

*This book celebrates female friendship, so very special thanks to
my girlfriends, who've been like a life-support system to me
over the years.
We're so much stronger together, ladies.
Always.*



Winter

Susan

48 THE CRESCENT

Susan didn't used to be like this. To look at her now, soaked through to the skin on a dark, wintry night as she stood on the street outside an eighteen-year-old boy's home, staring, just staring up at his bedroom window, you'd think she was some kind of deranged stalker.

It's eight minutes past eight, she thought, glancing down at her watch. I'll stay here as long as I can, no matter how bad the rain gets. From bitter experience over the past few months, she knew that an hour was about as long as she could hold out safely for, before someone came out of the house to accost her. To tell her to cop herself on, that she'd a pre-teen daughter at home who needed her.

Haven't you better things to be doing with yourself, Susan? We know you're hurting, but hurting us isn't really going to change anything, now is it?

Worst-case scenario, someone from inside the house would call the Guards (again) and report her (yet again). Then if they weren't too busy, a squad car would generally arrive between thirty-four and forty-two minutes later, with flashing lights and full sirens blaring, if they really wanted to intimidate her.

Two cops would get out – it was always two – one usually a woman, who'd do a 'bad cop' routine with Susan, at least until they heard her side of the story. Then after a good talking to and maybe even the vague threat that she was running the risk

of getting herself sectioned if she kept up this carry on, they'd take her back home to Primrose Square. There, they'd usually make her a strong cup of tea and give her the same 'you want to watch yourself' speech Susan had already sat through dozens of times.

Generally that's what would happen, as soon as they realised she wasn't an arsonist or a stalker or a deranged middle-aged woman in love with a minor. Just an ordinary woman dealing with the unimaginable the only way she knew how.

Time would pass, days, even weeks. Then sooner or later, the cops would try to wash their hands of the whole sorry mess (yet again) with the threat of a restraining order or a visit from a social worker 'just to check how you are', and a stern caution to 'try to be more careful in future, Susan. We know this can't be easy for you, but this kind of behaviour isn't doing you any favours. Next time you could end up in real trouble.'

Worth it, Susan thought, as a bus splashed past her, momentarily blocking out her view of the house she was fixated on. Well worth it. What real harm was she doing anyway? All she was doing was standing on a public pavement minding her own business, nothing more. Nothing she wasn't perfectly entitled to do. Besides, in this city, the cops should be out trying to catch warring drug barons, not hassling innocent women who weren't bothering anyone. At least, no one who hadn't bloody well asked for it in the first place.

I can't forget, she thought. *Never, as long as I draw breath, will I ever be able to forget. So why should he? Why should this fucker get to sleep soundly in his bed at night after what he's done?*

Tonight I'll give it exactly another fifty-seven minutes and forty-five seconds, she decided, squinting down at her watch through

the icy cold darkness. Then, providing they didn't throw her into a prison cell overnight as a cautionary warning, she'd come back again tomorrow at precisely the same time and do it all over again.

Melissa

18 PRIMROSE SQUARE

At exactly 8:08 p.m., Melissa Hayes was at home, in the kitchen extension that once used to be her mother's pride and joy, heating up a beef stew that no one would touch, and taking care to leave the place spotless behind her, which no one would thank her for. Twelve years of age and desperately trying to keep up some semblance of normality.

Her dad had at least called her from abroad, she thought, picking at a tiny bit of stew. (It had tasted so delicious when she'd made it earlier in Miss Hogan's home economics class, but it was all dry and salty now, probably because she'd left it in the oven too long.) They'd only talked for a few minutes, but still, it didn't really matter. At least Melissa could silently thank her stars that her dad was one parent she needn't worry about.

He was in the army and on active service with peacekeeping troops out in Lebanon, where he worked in the Engineering Corps. It was to be a six-month tour of duty, which he'd signed up for last year, not long after everything that had happened. Escaping, Melissa had thought at the time, though, of course, she hadn't said a word out loud. Her dad had patiently explained that he had no choice; when you were a Lieutenant Captain in the army, you went wherever you were posted, without any say in the matter.

Still, though. It looked an awful lot like running away from where Melissa was standing.

‘It’s only for a few months, sweetheart,’ he’d tried to reassure her before he left. ‘That’s all. And I’ll call my little princess every single day – that’s a promise.’

Melissa had swallowed back the tears and told him that she understood, even though she didn’t really. It didn’t make sense; her dad was like a rock to her, so why did he have to go and leave them at a time like this? Night after night, when she was meant to be in bed asleep, she’d overheard her parents rowing, and she knew how upset her mum was, so her job was to pretend not to be.

Ever since what happened, Melissa had got good at pretending. Really good. She’d got so good that she could act like she was fine all day long whenever grown-ups were around and save her crying for when she was all alone in her room. Silent tears that no one would ever hear. She could pretend she didn’t mind a bit when her Auntie Betty ruffled her hair and said, ‘You’re to be a brave girl now, pet. Remember you’re all your poor parents have left.’

Melissa even managed a big, bright smile that horrible morning when she waved her dad off, all dressed up in his full uniform. There was only Melissa to say goodbye to him; her mum hadn’t even bothered to get out of bed. Probably because he was running away. She knew it, her mum knew it, they all did. Melissa didn’t even blame him. Half of her even wished she were a bit older, so she could run away too.

‘So where is your mum, then?’ he’d asked down the crackling phone line earlier that evening. ‘Can I talk to her?’

‘She’s just stepped out to do a bit of shopping,’ Melissa said, hating that she had to lie. But then what was the point of worrying her dad when he was thousands of miles away? That was just mean. Better to act like everything was hunky dory at home and

hope her mum wouldn't be gone for too much longer. Better to pretend. Better to keep the truth a tight little secret.

'And how is she?' her dad asked, worried.

'Mum? Oh, she . . . emm . . . she's cool. Fantastic. We both are. We just really miss you, Dad, that's all.'

'All right, princess,' he said after a long, doubtful pause, his voice wafting in and out of coverage all the way from the Middle East. 'Well, tell her I called and I'll call again tomorrow at the same time. And that I love you both very much.'

'Will do!' Melissa had forced herself to say cheerily before hanging up. At least he'd checked with her, though, she thought, making herself swallow down a bite of the horrible, chewy beef. Even if she'd just told him a big pack of lies.

The truth was it was almost a quarter to nine and there was still no sign of her mum. She wasn't answering her phone either; Melissa had been trying it all evening with no luck. So now she'd gone from being a little bit worried to feeling full-on sick, almost like she could throw up.

Unable to stomach the smell of the stew, she shoved it away and picked up her schoolbag from the kitchen floor, so she could at least make a start on tomorrow's homework. There was a towering pile of ironing and laundry still to be done, but that'd just have to wait till later, along with the rest of the housework.

The kitchen had been like a bomb site when Melissa had come home from school earlier and she'd already lost so much time cleaning it up – or at least trying her very best to. She'd emptied the dishwasher, filled it up again, taken out the bins – which by then were stinking – and wiped down all the kitchen surfaces. It wasn't much, but at least if the neighbours or social workers called to the house asking nosey questions again, the place looked okay.

Well, okay-ish. The bedrooms upstairs were a complete pigsty and Melissa couldn't remember the last time her sheets had been changed or the towels washed. But that would just have to wait till she had more time at the weekend, wouldn't it?

She was already dead late with an English essay on *Romeo and Juliet* and if she didn't hand something in tomorrow, there'd be big trouble. Sally Jenkins, the school counsellor, would take her aside and start probing her about how things were at home and how they were all coping. It was happening a lot these days and it was mortifying.

'I don't mean to put you on the spot with personal questions, Melissa,' Sally had said just a few days ago. 'But we do know things can't be easy for your family at present. I'm just saying, if you ever need to talk, you know my door is always open.'

Melissa knew Sally was a kind woman with a lovely office where there were little bowls of fresh fruit and Maltesers that you could help yourself to, and Sally never minded how many you took to have for later.

'Just make sure you don't ruin your appetite for dinner,' she'd said cheerily to Melissa only last week. 'Or else your mum will be angry with you!' Little did she know that the little fun-sized pack of Maltesers and the apple Melissa had stuffed into her schoolbag *were* her dinner.

Melissa couldn't remember the last time her mum actually shopped or cooked or did anything normal, like all the other mothers did. And she knew Sally only meant well, but still, how could she possibly tell her what was really going on? That she had to look after herself because her mum just didn't seem able to any more? How could she tell any adult the real truth, without the threat of being carted off into a foster home?

So Melissa did what she'd trained herself to do over the past few weeks and months: she put on her brightest, bravest face and assured Sally that everything at home was just fantastic, thanks very much.

'In fact, my mum is really looking forward to the cake sale this weekend.' She'd beamed, plastering on the biggest, fakest smile she could as she embellished the fib. 'She's been baking round the clock. Wait till you see the chocolate biscuit cake she's made, Sally, it's so cool!'

All lies, of course. Melissa's mother hadn't so much as cooked a single meal in months, never mind baked an actual cake. Chances were that if Melissa even bothered to tell her about the cake sale, her mum would just say something like, 'That's nice, love,' then go back to twiddling with strands of her hair and staring into space, like she did so much these days. But Melissa had to say something to keep up appearances. Someone in this family had to keep the show on the road, didn't they?

She sighed and looked around the empty kitchen table, which she'd automatically set for four, then felt sad when she remembered she'd never need to do that again. Time was when dinners around the table were full of chat about the day's news, just like any other normal family. Her mum and dad were always laughing at some private joke, while her big sister Ella held court, usually ranting on about politics or else whatever protest march she was planning on getting to next.

Ella always seemed to have her nose stuck in a book at the table and her mum would have to yank it off her every single time, saying that it was bad manners to read during family dinnertime. The two of them would often have rows, but only pretend-y little ones. Joke rows. Then Ella would sigh dramatically, saying something

sarcastic like, 'Well, *excuse me* for trying to expand my mind, Mum'. But Ella would always shoot Melissa an exasperated eye roll, as if to say, 'parents, eh?', followed by a reassuring little grin to show she was cool about it really.

There was a time, not so long ago, when Melissa never had to tell any fibs about her mother's baking or about cake sales or about how her family was doing. There was a time when the Hayes were just happy and normal and Melissa never even considered having to set foot inside the school counsellor's office.

But that was then, she thought, putting the thought out of her mind as she whipped out her copybook, determined to make a fresh start on her essay. *And this is now*.

By 9 p.m., there was still no sign of her mum. With her schoolwork all but abandoned, the knot of tension in Melissa's stomach had got far, far worse. Still no reply to any of her texts, even though she'd sent about a dozen at this stage.

**MUM, WHERE ARE YOU? PLEASE COME HOME, MUM.
PLEASE.**

Wherever you are, Melissa thought, rereading the message as she double-checked that it had gone through. That was a laugh. There was only one place her mother could possibly be, wasn't there?

There was no way she could concentrate on her homework any more, so instead she opened the hall door, went down the three stone steps that led onto Primrose Square and glanced fretfully up and down the street, just in case there was any sign of her mum's familiar little Nissan zipping around the corner. It was a dark, wintry night and it had started to rain, so she grabbed Ella's fleece jacket and threw the hood over her head to

try and keep dry. It still smelled of Ella's good lemony perfume from Lush and somehow that was comforting.

If you can hear me, Melissa prayed to her big sister, then send Mum home safe. Please, can she just be safe.

She spent another half hour pacing restlessly up and down the square, praying her mum would come home soon, but it got to 9:30 p.m. and still there was nothing. The street was deadly quiet at this hour and the gates of Primrose Square Gardens were always locked early in wintertime, so it looked a bit scary and deserted. The wind howled through its towering, bare sycamores and the roundabout in the playground area squeaked, almost like there were ghosts riding it.

There were lots of lights on in the houses around the square, smoke coming out of chimneys, signs that there were normal families inside, doing normal family things, like dinner and homework and watching YouTube. Not pacing up and down the square in the icy cold looking for a mother who'd gone missing.

From the north side of the square opposite, Melissa could see Dr Khan clambering up into the huge jeep she drove, probably on her way to the maternity hospital where she worked crazy hours as an anesthesiologist. But Dr Khan looked busy and has-sled and must have been on call, because she never even spotted Melissa out on her own in the rain; instead she leapt up into her car and zoomed off at top speed.

Melissa sighed and was just about to give up when she heard a faint squealing noise, then felt something warm and furry between her feet. It was Magic, her next-door neighbour Jayne's cat, crying to get back inside.

'Oh Magic, look at you, you're drenched,' said Melissa, scooping up the wriggling little bundle of damp fur and cuddling

him into her fleece. 'Come on, Jayne must be going mad looking for you.'

She knocked on Jayne's door – number nineteen – where the poor old lady had the telly on so loud, you could hear the theme tune from *Agatha Christie's Marple* blasting onto the street outside. There was a long delay while Melissa patiently waited in the rain for the front door to be opened – probably Jayne fumbling around the place to find her door keys.

Jayne was a lovely neighbour, even though she was probably about a hundred years old. She was warm and friendly and seemed to 'get' when you needed to be on your own, unlike most other people. She never talked down to Melissa, or put on a sad voice and embarrassed her by asking, 'So, tell me, how are things at home?' like everyone else did.

She was almost like a granny to Melissa, yet she'd always treated her like a grown adult and Melissa loved her for it. Everyone on Primrose Square adored Jayne – she'd been there ever since she first got married back in the Dark Ages and was their oldest resident by a mile. Jayne had lived on her own after her husband Tom had died, but all the other residents made a point of keeping a special eye out for her.

It took ages, but eventually Melissa heard a slow, creaking noise from the other side of the hall door, as a light from inside was switched on.

'Oh, Melissa, love, it's you,' said Jayne, her face breaking into a big smile. 'What a lovely surprise. Come on in out of the rain, pet, you'll get your death. And you've brought Magic home to me too,' she added, as the cat leapt out of Melissa's arms and raced into the warmth inside. 'God only knows what that little monkey has been up to.'

‘Sorry, Jayne, I didn’t mean to disturb you,’ Melissa said, shaking the worst of the rain off her jacket and stepping inside. Jayne’s house was so homely, it was always toasty warm inside and spotlessly clean, even though it was cluttered with old lady china and books and vinyl records piled high. There was a permanent smell of baking wafting from the kitchen – it smelt of cinnamon and ginger tonight, which only made Melissa’s hungry tummy grumble even more. She almost felt guilty for wishing she could just spend the night here, where she’d be safe and minded and maybe even fed.

‘You didn’t interrupt a thing,’ said Jayne cheerfully. ‘I was just messing about on the new laptop computer I got. Skyping, if you don’t mind. It’s all the go, I believe. I’m in the middle of a call right now – and it’s not costing me a penny. Isn’t that fantastic? And I’m on Facebook now too and I don’t know myself. I’ll have to send you a friend request one of these days, love.’

‘Well . . . I’ll leave you to it then,’ said Melissa, slightly surprised that someone as ancient as Jayne knew all about Skype and Facebook. ‘I really have to get going anyway.’ She was half way down the stone steps again, reluctantly heading back out to the bitter cold, when Jayne stopped her in her tracks.

‘Just one second, pet,’ Jayne said, catching her arm and looking at her a bit suspiciously. ‘What are you doing outside so late and on a wet night like this anyway? With no umbrella or anything?’

‘Oh, nothing at all,’ Melissa stammered. ‘I just heard Magic squealing and thought she might need to get inside, that’s all.’

‘I don’t see your mum’s car,’ said Jayne, stepping outside into the rain and peering up and down a line of parked cars. ‘Where is Susan anyway, on an awful night like this?’

‘Oh . . . just, you know, out . . .’ Melissa’s voice trailed off lamely.

‘Don’t tell me you’ve been on your own all evening?’

‘No, not at all,’ Melissa began to lie, from force of habit mainly, but Jayne’s worried eyes quickly saw through her.

‘You don’t ever need to put on a brave face with me, pet, you know that,’ she said, looking at Melissa keenly. ‘This is me you’re talking to. You can trust me, I won’t say a word. I only want you to be safe, that’s all.’

‘Mum’s . . . not here,’ Melissa said in a wobbly little voice, hanging her head, glad to have that much off her chest.

‘And do you know where she’s gone?’

Silence. Just a little headshake from Melissa, that’s as much as she could trust herself to do without crying.

‘Right. Stay there, love. I’ll grab my car keys and we’ll go and find her.’

‘But you’re in the middle of a Skype call . . .’

‘Never mind about that,’ said Jayne firmly. ‘You’re far more important to me than some aul’ phone call. I think we both know exactly where we can find your mother, so let’s go and bring her back home, will we? And don’t worry, sweetheart, I won’t breathe a word to anyone else. This can stay our little secret, just between us.’

Jayne

19 PRIMROSE SQUARE

‘Hello, Tom, love, it’s me. Yet again,’ Jayne said, pummeling at the bread dough she was making, as she chatted away to an empty kitchen.

‘The thing is I really need someone to bounce this off or else I might lose my reason. Supposing you’d huge news to give your family and you didn’t know how? I’ve tried my best to keep what’s going on a secret for as long as I could, but it just doesn’t feel right to keep this to myself any more. Jason needs to be told and told soon – it’s the very least I can do for our only child. Fair is fair, and after all, this could end up changing his life just as much as mine.

‘So I’ve just emailed him (I know . . . me, Tom, on the emails . . . Can you believe it? You were always on at me to get a computer and now there’s no stopping me!) And I’ve invited him over later on this evening for a nice early dinner. The plan is, I’ll do a few nice pork chops for Jason – his favourite – and if he brings Irene with him, then I suppose I’ll just have to throw a head of lettuce at her till she gets over this whole 5:2 nonsense, or whatever fad diet she’s on right now. Then I’ll wait till the pair of them have eaten, because you know how Jason’s always in miles better form with a big feed in him.

‘Now, I know it might sound a bit rude of me, love,’ she went on, spooning the dough onto her work surface and sprinkling it with flour, ‘but the thing is, I’m secretly hoping they won’t

be able to get a babysitter, so Jason can't bring Irene with him in the first place. Granted, the woman has her good points and you were always at pains to remind me what a great wife she is to him and such a good mother to the twins too, but Mother of Divine, she really would try the patience of a saint.

'Do you remember the time Irene came around here not long after your funeral, and told me she could get the house professionally valued for free?

"The estate agency I work for would only be delighted to look after it all for you," she said to me, brazen as you like. Then she spent the whole night going on about her own mother in a nursing home and how she'd initially dreaded it, yet blossomed the minute she got in. "Oh, they've taught Mummy to do flower arranging like a professional now and she's even learned to bake at the home," the little madam said to me, right here in my own kitchen, with you, sitting right there in your urn as a witness, Tom.

"You really should consider it, you know," she said to me, smug as anything, with a big fake smile on her face. "None of us is getting any younger. And living on your own can't be easy, particularly since Tom passed away. We're the only family you have and we worry about you so much."

'Well, only good manners prevented me from giving Irene a good smack across that smug, pinched little face. I told her that I was going absolutely nowhere and that the only way I'd leave my home would be feet first in my coffin. "And as for flower arranging and baking," I said, "I'll have you know my Madeira sponge was third runner-up in the Primrose Square Bake Off this year."

'Then she started harping on about number twenty-four on the square, the house down the road that's had all the building

work going on for ages. “My company will be letting it out very soon,” she says to me, not taking the hint to shut up. “We’re confident we can get at least two grand a month for it, and you know I’d only be delighted to do the same thing for you, Jayne. I pride myself on being able to rent *anything* – you want to see some of the tiny little shoeboxes that we charge premium rates for! You could let out this place, move in with us and we’d split the rental income between us. You’d never be on your own again – now wouldn’t that be fantastic?”

‘As if, Tom! As if I could ever bring myself to leave Primrose Square! With all the happy memories you and I made here? Remember how it nearly bankrupted us when we first bought it as newlyweds all those years ago? We’d hardly a bean to our name, and everyone said that a Victorian three-storey, with such big rooms and lovely high ceilings in a spot so close to town, was way out of our league.

‘But we still did it, didn’t we? You knew I’d fallen in love with Primrose Square; the way our bedroom looks right over it and how beautiful it is in springtime, when the cherry blossoms come out and the local kids have all manner of fun in the playground. God be good to you, Tom, you were always so determined that our own kids would grow up in a nice, safe area just like this, with lovely neighbours around us to play with.

‘Granted, we were only ever blessed with the one child, who seemed happier spending most of his childhood cooped up in front of the telly rather than out on the square kicking a football around with his pals, but that wasn’t our fault now, was it? Jason’s long since moved out and you’re not around any more, Tom, but I still keep the house exactly as it was when you were alive. Almost as if you could walk in through the front door any

second, plonk down in the nice comfy, battered old armchair you loved so much and say, “What’s for dinner, love?” Sure I’ve all your stuff piled up here from decades back, your old books and your vinyl record collection, which to this day I can’t bring myself to take to the charity shop.

‘Tom, you of all people know how my neighbours have been like a second family to me, especially since you passed away and I got so lonely. They were the ones who got me through the dark days when my whole world seemed to shrink without you and hell would freeze over before I’d ever leave them.

‘You know how much I love every single neighbour here, and how I’d do anything for them. Sure, only last night, didn’t that scrap of a thing from next door, Melissa Hayes, come knocking on my door, far too late at night for a young one like her to be out and about. No sign of the mother, of course, and I know that family have had more than their share of troubles, but honestly, how could anyone leave a young girl like that home alone in this day and age?

‘Melissa is like another grandchild to me, you know that, so I did what anyone would do for one of their own – I jumped into the car and took Melissa off to bring her mother home. I was in the middle of a Skype call at the time with – well, you already know all about that, don’t you, Tom? Suffice to say that I abandoned the call I was on, grabbed my car keys and away we went.

‘Poor little Melissa, your heart would go out to her. I know she was only small when you passed over, love, but do you remember what a bright, bubbly, affectionate little thing she always used to be? “You’re not my real granny,” she used to say whenever she’d give me a hug, “but you’re like my pretend-y granny.”

‘And I know if you were here, Tom, you’d be the first to tell me to mind my own beeswax, but honestly, leaving a young one on her own just isn’t right. Susan Hayes should think herself very lucky it was me who found her last night and got her safely home, not some social worker who’d only have given her a hard time. The poor woman needs support right now and not an earbashing from social services. Still, though, she has responsibilities and a young daughter who needs her mammy.

‘Course, it didn’t take us long to find Susan. She was standing in full view right across the street from that kid’s house, Josh what’s-his-name, the one who everyone said was responsible for what happened. She was soaked through to the skin, shivering and blue with the cold, but I think she was glad it was me who’d found her and not anyone else. She got into the car for me easily enough, then just sat in silence the whole way home, twirling her hair around her fingers and staring out the window. Not a peep out of her. Didn’t even thank me when we pulled up back at Primrose Square, not that I was looking for thanks.

‘I’m worried, though, Tom. Susan Hayes has been through hell and back, and no one would blame her for acting out a bit. But it’s poor Melissa I’m thinking of. Not even thirteen years of age and with her dad off on duty, there’s only Susan to look after her. Of course I’ll keep a special eye out for the little pet, but it just breaks my heart to think that’s about all I can do.

‘So anyway, back to Jason,’ Jayne chatted away to the urn above her telly, as she continued pounding away on the dough she’d been kneading. ‘God knows how he’ll take my little bit of news, but I’m hoping he’ll go easy on me. Say a prayer for me, will you, love? Put in a good word for me with the Man above. If I can get through this, I’ll get through anything.

‘Actually, now that I think of it, a nice Madeira sponge, wouldn’t that be the very thing to put the lad in good humour? After all, as you always used to say, Tom, there’s no trouble on this earth that can’t be sweetened by my Madeira sponge, now is there?’

Nancy

FLAT 6B, SECOND FLOOR, CRAMPTON BUILDINGS

Please let this be the one, Nancy thought, hauling herself up yet another flight of stairs on yet another day, her heart hammering from the mad dash she'd had to make to get to the appointment on time.

Haven't I been through enough already? Please Jesus/Buddha/Santa – anyone up there who's listening to me - please, please, please just let this be The One.

'So over here we have the living area,' the letting agent said brightly with an authoritative sweep of her arm, indicating little more than an armchair and a tiny coffee table. And that was it.

'As you can see, the entire flat is lovely and cosy,' she chattered away to Nancy, with a big cheesy grin plastered across her face. 'Compact. Ideal for the single tenant, really. Absolutely perfect for a busy lady like you.'

Then, dropping her voice down low, she added, 'And just between ourselves, Ms Thompson, there's huge demand for flats at this price level, so in your shoes, I'd save myself a lot of time and bother and just sign on the dotted line. I've got three other prospective tenants all lined up to see this place directly after you and I know it'll be snapped up by the end of the day.'

'But the good news is that I've taken a bit of a liking to you,' she added, with a patronising little smile. 'And I know that relocating to a new city can't be easy – particularly a city

like Dublin, where property is at such a premium. So I'm just giving you a little heads up, that's all.'

'That's really kind of you.' Nancy smiled politely, spinning around on her heel, so she could really take in the tininess of the place. 'But can I just ask – where exactly did you say the living room was?'

Because she was seeing everything else except an actual living room in front of her. She noticed the drab, grey carpet that must have been standard issue on rental properties – she'd already seen its match in dozens of other Dublin flats to date. And the tiny Velux window overhead, which you'd need to stand on a stepladder to reach. The fact that it was almost noon, and yet so gloomy in the flat, you'd need to switch on lights to see properly.

And don't, she thought, even get me started on the smell. Oh dear God, the smell. Damp, mixed with fresh paint in a clear attempt by a desperate landlord to try and disguise it. Nancy had been flat-hunting in Dublin so aggressively by now, she'd have known that giveaway stench a mile off. As if that wasn't bad enough, the flat was situated directly beside an alleyway full of dumpsters, which wasn't exactly helping, pong-wise.

'No, no, no, lovey, I think you meant to say the living *area*,' said the letting agent, who was called Irene and who was bone-thin, over-bright and quite comfortable with calling Nancy 'lovey', even though they'd met exactly seven minutes ago. 'You're standing right in the middle of it, my darling. Fabulous, isn't it? Such a wonderful energy flow. Can't you just see yourself living here?'

'You mean this is it?' Nancy asked her, dumfounded. 'A chair and a coffee table?'

She badly wanted to add: 'Which you want nineteen hundred euro a month for?' but politeness prevailed. Plus the fact that her brand new job was due to start the following day, and she was officially homeless.

I bypassed 'desperate' about ten viewings ago, she thought, and now I'm officially in a state of panic. It was either settle for this kip, or else fork out a ridiculous amount of cash that she didn't have for yet another night in an exorbitantly priced 'budget' hotel. Yet again.

'Isn't it just to die for?' Irene said cheerily, with a big toothy grin. 'Oh, and yet another added bonus,' she enthused, 'look how handy the living area is for access to the kitchen!'

'The kitchen?' Nancy said a bit more hopefully, looking around and wondering if she'd somehow missed a room on the way in. 'Where's that?'

'You're already standing in it, my love.' Irene smiled back benignly.

'But I haven't budged an inch.'

'You see?' Irene practically beamed. 'Look how conveniently close it is to the living area! Can you think of anything handier? Who wants doors and hallways anyway in this day and age? Who needs 'em, eh? That's one of the main features I love about this flat: the fabulous, paired-back, Scandinavian minimalism. Stunning, isn't it?'

'Hang on a second, Irene,' Nancy asked, as her heart sank in utter disbelief. 'By "kitchen", do you mean that tiny microwave oven?'

'Well . . . yes, actually,' she said brightly.

'So just to be clear, the kitchen is actually a microwave perched on a windowsill approximately three inches from the sofa.'

'That's right!'

‘The sofa, which you also describe as the living area.’

‘Well, it’s actually less of a kitchen, more of a food preparation area really,’ Irene chattered away, undeterred by her client’s total lack of enthusiasm. ‘But just think,’ she added, ‘could a set-up like this be more ideal for a busy professional like yourself? Think of all the eating out you’ll be doing in the evenings! The whole of Dublin will be like one giant restaurant for you. So why would you want the bother and hassle of a kitchen? More trouble than it’s worth, if you ask me. A microwave and a kettle, that’s as much as any hardworking, professional tenant needs, I always find. Perfect for you!’

‘Irene,’ Nancy said, ‘I’m really sorry to have dragged you all the way out here, but I’m afraid—’ She was about to say ‘clearly we’re both wasting our time’, but Irene was having none of it.

‘Oh! And did I draw your attention to the fabulous panoramic view?’ she went on, indicating a tiny window beside the sofa in a clear attempt to distract, much the same way you’d distract a kitten by tossing a ball of wool in its direction. ‘It’s a massive USP of this particular flat and I really think you’ll love it – it’s super special!’

Gamely, Nancy peered out of the window, expecting something – anything at all – to justify the staggering rent the place was asking, but no, there was absolutely nothing to see.

‘Breathtaking, isn’t it?’ said Irene, hovering at her shoulder.

‘I’m sorry, but what view are we meant to be looking at exactly?’ Nancy asked her, mystified.

‘The city!’ Irene beamed, nudging her sharply in the ribs. ‘Look, spread out like a glistening carpet beneath you. Out of this world, isn’t it? Right up there with Manhattan, if you ask me. Or the Taj Mahal.’

‘But we’re overlooking a Lidl car park,’ Nancy said. Granted, if you squinted closely enough, you could just about make out a roundabout with backed up traffic and a Tesco Metro, but that was pretty much it as far as the panoramic view went.

‘You see?’ Irene said, undeterred. ‘Yet another plus to this flat! Proximity to a shopping centre. Very handy, I think you’ll find. Single tenants are always looking for a convenience store close by. You are a single lady, aren’t you, sweetheart?’

There was a tiny, giveaway pause before Nancy replied.

‘Yes,’ she answered, clearly and confidently. *Bugger it*, she thought, *better get used to saying it out loud and proud*.

‘I knew it!’ said Irene, with a snap of her fingers. ‘I really do have a sixth sense for these things. My husband is always telling me it’s a real gift. So just think of all that late-night shopping for microwavable dinners for one! Oh, you’re going to be so happy here. I just know it.’

‘And that’s it?’ Nancy sighed wearily, trying to ignore the whole clichéd, sad-saddo-with-a-microwave-dinner-in-a-plastic-tray image that had just been conjured up. ‘That’s the “spectacular view”?’

‘Well, now, what did you expect from a top-flat window in Kilbarrack?’ Irene replied, with a sharpness in her eyes that wasn’t there before. ‘The Spanish Steps? You’ve got to be reasonable here, sweetheart, don’t you?’

‘I know, I know.’ Nancy sighed as a familiar wave of disappointment sank over her. ‘And I know you’re only doing your best, Irene. It’s just that it’s an awful lot to pay for a tiny one-bed flat without a living room.’

‘Ahh, but you’ll notice that I didn’t say living *room*. I was actually very careful not to say living room. I clearly specified that this was a living *area*. There’s a massive difference, you

know. Like about a grand a month difference. And you get what you pay for, don't you? Particularly when you're . . . let's just say, on a more challenging budget. You're relocating from London, aren't you?

'That's right, yes.'

'I thought I recognised the accent. Any particular reason why?'

Nancy braced herself. After all, it's not like she didn't expect lots of questions along those lines.

'I'm moving here for work,' she rattled off, almost like she was reading from a script. 'At the National Theatre,' she threw in, for good measure.

Now that wasn't so bad, she thought. My first hurdle and I hope I handled it reasonably well, with minimal fuss.

'So when did you leave London?' Irene probed, peering beadily over her clipboard at Nancy.

'Just over two weeks ago.'

'And when do you start at the National?'

'Tomorrow, as it happens,' Nancy answered, distractedly opening up the miniscule fridge door and burying her face in it, hoping against hope they could get off the bloody subject.

'Bit of a rush job, then, wasn't it?' Irene shrugged. 'You certainly haven't allowed yourself very much time to find somewhere to live before you start your new job, have you?'

'Emm . . . yes, well, you see the job offer came along very suddenly,' Nancy stammered, turning her face away from the fridge when the stink of gone-off eggs inside it got too much. 'It's not ideal, I know, but that's the theatre world for you. So here I am and I need somewhere to live, fast.'

'A theatre job. Wow.' Irene nodded. 'Onstage?' she added hopefully, her finger twitching at her mobile as if she was about

to ask Nancy for a selfie, just in case she turned out to be some famous Brit import. Nancy could almost see Irene eyeing her up and down, then looking a bit disappointed at how utterly unlike a proper celebrity she was, with her total lack of contouring, skinny jeans and neatly tied back hair, with ne'er a beach wave in sight.

'Behind the scenes, I'm afraid,' Nancy said.

'Really? As what?' Irene fished, clearly far more interested in the job than in the flat she was supposed to be offloading.

'I'm about to start as an assistant director on a production of *Pride and Prejudice*,' Nancy told her, and even though it was only a short-term contract that had only come about because she was happy to be a last-minute replacement, she still swelled up a bit with the buzz you got from starting work on a new show. *Any* new show.

Particularly one that got her away from London as fast as she could.

'An assistant director at the National?' Irene whistled. 'Big job.'

'It's not really,' Nancy shrugged modestly. 'It's more like two hundred small jobs—'

'Well, now, you see?' Irene interrupted, as a fresh selling point seemed to strike her. 'So just think of all those long hours in rehearsal at the theatre! Not to mention all the after-show parties and functions that you'll be attending. Now just ask yourself – when will someone like you even be in the flat, other than to crash? Somewhere low-maintenance like this place couldn't be more perfect for you! Okay, I grant you, it mightn't exactly be Versailles . . . but you know it's available for immediate occupation . . .'

'I do appreciate that,' Nancy replied, locking eyes with Irene so she was forced to actually listen to her. 'And I'm sorry about

this, but I really think you and I are done here. Trust me, this is not the kind of place I'd ever see myself living in.'

'But you're really not giving it a fair chance,' Irene sniffed. 'Tailoring the perfect property to an individual client is where my agency excels, and really, you'll go a long way to find a flat that suits you better. This flat is who you *are*. It makes a statement. And most of all, it's within your budget.'

'Look, there's no delicate way to say this to you. But sitting with a fridge at arm's length from me on a minuscule sofa that doubles up as a bed in a freezing, damp flat is actually not who I am. Not by a long shot.'

'Easy for you to say now,' Irene replied, with ice creeping into her voice as her smileyness quickly evaporated. 'But if you're expecting somewhere close to Dublin city centre on what you're prepared to pay, then dream on. If it's Dublin 4 you're looking for, then be prepared to pay D4 prices. Which, on the salary you gave us on your application form,' she added, with a quick, professional glance down to her notes, 'I'm afraid just isn't doable.'

'In that case, I'm really sorry for taking up your time,' Nancy said apologetically, even though Irene had practically strong-armed her into viewing the dive in the first place. Politeness prevented her from adding what she really wanted to, which was that she'd seen prison cells with more home comforts than this place. And that living like an extra from *Orange is the New Black* really wasn't her idea of how her new life in Dublin would be.

'Oh, but it's your own time you're wasting, Ms Thompson,' Irene said crisply, instantly downgrading Nancy from 'love' and 'darling'. 'I can guarantee you, this flat will be snapped up by the end of the day by a more, let's just say, street-savvy tenant than yourself.'

‘Then all I can do is wish you well with it,’ Nancy said as evenly as she could.

‘Actually, no,’ Irene snapped, making absolutely no attempt to hide how pissed off she was. ‘I should really be the one to wish you luck.’ Then, grabbing a fistful of keys, she added bitterly, ‘After all, I’ve got a roof over my head and a home to go to. You’re starting your big new job in the morning and you’re the one who’s homeless, aren’t you?’

That horrible estate agent was right, Nancy thought miserably, being jolted this way and that on the packed train as she made her way back to the ridiculously priced hotel she’d pitched up in. I am officially homeless. Ever since I arrived this city, I’ve traipsed my way in and out of dozens of rental flats, all with zero success.

And it’s not like I’m looking for the earth, she thought, her face pressed up against some total stranger’s armpit as they both clung onto the overhead bars for dear life. After all, her new contact at the National Theatre was just a temporary one and, if the worst came to the worst, she’d be trudging back to London in a few months’ time, as soon as the final curtain came down.

But at the very least, a few short months would give her what she so badly needed. Space. Time. A fresh chance to get away from London and, more importantly, everyone in it. Plenty of her colleagues in the UK would have regarded working in Dublin as a something of backwards step career-wise, and plenty more well-meaning pals said as much to her face. But Nancy’s mind was firmly made up.

Because, just then, she needed three things and she needed them fast: to get away from the tight-knit, incestuous theatre

scene in London where everyone *knew*; to start a brand new job with a fresh, clean slate; and, with any luck, to move on. And so what if this job wasn't at some flashy West End theatre with all its bells and whistles and career prestige? God knows, it couldn't have come along at a better time for Nancy and that, as far as she was concerned, was good enough.

Just then her phone pinged as a text came through and, out of habit, she jumped, just in case. Gingerly, she maneuvered her hand into her coat pocket to see who it was – and instantly her heart sank right back down to the ground again.

It was her mum.

Your dad and I so worried about you, Nancy, love. Let us know you're OK, won't you? Come back to London to see us in the next few weeks – we miss you so much.

Nancy bit her lip and willed herself to stay strong. Of course she missed her parents and friends too, and there was nothing she'd have loved more than to hop on a cheapie Ryanair flight to zip home to see them all. But as she'd painstakingly explained to her nearest and dearest before she left, that was out of the question just now.

She'd already moved every stick belonging to her out of the gorgeous Islington flat she'd loved so much. She'd said a rushed, hasty goodbye to anyone and everyone she knew. She'd well and truly burned her bridges. She hoped they all understood, but if they didn't, then there wasn't a huge amount she could do about it, was there? So now, all she really needed in Dublin was to throw herself into work and find somewhere to live.

I'm thirty-three years old, she thought, as the train rattled on, becoming more and more packed and airless the closer it got to Connolly station in the centre of the city. I'm too old to live in horrible hovels that stink of damp and cat wee. I'm not high-maintenance, but I've served my time crashing on friends' sofas and living in dives when I've toured with shows. And I didn't leave my lovely, warm, central little flat in London, just to end up living hand-to-mouth out of a suitcase.

She was clinging onto an overhead bar to balance herself and the guy who was pressed right up against her was doing exactly the same. They were millimeters from each other and yet both stayed resolutely silent.

It was lonely and scary and intimidating pitching into any new job without having to relocate on top of that as well. *But then, you wanted this job, didn't you?* she reminded herself. She'd actively pursued it, never for a moment thinking she'd actually land it. It had been so last-minute too; all Nancy had been told was that the previous assistant director had dropped out of the gig because of 'artistic differences' with Diego Fernandez, her boss-to-be.

Granted, when the mighty Diego quizzed her about the logistics of relocating to Ireland and asked how she felt about that, Nancy just batted it away. Getting away from London was actually the main selling point of the gig, but that certainly wasn't something she was going to get into with a hotshot director she was trying to impress.

So instead, she stressed what a huge deal it would be to work at the National with someone like Diego, who was the most highly respected director, not just in his native Spain, but probably in the western world, with all the Tony and Olivier awards practically hanging out of his earlobes to prove it.

Anyway, the mighty Diego Fernandez must have seen something in her that he liked, but whether it was hunger or sheer desperation, it was hard to tell. Nancy was thrilled about the gig, though, and utterly determined to bring everything she possibly could to it. If she needed to work eighteen-hour days, then she was all for it. Weekends? Overtime? Not a problem. She was your gal.

Burying herself in work was good, she figured. After all, it was the one constant in her life that had never let her down. And so what if she was a bit lonely in a new city? Nancy would get over it in time. Quietly, and with minimal fuss, just like she did everything.

It was just that she'd really have welcomed having one single pal in Dublin; someone she could talk to, full stop. Someone who might steer her away from viewing flats in areas where you'd need pepper spray on you just to go out for the Sunday papers.

Nancy wasn't expecting to stroll into a Dublin 4 flat with a view over Dublin Bay for the rent she could afford; that bossy woman Irene had been quite wrong about that. But she did know this much: she couldn't and wouldn't haul herself on yet another gruelling rail and bus journey to a poky little flat no bigger than a prison cell, at a rental rate that would leave her foraging through the bins looking for food, only to be told, 'Well, this is Dublin, what did you expect?' Or worse, 'Our ad did clearly specify that fussy tenants need not apply.'

This girl, she thought, has had quite enough.

It was early evening and Nancy had just got off the train and was weaving her weary way back to her hotel on Pearce Street, when

she happened to stroll past a gorgeous, residential-looking square, with Victorian villa-style terraced houses dotted all around it.

Most of the homes looked tidy and well maintained; each had scrubbed stone steps that led down onto the pavement below, and there were loads of well-kept window boxes and potted urns standing neatly beside gleaming hall doors. From where Nancy stood, she could see joggers wrapped up against the icy cold doing laps of the square, as kids kicked a football about and had a laugh in spite of the fading, wintry light. There was even the remains of a half-melted snowman right outside one of the houses, wearing an Ireland football jersey, with a half-eaten Twix for a nose, which made Nancy smile.

It was such a lovely scene, she paused to take it in. She even kicked the football back to the kids when it bounced her way, to loud shouts of 'Thanks very much, missus!' The square seemed neighbourly and yet so close to the city centre, you could walk everywhere. There was a warmth about it, a friendliness that radiated. She glanced up at the nameplate on one of the houses: Primrose Square.

Of course the houses along here were way out of her league, she thought, given the location. But still. Wouldn't it be absolutely wonderful to start afresh somewhere like this?