

HOW TO PLAY DEAD

Also by Jacqueline Ward
Perfect Ten

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DEAD**

JACQUELINE WARD



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To Kathie

Chapter One

Day 29

I'm standing backstage on a Tuesday night looking out at the audience when Danny texts me. When I say backstage, I mean behind a set of dusty burgundy curtains, half drawn back to reveal a rickety podium laden with plastic, star-shaped trophies. And when I say audience, I mean a half-full meeting hall in a run-down cul-de-sac just outside Manchester.

It is what it is. I know that. I also know that every woman here, especially me and Janice, is holding her breath, waiting to see what happens. This is one of the most important nights of our lives. I read the text and my heart warms.

Day 29. I'm there. Here. Flight wasn't too bad. Can you believe it? One day down, 29 to go and we'll have enough to buy our own home and be back in the black. It isn't going to be easy but it will be worth it. I love you x Always x Good luck tonight, babe

I'm giddy with delight, even though I don't share Danny's desire to be the master of his kingdom. His settled kingdom. I'm a serial mover. I've lived in fifteen places since I left home twenty years ago, seven of them since I married Danny. Three of them since I

had children. It's not that I don't want to settle down. It's just that I can't. But I do want to be out of debt. He's right. It's going to be difficult with him away, but he is right. And I love him.

I love my job, too. It's harsh, but I love the success stories, and I hope tonight will be one of them. I stare out into the hall: it's filling up. Women looking for their names, which I so carefully Sellotaped to the backs of the tiny wooden school chairs earlier today. The local press snapping away at every fourth chair. Empty. Carefully labelled. I'd briefed them with the standard 'One in Four' message, but I knew it was all in the visual. On my rise to the top of refuge work I've learned that words often fall on deaf ears because people don't want to hear bad things. They switch off. But if you show them, it sinks in.

That's why I insisted on holding tonight's proceedings in the hall right here at SafeMe; in a domestic violence refuge with the women affected as guests. Each one of those empty chairs, one in four, represents a woman who has not survived; each one will help us get funding for those who came afterwards. Like a silent legacy. I know for a fact that it is exactly what the women who should be sitting there would want.

It's a strange dynamic. Although it's heartbreaking, I know it has worked and I am happy. I'm happy Danny is away too, even though I will miss him desperately. He is doing this for us, finally dragging us out of the one-pay-packet-away-from-poverty life we have become used to.

I see Sheila James hurry to the front, seeking out her seat. She's all peroxide-blond, false lashes and fake tan massaged deep into her ageing skin. She looks a little shaken and, as she sees me and waves, I see that her wrist is freshly plastered. I panic. Making sure she is OK means more than some award, but I can't get off

the stage. I rush around the barrier and bump into the PR woman I hired to run the event. She's wearing a headset and Bluetooth earpiece and carrying a clipboard. It's all completely out of place in the small hall and much more at home at the O2 arena. She holds my arms and moves closer, wide-eyed with adrenalin and hissing frantically. 'Two minutes to go. Look, I know you must be nervous. God knows, anyone would be in these circumstances.' She looks around as if we were just about to take the stage at a stadium gig. She shakes me. 'You need to get a grip.'

Get a grip. I look around. PR woman extraordinaire. Sheila James, obviously hurt again. A room full of women who are relying on me. Yes. I smile. She doesn't know me. She doesn't know how many times I've had to get a grip, to fight my way through. I have elbowed myself into the place I am now, at the top of my profession. *Get a grip.* I got a grip, all right. Tough and strong-nerved at work, I shed that steely exterior like a second skin when I am home with Danny and the kids.

She's counting down silently now, complete with arm movements. A loud fanfare sounds and the mayor appears on the stage along with one of our trustees, Marjory Bates.

I know it's going well. I know when the audience clap at Marjory's speech. I know when the members of the borough council who hold our future in their spreadsheets start to pay attention. I know when the funders, who turned up right at the last minute and were directed to their junior-school seats at the back, stop looking annoyed and start to look surprised. I know when the pictures of all the women who have passed through our doors are flashed on the walls one by one; those who survived stay there while the others fade. I know by the complete silence in the room and the realisation on the faces of the funders that I have made the right

impression. My message has got through. This time.

Then it's time for the awards. Mine is second to last. Marjory turns and smiles at me as I feel the confidence I have cultivated push its way to the front. The fanfare that heralds each award is overkill now and, from my elevated position, I can see people fidgeting. I wish Danny was here. But I know that if he doesn't do this work in Dubai, just for a month, things will only get worse.

'And the award for Superwoman of the Year for services to SafeMe goes to Ria Taylor.'

I stride on to the stage and smile and take the lightweight star with my name on it. Sheila is clapping and smiling and the photographer beckons. I pose and smile and blink into the flash. I feel for the envelope in my pocket, folded over. I always have a plan. They usually work, but sometimes my plan is not enough. My nerves are truly jangling when I think about the bailiff's letter and the debt collectors. This is not the time. I know I could get another job, better paid, but I love this place and if I left, what would happen to these women? No. I know Danny is right. His thirty days away will get us out of the shit. And more.

Marjory is heading my way with Trevor Jones, the funding coordinator, so I fix a smile again and hold out my hand.

'Trevor, how lovely to see you again.'

This is a huge lie, which I dress up in its own elaborate outfit of a fuck-you tone. Trevor takes the bait and my hand, which he grips harder and longer than he needs to.

'And you, Ria. And nice to see you looking so ... colourful.' We all pause to take in my trademark Day-Glo orange jumpsuit and the matching scarf wound around my dyed-red hair. Trevor smiles benevolently. 'Of course, it does the customers good to see you looking so cheerful amongst all this ...'

We look around. We know what SafeMe is. It's the brink of change for some women, and for others the last stop. We are at the front line of services, the only small pocket of funding left and only for those people whose situations are absolutely critical. These are women with nothing left, nowhere else to go, often injured or scared to fucking death by violent partners. Life or death, for some of them, which is what I had tried to convey this evening. I fill in for him.

'Crisis? And they're people, not customers.' There is always a crisis here. But it doesn't look like crisis. Not tonight. We're putting on a show for the people in charge of the purse strings. They never see what it's like in the cold light of day when we're all leaning on a door in front of a terrified woman whose ex-partner is trying to get to her. I look at the empty chairs and his eyes follow my gaze. He looks back at us, unsmiling now.

'Look, we'll be considering the funding in a month and this definitely helps. Definitely. You know, if it were just my decision ...'

I feel the rage creep up. I will defend this place to the end of the earth.

'Well, let's hope that everyone else feels the same, Trevor. Or there won't just be more empty chairs. There'll be no chairs at all.'

I stare at him, my infamous 'Ria stare', which has warded off hundreds of angry men over the past twelve years, allowing their frightened partners space to breathe and recover and decide what to do next. Trevor Jones nods and shifts uncomfortably until Marjory guides him away. I want to check my phone, check if Danny, now thousands of miles away, has sent any more lovely messages. But Sheila is heading my way. I sit down on the low stage and she sinks down beside me.

'Went well, didn't it, lovey?'

Her voice is gravelly and thick. I see her bright red lips twitching, her hand on her ciggie packet. She's dying for a smoke but she doesn't want to miss anything.

'Yeah. Really well. So ...'

It did go well, and I feel a surge of pride. I glance at her arm.

'Oh, don't bloody start. I fell. On the stairs.'

Her dead, glassy eyes tell me that she did not fall on the stairs. That this is yet another of the well-practised lies that she has rehearsed over the years. I have been Sheila's advocate for ten weeks now, since she left her husband Frank. She's lives in an independent apartment but spends all her time at SafeMe because she is scared shitless. Frank is a has-been local bent politician, ex-mayor and councillor, but he definitely still has connections. Shelia regales me with tales of how they are coming to get her. In reality, it's Frank she is scared of. Just Frank, because Sheila could take on the rest of the world with no problems. Sheila, five foot nothing in her bare feet, is a human dynamo at sixty-three years of age.

But the rest of the world hasn't controlled her every move for decades, and Frank has. She is completely conditioned, and my job is to change her thinking so she can be safe, away from this man who claims to love her. The day I met Sheila, she was wearing a neck brace and her arm was in a sling. Before I said a word, she had qualified her appearance.

'Looks worse than it is. A bit of whiplash.'

But I knew she had been found abandoned in a car park in the middle of the night, crying and afraid. The two men who found her told the police she had been pushed out of a moving car, which turned out to be Frank's limo. Of course she refused to press charges. She also refused to go home. Frank came to our office, palms turned upwards like some used-car salesman to claim his

property. He reasoned with us then threatened us with legal action but we all knew what he really meant was that Sheila would pay for this.

I look at her now, her shoulders hunched and her eyes ever on the door.

‘Did you go back to your house, Sheila?’

She nods. ‘I needed to get something.’

I put my hand on her shoulder. ‘I’ll get Janice to give you a lift home. Will you be OK on your own or do you want to stay at SafeMe? You can, you know.’

We officially have twenty-four emergency places in the ex food warehouse that is partitioned into tiny rooms, each with a bed, a toilet and a sink. Some rooms have cots and smaller beds for children. They resemble prison cells but represent the biggest freedom most of these women have had in a while. Pull-out sofa-beds in our spare rooms and lounges extend the places to thirty-six at busy times.

Janice, my co-manager and best mate, and I have transformed the main area into a veritable wonderland. It is a grotto, complete with charity shop chandeliers, fairy lights and donated rugs. Chesterfields we have done up with patches where they are worn out. The, mostly, women who have been driven out of their own homes love it. The men who drove them out and turn up here to try to reclaim them, not so much. Sheila smiles without looking at me.

‘It’s all right, lovey. This is nothing.’

I know it isn’t nothing. But to Sheila, she got off lightly. I hug her and beckon Janice over. She knows me so well and reads me immediately.

‘Shit. Has he gone?’ I rest my head on her shoulder and she

envelopes me into her. I hear her sigh. She knows me and Danny are a strong team. 'Won't be long, though. Thirty days? It'll fly. And you've still got me.'

I can't help but smile, even with Danny in Dubai and the prospect of the bailiffs banging on my door.

'Give her a lift, yeah, Jan? Make sure that the building is secure as well.' I touch Sheila's shoulder. 'You've got your physio tomorrow, so I'll be round the day after.'

They leave, and the evening is wrapping up. I get my phone out and text Danny.

It went well, love. Don't wear yourself out. I love you too.

Always x

I know he wants to be here to support me and he'll be waiting to hear how tonight went. He is so patient. All the moving around, dragging Danny and the kids to new flats in new locations, all the jokes about being a serial mover. But I just couldn't settle.

Like lots of people, my difficult teenage years made me afraid to have a relationship for ages. Skipping from each one-night stand to the next, numbing myself with alcohol, cake, new clothes – anything. Only relenting when Danny held me tightly enough to let a little bit of the love he had for me seep in. Later, when we married, the horrible feelings faded. But some days I would wake up on edge and be unsettled for the rest of the day until Danny asked me what the matter was and offered to go to the chippy for tea. I need to settle, I know I do.

I hurry the rest of the way home and let myself into our ground-floor flat. Terri, my babysitter, stands up to leave.

'Danny's going to be away a lot for a bit so ...'

She smiles. 'I need the money, Ria. Any time. They're good as gold, anyway.'

Simon and Jennifer. *Good as gold*. They are gold to me, only more precious. I cannot ever imagine being without them, or them without me. Terri gone, I flick on the kettle and sit in our tiny kitchen at the Formica table. These flats have paper-thin walls and I can hear next door's telly booming out and someone laughing in the flat above. It's strangely comforting because I know I'm not alone.

Tea ready, I open the envelopes that are stacked on the table. The glue is dirty, yellowed and thick with fluff. I pull out the contents, one by one, crumpled now, and unfold them. I feel a little flutter in my heart, a sudden stab of brilliant hope that this is finally going to go away. It isn't as if we are frivolous; we have only bought what everyone else has. Our rent is high even for this tiny flat and the bills are steep. Things have accumulated over time. One loan in top of another, then topped up for Christmas. Then Danny was made redundant. Again.

It feels like failure, but I know it isn't. It's just that I am rubbish at managing money. And school uniforms come before loan payments. I guess I've seen the absolute pits of life at SafeMe and this seems so trivial. Until the default letters began to arrive.

I text Danny again.

All good here love. Goodnight xxxx

And it is good. Danny is getting us out of this fucking mess and the evening went well. What more could I ask for?

Chapter Two

Day 28

I slept on and off. I'm in the kitchen at five-thirty drinking strong tea. I miss Danny. He's completely and happily unqualified and works as a shop fitter. The money is rubbish but every so often he has the opportunity to work long, hard hours on a project for megabucks. Last week he came home and told me that there was a huge shopping complex in Dubai that needed to be ready quickly. He had thirty days' work.

The only catch was that it was thirty days away. Thirty days separated. We've barely been apart for more than one night since we met. I protested. He wasn't getting any younger and it would wear him out. Thirty consecutive days. It was too much.

But Danny wants his own home. A home for us. Neither of us earns brilliant money. I have a good job but it's a charity salary and low for what I do. Danny works when he can. It works for us personally, but it means that if we are going to have our own house, we need a huge deposit. He has saved and saved and now he has his target. Thirty days and he will have enough to put down on a modest house in a decent area and clear all our debts. It's what Danny wants out of life and if it wasn't for my constant fears about money, it's what I want too.

Despite my protests, I knew he was going to do it. He sat at the kitchen table under the fake Tiffany downlight that makes the

dark flat look homely. He got out his ancient Casio calculator and worked out how much he would earn, then deducted the air fare and accommodation. I could not imagine thirty days without Danny and when he announced that it would be possible, my heart sunk.

‘It’ll be fine, love. Fine.’

I knew it would. On the surface. But underneath I know that this unit is what keeps me together, makes me able to deal with my job. I have to be OK for Danny and the kids. I have to be alert at work.

I don’t start work until ten because I take the kids to school every day and Danny picks them up, so I go back to bed. I wake up in our bed with Jennifer’s face next to mine. Her red curls are damp with sleepy sweat and her cheek is squashed against my shoulder. Danny’s side hasn’t been slept in and I touch the cold sheets. Jennifer stirs and I envelope her warmth and hug her close. My heart leaps with happiness.

I don’t want Danny to get an inkling of how much I miss him, and he can read me like a book – even my voice can give away my feelings. I know what he will do. When we first met we did the usual three dates, then straight to sex, staying awake all night afterwards talking. I made out that I’d done this before – that I was used to the flow of relationships but I wasn’t. Danny was so easy and free, so friendly and cool. He hung a string of fairy lights around the bed in the flat where I was renting a room and told me that he would be with me for ever. The inevitable getting-to-know-you questions came up. Tea or coffee? Sugar? Where did you grow up? How many sexual partners? Serious relationships?

He’d pressed me. With a wide Danny smile and a twinkle in his eye.

‘How many, then?’

‘Serious or ...?’

‘Serious. Just so I know what I’m up against.’

It had been easy, really. Danny was beautiful. Quietly sexy and very, very interesting. And he believed every word I said.

‘Just a few.’

He smiled.

‘So were you engaged or ...?’

‘No. Not really. On and off. Came to nothing.’ His eyebrows were raised. He wanted more. ‘I went on a few dates but I can only sleep with someone I am in love with.’

It was clever of me and I knew it. I’d been saving it until an awkward moment like this, where the surface of my life was about to be punctured with questions. Something grand to distract him. Something to make me stand out from all the other ex-teenagers moaning about their upbringing. He had melted into me and we were a couple.

But one thing I do know about Danny is that he won’t take any shit. He told me right from the start that he expected complete fidelity, complete truth, and that anything else was a deal-breaker. Here, with me and his children, he is the gentlest, most patient man. But I have seen his temper flare, rushing out to protect and insulate our little part of the world, our relationship. I know that if he found out how much I was pining for him, he would be back on the first flight.

Simon appears with his games console. He sits on the end of the bed and clicks away at it, his body moving with the game. My two babies, here with me. I close my eyes and listen to Jennifer’s breathing. Simon clicks away until Jennifer wakes and pushes her hair out of her eyes. She pats my face gently to wake me and Simon’s clicking stops.

‘Mummy.’ It feels good. I know in that moment I will do anything to protect this. That this is the right thing.

I hurry into the kitchen and start breakfast. This is the metronome of the day and Jennifer is jumping up and down on the sofa.

‘Are we going to see Grandma after school?’

‘No, love. It’s only Wednesday. Saturday is Grandma’s day. Grandma Vi’s today, love.’

I pop some bread into the toaster and she continues. We both know where this is leading. Finally, we get there.

‘Why have we only got one granddad, Mummy? Why do we only have Daddy’s daddy? Janet has two granddads. Where’s our other granddad?’

I sigh. It’s a good question but one that it will never be easy to answer. When I had been seeing Danny for six months, he took me to meet his mother. Violet, a wonderful West Indian woman, welcomed me into her family with open arms. She asked me questions about my life and told me all about Danny’s exploits as a child, complete with photographs. His father was an older version of Danny, easy-going and vitally happy. The opposite of my father.

When I left home I visited my parents about once a month. They live in a village at the other side of Manchester, high on a hill that sits at the foot of the Pennines. My childhood was spent traipsing across the heathered moors and running up and down the steep inclines with my best friend. I fancied myself as a Cathy and I was desperate for my Heathcliff. I never wanted to be indoors with my parents. Their semi-detached bungalow has been their home since they married, and my father’s armchair in the window was a permanent fixture.

So when I took Danny to meet them he was the first thing we saw. His reaction took me completely by surprise, but on reflection I don’t know why, after how he had treated me. I had never seen

him answer the door, not even once, always leaving it to my mother. But he was out of the chair, newspapers floating through the air, and at the door before we even got down the drive. He fixed his stare on Danny, stony-faced and hostile. We should have left then, I knew it instinctively, but Mum intervened. 'Ria! Come in. Come in.'

I walked in with only a brief glance down the road to Dougie Peter's house. Danny followed me inside my mother and father's beige home. Mum made tea and Dad just sat staring at Danny, seething. Finally, Mum beckoned me into the kitchen.

'He seems nice, Ria. But are you sure ...?'

I totally missed the point.

'He's got a job and we're moving in together.'

I folded my arms and stood firm. She pulled her lips thin and looked down.

'But children ...'

'I'm on the pill.'

She turned away and fussed with some Madeira cake. I could hear the silence in the lounge and then Dad got up and went upstairs. Danny was very still. It's the only time I have seen him visibly hurt. He took my hand.

'Come on. Let's go.'

Mum stood in the lounge with a tray of cake, her hands shaking. We moved towards the front hallway and she followed us. Dad was standing at the top of the stairs.

'If you leave with him now, don't bother coming back. Not you and not any kiddies. Bloody hell, Ria. I thought I'd brought you up better than ... that.'

I looked at Mum but her face was set in a look I had seen so many times before when he had proclaimed that we would not go abroad on holiday. Or that we would not eat that foreign shit

when she cooked pasta. She looked from me to Danny and back again but she didn't do anything. Not for a full minute. Then she put the cake down on the table and ushered us out. As I stood bewildered on the front doorstep, she smiled stiffly.

'You can still phone.'

She said it hopefully, and I still did. But if she wants to see Jennifer and Simon she must meet me in town. We've met almost every Saturday since I had them. I meet her outside Boots and she takes them to McDonald's while I wander around the shops or sit alone in a coffee shop thinking about how I can make things right with her. She always manages to make it sound like she's doing me a favour.

'Come with Grandma while Mummy does some shopping.'

The way she says 'Mummy' holds a mild sarcasm, as if she doesn't really believe I'm their mother. That I could have produced these beautiful creatures with Danny. In many ways it suits me as it means I never have to think about my childhood. But it also means that my children have never met their grandfather.

I still need her at times like this. I think about phoning her but it's early and I know that she will be making his breakfast and might not answer. My father has never made a cooked meal in his entire life; she has to do everything for him. I once asked her why – why she let him treat her like this. But she told me to keep quiet. That nothing ever came of making accusations you can't prove. *To keep my mouth shut*, which is the very opposite of what I tell the women I work with every day. I knew deep down she was thinking of my father. Of the trouble it would cause. Interrupting his going to work and coming home. Eat. Sleep. Repeat. She was telling me to do what she did: keep quiet and suck it up.

I take the kids to school and go into work. The whole day is spent dealing with enquiries from the awards evening. The reporter who took the photographs phones and asks me for a quote. I answer him almost mechanically.

‘Two women per week are killed by their partners. I am making it my life’s work to stop this happening, whatever it takes.’

He pauses and I hear him clicking away.

‘So what made you want to work in this area?’

I snort. Journalism 101.

‘I grew up around controlling people. I just wanted to save others from it.’

Vague enough for most people, but hopefully my father will read it and know it’s about him. The reporter is satisfied. He tells me it will be in tonight’s teatime edition and ends the call. It’s like throwing a grenade into a room with my mum and dad, but if change is going to happen, it might as well be now.

Janice organises the rooms back to normal and talks to our guests. Danny’s sister Donelle has collected the kids from school so I go along to Danny’s mum’s to pick them up. I realise as I sit down at the table to dinner with her and Danny’s family how much they mean to me. Danny’s mum squeezes my arm.

‘All right there, Ria?’

I smile at her. She means it. It’s not a platitude.

‘I’m fine, Vi. Fine.’

She nods. ‘Work, is it? You’re a bloody saint, you know. Working there. Them women need you. Bloody saint.’

I snort as I sip my tea. ‘I’m no saint, Vi. Your Danny’s the one who props me up. You did a good job there.’

Jennifer joins in. ‘Daddy’s amaaaazing!’

Donelle holds up the local paper, which has an old picture of

me and the headline 'Ria Taylor – Local Superwoman.'

'But Mummy's Superwoman, isn't she? Or so I hear.'

We all laugh and I'm tearing up again, thinking how this could have been me and my mum and dad. It's not like me. Janice calls me Teflon: tough as nails and nothing sticks. But Danny's barely been gone two days and I'm blubbing.

I don't want anything to spoil this. It may sound selfish, but this family, this round-the-table situation, is what I want to preserve. It suddenly strikes me that the past two days and all the worrying over money has made me count my blessings.

At half seven we say our goodbyes. I finally sit down at home around half eight and ring Danny's mobile. He answers in one.

'Ri. Hi. Look I'm sorry I didn't ring but. I just ...'

It's so good to hear his voice.

'It's OK. I just wanted to check in. It's been a hard day.'

He laughs, deep and true.

'Aren't they fucking all! Look, I'll be back in the real world sometime tomorrow. That flight then a full day labouring's wiped me out. And I can't wait until we have that deposit in our hands. Get looking. It's gonna happen.'

I smile to myself. I want to tell him I love him, and explain how much, tell him how happy he makes me. Because I do. So much. But the unspoken cost of a foreign phone call hangs between us, eating into Danny's house deposit dreams and the debt-busting trip.

'Yeah. Speak tomorrow, love, take care. Love you.'

He ends the call and I immediately open my laptop. It's better to look to the future. That's what we agreed. I'd look for houses while he was away. We could still get a mortgage if we sorted the debts out now. He is right. I flick on to Rightmove and lose myself in what could be my future home.

Chapter Three

Day 27

When I woke up this morning Danny's jumper was in bed beside me. I must have reached for it during the night.

I get up and make tea. It's my ritual, holding the hot cup in my hands and having half an hour to collect myself before Jennifer and Simon burst forth. Our home is tiny but comfortable, most things recycled from either our previous homes or house clearances via work: the houses of women who are gone, their partners in prison or far away.

Yes, I grow attached to them. It's hard not to because they become my friends. I spend hours and hours helping them, sometimes sitting in silent witness to their oppression, other times an endless sounding board. Whatever they decide I will honour, even if it is returning, because it is their choice. But when the end of their world comes, it is devastating. SafeMe is a family, and it is like losing a sister. I always keep a memento of them, and they are here, dotted around my home: a thimble, a ceramic cat, a moulded plastic bangle. Nothing matches in my home, but everything matches people's lives.

I think it's rebellion rather than general untidiness. Even as a child I cluttered my room with bits of toys I had collected from the street and from friends' houses. In my mind, I was creating a

toy hospital where I could put them back together and gift them, reconfigured, to my friends. In my mother's mind it was a fucking mess. The bungalow was spotless and washed over with magnolia paint every six months to 'freshen' it. None of that for me.

I sort through the various hats and gloves and boots. I take Simon and Jennifer to school and wave to them long after they've gone in. I walk to work through the backstreets of Manchester, social housing turning to quirky bedsits and old mills turned to posh flats. Once there, I pull out the work diary. Someone has complained about us. They mistook us for a bail hostel. I open a word document and think about how to explain that the women here are not criminals but not victims either.

My thoughts are interrupted by Janice bursting into the room. She thrusts a package into my hand along with a bunch of envelopes with a thick elastic band around them. I see my chance. I produce a bundle of final demands out of my pocket.

'Got a minute?'

She turns around and sinks into a chair. She reads the letters, some of them in bright red ink. Her face reddens a deep beetroot in temper.

'Fucking hell. Is this why Danny's fucked off to Dubai?'

'Yeah. That and a deposit for a house.'

She whistles into the air.

'Bloody hell. Must be some job.' She shuffles the letters. 'Will there be time? I mean, some of these are quite ... old.'

I grin at her. We're used to last chances.

'Yeah. I'm going to ring round today. Give them a payment date.'

'So is this why you've been a bit pissed off. Not the usual strength of Little Miss Sunshine?'

I nod and grin still.

‘Yeah. That and Danny being away.’

She looks at me.

‘Happens to the best of us. Wasn’t so long ago our Eamon owed Very five grand. And he’s an accountant.’ We both laugh. She’s right and I know it. She kisses the top of my head. ‘Got to run, Ri. But cheer up, Charlie. You did the right thing telling me even if it’s only so I know why you’ve got a face like a fiddle. We’ll chat later. I need to tell you about Tony’s girlfriend.’

Normally I would be all ears. Janice is my female soul mate and the source of hilarity, but I’m already sorting through the post. I relax. Bills and benefits letter for the residents. I open the package and pull out the box inside. It’s a cheap mobile phone. I look at the label and it’s clearly addressed to me. Probably for one of the women. I turn it on and the screen bursts into life. There is an icon on the front that says ‘media file’, and underneath ‘play me’.

I press ‘play’ and it’s me. It’s me walking away from SafeMe, down the road. It is filmed from a distance, probably from inside a car. I turn up the volume and I can hear rustling, the noise of traffic and breathing. I watch the footage until it ends, then flick to the numbers. There is a single number in the address book. The freeze-framed picture of me on the screen is half astride and there is something mildly comical, almost clown-like about it. I’m wearing black dungarees over a bright yellow T-shirt.

I snort. *Fucking idiots*. I’ve had this kind of thing before, although not this blatantly – more catcalling and threats on the street outside SafeMe from disgruntled ex-partners who truly believe it is my fault their wife has taken their children and left them.

This is a new turn. They don’t usually go to any expense. Except time, but they tend to have plenty of that, having followed their

desperate partner halfway around the country. But they usually like to save their money for elaborate deliveries of bouquets and chocolates. As if that will put it right with these women who have been beaten so badly they have left everything. I watch the clip again then I throw the phone into my bag.

I get home to an empty flat minutes before Donelle drops off the kids. I watch the footage of me again, trying to glean any clues as to who could have sent it. There are so many to choose from, so many men who have sworn to take revenge on me for giving their wives and children a better life away from them.

It doesn't scare me. Janice and I have each other's backs, logging anything of concern and high-fiving the rest away. I know it is well within the range of many of these men to harm me; I also know that they prefer to harm someone much more defenceless, isolated, vulnerable. I have people. I feel safe.

Even so, I try to listen to the breathing, to discern if it's a man or a woman. I'm fuming, but competing worries pile on top and I stow it away in the mental box marked 'Disturbing Things', that fuzzy place that stops me losing the plot. I check my own mobile, the familiarity comforting. Danny has not replied to my last text despite my checking every thirty seconds. A new worry has piled on the usual ones because I knocked on Sheila's door earlier and she didn't answer. Her nearest neighbour, Stella, leaned out of her window.

'Went out early, she did. All dolled up.'

I ring Sheila's mobile but she doesn't answer. I text the warden of the individual living complex she lives in – it's part of SafeMe but just around the corner – and ask her to let me know when Sheila gets back, and I ring the hospital just in case. She isn't there. A million Sheila-related scenarios cancel out everything else as I

pop some fish fingers under the grill and saw at the fresh bread I brought home.

Donelle arrives with the kids and the panic shuffles to the back as love hurries to the front.

‘Fish finger butties!’ I proclaim this loudly and Donelle laughs.

‘No wonder they call you Superwoman. Is there enough for me?’

I smile at her. I love Donelle. She is a wonderful person, full of vitality and the definition of sass.

‘Of course, Sis. Help yourself.’

The kids are ravenous but I just pick at my crusty bread and dip my finger in the tomato sauce. Donelle pauses mid munch.

‘You OK? You don’t seem yourself.’

I smile. I am OK. Some fuckwit with a camera phone isn’t going to faze me.

‘I’m good. Just tired.’

She finishes chewing then nods.

‘Danny? Look, I know it’s hard without him but it kind of gives me a chance to see the kids more. If that’s OK?’

She stares in anticipation. Her job doesn’t let her be here as much as she would like, and Danny’s recent unemployment meant he was picking the kids up most days. I put my hand over hers.

‘Course. It will be great to have you here more.’

Jennifer is sitting on Donelle’s knee and Simon is beside her as she reads Roald Dahl’s *BFG* for the thousandth time. The cheap phone pings and, despite wanting to ignore it, I simply can’t.

I get up and go into the back garden we share with the other flats. It’s a cool evening and I look up at the stars. I instinctively try to predict what this message will say, veering to the positive as ever – the eternal optimist.

I press the ‘open’ button, read the words.

I'M WATCHING YOU

I chill but then remember that this is a stupid game being played by someone on the losing end of a long battle. I smile to myself. I know I shouldn't answer. But that small 'fuck you' part of me, the part that doesn't give a shit about debt or threats and what got me into trouble in the first place, can't help itself.

I press 'reply' and touch the phone keys quickly, laughing as I press 'send'.

NO SHIT SHERLOCK