

Night Swimmers

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Roisin Maguire



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Part One



Chapter 1

SHE HEARD THEM BEFORE she saw them, a cluster of brightly coloured chickens, fussing at the water's edge, flapping and clucking.

'Silly bitches,' she said.

Treading water, blinking the salt from her eyes, she watched them for a moment. They were folding towels, stowing phones in yoga-bags, pulling off sandals. They were toeing the water, expressing dismay at its temperature. They were coming in, now. She could hear the giggles and the tiny little screams of surprise as the water met their smooth white feet. They wore dinky little swim-hats and their shoulders were hunched and pale and narrow.

She flipped herself over and ducked down, down, down under the surface, letting the sparkle of her bubbles soothe her, feeling the cold rush over her skin, her belly, her thighs. A cool hand. She felt the tick of her pulse grow heavy as she dived into the dark, but kept going, kept swimming and wriggling downwards until her heart became a knocking in her throat and temples, forcing her to turn back, push to the surface again, pull fresh air in and blink and drip and breathe and look out to sea and try to pretend she was on her own.

'What the hell are they doing here?' she grumbled, lying

back crossly and kicking great columns of water up into the air, letting it rain down again, delicious. She could have stayed for ages longer but the shrieking and splashing carried out across the still plane of water in the bay – her bay – and jangled her, spoilt it all. No one ever came all the way around here, to this pebbly, inhospitable place. They put up their windbreakers and their deckchairs and the rest of their shit back around the corner on the main beach where the sand lay golden and inviting and cool and bright, and left this place for her.

Bugger, she thought.

She rolled over, disgruntled, looking out to where the grey sea met the grey sky and disappeared, feeling the depths beneath her dangling toes, dark and heavy and beautiful. It was maybe fifteen, twenty metres deep out here, just at the edge of OK, just before the currents began, those whip-strong lines of muscle from east to west, those unstoppable forces, those dangerous beasts. She could see them from where she was, juddering the water ahead, as if freight trains ran just underneath the surface and dragged the sea along.

She swam away, just to be sure, swam a little distance in, towards the shore.

They were still in a tight group, the other women, but they were in the water properly now at last. Their red and green and blue and white heads bobbed up and down as they sketched a communal breaststroke around and around in tight circles, up down, up down, up down, like that fabulous fairground game where you got to hit rodents with a mallet. She wished she had a mallet, now, she surely did.

They'd be there for ages on her beach, she grumped, even after they'd got out of the water – swaddled in special swimming robes and taking photos of themselves, drinking hot things that steamed from shiny metal cups. Adventurers, all. Triumphant explorers of the deep on social media.

She'd have to go in, then. Get it over with.

Damn.

She headed back, slowly, like a schoolchild at the morning bell.

The dog saw her coming, jumped up from the shelter of the dark rocks, and started barking as it always did.

‘Good lad,’ she said, and smiled a little, felt a teensy bit better.

The dog came to the edge of the water, barking, barking, barking.

The chittering and bobbing stopped among the swimmers, and squeaky wondering began.

‘Oh my god, look at that thing – I wonder where its owner is.’

‘I wonder if it will come in? D’you think it will come in?’

‘Oh god, Ellie, I hate dogs, you know I hate dogs. I hope it doesn’t come in.’

‘That’s not a dog, that’s a monster.’

Nervous giggling, swivelling of bright heads.

‘I’m getting a bit cold. I’ll really need to get out, in a minute.’

‘How can we get out, if it’s there, like that? I wonder how we can get out?’

Their voices, rising, travelled faster over water than on land. She could hear every word, their clear assertive diction shining through.

‘Oh my god, look! There’s someone way out there – I bet it’s their dog.’

‘Where?’

‘Where? I can’t see anything.’

‘They haven’t a hat on, or anything. Look – miles away – that black dot, there, see?’

Pause. Everyone looking.

She felt like waving, but didn’t.

Dog, barking and barking.

Barking and barking and barking.

Paws in the water now, barking and barking.

She imagined its mouth open, doing that frothing thing by now, all the teeth jangling in there, sharp in its blunt ugly head.

The heads turning to her, to the dog, to her again.

All standing now, pimpled and chilly no doubt, their silly orange tow-floats dangling, staring out along a pointing finger to where she swam.

‘Unless it’s a seal?’

‘Oh god, Ellie, I hope it’s not a seal. I hate seals.’

She obliged, with a flip of her feet, ducking under, hearing a shriek before the water bubbled over. It was a pity, she thought, in the murky white of it, holding herself down by letting breath stream out. It was a damn pity she wasn’t a seal. Seals could submerge for six minutes or more. Fantastic creatures, altogether. She could have swum right past them, right in to shore, invisible; lolloped out and up the beach and away, before they knew it.

As it was, she thought, bubbling slowly to the surface, she’d have to go past them.

She began to swim again.

She used long, strong, steady strokes, forgetting the others briefly in the tick-tock-tick-tock of it, loving the stretch and the pull of it, loving the slip-slap of it on her face as she turned to snatch a breath, then turned to swim again. She saw the sleek dark rocks slip past, marked her progress on the familiar spikes and lumps of them, felt herself getting close to shore.

‘Excuse me! Hey, excuse me!’

She kept swimming, tick-tock-tick-tock.

‘Hi!’ On two friendly notes, ‘—Excuse me, is that your dog?’

Dog barking and barking and barking.

Its stump of a tail would be whacking back and forth now at the sight of her approaching head. All four legs would be bouncing on the sand at once, as if she’d been gone for a fortnight – stupid thing.

Tick-tock-tick-tock.

Bark, bark, bark, bark.

‘—Hello? Excuse me?’

‘He won’t answer. Why won’t he answer you, Kate?’

‘Rude thing. Horrible, like his dog.’

‘Honestly!’

She must be almost level with them by now.

She could see the seabed, rippled and light, within a toe’s reach below her.

Tick-tock-tick-tock-tick-tock.

‘Hey! Can you call your dog, please?’

The voice was bawling now.

‘—You shouldn’t just let it run loose like that, you know. Scaring people. Hello? Hello?’

She paused in the water, blinked it out of her eyes and found her feet on the sand. It crisped nicely between her toes like a welcome home. She looked at them, standing there. The woman stopped shouting. Moderated her tone. Straightened her bony shoulders.

‘It’s – your dog’s being a nuisance! Look! It won’t let us out of the water!’

Behind her, the other women closed in, a line of faces with knitted eyebrows, nervous eyes.

Bark, bark, bark, bark.

The leader’s swimming-hat was a deep purple, no doubt she’d say it was mulberry, with daft little rubber flowers dotted around the edge. Grace knew that if she ripped it off, the hair underneath would be long and shiny and perfumed and smooth. She didn’t, of course. She flicked her own wild seaweed lengths back over her shoulder instead, and let the woman register several things. Then she stood up slowly. Felt gravity pull everything back down, that had floated so nicely before. Watched the woman’s face go slack with surprise. Smiled.

‘Good god, she’s got nothing on.’

‘Oh my lord, I wish I had my phone.’

Tittering behind Purple-hat, who didn't seem to know where to look.

Bark, bark, bark, bark.

'Em,' the woman lowered her head and shook it, as if trying to get rid of the image she'd just seen '—your dog—'

'Not my dog,' said Grace briskly, heading for shore with great long strides, hearing snickers and snorts behind her, 'never seen it before in my life.'

Chapter 2

‘WHAT SORT OF A NAME’S that? English?’

The man leaned on the wall with a big elbow, and his belly swelled out in profile as if he were being slowly inflated. Evan made himself smile and meet the man’s eyes.

‘It’s Welsh, I think, actually.’

‘You Welsh then?’ The voice was marginally friendlier. ‘You boys can play rugby, I’ll give you that.’

‘No,’ Evan answered quickly with a little laugh, ‘I’m from Belfast.’

‘Oh right, so who d’you play for then? Cooke?’

‘Eh, no. I don’t actually play rugby, at all, I’m afraid.’

‘Oh.’ The big man nodded, with some disappointment, and kept his steady gaze on Evan who was standing on the step of the little house with the heavy cardboard box in his arms. It sagged at one end, wetly, and he realised the milk must be leaking inside. He shifted it a little, taking the damp weight onto his forearms to stop the bottom dropping out. The morning sun was strong on his face, glancing sharp off the water, and he felt a prickle of sweat in his armpits, as if he’d been caught doing something he shouldn’t.

‘—I used to climb a bit, though, when I was single, and do some mountain biking too,’ he heard himself say loudly, and

there was a little sharpness in the tone, a bit of the old fire. The man stared back as if it were a school-yard contest, his face blank and expectant like a great big dog. A reek of fabric conditioner wafted across the little garden wall between them and Evan had a sudden image of the man's vast white polo shirt hung out on a washing line somewhere, flapping in the bright sea breeze, and the man himself naked from the waist up beside it, waiting for it to dry, that wide inscrutable face staring out any curious passers-by.

'The wife not down here with you then?'

Evan blinked. 'Eh, no. No. Not this time.'

'Aye, well. It takes a wee break sometimes, or you'd have them strangled, I suppose.'

Evan looked at him, and the man looked right back.

'You don't sound like the Belfast ones we get around here, so you don't.'

Evan smiled apologetically. There was a tickle of liquid at his elbow. 'Well,' he said, 'I'd better—'

'—It's a big box, that.'

Evan nodded. 'Yes, it is. And heavy too.'

'You here for a while, then?'

'Just the week. Airbnb, you know?'

The big chin lifted as if to say is that right? and Evan couldn't think of anything else to do but smile and shrug and start to move backwards, already feeling the dark and gloomy interior of the cottage as a sanctuary to be gained.

'Well. It was nice to meet you . . .?'

'—Frank,' the man said, and nodded back over his shoulder where the little lane wound up and around, away from the beach and towards the little village. 'Live back round the corner, there. Coastguard houses.'

Ah, yes, he'd noticed them on the way in, last night, a snug little row of white cottages, creeping their way down the hill, hunkered down against the sea storms that must batter the place in the winter months.

Evan nodded. He was being vetted. Being checked to see if he'd be any trouble. Midnight parties and skinny-dipping, that sort of thing. What the other Belfast ones did, maybe.

'Well, I'm just here for a wee break, just a week, Frank. Nice and quiet. Bit of photography. That sort of thing. You'll have no trouble from me, I promise.'

The silence buzzed in the air between them, at one with the gentle rustle of the waves just a few steps beyond the lane. The tide was right in, it seemed, filling up the whole of the bay, sneaking towards them as if eavesdropping.

The milk was still dripping.

'Well, it's nice meeting you.' Evan gave a last friendly nod of farewell and pushed the door with his elbow so that it swung wide behind him, the little house cool and dark and private.

'Christ!' he said quietly, to the solid, dark wood.

It was a relief to turn and set the soggy box on the little table and shake the milk from his fingers. The carton had fallen over inside, and the lid was loose. Going to the thick white sink under the window he found a dishcloth and wiped the stuff from his arm. It had run all down the side of his t-shirt too, leaving a splodge the shape of Ireland, but he didn't change it. It didn't matter.

Through the window a tall dark hedge loomed, full of bald places and gaps where the leaves had failed in the salt wind and a ragged plastic bag clung limp to its topmost branch.

Seven days, here. He looked around slowly. Seven days.

His stomach growled and he lifted a loaf from the top of the box and ripped open the flimsy plastic wrapper. Pulling out the end piece, the heel, he bit into it. Anything would do. He chewed in the dark and quiet room, and the bread was dry and soft and thick and good.

'How long d'you need?' he'd asked her quietly, yesterday. She'd been perched at the very edge of the big soft chair in the sunroom, where Jessie had died, and her hair was knotted up in a rough pile on the top of her head, dry and straggly, a

funny colour at the roots, and she was engrossed in whatever she was doing on the laptop on her knee.

She hadn't looked up at his question, and her fingertips flew across the keyboard in hot communication with someone other than him. He looked over her bent head out through the big bay window into the bright green of the garden full of spring birdsong, where the sycamore's thick trunk curled and curved into branches heavy with new leaves.

'Lorna?'

'Oh my God, Evan. *I don't know.*' She'd twisted her face up and away from the screen in his general direction, but hadn't looked at him. Not really. She never did. Her shoulders were hunched up against him, and there were dark lines down the sides of her mouth where she held herself tightly in.

'A week? Would a week help?' he'd ventured. 'I mean, tell me what you need, that's all.'

She'd looked back down where her hands rested on the keyboard and made that long sighing sound that meant he was being obtuse again – stupid, thick, impossible.

Her shoulders were thin where he stood behind her. He could see the sharp lines of them through the blouse she wore, and he thought she must be cold, but he knew better than to mention it. One long elegant finger tapped a key as if eager to be off again, making words for someone else to see.

'Whatever,' she'd said, finally, as if realising he was still standing there. 'Yeah. A week. *Fine.* Christ.'

Her shoulders had that tension, that last-minute holding before she snapped.

'All right,' he'd said quickly then. 'All right. I'll go. It's fine. I'll get somewhere to stay, today, this afternoon, leave you in peace—'

'Evan. Could you just – fucking – stop – talking?'

He could hear her teeth through all the words, clenching. As he watched, she shook her head slightly, as if to rid it of a buzzing thing, an irritant, and her fingers started dancing

again, speaking to someone else – anyone else other than him.

She'd sat there, typing, as he left the room, went to the car for his iPad, started searching for somewhere not too far away, but not too close, either, for one person, for a week. She hadn't looked up to say goodbye, even when he hovered at the door with his bag on his shoulder – or watched him drive away down the street and out of the city and away from her, from Luca, from home, from everything.

The bread stuck in his throat and made him gulp, hard, to shift it.

He looked down and saw he'd eaten several slices without noticing, but he felt a bit better. There was butter in the box somewhere, too, he remembered, and jam, so he pushed aside pasta, bacon, tinned soup, and that little bottle the weird shop assistant had made him buy.

Hand cleaner or something.

'You'll be glad of it, so you will,' she'd told him firmly, nodding hard as he tucked the little bottle into a corner of the cardboard box on the counter. 'It's on the news, you know – it's a pandemic coming, so it is. Won't be able to get the stuff in a day or two. Honest to god. And are you sure you've enough pasta, there? That one bag won't do very long, will it?'

'Eh, yes,' he'd said. 'Thanks, it's plenty – I'm only here for a few days. There's only me.'

There'd been a distinct thumbprint on the lens of her glasses as she'd looked up at him, passing him the change, sizing him up. He would have dearly liked to take the glasses from her and give them a good wipe, the way he did to his own, but of course he didn't.

Seven days, here. Seven days.

He wanted a drink. He took a deep breath and held it.

He'd have water.

There was an ill-assorted array of glasses in the cupboard over the sink, and to his surprise they sparkled brightly,

spotlessly clean. He took one down and creaked the tap into action, letting it run a little before risking a fill. He was suddenly terribly, horribly thirsty, the cold water sliding down his throat and into his stomach. It was cold, and exactly what he needed. As he refilled the glass and drank again, the branches of the straggling hedge outside the window were lit up by the sun breasting the ridge of the little house, and became a little brighter, a little less dusty.

Inside the place was even darker, now that the sun was shining outside. The walls were papered with woodchip, grey with age, and the surface undulated in and out, the ancient stones behind the paper shifting with the passing of the years. A stern, dark dresser stood against one wall, stacked with ill-assorted things, and bookshelves were shoved here and there into alcoves and corners, bursting with paperbacks and tattered magazines.

A large and sagging sofa of indeterminate colour squatted in the middle of the room, and this was where he had spent the night, restless, tangled in woollen blankets and throw-rugs and cushions, rather than face the bedroom where things scuttled and squeaked after dark.

There was the skull of a little bird on the shelf over the fat and ancient TV set, sharing space with a few dog-eared novels and a battered box of Connect-4 and a couple of tattered packs of cards, all forgotten as families packed themselves up and left for their real lives, squabbling and hustling and shutting the door behind them, leaving the dark and the quiet for him, all alone, all alone.

‘Right!’ he said brightly to the empty space and to himself, clacking the tumbler down onto the counter. ‘Let’s get this place a bit more comfy, shall we?’

He put what was left of the milk, the butter and the eggs into the rumbling old fridge that squatted under the counter, finding it pristine on the inside despite its yellowed door. The cupboards too, although battered and faded on the outside,

were solid wood – good-quality old stuff that you couldn't get any more – and thoroughly clean. He arranged his bare rations neatly on one shelf and folded the soggy cardboard box ready to wedge it into the bin.

Bin.

He looked around, opened a few cupboards, but realised it must be outside.

The back door was a half-door, like a stable, and it took a bit of shoving and cranking and scraping of bolts to get both halves opened together, but at last he stood blinking in the light. A few steps away, a row of great big man-sized bins stood in varied colours.

He had a sudden vision of himself, tiny as a stickman in a child's drawing, fastened to the earth by the soles of his shoes, and the whole thing – air, sky, space, universe, galaxy, everything – spinning out and spinning out and spinning outwards and himself only a speck there, indistinct and irrelevant, being spun.

He was crying again. He thought he was over that nonsense. He put his hand up to cover his mouth and felt his face all wet, but there was nothing he could do about it. He let his shoulders shake and the tears run, and just waited.

Must get the camera out, set it up, he thought, after a while. That'll help.

He rolled his shoulders, several times, and felt them loosen up, drop down.

He began to move his hips in big wide circles, like at that yoga class the one time he went, where he'd hidden, mortified, behind Lorna at the back of the grubby hall, and watched her stick her lovely arse up in the air, and bend her tight body around and around, her face blank and still as a geisha's, looking through him even then.

'Aaaaahh!'

It was a long, loud sound, and he drew it out as slow as he could, still rotating those hips, still watching the pink skin of

his inner eyelids lit up by the sun. Then something rustled, and his eyes snapped open.

There was a face in a spindly gap in the hedge, shadowed by an immense hat like one of those the Australian cowboys wear, without the corks. Two grey eyes were staring at him, from a face that was either shockingly dirty or extremely tanned. It was impossible to tell.

Evan froze, feeling his mouth open and close, searching for words, but nothing came. His face flooded hot. Neither spoke. The face looked at him without expression. It was like being watched by a cat, inscrutable and detached; and then it was gone. It moved backwards, suddenly, and disappeared.

He held his breath, his skin prickling, his ears hissing.

There was the sound of feet scrunching over an uneven surface behind the hedge, and dappled light as the stranger trudged steadily away, the sound gradually fading, fading, and then gone.

‘Shit!’ he said, sagging, to the garden, to the hedge and the bins and the sky, and it came out angry. ‘What the hell’s *wrong* with these people?’

After a minute he stooped like an old man to pick up the cardboard and stuffed it deep into the bin with more force than was actually needed.

It was going to be a long week.

Chapter 3

GRACE CLIMBED THE STEEP BANK behind the cottages and the dog lolloped beside her, its tongue hanging out. For the last few steps she had to push hard on her thighs to keep moving, and she sucked each breath in deeply, right down to her belly, and her legs wobbled a bit. Came with getting older, she supposed, but it was a bollocks, altogether. Once upon a time, she could have sprinted up here, no trouble, turned right, and run all the way to the village on the narrow path without stopping – 10p in her hand for a mix-up and five Refresher chews.

At the top of the bank she paused to catch her breath and the dog ran yipping in crazy widening circles, as fresh as a daisy and as ugly as sin, hot on the scent of something wild and unlawful on its territory. She let it go. She looked out at the sea instead, her hands on her hips.

It was different every single day. Every single hour. She never tired of looking at it. They said it was the cure for sorrow, to look into water, and for all the troubles of the heart. Today it was beguiling, at its most duplicitous. Feathery little waves danced up the beach, coaxing the foolish for a swim or a paddle, biting their skin with tiny knives when they dared. She huffed a laugh, thinking of the women and their stupid

hats and their scandalised expressions. Only the hardy could swim this water, year round. Only the insane and the hardy. Only the damn bloody-minded and the insane and the hardy.

Only her.

The dog came to her heel, panting, with mud on its twisted snout.

‘What’s wrong with you? Not fit, or something, you ugly fucker?’ she asked it kindly. ‘Look at me, I could run all day.’

The dog shook itself hard, unimpressed, and a long string of drool whipped around its ears.

Grace stood a while longer, looking down from on high.

She could see her own house far off to the right, tucked away back around the corner, the last outpost before the cliffs and the wilderness of the coastal path. There was the rental cottage down below too, of course, and the lane winding around from it towards the main beach, and the coastguard houses running alongside, now almost empty except in summer, and then the hill got in the way and the few scrubby trees and grassy banks were all she could see to the left. The whole panorama of home, as familiar to her as breath.

Below her, the squat, dark shape of the rented cottage – her parents’ old place – sat at the edge of the narrow bay, its little garden a green margin around it, its low front wall touching the lane. When she was growing up, there had been a wide expanse of sour grass and scrub where the little pebbly beach was, now, and they’d kept a goat, an emaciated thing, on it for years. Gone, now, that particular goat – and grass, of course, eaten up by the sea and by time. She shook her head and her hat loosened.

The man had gone inside. Back inside and closed the door. No more weird gyrations on the back doorstep. No more crying in the garden.

She hadn’t liked the look of him. Not at all. Not one bit, she hadn’t.

The dog sensed her sudden tension and whined, so she

shook herself a little and turned towards the village. She'd check in the shop that there had been no trouble settling him in. They were a stupid lot, she'd found, these townie tenants, and even though the instructions were spelled out on the website – 'collect the key from the village shop, park your vehicle at the top of the hill where the road ends and the lane begins' – they invariably got in a tizzy searching for little code-boxes that didn't exist, or trying to drive their immense 4x4s down the tiny lane anyway, with forty surfboards tied on top or a million bikes or something else flashy and ridiculous.

She tended to let Big Frank wander down, suss them out, spend an hour or two of his long, lost days now he was retired from the building site. He'd see them passing by, looking everywhere, rubbernecking as they went, and he'd set out after them, rubbing his hands and telling Maggie Hitler that no, he'd behave this time, he'd be nice.

Like hell.

The dog had its head stuck in a rabbit hole now and was snuffing loudly and wiggling its sad stump of a tail, thrusting with squat hind legs in an effort to push itself further in.

'Come on, before you get your fat head stuck! Come on, Dog!' she told it, and waited until it withdrew, shaking its head free of dry earth and dust and looking at her with its tongue out, panting. She pictured the sweet little rabbit family deep down inside, blessing her, and cuddling close, and she smirked.

'Gettem next time, lad,' she said. 'I'll bring the stick, I promise, and we'll have stew.'

The village was as still and quiet as ever as she strode down the last mucky bit of the path and onto the cracked tarmac of the street. Everyone lived somewhere else now, in smart new farmhouses and ugly white bungalows, and the shop and the pub and the old empty church were like tethers, keeping them all from flying away altogether, and bringing them back now and then, to make contact with one another,

to bring temporary life to the stone and the brick of the place. There were a couple of cars parked in front of the pub, but no one stood outside having a smoke, and the door was closed against the warm spring day.

She took a frayed rope from her pocket and strung it around the dog's neck as a token of compliance, before hooking the loose end around an old broken fence post beside the shop. The dog sat down and looked at her as if butter wouldn't melt in its mouth.

'Fucker'll be gone before you step one foot in through that door,' laughed a voice behind her.

It was old Thompson. Harmless enough, but with an unhealthy addiction to the performance statistics of horses and dogs. Cost him his farm and everything in it, over time, the stupid bastard.

'Bit of luck, it'll get fucking run over,' she answered pleasantly. 'I can get a good-looking one instead, then – a bit more like meself.'

She liked Thompson. He'd carried her off the rocks that time – when she was younger, of course and a good bit lighter – and had called to the hospital in the town to visit her, too. Had stood, smelling of cows and shite, at the foot of her bed, and she hadn't known what to say, so hadn't said anything at all, and after a while he'd gone away again and she'd stared dry-eyed at the ceiling and felt her legs itch in their stiff new plaster and heard her ears buzz with the stretched-out silence of loneliness and living.

Becky was stacking old newspapers when she jangled in through the shop door.

'Got a right weird one this time, have I?' Grace asked without preamble.

The girl looked surprised. 'What makes you say that? I thought he was sweet.'

She bound the papers with twine and humped them down onto the floor behind the counter with a grunt.

‘Aye, well, you like dozy fuckers like Paddy Murphy so . . .’ Grace didn’t wait for an answer but looked along the shelves for something nice for after dinner.

Becky said nothing, but she was smiling. Grace could feel her doing it without even looking.

‘Paddy’s hardly dozy with a Master’s degree, Grace.’

‘Fucking Master’s degree doesn’t say he’s got any brains – will you catch yourself on? Any dozy bastard can buy themselves one of those.’ She brought a packet of apple pies to the counter and set them down, fishing in the deep pockets of her coat for coins. ‘What was it in, again? Horse racing? Liqueurs?’

‘Shame on you, Grace Kielty. You know rightly it’s a proper Master’s in Philosophy he’s got. He says he’s not going to be a barman all his life, that’s all, and fair play to him. Stop winding me up.’

She held out her hand for the money.

‘And we’ll be going contactless over the next few weeks, too, Grace. Because of this pandemic, so it is. Just so you know. So you can get organised. Do you want some hand sanitiser? I’ve only a couple left.’

Grace snorted, counting coins in her hand. ‘Contactless? What’s new, around here?’ she retorted. ‘Although the word is, Miss Breen, you’re well into the contact yourself, recently. You were seen at the beach corner, so you were. Just so you know.’

She nodded slowly and fixed the girl with her best stare, holding out a cupped hand full of small coins at the same time.

Becky propped her hands on her hips and regarded her, laughing, ‘Well, I didn’t have you pegged as a gossip, Grace, and that’s for sure. What are you like?’

Grace didn’t answer, but smiled back, looking knowledgeable.

Becky took the money with prissy-tight lips and tipped it into the till without checking it. ‘—D’you want a bag?’

Grace shook her head, and the box of pies disappeared into the loose folds of her coat. 'They won't be as good as Our Abbie's, but beggars can't be choosers,' she said.

'Och yes, Abbie. How's she doing up at uni? Any word from her?' Becky asked brightly. She and Abbie didn't get on, so they talked to and about each other like women out of washing powder adverts.

Grace shook her head and turned to go. No word. She didn't care. Girl could do what she wanted.

'Anyway, why d'you say he's weird?' Becky called after her. 'Your new one? What did he do to you? He's not even here a day yet.'

'Just looks weird, that's all,' Grace said over her shoulder. 'I don't like that tall, specky, gloomy type myself.'

'Just what kind do you like, I wonder?'

Grace swung around, to see the girl with her head cocked to one side, daring her to be angry.

'—You know, there's all types nowadays, Grace, that's all I'm saying. Someone for everyone, isn't that it? It's not too late, you know, to get it together with a nice wee farmer. You could shock us all and act normal.'

With a crack of a laugh Grace retorted, 'Hah! Normal!' and swung herself out of the shop and into the sunlit street where the old rope dangled empty from the post like a magic trick.

Chapter 4

THE HERON'S HEAD POKED FORWARDS, millimetre by millimetre.

It had its eye on something – the money-shot was coming any second – it'd strike, something would dangle and wriggle from that fearsome beak and the bird would shake its shaggy head to get it down and droplets would sparkle and it would be lovely, lovely – just hold it, any second now, *any second now*, he told himself grimly, his eye aching from squinting through the viewfinder.

But the sun had moved to a bad angle while he waited, and now it glared on the water in the foreground. It'd draw the eye away from the striking bird at the vital second – spoil the shot, he realised.

There was nothing fast about photography. All this staying still. Took stickability, concentration, patience – things he was only learning. The rocks underneath him poked steadily, painfully, into his belly, and his bladder was full and aching. Should he move? His mouth watered with the desire for a perfect shot, so he stayed exactly where he was, closing the shutter again and again to see the results, to predict the picture.

With infinite care, the bird raised one narrow foot and took a slow step forwards, dipped the foot down again into

the water without a ripple, on the hunt for something only its sharp eye could see.

‘Clever boy,’ Evan breathed, holding himself taut.

He needed to change position to get rid of that glare, but that would certainly spook the bird, deny him what he’d been waiting so long for. His elbow and right knee were wet where the tide was creeping in over the rockpools, filling them up, and limpets stuck into him at all angles where he lay like a sniper among them.

‘Come on, bird!’ he muttered, suddenly impatient and strung-out and anxious all at once; the weight of the day’s emptiness pressing down on him, his body deeply chilled.

Whiskey would slip down nicely now, it occurred to him. A hot toddy.

He blinked the thought away sharply and concentrated on the heron, which was looking once again at the smooth surface of the water, waiting. Its leg was raised, fraction by fraction, and held there. One-legged yogi, it stood motionless, its head and neck extended, pointing, its whole being projected down the long sharp length of its bill and focussed on what moved in the murky shallows beneath. He clicked and clicked again.

Then a dog yelped loudly and pelted slavering past him where he lay prone on the rocks and rushed on towards the water where it lolloped, barking and hairy and noisy and big. With a rough shriek the heron pushed out its great wings and lifted itself into the air, canting even as it rose, turning away from the dog and the sun and the camera, and flying out towards the little island ahead.

‘Fuck!’

He shoved himself up to sit, his belly soaked and cold, feeling as if he’d been woken from a deep sleep, and grouchy with it.

He looked around. A group of people were spilling themselves loudly down the little rockslide onto the sand, shouting

their pleasure in finding this secret hideaway, this secluded place away from the hordes on the main beach.

‘Here, grab them big stones, kids,’ Dad was shouting, ‘We’ll make a wee fireplace, put the barbie on top, like a proper campfire, eh?’

The kids flew about the beach, climbing, digging, splashing, ignoring him, calling for the dog who ignored them in its turn, and the whole place was suddenly alive with noise and movement and ruckus, where before nothing had moved but the lacy waves at the very tide’s edge.

One of the younger children noticed him there, lying low in the rocks in his camo-gear. She stopped running after her big sisters, toddled across the sand and regarded him with round blue eyes and the calm of the very young. When he raised his head from the camera she was just there, watching, and he found that he couldn’t move under her still gaze. She was about two, maybe three. There were dimples in her fist that hypnotised him and suddenly he knew how she would smell, if he were to stretch out and lift her, feel her fuzzy cheek against his own. They looked at each other in silence for a moment or two. He was held by her presence – couldn’t breathe, couldn’t shift even a tiny fraction in case he spooked her and broke the spell. A hot wash of sorrow ran over him, and his eyes stung and shamed him.

Dad’s eye was drawn to him by the stillness, by the child’s quiet. He nudged Mum, who had carried chairs and wind-breakers and cool boxes down the sliding slope like a pack animal, and was now wrestling with a fold-up seat, her mottled arms flapping in a vest-top. There was something feral in the way her head snapped up at the sight of him, sitting disguised on the rocks, and she called, ‘*Chelsea!*’ in a guttural voice which cut through all the other sounds, and made every child on the beach stop and look around.

‘Come here *nigh!*’

But the child remained, staring, and he had no choice but

to wriggle to the edge of the rock, stand up and wipe himself off as best he could, under the cold eyes of the other adults, the steady gaze of the little girl. Raising the camera, he waved it sheepishly at Dad, who took a few steps towards him.

‘All right, there?’ he asked loudly, from a distance, his hands on his hips.

‘Eh, yes,’ Evan answered.

There was a pause while everyone looked at one another.

‘Photographer,’ he said loudly, although he didn’t have to. He turned to wave the camera where the bird had flown as if for corroboration, but of course there was nothing to see. The strap flapped wet against his hand. He’d have to be more careful of it.

‘I was—’

But Dad was no longer interested.

‘Go and play with yer sister,’ he said to the little girl, who at last removed the thumb from her mouth and smiled a slow, wet smile at Evan.

‘Go on, Chelsea!’ Dad said, louder. ‘Leave the man alone.’

As if he was doing something unsavoury, in the cold, in the wet of these rocks.

‘*Angeline*, call Chelsea!’ yelled Mum, flapping towels and looking towards the other children.

Like a flock of birds, the little girls gathered at the water’s edge began to twitter, ‘Chelsea, Chelsea, Chelsea, come on, come on, come on,’ until she forgot the man in the rocks and turned and ran, fat-legged and frilly towards them, stumbling now and then on a worm cast or a pebble.

He made himself look away from her, to Dad who was still watching him, narrow-eyed.

A flare of anger made him say, ‘You staying for the afternoon?’

‘What?’

He gestured to the space, the beach, the water, the shrieking little girls now ankle-deep in the bright water.

‘You here for the day?’

Dad kept his hands on his hips, square. Nodded at the woman and the bivouac taking rapid shape behind them.

‘Yeah,’ he said without apology. ‘You?’

Evan angered himself by smiling and replying sheepishly, ‘Nah, I’m soaked. Better go and get dried off.’

The man didn’t smile, even then, and was clearly waiting to see him off the sand, to have this little lovely beach all to himself and his womenfolk and his horrible dog. Evan turned silently back to the rocks to lift his rucksack, the camera case – and for the first time saw something tucked in at the edge of the water, a fair bit off. Something that must have been there all along.

It was the man in the hat.

He was sitting in a hollow right where the sea licked the rocks, only the hat and the head visible, as still as the heron, and as silent. He was staring out to sea, but Evan could tell his attention was on the beach too, with all its noise and flurry. It was as if he were holding himself stone-still on purpose, like the heron, so as not to be seen, not to be discovered there, among the shining browns and blacks and greens of the little peninsula, where he’d nestled back into its arms out of sight.

Evan thought back to the morning, when he’d first arrived on the beach with his camera bag, drawn out of the dark little house and his own bad dreams by the dance of the sun on the water. He must have been there already, Hat-Man, sitting in the gap of the rocks over there, so still and quiet he hadn’t been seen. Evan glanced down at his watch. Three hours ago. More. Wow.

Meanwhile, the Rowdy family had forgotten him and were coaxing flames from a small tin barbeque, so he took his own good time crossing the soft grain of the beach to the lane, and didn’t look back to the rocks again.

★

Evan sat by the window in the battered old armchair, his phone bright in his hand, and empty.

‘You go. Take the time you need, mate,’ John had said that day three weeks ago, when he’d found Evan crying in the gents, unable to stop. They’d both been frightened, looking at each other in the mirror, at a complete loss. John had put an awkward hand on his shoulder and then let it drop again, stepping back when it made no difference. Evan had kept on crying, because he could do nothing else.

John had waited, fair play to him, looking at the floor, mostly. He hadn’t backed up, gone out, shut the door, pretended he hadn’t seen it. He’d waited.

‘You should’ve taken time off after the funeral, mate. Don’t know why you came straight back – like this,’ he’d said. ‘Jesus. Go on. No – go on, honest. Get your things. I’ll let them know, see you’re not disturbed,’ and he’d clearly meant it.

That had been three weeks ago, and look.

Nothing.

He searched his apps with growing surprise. Not a dicky-bird, from any of them, on Teams, or Twitter or anything. Nothing.

He should be grateful. The workload had been immense, unmanageable. He hated his job.

He opened his personal mail, hit send and receive, and watched the little circle turn around slowly, as if thinking about it.

Nothing from Lorna, either.

He typed *LOR* and the machine auto-filled her address.

Hi, he wrote, poking awkwardly with tight elbows in the big soft chair.

Just letting you know I arrived safely. A weird little place called Ballybrady, right on the sea. I mean RIGHT on the sea. It’s practically in through the door sometimes. I miss you. The house is OK, but it’s small and dark and strange

and I suppose I'm not used to being on my own. I suppose you won't answer this. I think I'm not supposed to get in touch. I don't know the rules for this. I miss you. And Luca of course. Hope he's behaving. I've booked the place for a week like I said, although I'm only a couple of days in and it feels like I've been away for weeks. I'm counting the days, Lorna. Let me know . . .

He paused and fell into thought for a long time.

. . . what I'm to do after. What you decide.

I'm sorry about everything, Lorna.
Evan xoxox

Send.

The little circle took its own good time to rotate and then the message was gone.

He sat there in the fading light to see if she would reply.

At five o'clock he closed the device and got wearily to his feet, stretching slowly, before returning it to the bedroom, and closing the door on it.

Later, as he boiled eggs for a late supper on the ancient stove he heard the clamour and squabble of the Rowdy family going home, the clatter of plastic buckets and the whine of sugar-sticky, exhausted children, and the greater, heavier silence left by their passing, as he buttered toast loudly in the darkening kitchen and the last of the light went out of the sky.