

# One

## Dublin

The first night of winter and it was wet, very wet, and she knew the rain was pouring in drops down her face, could feel them drip, drip, dripping off the end of her nose. She could feel the tears too, hot and stinging in her eyes. Someone had given her a cigarette, miraculously she'd managed to smoke halfway down, but it was soggy and extinguished now, which was no bad thing. She never smoked, why add to her list of failures at this late stage?

At the far end of the lane, something or someone caught her eye, but she must be mistaken, because who in their right mind would be out on an evening like this? Probably a stray cat, attracted by the heat and aromas that emanated from the fans blowing into the frigid night air.

Her thoughts darted back to the kitchen behind her, Kevin, bloody Kevin. Well, she hadn't seen that coming had she. She was still reeling, angry, upset and, yes, she could admit it to herself, broken-hearted. And Valentina? Kevin was in love with Valentina, he'd told her, so it must be true.

She raised the dead cigarette to her lips once more, hardly noticed that it tasted disgusting. He'd only met her a few months ago, that was when she came to work in the restaurant. The girl, that's all she was, in her mid-twenties at most, but she looked no more than seventeen, had hardly a word of English four months ago. Yet, here Valentina and Kevin had become an item. How did that work? Oh, maybe she knew the answer to that already.

Things had cooled off a long time ago between Carrie and Kevin. She never counted the fact that they didn't have children. No reason, just one of those things, it never happened, she knew that to Kevin it was a relief. They settled onto their path, confident it would lead them to a contented old age. If the road markings she always took for granted were stolen from her, she blocked out her childlessness with the success of the restaurant and a gratitude for the simple things in life. Yet somewhere between moving

in together and working sixteen hours a day to get the restaurant up and running, they had lost each other. Funny, but they spent so much time together that they managed to lose their connection. He'd started sleeping in the spare room when her snoring became too loud. He didn't say it was because she had become overweight and the bottle of wine each evening didn't help either. She was fast to point out her sinuses were playing up and what could she do about it? She'd been a little relieved, to tell the truth. He had a habit of leaving hair oil all over the pillows, so she felt like she was wearing half a pot of Brylcreem most days.

It was still a shock though.

It was less than forty-eight hours ago.

They had walked into her office; bold as brass, the pair of them, holding hands.

'There's something I need to tell you, Carrie.' He'd had the good grace to look embarrassed.

'It is only fair, it is only right.' Valentina was contrite, her dusky Colombian voice, throaty and whispering. Did they want her blessing?

'Nothing has happened, but...' Kevin looked down at his hand, joined tight with Valentina's. Well that was a lie straight off.

'Really, nothing has happened?' Carrie looked deep into his eyes, managed to keep the tears from her own. It wasn't hard, she probably should have been angry or distraught, but somehow, she just felt numb.

'No, I mean...' Kevin looked at Valentina, his slack-jawed face was pleading for help.

Carrie knew him long enough to read him like a book. What a pity she hadn't kept her eyes on the pages, she thought.

'Kevin, please.' She wasn't begging him, but the least he owed her was the truth. 'This place, Kevin, all the years, all the days and nights of work... at least be honest with me.'

'We... I didn't want to hurt you. I couldn't... I mean, I can't help it. We're in love, Carrie, and it's a while since I felt this way.'

'I see.' Funny, but having it confirmed did not make it any better. This place, her office, had suddenly felt like none of it was hers anymore. That was just absurd though. It was hers, every bit of it, the restaurant, the five stars, the whole business from start to finish, she had built it up. Kevin might have been the talent, he might have been the toast of the Dublin foodie scene, but she was the brains behind the operation. Kevin

was the technical force, but everything else in this business was down to her. She'd picked the building, the art on the walls, she'd organised launches and managed to get the press to feature them. She'd chosen the tablecloths and ordered the wines and she did the hiring and firing. She'd hired Valentina because she came with good references. Of course, she was a stunner, everything about her was glossy, as if she had been dipped in polish; inky black hair, a wide vermilion smile and impossibly white teeth. She slunk about the restaurant, weaving her curves through the tables and flirting throatily with everyone she met. The customers loved a bit of glamour about the place. She was smart too, and from the moment she set foot in the restaurant, Carrie had a feeling that one day, Valentina could be capable of running somewhere every bit as good as 'The Sea Pear', but this was the last thing she had expected.

'Is that all you can say, "*I see*",' Kevin looked like a five-year-old, waiting for a scolding after walking muddy shoes across the kitchen floor.

'Well, it's a shock, obviously.' Carrie had managed to look him in the eye, but she would not cry, not before them. They'd left with light steps and the soft click of the door behind them.

It took two days. It was unreal of course, those two days; Kevin had not come home. Carrie assumed he was staying with Valentina – where else? Maybe that incongruity had stoppered her rage, because she knew she had every right to be angry with him – with both of them. Instead, by going on as if things were completely normal, showing up for work and still keeping out of each other's way, it felt as though her fury was in a vacuum. Somehow it seemed irrational to cry and scream and wipe the floor with them as she knew they deserved.

They'd gone through their usual routines, arrived at work at the normal time, Carrie spoke with staff and customers with her usual charm, like nothing had changed. Kevin stayed in the safety of the kitchen, immersed in the nuts and bolts of keeping orders moving through to his own exacting standards. Then today, the dam had somehow washed through and as she'd walked through the kitchen, she saw them. It was all very casual. He was checking sauces, Valentina was handing him seasoning and she placed her hand on his arm, there was just a glance. It was a fleeting look that said so much more than they managed to convey a couple of days earlier when they told her. It was filled with intimacy, charged with chemistry and Carrie could see it was fuelled by alliance. It suddenly struck her, the thing that she managed to ignore for two whole days. It dawned on her, that it was not just that her relationship of over a decade had

died a lingering death until it's final cruel severing, that was not what tipped her emotions over in the end. Rather it was realising that Kevin and Valentina were a couple and she was trapped here with the two of them.

She'd run to the back door, flung herself through it. She'd needed air, suddenly, she was stifled with heat, misery and a dreadful tightening in her gut that she knew was something close to emotional claustrophobia. One of the cleaners had been sheltering, smoking a rolled-up cigarette. It could have been a joint for all Carrie knew. He'd tapped open a bruised-looking tin box and handed one across to her, lit it silently with his back crouched over it against the bitter night and left her to it. The door had banged heavily in his wake, and here she'd stood, for almost twenty minutes while watery sleet pelted from the heavens.

The evening was beginning to darken, the sky menaced layers of gloomy grey that would not push over until they had blown Dublin inside out. Carrie pushed back her fiery curly hair from her face, the sleet against her cheeks like icy cold slaps that she hoped might snap her out of this nightmare. She tried to imagine that far above the clouds, a blue sky with the sun shining waited to impart some light. She couldn't come near to mustering up the image.

Again, at the far end of the lane, something moved in the dusky shadows, she was sure of it now. Suddenly, she became aware that she was standing sodden and alone in a downpour, looking like an out-of-condition wet T-shirt wannabe. She had to make a choice, go back into the busy kitchen, looking like a drowned rabbit and face Kevin and Valentina or stay here with whoever was lurking about down the lane. The shape was tall, dark, and suddenly a little intimidating.

Carrie quickly pulled the restaurant door, but it was stuck. The cleaner must have let the lock slip in his haste to get away from her. To be fair, she'd probably scared the wits out of him, with her tear-filled eyes and spluttering sobs and now the man – it was definitely a man – was moving towards her. He was dressed in black and he certainly didn't look like the type to be hanging about dark alleys, but then, who knew what he was up to? This was a dead-end alleyway; it led nowhere but to the back doors of businesses. Anyone lurking about down here was either up to no good or making plans to get up to no good.

Anxious and panic-stricken, she turned towards the door, pulled at it furiously, but there was no budging it. Fear tore up through her, threatening to overtake her, she fought the urge to scream, where had the bloody key gone? Carrie began to thump

loudly on the door. She wasn't thinking rationally now – she was hardly breathing, never mind thinking. Her logical self was so consumed in just going through the motions these last few days, it meant that she was unusually jittery. It felt as though her natural equilibrium had tilted over, so shadows made her jump, loud noises tripped her up and anything out of the ordinary caused her stomach to turn to a knotty fist. She tried not to picture the stranger advancing at her back in the sleeting rain, with the city a soundless far-off cry.

Carrie filled with fear. Unreasonable as it might be, she just expected the worst on this black night. 'Don't come near me, I'll scream,' she said the words softly, but inside they were already shattering through her brain.

He stopped at the bins, lingered for a moment and she realised, he was looking for something. He turned and, for a moment, their eyes locked, and she could see, he was weary. That realisation didn't exactly foster any sense of civic duty, rather the terror that had filled her up turned to a frantic dread. She banged on the metal door, louder now so it echoed out above the sleet. She closed her eyes, fully expecting the worst. They wouldn't hear her inside. The kitchen was loud and busy and its walls held captive the sound from outside. Kevin was preparing mains for a full house; he wouldn't notice her rattling against the outer door. She laughed, a nervous wretched sound, he didn't notice her when she was standing in front of him these days, not now Valentina was on the scene, it was ludicrous. Madness to think he might come to her rescue now.

It was useless. She turned, accepting her fate. He probably carried a knife; you never knew, after all...

Oh, God, the most terrible thought, all those serial killers, they looked normal, average, even maybe attractive, it was how they lured their victims in. This was the kind of man, tall, handsome, brooding, he could be...

She opened her eyes to see him, just a little distance from her, he was bending down, fiddling on the step near her feet by the pot the staff used for collecting used cigarette ends. He turned abruptly. Something glinted in his hands. She could see the light of it cast up before him, too dull to gleam, but there all the same. She felt weak, but she would not close her eyes again. He stood before her now, taller than her, broader, solemn. In that moment, she thought his face and body were so close, she could smell him. It was a wafting sense of soap, but she felt light-headed and weak with fear and knew she must have imagined it. Then the oddest thing, his eyes, dark and almost shaded in the half-light, creased just a little at the sides. He was smiling at her, holding

something before him and smiling. She pulled her eyes from his and looked down. It was a key. He was holding a key; he must have pulled it from beside the pot.

‘Here,’ his voice was hoarse and heavy, maybe darker than his eyes, but they danced with an emotion she could not name. He handed her the key and stepped back from her, their eyes still locked.

Then, she turned quickly, thrust the key in the lock and pushed the heavy door. Suddenly, she was in the hot kitchen, wafting aromas of beef and fish and pork filling her nostrils. Everyone working busily at their stations. They didn’t notice her, standing there, wet, scared and miserable.

Then she realised, she’d never said thank you. She’d never thanked the man. Perhaps she should offer him something, food or at least a cup of tea? She stood for a moment, dripping on the non-slip tiles that Kevin was so obsessed with keeping dry. She watched him now, he moved about the kitchen with the kind of deftness and speed that only shaved past others, while all the time checking over shoulders and seeing to his own tasks. He was immune to the people around him. He worked the restaurant like an intricate dance routine, chopping, slicing, stirring, spinning, weaving, smelling and tasting. It was so unlike Carrie’s role and she realised that a moment ago her reaction outside the door had been classic Kevin. Kevin expected nothing from people, he begrudged paying a decent wage to his employees and he assumed that most people he met would take rather than give.

Carrie drew her breath in sharply. She would not become like him now, not just because she was broken-hearted or anxious or... Well, whatever she was – she was holding onto the basic human decency that separated the happy from the empty.

She had to say thanks. Without the key, she would still be there, locked out and forced to walk around the front, in through the crowded restaurant looking a mess. She opened the door quickly, the rush of cold air an instant souvenir of what she’d just escaped. She looked up and down the laneway, stepped outside for just a moment and scanned every crevice along the route. It was snowing now, silent and empty, the only sound a whimpering dog that nosed out from beneath the huge wheelie bin opposite.

‘Aw,’ she heard the sound escape from where it had lodged at the back of her throat. Carrie dashed across the alley, grabbed the little dog, pulling him out from his abysmal sheltering spot. He nuzzled her neck; they were as wet and miserable as each other, but he was friendless and vulnerable. When she rested her chin on his head, he was soft and silken-haired despite the dirt.

She stood for a moment looking about her in the hollow darkness. ‘Hello, is there anyone there?’ She called out to see if the man might step forward again to claim this little dog.

There was no sign of anyone in the alley now, only Carrie standing in the shaft of light and wafting steam at the wedged door. She searched the darkened corners with eyes that stung from salty pathetic tears, but deep down, she knew, he was gone.

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It was over a long time before Valentina walked into the restaurant. It was over between him and Carrie, probably for years. The truth was, he needed her and, as Valentina said, that’s no basis for a relationship.

God, she was hot. Valentina was the love of his life, simple as that.

‘It’s just sex, mate.’ His friend Jim said when he told him. Marriage and kids had made Jim philosophical about sex – these days he was more interested in football and property prices, or at least that’s how it sounded to Kevin.

‘It’s not just sex, it’s...’ Kevin couldn’t begin to explain to Jim. Jim above all people, with his safe marriage to Sandra and their two perfect children. ‘It’s the real thing. Valentina is the love of my life, the kind of woman every man wants on his arm.’

‘Yeah, but not the kind we marry,’ Jim muttered into his pint and Kevin knew it was only because most people settled for what they thought they deserved. Well, the worst was over now. He – or rather they – had told Carrie. It wasn’t even as bad as he’d expected, actually, she’d taken it rather well. He’d been steeling himself for weeks, if he was honest. It wasn’t cowardice, so much as picking his moment. In the end, Valentina picked it for them and he knew it was for the best. No more sneaking around – the stress of all that, while no doubt it had added a risky excitement to the sex – he knew, he’d probably have a heart attack if he kept it up for much longer. Kevin just didn’t have that additional layer to him that subterfuge required, although, he was flattered that Valentina assumed he might and that all this was standard for a man about town like himself.

‘Pure and simple, I said it to you years ago. You and Carrie, too young to settle into all that happy families.’ But of course, there was no family, just a partnership that never made it to a marriage. Sometimes, Kevin wondered why they hadn’t married – perhaps Carrie had been waiting for him to ask? Of course, she must have known, after all these

years, Kevin would never get around to asking. If they were to marry, it would be down to Carrie to organise it – and, of course, she never had.

‘It wasn’t just that,’ Kevin said. He wanted to tell Jim that he’d pursued Valentina, had seduced her and set about staking his claim on the future that was assembling before him. Although, the truth was, they’d fallen into their relationship one night when Valentina had teased him into opening a bottle of red after everyone had left and they’d made ravenous love against the stairs in the restaurant. Red wine always made Kevin tipsy; he just didn’t have the constitution for it. Even now, it was like a dream to Kevin. He was seducing this beautiful woman and he wasn’t entirely sure how he’d managed it, but he could no more halt than the world would stop spinning.

‘No, there was no family, but the restaurant that was your baby. It was hers too.’ Jim shook his head, considered his pint of beer. ‘I suppose you’ve thought about what will happen with that?’

‘With the restaurant?’ Kevin had thought about it, but not in any concrete way. First he’d had to tell Carrie, now that bit was over, they could make plans, decide what to do for the best.

‘I can’t see her walking away from it, and to be fair, you’d be mad to let her.’

‘How do you mean?’ Kevin was a little affronted.

‘Mate, I’ve known you both a long time, remember, we go back to first-year catering college together. Without Carrie, you’d be like all those other guys. True, you have talent, but let’s face it, Carrie is the brains behind the operation.’

‘Hold on, Jim. It’s my food people come for.’

‘Yes, and they also go to the Shelbourne for food and to McDonald’s. They go to your restaurant for the experience and that’s everything from the food to the people-watching, to the comfy chairs and even just to have Carrie look after them.’

‘Valentina is very good with the customers.’ Kevin might have been insulted if anyone else had said those things, but with Jim, well, he was probably telling the truth.

‘She may well be, but she’s not Carrie.’

‘God, no, she’s definitely not Carrie.’ Kevin smiled, remembering the way Valentina affected him. She did things slowly, spoke slowly, ate slowly. God, but she took off her clothes slowly. Each and every item hitting the ground, and his pulse began to beat rapidly just thinking about it.

‘Stop it, you’re torturing yourself.’ Jim could read his thoughts almost as well as Carrie could. ‘Actually, when I think about it, a Colombian hottie, you’re bloody



torturing me as well.’ They sat for a while, looking at the giant TV over the bar, neither of them really following the game, both lost in thoughts of their own. ‘You’ll have to sort something with Carrie, mate.’

‘I suppose.’

‘There’s no suppose about it. It’s a right mess. There’s the house, the business and then all the other stuff that’s going to get tangled up in the crossfire.’

‘What other stuff?’ Kevin didn’t want to hear this, probably it was to be expected, but why couldn’t Jim just be happy for him, well, ideally, if he could be a little jealous too – it wasn’t much to ask, was it?

‘Have you forgotten Melissa and Ben’s wedding?’

‘Oh, Christ.’ Kevin had completely forgotten Melissa and Ben’s wedding. It was all planned, and as best friends of the bride and groom, Kevin and Carrie were asked to be maid of honour and best man. ‘That’ll be a bloody nightmare.’

‘Ah well, fun and games,’ Jim said, draining his pint. He nodded to the barman. ‘Must be off, back to the old ball and chain,’ he looked at his watch, ‘getting late for you too, Romeo.’ He slapped Kevin hard on the back. He took up his newspaper and headed into the night winds; leaving Kevin for another half-hour before he was due at the restaurant for the evening rush.

It was a mess. It was a right bloody mess, but he had no choice. He and Carrie were finished. He was in love with Valentina now and there was no going back. Not even for The Sea Pear.

God, The Sea Pear. They’d named the restaurant together. Had they been in love then? He thought they were, but it was nothing like with Valentina. Now, it seemed their restaurant would outlive whatever had drawn them together all those years ago. A favourite celebrity haunt, Carrie had furnished it with a mixture of classic modern cleanliness accented with the occasional antique worn down to just the right degree of easy charm. They had opened up when Dublin was crawling towards some kind of financial stability. While other haunts were closing their doors, The Sea Pear whispered a note of optimism amongst the set who never really felt the economic crash. They managed to get decent premises on Finch Street, close enough to Temple Bar for ambience, but far enough away to distance itself from the madding crowd. Since the city began to turn towards booming times again, the properties around them became packed with professional offices. These days, they were surrounded by financial services, solicitors and advertising companies who closed their doors at five each

evening, even if their employees did not go home until much later. All but the shabby pub across the road had filled with young and wealthy customers only happy to wine and dine in one of the city's top eateries. Yes, The Sea Pear was a great success all right. They'd have to sort it out.

He would tell Carrie tonight that perhaps tomorrow, if it suited, he'd pop round to pick up some clothes. He needed clothes and he needed to clear a few things out of the house. The house was in both their names. He hadn't told Valentina that. He wasn't sure why, but he had a feeling it could cause a row and it was enough to be in the bad books with Carrie for now.

And Jim was right, he hadn't thought about Ben and Melissa either. He'd been in primary school with Ben. There was no way he could miss out on his wedding. They'd gone on holidays together, their first foreign trips as a couple were with Melissa and Ben. Perhaps Carrie wouldn't want to go? That would be great; Kevin was getting a warm feeling thinking about it. Carrie probably wouldn't want to go. They were holding it in one of the most splendid locations. Coole Castle had four hundred years of history and a pastry chef who could whip up desserts that were lighter than clouds, just west of Sligo town. Valentina would love it. Carrie had booked them a room for two nights, yonks ago. Well, there was no way she'd want to go now and no point letting the booking go to waste, right?

Right.

Kevin got up from his stool. Cleared his throat, half coughing to draw attention to the fact that he was leaving, he pulled his jacket from the hook on the wall beside him. The barman at the far end of the counter didn't notice he was finished. Kevin tried to grab his attention. He liked to feel he had the gratitude of the staff for spending time in their establishment. When there was no salute, he stuffed his arms into his jacket and headed out into the icy evening air.

Maybe Carrie would be happy to keep the house and pull out of The Sea Pear. Maybe. She hadn't said a word either way yet, so Kevin knew he might be able to talk her round. He could always talk Carrie round.

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Jane Marchant wasn't sure, as she looked out of her sitting room window, if there was a movement in the street outside or not. It was dark, but the light dusting of sleet

brightened the city and the streetlights – tall mock-Georgian beamers – cast their glow so there were no shadows. It wasn't the lighting that was the problem, Jane was sure of that, nor was it her view, and there was absolutely nothing wrong with her eyesight. No, the problem on nights like these, and most days too if she was honest, lay somewhere altogether deeper.

Once, when she was younger, they'd have blamed her nerves – they were probably right. Things hadn't been the same since that awful night fifteen years ago, when she had lost her soul mate. Jane shivered, she was not cold, but it didn't do any good to think of things that upset her at this hour of the night. She turned from the window, pinching the heavy velveteen curtains in a hard bunch at their centre. She could stand there all night, if she let herself; it was a rabbit's hole lined with insecurity and carpeted with fear. She'd only just managed to get out of it once, and she was not going there again.

On the mantle, the carriage clock struck out midnight. She sighed, over halfway to daylight; it was what she'd always thought. The clock reminded her of Manus. It was a gift from his mother on their wedding day. Jane loved that clock, it was probably the most precious thing Theresa Marchant had had to her name. A family heirloom, really, brought over from France after the Great War, by her brother. It was a measure of the family. The only thing Theresa had had of any great value and she gave it freely to her daughter-in-law. Jane knew she'd been lucky, Manus had taken after his mother and their lives together had been happy and content, until that awful night.

The clock struck its final chime, a soft peal that echoed from so many years before. She wiped her eyes, sentimental old fool, it was all she was, but since there was no one to see, it probably didn't matter very much, she told herself.

Jane made her way down through the bar one last time before she went to bed. She did this every night, walked through the old building in near darkness, checking doors, rattling locks, securing everything as if it might make some difference. Sometimes she stood, listening to the silence and let the many satisfied years roll past her. And they had been content, she and Manus here in The Marchant Inn. It had been a joyful home and a thriving business, once. They'd been happily married and run this bar together. She never imagined he'd leave her so unexpectedly, so violently, fifteen years ago. These days, she lived between two rooms and opened the bar up in the afternoons, and only then for a few hours, to pretend to herself at least that she was still in business. Of course, the smart young people who worked on Finch Street now rarely darkened her

door, but the old regulars turned up to drink bottled beer or tea and share stories of times that would never come again.

There was a time, when she wondered, if they'd had a family, how things might have turned out differently. It made no difference now, one miscarriage and a botched-up job of setting her straight wasn't something they could do much about afterwards. Manus had just been happy she'd survived. When she'd realised the truth of it, Jane sank into such a darkened place she feared she'd never find the path back home again. So now she never thought of how things might have been. She'd learned a long time ago that thinking like that didn't make things better and so she buried that sadness long before Manus had been interred in that too large plot beside his mother. The main thing was not to think too often how much she looked forward to joining them in their peaceful place.

The cold floor beneath her feet made her shiver; drawing her from those gloomy thoughts once more. At her neck, she wore a pendant. They'd given it to her a few years earlier, a lovely woman who called on people like herself, old people, vulnerable people, who were mostly forgotten about in this speeding city. The pendant had an alarm button attached to it and although she'd only used it once – and then by accident – it gave her a kind of refuge, as if she carried some bit of courage about her neck.

Jane stood at the door for a moment; across the road, that fancy restaurant was just closing up for the night. The lights dimming and then extinguished, there was the sound of an alarm, cutting across the silence of the empty street and then that pretty waitress standing on the path outside. The girl, foreign, by the looks of her, wore an impatience about her like a shawl, as though she couldn't get away quickly enough. Jane had seen her hanging about on her smoking break and she sucked ferociously on her cigarettes with the same irritation. Next, him, the owner – he was a right sour piece, not like his partner. No, Jane never liked the look of him at all, and from the carry-on she'd seen with that foreign girl, her instincts had been right from the start. Jane wondered if she should mention something next time Carrie called across for a cup of tea. *Knowing what to do for the best*; that was the problem. Her mother-in-law would have advised, the least said, the soonest mended.

Carrie dropped in to see Jane every so often, not enough to interfere, but she'd taped her mobile number to the wall beside the phone, just in case. Not like that man of hers, he'd never so much as set foot across the threshold of the bar. Now, there was a man who'd landed on his feet, even if he'd never know it. Jane watched as he fiddled with

the lock, balancing under his arm a bag that surely held the day's takings. He grumbled and then gave the door a push, checking to see all was locked up safely. There was something strangely final about seeing just the two of them walk home for the evening. It was unusual that Carrie was not there, but then, everyone deserved a night off.

She sighed and turned from the door back into the empty bar, its memorabilia a persistent reminder of happier times that seemed to fade a little more gently away from her with each passing moment. Photographs of Manus lined the walls all about her, but it was funny, these days, they made her feel as if he was further away from her than ever.

'Goodnight, my sweet,' she said as she climbed the narrow stairs that led up to the flat above. It had been her home for over fifty years. She knew every inch of this old place, the creaking floorboards, the rattling panes of glass and the verbose piping that rattled in the otherwise silent night. Perhaps her mind was full of memories or maybe just a lingering uneasiness about that foreign girl across the road, but Jane managed somehow to stumble on that final, slightly higher stair. She heard the soft thud, thud of her body, light and fragile, hitting off each carpeted step. It was with a sickening crunch that she reached the cold floor and it seemed as though she'd been tumbling for an age.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, but when she woke, her body shivered, cold and sore, there was no picking herself up. She was old enough, and maybe just about wise enough, to know she didn't have the strength. Instead, she fidgeted about until she found the alarm pendant that had lodged beneath her. Freeing it with an almighty tug, she pressed her thumb down hard, praying that tonight someone would come to her rescue.

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Luke Gibson wasn't sure what brought his father to this place. True enough, they'd gravitated back to Dublin often over the years, but it wasn't as if they had family here or any kind of stake in the city. Truthfully, he should probably just buy a sensible little house somewhere quiet, settle there and count his blessings. He could understand his father's wanderlust was beginning to abate. But Ballyglen? A nursing home? Really, it was like giving up and Conn Gibson had never been a man to give up.

It was almost two o'clock in the morning and Luke couldn't sleep. He pulled on his jeans, shook himself into the big wax jacket that hung on his bedroom door. He slunk

out of the bed and breakfast; it was hard to resist walking on newly fallen snow and the little dog still played on his mind. He was like Luke, no different, drifting, maybe searching. He turned the corner and came back to the street where he'd seen him last. Certain he'd disappeared down a lane, Luke had followed him, but he'd only ended up half scaring some poor woman to death. He smiled now as he remembered the surprised look on her face when he handed her the key that was glinting so close to her feet. Still, there was no sign of the little dog and in weather like this... well, he didn't like to think of the small chap out and about in the snow.

Outside the old pub, an ambulance throbbed blue light about the buildings and the melting slush. Luke stood in that uncomfortable place between watcher and voyeur. In the end, he walked past, just catching sight of an old woman being wheeled helplessly from her home. Her eyes were dark and penetrated him with the kind of fear that held him up. He considered walking over, to see if there was anything he could do for the old dear, but of course, what did he know of her or she of him? They were strangers, nameless and unconnected in a city of anonymity. Instead, he stood for a moment, did something he hadn't done in years – he offered up a prayer that he might see her again, well and soon.

The sound of the paramedics, securing their patient and getting ready to set off for the nearest emergency ward made Luke shiver. Finally, the younger, burlier of the two, locked up the pub, standing back for a moment, perhaps checking that all the lights inside were switched off. He rattled the door with an irrevocability that made Luke wonder if they thought she might not be coming back. Strangely, that notion filled him with unreasonable loneliness that made him pull his collar closer and decide that tomorrow he was going to drop into that pub and enquire how the old lady was.

## Two

Carrie tucked the little dog beneath her jacket and left the restaurant early. Kevin would surely manage without her for one night. After all, he had Valentina now. Either way, Andrew was happy to hold the fort for her once he saw the state of her when she called him up to tell him she was going home. Andrew was more than any employee could ever be, they had become friends, in spite of Kevin's barely masked homophobia.

Carrie was cold and miserable and empty. Her bones felt as if the sleet of earlier had cut deep wedges in them and she would never feel warm again. Normally she had a glass or two of wine when she finished up for the day. Usually, she was wrecked, the restaurant business was gruelling, torture on the feet and by the end of a twelve-hour shift her brain was either too hyped up to rest or too tired to sleep. Tonight, she felt she could do with something warmer. She looked at the shelf filled with bottles of wine and various spirits and reached for a bottle of brandy. This would warm her up.

Taking the first sip, she caught her reflection in the kitchen window. Did she really want to be one of those women who came home gasping for a drink each evening? If she was going to live alone, what would she turn into if she sat down with a bottle of wine every night? There could be no pretence now that she was sharing it with Kevin. Truthfully, he hardly touched the stuff anyway. She turned the glass into the sink, watched as the bronze contents flowed down the drain. The bottle of wine every other night had contributed to her expanded waistband and to her chronic sinus infection, she could admit that to herself at least. Perhaps without it, she might not have been such a fulsome snorer.

She washed out the glass, left it on the draining board, placed the bottle back on the shelf – she was better than that. She was going to be better than that, she decided, and turned towards the little dog at her feet. He was a tricoloured smooth-haired crossbreed. Carrie couldn't decide what his parents were, but she'd hazard a guess that there was a mix of terrier, spaniel and basset hound somewhere in his lineage.

'Teddy?' she had checked his collar earlier and now he looked at her with a keen interest as though he couldn't quite figure out how she might know his name. What had she been thinking bringing home a stray mutt? But she couldn't leave him out in that weather. He could freeze to death by the morning if he didn't find shelter. 'Just one

night,' she told him softly as she rubbed his filthy ears. Food and heat were what he needed most and he seemed glad to take her conversation with him as a bonus.

She opened the fridge. Considering the meals she served up to customers each evening, her own stock was meagre. There were a few portions of lasagne in the freezer and she figured that they may as well go to her unexpected canine guest.

He lapped up the lasagne and seemed satisfied to let her wash the dirt from him in the bath filled with warm sudsy water. Then he settled contentedly on a fluffy bath sheet under the radiator.

'Well, it's just you and me tonight, Teddy,' she whispered, when he nuzzled into her later. It was funny, but she'd used generous fistfuls of Kevin's expensive shampoo and conditioner on him, and yet, to her mind, the fragrance sat much easier on this little fellow. She'd worry about finding his owner tomorrow, she promised herself. There weren't any contact details on his collar, just a name, and Carrie wondered if perhaps he belonged to the man in the alley earlier.

Later, after she settled the little dog for the night, she dropped her clothes to the floor, while she selected the fluffiest pjs and thermal socks she could find. For a moment she lingered before the rails and shelves filled with Kevin's clothes. A lesser woman might take a scissors to them, she told herself, but the truth was, she was too tired to think of revenge. Suddenly even picking up the clothes she wore earlier seemed like it might be too much. So, she left them where they landed, knew that if she wasn't suffering from a broken heart, they would be put away as she always did. Instead, she folded herself into the king-size bed they'd bought together. Would he want to take this with him? For Valentina? They hadn't thought of any of those things. She'd bet it hadn't even entered Kevin's head. They spent years gathering up the things that people work for. A home, a successful business, they had been the inevitable milestones along the way; tying them together, as firmly as any ring, or so she believed. Kevin's clothes in the wardrobe, she had bought almost every item, apart from a few errant scarves, gifts from his sister, his mother, her mother.

God. She couldn't face telling them yet. At least, she wouldn't have to tell Kevin's mother. Maureen Mulvey would be Kevin's worry now and that at least made her smile as she lay in bed. For tonight, she'd just close her eyes.

A slight whimper and the sound of a tail thumping on the carpet outside her door made her smile. Teddy.



‘Okay, you,’ she said opening the door softly, ‘you can sleep on the floor, but one sound and you’re back in the kitchen,’ she ran her hand across his curled-up body. He settled himself just outside her bed on the deep shag rug that Kevin always hated. Soon, he was sleeping gently, his breath an easy accompaniment to her own, so Carrie realised she was drifting towards sleep with the hint of a contented smile on her lips. She reached out, turned off the alarm so she could sleep right through. The next day was Sunday and that’s what normal people did, wasn’t it? They slept late on Sundays.

Carrie woke at five, perhaps it was the niggling worry that Teddy might need to relieve himself. She herded him downstairs and out for a quick round of the garden, although he was not keen. He moved slowly and grumbled like an old man at the disruption of his beauty sleep. Would Kevin be sleeping late with Valentina? He must be staying with her now. Kevin couldn’t go out and buy himself a pair of socks without Carrie. He would need someone to slip into that role. Carrie couldn’t imagine Valentina hitting the men’s underwear section any time soon. It struck her that Kevin hadn’t really thought about this at all. He couldn’t survive without Carrie; he needed her. The problem was, she suddenly realised with the clarity of that sheeting snow against her window, he didn’t want her anymore. He just didn’t want her.

There was light outside when she woke next, that sort of sterilised whiteness that always comes with snow and made her feel as if, in some way, her life had been untainted and made purer. The notion was in itself an odd if satisfying surprise. It was a dull insipid bright, but still much better than the heavy leaden look of the day before. On the other hand, she knew, with her sleep-filled eyes, it may just be very late. It was after eleven in the morning, as late as she could remember getting up for years. Normally, on a Sunday morning, she got up early and headed for mass with Kevin’s mother. She’d completely forgotten that today. She did the journey more for Kevin than for his mother. Maureen Mulvey had a way of getting them all to jump to her command. Carrie didn’t even like mass. She wasn’t sure she believed in any God anymore; maybe less today than any other Sunday. She hadn’t thought about it before, but she picked up Maureen every Sunday morning, while Kevin slept late. She drove her the short distance from Maureen’s semi and parked where she was told and then trudged to the same seat each week. At least, Maureen had stopped giving her digs about ‘living in sin’ with Kevin. Maureen had all the benefits of a daughter-in-law, without having to part with her son.

Carrie lay in her bed looking up at the ceiling. It needed a good painting; a crack ran right down the middle, as though it separated the two sides of the bed beneath it. This house was ninety years old. The crack in the plaster over her head was nothing to worry about; perhaps it had been trying to tell her something all along.

Reaching out for her phone, there were five missed calls, four of them from Maureen, the fifth Carrie didn't recognise, so she let it slip. She wondered idly, if perhaps some poor neighbour was roped in to take Maureen in the end. She presumed Kevin had not contacted his mother nor had he brought her to mass. She wasn't surprised, he would put off telling his mother. He would put off telling everyone. Kevin hated any kind of conflict. He'd miss that too; Carrie had removed as many of those stressful situations from him as she could. Not this time. She pulled her phone closer to her and flew off a text to Kevin.

Better explain to your mother why she has no lift to mass anymore –  
unless Valentina will oblige.

She'd hesitated about putting an x on the end. Kevin would know she was only being bitchy, she wasn't a kiss-kiss sort of woman. She was good old Carrie, get things done, keep things moving along. On the drive, outside her door, she had a BMW. It was a compromise. She'd have preferred a Volkswagen, they were meant to be so reliable, but Kevin insisted that they needed to look the part of successful business people. With the sort of customers they had coming in, having a twelve-year-old crock outside the door just wasn't going to cut it. There it was, in a nutshell, the difference between them. Valentina would probably give her false eyelashes for a Beamer. Carrie assumed Valentina's eyelashes were false, after all no one gets the eyes, the legs, the teeth, the boobs and the lashes – not unless they're a Victoria's Secret model.

So what would she do with her day? Now that she didn't have to sort out Kevin's mother, Sunday seemed to stretch ahead like a jail term. She couldn't think like that, she knew she couldn't afford to. She had two choices, either she could sit here, stare at Teddy and hope Kevin came to his senses, wait and die a lonely spinster or... Well, she wasn't sure there was an alternative, but she wasn't going to be sitting here waiting for Kevin bloody Mulvey to come round.

Teddy slept soundly until Carrie threw the quilt back on the bed. It was as if he'd marked time with her, loyally waiting by her bed. She opened the back door and he

scooted out immediately, prancing over the icy whiteness as he nosed about the potted plants she'd dotted around the little patio. Carrie enjoyed watching him, diverted for a short while from a slowly gripping desperation, as the life she thought was hers slipped from her.

After a quick bite, Carrie cleared away her breakfast and she set the kitchen to rights. 'Well then, Teddy, what are we going to do about you today?' she asked him and he tilted his head as though she might have the answer already. The poor little thing, she really would have to figure out what to do with him.

Apart from the refuges and the pound, she wasn't sure where else she could check on a Sunday and once she'd made a couple of calls to clear her conscience, she was glad to be headed towards the nearest pet shop to pick up food and a decent lead and chew bones for him. She enjoyed that, spoiling him. It was a little like shopping for Kevin, but she felt it was much more deeply appreciated, then she drove into town and headed for The Sea Pear. She wasn't sure why; she knew it would be empty now. Perhaps she could see how last night had gone from the state of the place and from the till receipts.

She pulled up on the empty street at the front. Normally, on weekdays, you couldn't move on Finch Street, but Sundays saw the place deserted and she'd often come here, just to update her blog and have a quiet cup of coffee on a Sunday afternoon, after dropping off Maureen.

She wasn't in the mood for opening the blog today. Not, she realised that anyone would notice. It was just a hobby, somewhere to share recipes and tips and chat with her friends from college who were spread across the world now. Her only true follower was her friend Anna who had no interest in cooking or kitchen hygiene. Anna was her best friend; they'd stuck together since primary school. They were, as her mother liked to say, 'chalk and cheese'. Anna was arty, flighty and insuppressibly flirty. She was an ice cool blonde with a precarious acting career and an even more precarious approach to her domestic life. She lived like a student and blew between jobs and men like other women did nail varnish shades. She liked the idea of supporting Carrie in her one occupation outside of 'Operation Kevin', as she termed the rest of Carrie's life.

Carrie walked through the restaurant with Teddy at her heel, picking up cutlery and checking that it shined. In the kitchen, she switched on the kettle for a cup of instant coffee. Carrie never bothered with the machine. It was far too much effort for the same results, as far as she was concerned. The kitchen was clean; it looked and smelled as if

Kevin had gone through his usual night-time routine. He was obsessive about clean-up. Probably, he'd have a fit if he knew she had brought a dog in here.

The back door caught her eye, for a moment. She thought about coming through it the evening before, standing there, no one had noticed her. She had walked through the kitchen, the dog in her arms, up the back stairs to her office, before picking up her coat and tidying herself up as much as she could then dashed to her car without so much as one person lifting a head to greet her. Only Andrew, whom she had summoned, had regarded Teddy with interest.

Now, she walked to the door, thinking about the man who had given her the key. It felt like a dream today. He seemed unreal, as if she imagined those dark eyes in the rain. She pulled across the latch and threw back the door, the smell of last night's refuse pinching her senses. What on earth had he been doing in the alley at the back of the restaurant? Perhaps he lived locally. Although Carrie was fairly sure she knew most of the people who lived around here. There was a guest house, just around the back of the block; maybe he was staying there?

She turned to go back in, she would have a coffee and then decide what to do with the dog and the long day stretching out ahead. Then, at the top of the road, she saw him. She was sure, it was him. Standing, undecided as to whether he should come towards her or not. She waved at him, a small movement of her hand; caught her breath while she waited. Then, there it was. He waved, as self-consciously as she had, back at her and then he moved off. Carrie popped back into the kitchen, propelled by she was not sure what. She ran to the front of the restaurant, the dog at her heels. He was almost three doors down by the time she got out onto the street.

'Hello,' she called after him and her voice sounded strange and disconnected on the empty street. 'Hello,' she shouted again, but still he kept on walking away from her. She left the restaurant behind her, the keys held firmly in her hand, the little dog enjoying the excitement of running about her. Then, she was beside him and suddenly, she realised she didn't know what she wanted to say. 'Hello,' she said a little breathlessly, she was never an athlete, even before the toll of her daily bottle of wine had led her into the darker end of the doctor's BMI chart.

'Hello,' he said automatically, looking at her as though she'd just lost the run of herself, but much too polite not to greet her. Then he smiled, when they both realised the awkwardness of the situation.

‘I wanted to thank you, for yesterday. I never said... and then, when I went to look for you, well, you were gone and I thought...’ He was looking at her blankly and she realised perhaps he didn’t recognise her. ‘Thank you.’ She held out a hand to shake with him.

‘You’re welcome. I’m sorry if I scared you,’ he said and looked down at the dog at her feet. ‘Well hello, you.’ He bent down and patted his head. ‘I was looking for him, last night when you...’ He stood then, smiled at Carrie.

‘Ah, that answers a lot of questions,’ she said then. ‘He’s yours so?’

‘Not exactly...’ The man smiled, ‘I thought he was a stray...’ He looked up and down the street, his eyes drifting across the pub opposite. ‘I was going to pop into the pub over there for coffee, but it seems to be closed.’

‘Oh dear, the Marchant Inn only opens when Jane feels like it and even then, you can’t be sure of opening hours. But, funny you should mention coffee...’ Carrie found herself smiling at the man now. ‘I’m Carrie by the way,’ she said. ‘I – or rather we, myself and my... partner, we own The Sea Pear.’ She nodded back towards the restaurant.

‘Nice to meet you,’ they shook hands again and Carrie couldn’t remember if they’d already been introduced, because there was something so familiar about him. ‘I’m Luke Gibson.’

‘Come on, come with me,’ she said and then she was leading him back towards The Sea Pear before she had time to think about it. ‘The least I can do is make you a coffee to say thanks.’ She brought him through the restaurant, into the kitchen, the little dog yapping happily beside them. ‘So, you and Teddy?’ she nodded towards Teddy when she had made two coffees for them.

‘Yes, I’ve just been kind of looking out for him,’ and he smiled again. ‘I’ve noticed him around the streets these last few days. So, I’ve been making sure he had something to eat, you know...’

‘Well, that’s strange, because I’d surely have noticed him before if he was hanging about.’

‘He looks like he could belong to someone elderly, but then sometimes...’ He shook his head. ‘The old lady over in the pub, he wouldn’t be hers, would he?’

‘Mrs Marchant?’ Carrie’s eyes drifted towards the little dog who sat now watching them both with interest, as if he might at any point contribute to their conversation. ‘No, she’s all on her own over there. Mind you, if she was a dog a person, he’d be lovely

company.’ There was a thought; she’d never considered suggesting a dog to take the loneliness for Jane out of The Marchant Inn. ‘I might pop across later and see if she’d like to take him in for now.’

‘You haven’t heard?’ he said, sipping his coffee.

‘Heard?’ Carrie began to laugh, but it was a nervous sound, there was no mistaking the tone of his voice.

He sighed. ‘She was taken away in an ambulance late last night, it looked serious. It was why I intended to pop over there for coffee today, just to see if she was all right.’

‘Oh, no, my phone, there was a missed call...’ She rummaged in her bag, fished the phone out from what seemed like the very depths. ‘Thank goodness I didn’t delete the number.’ She dialled it and waited as it hummed and beeped until various admin staff could put her through to a ward nurse. ‘I’m her next of kin,’ it was a white lie, but she made a face at Luke to share the guilt of it.

‘Your aunt?’ the nurse said on the other end of the line and Carrie had an unfortunate feeling that the woman was wrinkling her nose, judging her for not being by Jane Marchant’s side when she was needed most.

‘Yes, that’s right.’

‘Well, she’s here on the main ward. She’s been badly bruised and knocked about. At her age, falling is never good and falling down stairs, well, it can be...’ her words tapered off. ‘But, she’s been lucky, no broken bones, although, as you can imagine, she’s very shaken – upset and extremely nervous in herself.’ The nurse lowered her voice then, as if she was about to share some vital confidence, ‘To tell you the truth, she could do with people around her – that would probably mend her quicker than any medication we can give her here.’

‘Right, thanks for that,’ Carrie said and she ended the call. She looked across at the man opposite her. ‘She’s in St Teresa’s, just a few streets away. I’ll have to go there now.’ Then she looked down at the little dog. ‘What to do with you? That’s the question.’

‘Oh, no. I can see where this is going.’ Luke smiled. ‘I can’t have a dog, not all the time. I travel too much and anyway...’

‘Anyway?’

‘Well, I’m not a dog person, not really.’

Carrie didn't believe him. She figured he was as much a dog person as she was. She'd never been able to keep a dog in the same house as Kevin. He was allergic to everything and dog or cat hairs would have brought him out in a rash.

'Well, anyway, I don't know how long I'm going to be in Dublin for, I'm really just passing through. I'm staying in the little bed and breakfast, just around the corner – they're not going to let me keep a dog there.'

'Ah, well, that's a shame,' Carrie said and when she met his eyes, she realised that the words could mean any number of things. 'About having a dog, I mean.' Then she looked at the dog, 'It really is a shame, because, I can't possibly keep him either.' She shook her head, but of course, she wasn't going to just throw the poor little thing out.

'I'm sure you can't. Perhaps it will only be for a night or two. No doubt his owner will come forward soon enough, there's a good chance that they're worried sick about him already.' He held her eye for a moment too long. The grandfather clock that stood in the restaurant chimed loud through the open door.

Carrie checked her watch and sighed. The old clock was still, after all her tinkering, running almost eight minutes fast.

Luke got up from the table, moved his cup towards the sink.

'Oh, you don't have to do that,' she said needlessly.

'Here,' he said, digging deep into the wax jacket. 'Just hold onto Teddy for a day or two,' he pulled out a card. 'Here's my number, if you give him a bed for a few nights, I'm sure we'll have him back with his family before you know it.'

Carrie didn't remember agreeing to take the dog in, but she followed Luke to the door of the restaurant and let him out into the street. She watched him walk towards the corner, checking his watch and pulling out his phone. Carrie smiled, perhaps just a little thankful to have an excuse to hold onto Teddy for a short while. It was funny but, somehow, this little dog made her world feel better than it had in a long time.

\*

Jane knew it was slightly irrational to look about at all the other old ladies on the ward and feel that she didn't belong among them. They probably all felt the very same, or at least the ones who still had their wits about them. The nurses were lovely, if harried, but they were still kind.

‘Your niece called, I’m sure she’ll be here soon, Janet,’ one of the younger ones promised her softly, as though she was placating a child. Jane didn’t have the stamina to correct either her name or the fact that she didn’t have a niece – she didn’t have a soul in the world to call her own, not for the last fifteen years.

‘That’s nice,’ Jane managed to nod, she might have embellished the notion and made a true lie of it, but she had a sense that the nurse wouldn’t remember or notice if she had a visitor or not.

‘Better off here,’ said the old lady in the bed next to her. She had a locker overflowing with grapes that threatened to choke her and enough fizzy drinks to put her in danger of full-blown diabetes if she ever got to the end of them. At her back, there was a line of get-well cards, all of them pronouncing her role as granny, mother or friend. Jane felt bereft by comparison. ‘Who wants to be out there with the snow building up at your front door? That’s what I say, here we are, sure you wouldn’t get this service in the Ritz!’

Jane was just patting down her hair when a familiar face appeared at the foot of her bed. ‘Oh, hello,’ she said rather awkwardly and she could see from the expression on Carrie’s face that she felt every bit as uneasy being here.

‘How are you?’ the look of concern in Carrie’s eyes was unmistakable and it managed to create a wave of something warm and unexpected within Jane.

‘That your niece?’ asked the matriarch in the next bed.

‘That’s right,’ Carrie said, smiling across at the other woman before she took a seat and sat close to Jane. Then she lowered her voice and explained that she’d never have known Jane was here if it wasn’t for some random man in the street.

‘I saw him,’ Jane said softly. ‘Last night, he was standing at the restaurant and there was something about him...’

‘It seems you made quite the impression on him too,’ Carrie laughed. ‘He was going to drop into the pub today to find out how you were,’ she said. ‘It was an eventful night for all of us,’ Carrie told her about meeting Luke and bringing home Teddy. ‘So, for now at least, I have a house guest, but if you’re interested in some company...’ Carrie smiled kindly and Jane thought there was a new warmth to her when she talked about the little dog. Now, she wondered if Carrie ever knew what it meant to have a partner who really cared about you. She shook the thought away, of course, she did, after all, didn’t she have Kevin.



‘That’s nice.’ Jane murmured, but her eyes began to fill with tears. ‘I’m sorry, it’s just... probably shock – you know, last night it was all a bit...’

‘It’s okay. You’re going to be fine; everything is going to be all right.’ Carrie moved closer and took her hand. The action seemed so natural that Jane hardly thought about it, but it was nice. Strange to think the last hand she’d held had been Manus’s, his grasp had always been firm and gentle all at once. Whereas, Carrie’s was filled with a concerned warmth – it was comforting, in some unfamiliar way.

‘I just...’ How could she say that she didn’t give a damn for the bruises or the scratches, all those pains were nothing compared to the ache of loneliness that filled her every moment and had become like a searing pain that forged through her now. Then she looked at Carrie, a young woman with life ahead of her, she was successful and happy and capable of doing anything she wanted in the world. ‘I suppose, it’s the thought of going back there,’ she whispered when the tears had run out. ‘I lay there, thinking that perhaps no one would come.’ Then, her biggest sadness, on a shuddering empty breath, ‘That there was nobody *to* come.’

‘Hush, now, don’t upset yourself.’ Carrie wrapped her arms around her. She held her like that for an age and Jane didn’t hear the nice nurse come along and pull the curtains about her cubicle or the gentle snores of the woman in the bed next to her. ‘You’re not on your own, not really, not any more than the rest of us.’

\*

Staying with Valentina wasn’t the same as being at home. Sure, the sex was great, but her flat was small and then there was the question of the other people who came and went at all hours of the day and night.

Kevin was no longer twenty, even if his girlfriend was – living like a student no longer suited him. Not that it ever had. Back in the day, he chose to stay at home with his mother. Why move into some grotty, germ-infested set, when you could stay in your own bed, with your favourite dinners on the table every night and your chef’s uniform washed and starched to perfection. It just didn’t make sense to move out.

‘Emm, have you thought of moving?’ He was trying to be tactful.

‘Why would I move, I can afford these place? Eetees the best I can get in Dublin.’ She looked perplexed, as though he was suggesting she might downsize.

‘Well, that was when you came first, but now, well, you’re settled now, not just a student anymore. You have your little job at the restaurant and...’

‘Yeees, and I have a very wealthy boyfriend who might pay my rent, non?’ She raised an eyebrow.

‘Well, we’ll see, I mean, it’s early days, isn’t it?’

‘Eef you are staying here, they will expect you to pay too,’ she said as she brushed out her long dark hair. God, but even when she brushed her hair, she managed to make it look as though it was some sort of erotic foreplay.

‘Right, well, I don’t mind paying my way. I’ll throw fifty in for the electric, will I?’ He pulled a note from his wallet. ‘And here,’ he handed her another fifty, ‘maybe we should treat ourselves to new sheets, so long as we’re here, yeah?’

She looked at him blankly, and for a moment, he thought she may not ever have gone out to buy sheets before. Who knew what they slept on back in the old country.

‘Well, I must be off,’ he kissed the top of her head, lingered for a moment; she really was the best-looking girl he’d ever laid eyes on, never mind actually dated. ‘You take your time coming in tonight. I appreciate all the extra responsibility you took on last night, and I’m sure Carrie will be back to herself this evening.’ Actually, he wasn’t sure. He didn’t want to think how she was feeling, this was a bolt from the blue. But, Carrie was a trooper, she was the strong one, he’d always said it.

‘No problem. I enjoyed eet. You know I love the restaurant as much as you do.’

‘Well, last night you proved that you’re good at it anyway,’ Kevin had enjoyed watching her from the safety of the kitchen.

Simo and Reda were having what Kevin presumed was breakfast on the dirty leather couch as he left the flat. He didn’t ask them what they were eating, but it smelled of yesterday’s fish heavily spiced with cayenne, turmeric and garlic.

‘Good morning, lads,’ he said cheerfully, attempting to cover his fear. Valentina had told him they were her cousins. Kevin thought they looked like a different species, never mind actually being related. Still he had a feeling that they were watching him. One wrong move and he’d be put in his place.

‘You call this good?’ Simo said, jabbing his thumb towards the window. ‘They are saying on the news that this month there will be one snowstorm after another.’

‘Your country stopped for the beast from the east last winter; already it looks worse this year.’ Reda spit his words in Kevin’s direction.

‘It’s when July blows in and there’s been no let-up, that’s when we Irish start complaining.’ Kevin said, keeping his smile fastened tight.

‘That is why you let everyone and anyone in to your country, no? You are hoping we will all leave Colombia and you will emigrate there for the good weather.’ He guffawed, and Kevin spotted a long tattoo than ran down his neck, it seemed to slither right across his chest.

Kevin shivered; he was not used to men like Simo and Reda. They came to Ireland to find work, any work. They ended up delivering free newspapers and advertising door to door. They were the kind of men who knew how to take care of themselves; their dark skin bulged with muscles Kevin would never possess. Their eyes moved quickly, their bodies cut lithe sharp movements and when they spoke to each other, they hardly halted for breath. Their English was impressive too. They’d hardly a word between them a few weeks ago and now they said things and Kevin thought he could hear the Liffey in their voices.

‘You ever theenk about getting security at your place, Keveen?’ Reda asked slowly, concentrating on each word.

‘We have security, when we need it,’ Kevin said automatically. ‘Why?’ It just occurred to him, were they going into the business of racketeering?

‘It ees just, we were thinking of starting our own business, something small, something we know more about than...’

‘Oh, I see,’ Kevin said, although he wasn’t sure he did. ‘Well, good for you,’ he said and grabbed his coat. He didn’t want to hear about their business plans. He didn’t want to be part of them and he certainly didn’t want to be backing them financially. ‘Well, must be off,’ he said and his voice sounded a pitch too high for the cheerfulness he was aiming at.

‘Maybe we tell you about it the next time you call...’

‘Of course, of course,’ Kevin said and he fled, carrying his jacket over his arm, even though there was a blizzard blowing through the narrow Dublin backstreets. He had parked his car four streets away, now he cursed under his breath, but better get soaked than have it vandalised or stolen in this dodgy area. Still, Kevin hated this weather, he gripped the railings as he passed by streets, always felt like a ninny, but he hated the notion of the wind catching him off guard. He sighed with relief when eventually he sat into his expensive car.

He wasn't due at the restaurant for another hour or two and he had no intention of showing up there until he had to. The last thing he wanted was to run into Carrie. He hated fights, hated any sort of confrontation. Carrie didn't like them either, he was sure of that. She went out of her way to avoid any fuss. Maybe that was the problem; they were in some ways too alike. There was no passion between them anymore. They made great business partners, no doubting that, The Sea Pear was making them a lot of money. And they could continue to work together, why not? Lots of couples did, surely. He could think of lots of couples like...

He leaned his head against the window of his car while he waited for the lights to change at the end of a very long, slow-moving snake of traffic. God, but sometimes Dublin was the pits.

Sonny and Cher? There was a couple he could give as an example. She even went to his funeral, didn't she? Ike and Tina – he was getting good at this.

He just had to figure out what they needed to do next in the divvying out of their lives together. There was so much to sort out. So much, that he hadn't even thought of before they broke the news to Carrie. He knew now, maybe he knew it then, but it was all very fast. True, he was in love with Valentina, but maybe he should have thought through how he wanted things to fall, once they declared their love publicly. He hadn't even told his mother yet. God, he was dreading that, even more than sorting out everything with Carrie.

He took the coward's route and turned his Mercedes towards Dundrum. His sister Penny worked in one of the smarter men's shops in the shopping centre there.

'Penny,' for once she answered her mobile on the first ring, 'I need a favour,' he shouted into the phone, flicking his indicator to take him out of the city centre.

'I bet you do,' Penny said. She sounded like she did when he was fourteen and she caught him leaving school early so he wouldn't have to face up to Bullet Delaney, his biggest tormenter in the school. 'Mum knows.'

'What? What does Mum know?' He could feel his blood pressure drop down through the accelerator.

'She knows something is up. Carrie never collected her for mass and she's been ringing her ever since, and not so much as a dickey bird. That's not like Carrie.'

'I can't believe she didn't collect her.' He'd seen Carrie's text, but there hadn't been a word from his mother, so he convinced himself that maybe Carrie had collected her anyway, this one last time, and the text was an attempt at niggling him.

‘So, she’s not down with the bubonic?’ Penny’s voice was calm, no kids in the vicinity. She must be on a break at the shop.

‘Emm, no. She’s not sick, exactly,’ he couldn’t believe that Carrie had let his mother down. Just like that. It was as though she meant nothing to her, and after all these years, really.

‘Well, is she or isn’t she?’

‘What?’

‘Sick, oh, for God’s sake, Kevin, keep up. How’s Carrie?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘How can you not be sure; don’t you live with the woman?’

‘Well, not exactly, not anymore.’ The words brought a certain reality into the car, one that he wasn’t entirely sure he wanted to face. The world, suddenly, seemed a little scary without Carrie bringing his mother to mass. What else would she renege on?

‘Oh, Kevin, she threw you out?’ Penny paused to let this sink in. ‘What did you do?’

‘How do you mean, what did *I* do?’

‘Well, for her to throw you out of your own house?’

‘I didn’t *do* anything,’ he knew he sounded indignant, but really the very thoughts of anyone throwing Kevin Mulvey out of anywhere –it was preposterous.

‘Well, the rotten old cow. I always said she was a hard piece. Listen to me now, Kevin, you have to go back there. You don’t want her taking the house out from under you. I know you bought when the prices were low, but it’s worth an absolute fortune now. You won’t pick up anywhere for even double what you paid for that place.’

That was true. ‘Penny, I can’t talk about this now. There’s too much to sort out. I need to get clothes; can you help me?’

‘Clothes?’

‘Yes, are you turning into a bloody echo? I need socks and underwear, a couple of tops and jeans. Can you choose some clothes for me and I’ll pick them up in half an hour?’

‘Of course, but, Kevin...’ Penny stopped talking. She was on commission. As far as Penny was concerned, you couldn’t have too many clothes. She’d kit him out and he’d look well. The prices would be top dollar, but at this stage, Kevin felt like he’d pay anything just to get everything sorted. He couldn’t face going back to the house today.

## Three

Carrie eyed her stocky frame critically in the mirror. She had washed her hair and attempted to brush it out straight, but of course, as always, it disobediently fell back into a mass of curls. In the end, she pinned it up in a messy bun and pulled a few tendrils free, in case she needed to hide behind them. She had just spent an hour crying about the way things had turned out, so she hoped there were no more tears left. Her shift in the restaurant started in less than forty-five minutes. The last thing she wanted was a replay of the previous evening. She may be an emotional wreck; it didn't mean that all sense of herself had to be obviously lost.

She pulled out an emerald wrap dress she'd bought in New York a few years earlier. It was made of the softest wool and always garnered a compliment when she wore it. It worked quite well with patent heels and her black lacy bolero. She needed a splash of Manhattan in her life now. The wrap top managed to hold in her ample boobs. The skirt though narrow didn't make as much of her peasant thighs as some clinging skirts did. It was the best she could do, and she wasn't sure who she was trying to impress anyway, she could never match Valentina for looks.

'Right, Teddy, how do I look?' she quizzed the little dog when she went back into the kitchen. He looked at her curiously, she was not sure if she passed the appearance test, but she had a feeling he saw something in her that went deeper than her figure. She bent down and scratched his head gently. He seemed content to slumber in the same spot in her kitchen, so she left him there.

She was dreading going into The Sea Pear. There, she'd said it. How long had she felt like that? She shook her head, not long, probably only since Kevin made his announcement. God, it was almost a full fifteen minutes since she gave him a thought. Now the dread filled her again. There was no point going through the thoughts that were cramming her mind: *What was she supposed to do now? What was Kevin going to do? Was he going to shack up permanently with Valentina?* Carrie couldn't allow her mind to go there, not yet. For now, she had to get through working in the same building as the pair of them. For now, that would be as much as she would demand of herself.

The restaurant felt warm and fresh when she arrived. It wasn't four hours since she walked through here with Teddy and Luke. Yet, knowing that Kevin was going to be

here now, the place felt different. As though its familiarity was jarring with what it should be. She hadn't been at work since yesterday evening, when she'd run out of here distraught. No one had checked up on her and the business had not come crashing down without her. Actually, the place looked fine. Everything was exactly as it should be.

The smell, familiar, trailing before her was Kevin – a mixture of Calvin Klein and hair products to make his wiry hair appear sleek. They had not spoken, not really, since he had trotted out of her office with Valentina at his side. Oh, they'd exchanged orders from the kitchen to the front of house. They'd worked around each other in careful silence for almost two days, until finally the hollowness inside her had given way last night. He, she knew, was much more cowardly than she. Had she always known that? Was he actually spineless? She thought about it for a moment, then she threw her shoulders back, her ample chest out and marched into the kitchen. She was not afraid. Broken, but not afraid.

'I can't believe you left my mother high and dry.' Kevin's voice reached a pitch she hadn't heard in years.

*'How are you Carrie? How are you doing? I was worried about you?'* Carrie said the words sarcastically; after all, they were what she imagined she would say to him if things were reversed.

'Of course, I was worried about you, we both were, but...'

He ran his long fingers through his thick hair and she noticed it seemed greyer now than it was before. Could he have aged overnight or was it really so long since she'd actually properly looked at him? 'But still, what was I supposed to do, drag you back to work. Valentina said you probably needed some time to get your head around things. We managed fine, by the way,' he nodded towards the restaurant.

'Really,' Carrie said and she let the hurt of him talking to Valentina about her slide sideward on her consciousness. She couldn't think about all the times they'd probably spoken about her these last few weeks or maybe months. 'Well, good news for both of you. But I'm back now, so...'

'Well, of course,' Kevin bit his lip, a nervous habit he had worked hard to kick in college. 'And...'

'Yes?' she said. Had he thought about the restaurant, had he thought about the house? She'd bet Valentina had thought of it.

'Well, it's just...'

He was too weak to move things forward and for that, perhaps, she was glad; she had enough to cope with for now.

‘You’ll need to tell your mother, Kevin. From now on you’re going to be bringing her to mass every Sunday.’ She grabbed an apple from the top of a newly delivered box and took a satisfying bite. God, but she’d love to be a fly on the wall when he told Maureen Mulvey about Valentina.

Working in the restaurant that evening was hard. There was no point lying to herself. Carrie sidestepped Valentina when she could, but they couldn’t avoid each other. Perhaps she could ask some of their friends to give Valentina work in their restaurant. Jim McGrath ran a little bistro on the north side; she’d make a bomb there in tips. She could suggest it to Kevin, maybe, in a few weeks, when they had time to cool down, all of them.

That was the funny thing though; they were all very cool about this. She hadn’t lost her temper, she hadn’t screamed or shouted, or thrown plates. Today, at least, she didn’t want to hit him or hurt him in any way and, maybe, that meant something. Maybe it meant something more than she’d have realised if this hadn’t happened. Oh, she was hurt. She was hurt beyond description, the kind of pain that goes deep into the core of you. Even when she thought she’d cried herself out, she felt a new current of grief rise within her, bringing waves of tears to her eyes that there was no stopping. Poor Teddy had leant against her leg, lapped up the tears and occasionally rested his head on her lap, as if to offer her his own brand of sympathy. It was a funny thing; there was something in the dog that made her feel he actually got her pain, he, by his very wish to console her, somehow made things better. She was so glad to have him in the house with her.

She looked up at the clock, almost ten p.m. She walked to the door. Across the road, The Marchant Inn was in darkness and its emptiness thrashed like a wave of lonesomeness through Carrie. She thought of Jane, so fragile and alone in the hospital. Through all those tears, Carrie had made a promise of sorts, even if she hadn’t put it into words – she was going to look out for Jane from now on. Somehow, she was going to help that lonely woman get back to a life that meant something. She sighed, perhaps it would do her good to think about someone else for a while and take her mind off Kevin and Valentina.

Sunday night was always quiet, very few bookings this evening and generally, everyone was seated by nine or half past and they managed to clear out by twelve. She was looking forward to getting out of here now. Funny, but she’d never felt like that before.



Carrie slipped upstairs to her office and turned on the computer. She logged into her Facebook account to catch up with what was happening with people she knew who were flung all over the world these days. For one more time, she could pretend that everything was normal. Then she'd call Anna and tomorrow she'd go and see her mother.

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'I have been thinking Keveen, thees place, you are right, it ees not good for us,' Valentina pouted at him the following day.

'Of course it's not, we should be...' he wasn't sure what to say next. Did he want to set up home with Valentina? Of course he did, he'd be mad not to, wouldn't he? 'We should look for somewhere to live, properly, a nice place, just the two of us.' He'd had enough of Reda and Simo.

'Yes, just the two of us. We should go hunting houses, ees that what you call it?'

'House hunting, of course,' he hated the idea of having to find somewhere, but equally, having seen how Valentina was content to live, he wasn't sure he entirely trusted her judgement around the bigger issues in life. 'Er, what kind of place would you like?' It was worth asking.

'Oh, I don't know, not too big. But somewhere nice, maybe close to the restaurant?'

'Well, that all sounds very sensible.' He was trying to rack his brains for houses in the outlying areas of Dublin, 'Perhaps the Liberties?' It was a reasonable area, certainly not posh or glamorous, but it was safe and very affordable.

'Oh, no, Kevin, that is just grotty and we would want to be in a safer part of the city, especially for parking your car, non?' she shrugged, threw her eyes up towards heaven and snorted a feminine little sound that made him smile. 'Maybe, I go looking, I pick something nice and then you decide? Non?'

'Well, there's no harm looking, I suppose.' Kevin wasn't sure. Carrie took care of all the domestic issues for him and before Carrie his mother had made sure that life was just tickety-boo. His mother. He would have to talk to her. He would not be telling his mother about Valentina. Wasn't she always saying she had a delicate constitution? What good was there in giving her too many shocks at once? He'd managed to avoid Penny, by the grace of God, she'd rung up his purchases in advance, so all he had to do was swipe his Mastercard while she talked to some smart young buyer they'd foisted

on her from head office. Maureen Mulvey, his mother, would not be so easily distracted. He would bring flowers. Flowers were always good for women of a certain age.

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‘Kevin, you know I hate flowers. I’ve been allergic for years,’ she sniffed as she put them in a vase and left them in the front porch for all the neighbours to admire. ‘Anyway, I don’t need flowers from you, all I ask is a lift to mass on Sundays and an occasional phone call during the week.’ She was still miffed at having missed mass. Honestly, sometimes women could be so unforgiving.

‘Yes, Mum, about mass.’

‘What about mass?’ she whipped around, far faster than he thought possible for a woman of her age.

‘Well,’ Kevin moved towards the kitchen, ‘Carrie, didn’t collect you?’

‘You’re not telling me something I don’t know. She didn’t even have the decency to ring. Not so much as an apology and me sitting here in my Sunday best and no mass. I mean, if she’d said. If she’d had the manners to ring and let me know. Well then, maybe I could have gone with the Brownes next door, or even a taxi.’

‘Yes, Mother, the thing is...’ this wasn’t easy, he knew it wouldn’t be. ‘Well, we’re not actually, I mean, she’s not actually my...’ God, he was making a complete bags of it.

‘Kevin, for goodness’ sake, out with it,’ his mother spat angrily in his direction.

‘That is to say, we’re not actually...’ he chewed his lip, could feel a salty rise in his gums, he had to say it. ‘We’re not together anymore. We’re finished, I mean, she’s not my girlfriend anymore.’

‘She’s not your girlfriend?’ His mother shook her head. ‘Really, Kevin, that’s ridiculous. You’re not fifteen anymore, either of you. You don’t just go breaking up with your girlfriend when you’re forty-something and you’re living together with a business. It’s the other way you’re meant to be going. Booking the day, I should be buying a new hat.’ The news was sinking in; she fell into the reclining chair Carrie had bought her a few Christmases earlier. It was deep and plush and the most comfortable chair she could find in Dublin. It was from them both, of course, but his mother always called it Kevin’s chair. She placed a hand, smaller and older than he remembered, on

the arm and held it tightly. ‘No, Kevin, you have to do something. You’ve been living together...’ she shook her head, ‘in *sin*.’

‘Mum, it’s not like that nowadays.’

‘Sin is sin. It doesn’t matter if you’re about to walk across the Red Sea or boarding a spaceship. In the Lord’s eyes, a man and a woman, living together like that... Well, it’s just not right.’

‘People don’t actually see it like that these days; it’s not how things work now.’

‘Well, how things work now isn’t always the right way round.’ She went silent for a moment, digesting perhaps the reality of her newly single son, or some greater question about the lost morality of a whole generation. ‘So?’ She met his eyes and there was no looking away.

‘So?’ He wasn’t sure what she wanted him to say. Did she want him to tell her that he would go and try to win Carrie back or was there some more awkward question settling on her lips.

‘So, did you ask her to marry you?’ She nodded, perhaps believing that all would be well if he popped the magic question.

‘No. It’s not like that, Mum. Getting married doesn’t fix things. For some people it only adds more complications.’

‘Of course, we wouldn’t want to complicate it by doing the right thing, now would we?’

‘Oh, Mum.’ He slumped down opposite her at the table. He didn’t like this. He was normally the apple of his mother’s eye. Sometimes, even with all the giving out and the sarky remarks, he used to think she liked the idea of him not having married Carrie. It was no secret – Maureen Mulvey believed the woman good enough for her son had yet to be created. Carrie was as good as they could manage, although perhaps not good enough to marry. ‘Mum, I didn’t ask her to marry me because I’m not in love with her anymore.’

‘What kind of a reason is that?’ She looked completely perplexed.

‘I think it’s a very valid reason. And, maybe, if you asked Carrie, she might feel the same way.’ Well, he reasoned, she might very well feel the same way now that she knew he was playing away with Valentina.

‘Young people, I don’t know.’ She sighed. ‘Do you think I was “in love” with your father every day of our lives? Don’t you think for one minute that any marriage is all roses and light, because it’s not. No, but it’s the determination to stick with it, that’s

what gets you to the end.’ She was tapping her fingers on the armrests, as though playing out a complex piece of music and Kevin had a horrible feeling it was moving towards a crescendo.

‘Well, it’s important to me, Mother.’ He kept his voice low; he couldn’t manage to meet her eye. He was willing himself not to let Valentina’s name slip onto the brewing disapproval between them.

‘And what about the restaurant? What about that lovely little house you bought together? What about all the years? You’ve taken that girl’s best years from her; do you know that? Have you thought about that, Kevin?’

‘It’s not like that,’ of course he hadn’t thought about that. He’d fallen in love with Valentina and she was dark and dusky and beautiful. She did things to him that had nothing to do with best years or The Sea Pear or the smart little detached house that he’d bought with Carrie when prices were low and they had money flowing in. ‘Carrie never mentioned kids or marriage or any of that. She wanted what I wanted, she wanted the restaurant and to be a success. We’ve achieved a lot together, but things change.’

‘It wasn’t up to Carrie to mention marriage or kids,’ Maureen Mulvey sighed, and in that lament, Kevin caught a whole lifetime of discontent blown into the kitchen. A whole raft of frustration and disillusionment fell heavily on his shoulders. Suffocating silence cloyed about them, but there was nothing to say. To Kevin’s mind, his mother’s ideas were outmoded – best years indeed.

Later, on his drive back into the city, he would find the words he needed to say. He’d given Carrie as much and, to his mind, more than she’d given him. The truth was, they slept in separate beds, in separate rooms and that had suited Carrie every bit as much as it had suited him. They had stopped being a couple and fallen into something platonic long before Valentina had arrived. Carrie might have encouraged him to sleep in the spare room because she had a sinus infection, but she’d never suggested he return when medication cleared it up. It seemed to Kevin that the only thing holding them together was the restaurant.

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Luke hated the nursing home. It wasn’t that there was anything wrong with it exactly, but it was that overriding feeling, that everyone here was standing in line. They were all in a waiting room and nobody particularly wanted to be first called. It was

unfortunate that the place backed onto a graveyard. The original building started out as a convent, the graveyard had long been decommissioned, the nuns buried elsewhere and two lines of small black crosses now weaved evenly along a narrow path. It was cruel too, to think that even the people here made him feel just a little anxious. Would his father become just like the old man who wandered the corridors always searching for Emily?

‘Dad, are you ready?’ Two months ago, Luke would have said that his father was probably the fittest man here, if not the youngest. But it seemed over the last few weeks his father had very quickly fallen into old age, as though he’d taken a giant leap and bypassed several years where he might have just slowed down more gradually. Still, he had a mop of strong snow-white hair that truculently misbehaved when it grew a little too long. Like Luke, Conn Gibson had spent most of his life travelling. He had pulled his only son to the four corners of the world in the name of research and archaeology. There was no doubt he had lived a full and interesting life, but the downside was that when it came to retire, nowhere really felt quite like home. He had chosen Ballyglen, over other equally available options, but lately, Luke wondered if even Conn was beginning to realise he’d chosen in haste.

‘Always ready, you know me,’ Conn quipped. Still, he kept a compass by his bed and a penknife in his pocket. ‘Where are we off to today?’ and it seemed to Luke that there was fatigue that hung about his father and it went far beyond his years, to something deeper that couldn’t be papered over for much longer.

‘I don’t know, where do you fancy?’

‘Well, they put up dinner here at five,’ Conn looked at his watch, but they both knew that it would take more years than he had left to become a man who worried about mealtimes or regular hours.

‘Should we skip out of here and make dinner my treat?’ Luke offered and they made their way out of Ballyglen without a backwards glance.

It was always the same, they took the battered jeep that Conn had held onto for years and drove out to the Phoenix Park. If they were lucky, they would watch as a herd of deer made their way across their paths. In this weather, it was hard to knock half an hour out of Conn’s favourite bench, but sitting there, watching their icy breaths on the afternoon air, somehow settled Luke. It wasn’t what they spoke of, so much as knowing that they didn’t need to say a word; their companionship was complete already. Luke sensed that his father had hit some kind of divide in his life. Conn Gibson wore

hesitancy like a buttoned-up coat, sometimes sunk deep within it and hardly saying a word when they sat here together. At other times, it was as if it stifled him and he was restless, wanting to be gone without any clear destination. There was an undercurrent of decisions to make and, at this moment, he was just treading water, unsure which path to take. Perhaps this unease had some contagious quality, because far from wanting to get back to the real world, Luke was feeling more each day that he too was being faced with a choice, not to go, or where to go, but rather that he might stay. Very often, they just sat contemplating so many things, comfortably and silently.

‘Colder today,’ he said gently after they had watched a stag course through the open plain, his hoof marks cutting deep into the untouched snow. Behind him, the herd followed, a mixture of reluctant keeping up and playful sauntering. ‘There’s a nice place to eat, near where I’m staying, if you fancy something warm,’ Luke offered.

‘As long as we don’t have to meet your awful Mrs Peril.’ Conn chuckled. Luke’s landlady had a way of enquiring just a little too earnestly after everyone’s affairs.

‘No fear.’

They made their way back to the jeep.

The Sea Pear was quiet, only just opened for the evening trade. It was Luke’s first time to eat here, and somehow it didn’t seem quite as welcoming without Carrie. Instead, a dusky Colombian showed them to their seats and flirted with them both as though she might make off with their wallets as soon as they turned their backs. Still, the food was good and on their way out the door, his father noticed the pub opposite.

‘God, that brings me back,’ he sighed.

‘What’s that?’ Luke asked.

‘Nothing, just – The Marchant Inn – there was a pub in London of the same name, must be sixty years ago now.’ He shook his head sadly. ‘That’s the problem when you get old, Luke, too many memories not enough time to think of them all and then some of them jump at you like The Marchant Inn, and it’s so long ago they’re almost like they belong to someone else.’

‘Hmm,’ Luke said and it struck him then, that there was something about the place, as though it was drawing him. He decided he would ask Carrie about it again the next time he ran into her.