a good wife always meant surrendering to your husband’s wishes, but then she was very lucky with Richard, because he really did know best. And, that was it, there was no point having an argument with Tess Cuffe, because, Amanda knew she wouldn’t win. Instead, she turned on her heel and left the woman standing there with her infuriating knowing eyes mocking everything about Amanda. At least in her exquisite, immaculate home, she could pretend Tess Cuff did not exist and her world was just perfect.

Chapter 2

December 31 – Wednesday

‘It’s just a scrape, that’s all.’ Tess hated that her voice sounded so small here. It was the machines of course, buzzing, humming and occasionally beeping, eating up the static silence of her little cubicle. The A&E at St. Mel’s city hospital was hushed, ready for impending invasion by the Dublin City revellers, wounded in various, often-unaccountable ways for the sake of *auld lang syne*.

It was New Year’s Eve and this was not where she planned to spend it; not that she had any plan at all. It was a long time since Tess had anywhere she wanted to be for New Year’s, Christmas, or indeed her birthday. These days she told herself it suited her, but she was too wise not to remember what it was like to be part of something more.

Tess eyeballed the doctor. He was young, maybe a bit of a smart-arse, but she put him in his place when he mispronounced her name and again when he stumbled over her prescription. ‘I’m going home now. Either stitch me up, or give me a needle and I’ll do it myself.’ She swung her legs as smoothly as she could off the trolley that they had allocated to her almost three hours earlier. ‘For goodness sake, you’ll have all sorts in here soon.’

It was fuss over nothing. So, there was a bit of blood, but nothing broken on this occasion. Tess had tripped, that was all there was to it. A bloody cat wandering through her legs in the dark. It could happen to anyone. Of course, the fact that she had a broken wrist made her look as though she was always in the wars. The broken wrist had occurred just over a month before, but she had been sensible, had the X-ray, got the bandage and gone on her not so merry way. She blamed the damned heavy cast for throwing her off balance. It had made her feel a little light-headed. It had been dark and the last thing she’d expected was to have a cat in her little porch. That was how she’d ended up in here again. For the second time in the same emergency ward; same flipping cat, only this time when she fell she managed to land against the front door and shattered every last piece of glass in the long thin side panel. Nothing broken, this time, but there was plenty of blood and, Tess knew, you couldn’t be too careful with old glass. She’d called the bugger every name under the sun; if she got her hands on him there was no telling what she might have done to him. In the ambulance, she’d groaned at her own stupidity and the zealous EMT began to check for everything from

aneurism to zinc deficiency. She cursed under her breath, she was just a stupid old woman and there was no cure in this hospital for that particular condition.

‘So, you live on your own, Mrs, ah, Miss... Tess?’

‘On my own, of course I...’ then it dawned on her. They were treating her as if she was in shock, a head injury. They would never let her home if they thought she was on her own. It was the New Year, even if she wasn’t inundated with social invitations, she was damned if she was spending it in this place. ‘Of course, I don’t, my... husband will be so worried about me, so will you let me go home now?’ There was never a husband, but there might have been, once, long ago – but then he’d married Nancy and that was that.

‘Ah, Tess.’ A vaguely familiar-looking older man arrived, clipboard in hand. ‘You won’t remember me, Dr Kilker, I treated you last time round.’ He smirked at the hard plaster on her wrist. She disliked him instantly, had a feeling he knew something she didn’t and that just got up her nose. ‘So, you’ve been in the wars again? What was it this time, kissing the ground instead of kicking it?’ He moved closer to her, inspected the wound. He smelled of garlic mixed with a hint of tobacco, and aftershave clinging to survive on a ten-hour hospital shift, it drifted from him being so close.

‘No, for your information, I was the victim of an intruder,’ Tess snapped.

‘Half a dozen stitches should see you straight.’ He raised a sceptical eyebrow.

‘Finally,’ Tess grunted towards the younger doctor.

‘Now, be a good girl and sit still while I put it right.’ Dr Kilker silenced her while he tacked up the wound.

It was infuriating to be spoken to as if she were a child.

‘How did you really manage it, Tess?’ He asked as he stood back to admire his neat stitches.

‘There was a flipping cat in a dark porch; it could happen to the Pope himself.’

‘I suppose it could, but then, he’s not wearing a cast, is he?’ he said lightly. ‘No dizziness or blackouts? Nothing odd or strange going on that we should hear about?’

‘No, nothing like that.’ Tess glared at him. She wasn’t stupid. She knew when to see a doctor. ‘Maybe just a little too much seasonal cheer for my own good.’ She had just had a small nip before she went to lock up the flat for the night.

‘Hmm.’ From the shuffling, it was obvious none of them could visualise a cheerful Tess, seasonal or otherwise. ‘Well, stay away from the brandy bottle until those painkillers wear off.’ He handed her a prescription. ‘I’ll get a few of these to bring home with you, tide you over for a few days, okay?’ He counted out a half dozen small white tablets, placed them in a blue container then squinted while he scribbled some illegible instructions on the label. When he finished, he looked at her oddly over reading glasses that perhaps might be fashionable on someone decades younger.

‘Oh, I won’t need any of those,’ Tess said and then felt the blood rush from her head as she sat forward. ‘On second thoughts.’ She took the pills and folded the prescription into her bag.

‘There’s definitely someone to take care of you?’ Dr Kilker kept his eyes on the notes he was making to her records. ‘You’ll need to rest well for a day or two, let those stitches knit.’

‘Of course I have people to look after me, I’ll be tucked up in bed as soon as I get home and then...’ She left the words hanging. The truth was that some nights, she settled down on the old sofa in her little flat. Somehow, making the effort of getting ready for bed seemed to be beyond her too often lately. It was as though she was giving in that another day was over, same as the last, same as the next, until one day there would be no more.

One of the nurses suggested diplomatically that older women could be even more exhausted while convalescing; Tess just nodded wordlessly at her. Convalescing was for other people, not for Tess.

‘And then, there’s the neighbours,’ she said as if there was a chance she’d let that snooty wagon from upstairs over her threshold even if Amanda *did* decide to come check that she was still alive.

‘Retired yet?’ He tapped the pen on her file; she presumed he was looking at her age.

‘Not yet, shouldn’t you be thinking about it too?’ she said acerbically. Just because he was a doctor did not mean he could take liberties.

‘Oh, believe me, I think about it all the time.’ He looked around the hectic emergency ward and she caught a weary sound to his words. ‘Can’t come soon enough.’

‘Well for some,’ she said. ‘They’re still putting the finishing touches on my villa in Spain, if you want to know the truth of it,’ she shook her head. ‘Oh, yes, you’d be surprised at how us old girls plan to live it up when we retire, Dr Kilker.’

‘Well, you have to call a halt sometime.’ He smiled wryly, before beckoning to an ambulance driver who was just folding up a wheelchair. ‘Ted, are you heading back across town now?’

‘Yep, no calls, just a nice cup of tea back at the base.’ He smiled sadly. Perhaps, without the action of the job, it would be a long and boring night with far too much tea.

‘Any chance you’d give Tess a lift,’ he looked at her notes again, ‘to Swift Square?’ He raised an eyebrow, as though he was familiar with the place, then smiled sadly when he caught her eye.

‘Sure.’ Ted put out a hand to steady her before she got to her feet.

‘I’m well able to walk, young man.’ Tess saw Dr Kilker smile as she shrugged off the help. The distraction caught her off balance and in what felt like a slow-motion exaggerated dance move she ended up falling clumsily on her bottom.

‘Ah, Tess, I’m afraid you’re staying here for the night.’ The words floated about over her head; she blamed the painkillers this time round.

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The city bells woke her at midnight. New Year’s Eve. Well, this was a first. She’d never spent it in hospital before. Looking on the bright side, it turned out, she was not alone for the ringing in of the new, even if her company were all old biddies snoring loudly and unaware that they had made it into the next year, albeit, if from the sounds of some of them, it could be their last.

Tess yanked herself up higher in the bed. She looked out across the Dublin rooftops. It was surreal to see the city so quiet, and as if on cue, a loud bang heralded the start of a twenty minute fireworks' display. She had never watched the festivities before. Usually, Tess made sure she was fast asleep before people could get too nostalgic. Anyway, she was a morning person – liked to get a start at the day.

Now, watching each exploding colour bomb hit the inky sky, she regretted missing them over the years. They really were quite beautiful. Intoxicating.

She heard the thrum of modern loud music and the roars and claps from the city dwellers when the last golden burst faded into the smoky black night. Then, the oddest thing, she started to cry. This was not a raging upset, but more of a slow-releasing sadness at how her life had turned out. She was truly alone – not a friend to call on her over the Christmas holidays. No one missed her for ten whole days. At the various offices around the city, she'd temped in on and off for the last few years, they hadn't even sent a card or enquired how she was when she returned. Her wages just arrived in her bank account. Ten days she'd not turned up. The agency had just replaced her – and nobody had noticed anything different. She was an old woman now. She was only sixty-six, which was nothing these days. Women her age were winning marathons, running countries, and doing all sorts of marvellous things all over the world. She was younger than Meryl Streep for God's sake. Tess knew, though, that those women were not like her. They had young hearts, souls that sang with love and joy. It was many years since Tess had known what it was to be moved by passion for something that filled her soul. These last few weeks, she realised that she was, to all extents, invisible – could it be that she had allowed herself to become sidelined in her own life? That seemed neither possible nor practical, and yet, it had become an overwhelming sense within her. No one noticed if she didn't turn up, apart from the plants that she watered each day, because if she didn't, she believed no one else would. She temped in offices throughout the heart of the business centre in Dublin. Tidied up the mess left behind by the bright young things that couldn't quite manage to get their work completed. She found it mind-numbingly dull, of course, but she had shown up and for too many years to count, it was all she had to push her into each new day.

In this moment, Tess, all alone in the world, knew that it had been too long since she had loved. It was two score and more since she felt the kind of joy that she knew with certainty was still outside that window tonight.

What if it wasn't too late to change things? She considered herself a brave and resilient woman; was she courageous enough to turn things around, if there was time? And how on earth would she go about it? It was time to take a good hard look at her life.

In the near silence of the hospital ward, the only punctuating sounds were easily drowned to quiet when Tess began to sit up and think. This unease, this gulf that had become her whole

existence, wasn't just about taking stock of herself, it was her health, her happiness. Could she honestly move forward if she didn't first resolve the harm done in the past?

God, Tess shuddered. She couldn't go back.

There was Nancy, the sister that she'd treasured. Her parents, long dead now, she never really said goodbye. And then, of course, there was Douglas, the man she had so prized, all those years ago. It was a love that cost too much in the end. Should she have let it steal her life away? That thought jolted her now, or was it the sound of some buzzer, muted and unending far off, letting nurses know that they were needed once again? Tess knew, with the certainty of time and sudden blinding clarity, that was what she'd done. She'd allowed life to slip through her fingers, just a little with each passing year, until the gossamers of time had pulled so finally away that it was almost too late to make anything of what was left.

How could someone who started with so much have ended up with so little in life? Tess had an uncomfortable feeling that learning the truth of this might be the only way to make a life that was worth something more than another decade of loneliness.

Tess knew with certainty, in this moment, surrounded by women who were much older than she was, they would give their false teeth to have another ten years before them. She should have that, and surely, if she had, then she just had to try to make things up?