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The Brightest Star in the Sky

MARIAN KEYES



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For Dylan Martin

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Once upon a time
I was you
Keeping secret
Being True

What happened child
Of golden hair
What happened then
I wasn't there

Running wild
Laughing free
Bursting sun
You reached for me

But another won your heart
That day
A smiling lie
Danced your way

You followed him
Into a wood
No one saw
The wolf in hood

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And now you stand
And stare at me
Your frock is stained
Your knees are green

How do I hold your hand and stay
How do I heal
That death
In May

This day
This night
This hour
Long due

This ink
This page
This prayer
For you . . .

'Little Red Riding Hood' by Christina Reihill
From *Diving for a White Rose*

There is a crack, a crack in everything.
It's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

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Day 61

June the first, a bright summer's evening, a Monday. I've been flying over the streets and houses of Dublin and now, finally, I'm here. I enter through the roof. Via a skylight I slide into a living room and right away I know it's a woman who lives here. There's a femininity to the furnishings – pastel-coloured throws on the sofa, that sort of thing. Two plants. Both alive. A television of modest size.

I appear to have arrived in the middle of some event. Several people are standing in an awkward circle, sipping from glasses of champagne and pretending to laugh at what the others are saying. A variety of ages and sexes suggests that this is a family occasion.

Birthday cards abound. Discarded wrapping paper. Presents. Talk of leaving for the restaurant. Hungry for information I read the cards. They're addressed to someone called Katie and she appears to be celebrating her fortieth birthday. I wouldn't have thought that that called for much celebration but it takes all sorts, I'm told.

I locate Katie. She looks a good deal younger than forty, but forty is the new twenty, according to my information. She's tallish and dark-haired and bosomy and gamely doing her best to stay upright in a pair of spike-heeled knee-boots. Her force field is a pleasant one; she vibrates with level-headed warmth, like a slightly sexy primary-school teacher. (Although that's not actually her job. I know this because I know an awful lot.)

The man next to Katie, glowing with date pride – the pride

is in large part to do with the new platinum watch on Katie's wrist – is her boyfriend, partner, loved one, whatever you want to call it.

An interesting man, with a compelling life force, his vibrations are so powerful they're almost visible. I'll be honest: I'm intrigued.

Conall, they're calling this man. The more polite members of the group, at least. A few other names are hovering in the ether – Show-off; Flash bastard – but remain unuttered. *Fascinating*. The men don't like him *at all*. I've identified Katie's father, brother and brother-in-law and not one of them is keen. However, the women – Katie's mother, sister and best friend – don't seem to mind him as much.

I'll tell you something else: this Conall doesn't live here. A man on a frequency as potent as his wouldn't stand for a television of such modest size. Or plant-watering.

I waft past Katie and she puts a hand up to the nape of her neck and shivers.

'What?' Conall looks ready to do battle.

'Nothing. Someone just walked over my grave.'

Oh come now! Hardly!

'Hey!' Naomi – older sister of Katie – is pointing at a mirror that's propped on the floor against a cupboard. 'Is your new mirror not up yet?'

'Not yet,' Katie says, sudden tension leaking from between her teeth.

'But you've had it for ages! I thought Conall was going to do it for you.'

'Conall *is* going to do it,' Katie says very firmly. 'Tomorrow morning, before he goes to Helsinki. Aren't you, Conall?'

Friction! Zinging around the room, rebounding off the walls. Conall, Katie and Naomi volleying waves of tension against each other in a fast-moving taut triangle, the repercus-

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sions expanding ever outwards to include everyone else there. *Entre nous*, I'm *dying* to find out what's going on but, to my alarm, I'm being overtaken by some sort of force. Something bigger or better than me is moving me downwards. Through the 100 per cent wool rug, past some dodgy joists, which are frankly *riddled* with woodworm – someone should be told – and into another place: the flat below Katie's. I'm in a kitchen. An astonishingly dirty kitchen. Pots and pans and plates are piled higgledy-piggledy in the sink, soaking in stagnant water, the lino floor hasn't been washed in an age, and the stove top sports many elaborate splashes of old food as if a gang of action painters has recently paid a visit. Two muscular young men are leaning on the kitchen table, talking in Polish. Their faces are close together and the conversation is urgent, almost panicked. They're both pulsing with angst, so much so that their vibrations have become entangled and I can't get a handle on either of them. Luckily, I discover I am fluent in Polish, and here's a rude translation of what they're saying:

'Jan, you tell her.'

'No, Andrei, you tell her.'

'I tried the last time.'

'Andrei, she respects you more.'

'No, Jan. Hard as it is for me, a Polish man, to understand, she doesn't respect either of us. Irish women are beyond me.'

'Andrei, you tell her and I'll give you three stuffed cabbages.'

'Four and you're on.'

(I'm afraid I made up those last two sentences.)

Into the kitchen comes the object of their earnest discussion and I can't see what they're so afraid of, two fine big lads like them, with their tattoos and slightly menacing buzz cuts. This little creature – Irish, unlike the two boys – is *lovely*. A pretty little minx with mischievous eyes and spiky eyelashes

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and a head of charming jack-in-the-box curls that spring all the way down past her shoulders. Mid-twenties, by the look of her, and exuding vibrations so zesty they zigzag through the air.

In her hand she's carrying a pre-prepared dinner. A wretched-looking repast. (Greyish roast beef, in case you're interested.)

'Go on,' Jan hisses at Andrei.

'Lydia.' Andrei gestures at the, quite frankly, filthy kitchen. Speaking English, he says, 'You clean sometime.'

'Sometime,' she agrees, scooping up a fork from the draining board. 'But sadly not in this lifetime. Now move.'

With alacrity Andrei clears a path for her to access the microwave. Viciously, she jabs her fork into the cellophane covering her dinner. Four times, each puncture making a noise like a small explosion, loud enough to make Jan's left eye twitch, then she slams the carton into the microwave. I take this opportunity to drift up behind her to introduce myself, but to my surprise she swats me away as though I were a pesky fly.

Me!

Don't you know who I am?

Andrei is giving it another go. 'Lydia, pliz . . . Jan and I, we clean menny, menny times.'

'Good for you.' Breezy delivery from Lydia as she locates the least dirty-looking knife in the murk of the sink and runs it under the tap for half a second.

'We hev made rota.' Feebly Andrei waves a piece of paper at her.

'Good for you *again*.' Oh how white her teeth are, how dazzling her smile!

'You are livingk here three weeks. You hev not cleaned. You must clean.'

An unexpected pulse of emotion radiates from Lydia, black

and bitter. Apparently, she *does* clean. But not here? Where, then?

‘Andrei, my little Polish cabbage, and you too, Jan, my other little Polish cabbage, let’s imagine things were the other way round.’ She waves her (still soiled) knife to emphasize her point. In fact, I know that there are 273 different bacteria thriving and flourishing on that knife. However, I also know by now that it would take the bravest and most heroic of bacteria to get the better of this Lydia.

‘The other way round?’ Andrei asks anxiously.

‘Say it was two women and one man living in this flat. The man would never do anything. The women would do it all. Wouldn’t they?’

The microwave beeps. She whisks her unappetizing dinner from it and, with a charming smile, leaves the room to look up something on the internet.

What a peppy little madam! A most fascinating little fire-brand!

‘She called us cabbages,’ Jan said stonily. ‘I hate when she calls us cabbages.’

But, eager as I am to see what transpires next – tears from Jan, perhaps? – I’m being moved again. Onwards, downwards, through the health-hazard lino, through more porous timber-work, and I find myself in yet another flat. This one is darker. Full of heavy furniture too big and brown for the room. It features several rugs of conflicting patterns, and net curtains so dense they appear to be crocheted. Seated on a sturdy arm-chair is a dour-looking elderly woman. Knees apart, slippers on feet planted firmly on the floor. She must be at least a hundred and sixteen. She’s watching a gardening programme and, from the furrow-browed expression on her face, you’d swear she’s never heard such outrageous idiocy in her life. Hardy perennials? No such thing, you stupid stupid man! Everything dies!

I float past her and into a small gloomy bedroom, then into a slightly bigger, but just as gloomy, second bedroom, where I'm surprised to meet a large, long-eared dog so big and grey that momentarily I think he's a donkey. He's slumped in a corner, his head on his paws, sulking – then he senses my presence and instantly he's alert. You can't get away with it, with animals. Different frequencies, see. It's all about the frequencies.

Frozen with awe and fear, his long donkey-ears cocked, he growls softly, then changes his mind, poor confused fool. Am I friend or foe? He hasn't a notion.

And the name of this creature? Well, oddly enough it would appear to be 'Grudge'. But that can't be right, that's not a name. The problem is, there's too much *stuff* in this flat and it's slowing the vibrations down, messing with their patterns.

Leaving the donkey dog behind, I flit back into the sitting room, where there's a mahogany roll-top desk as dense and weighty as a fully grown elephant. A modest pile of opened mail tells me that the crone's name is Jemima.

Beside the mail is a silver-framed photo of a young man, and with a flash of insight I know his name is Fionn. It means 'Fair One'. So who is he? Jemima's betrothed who was killed in the Boer War? Or was he carried off in the flu epidemic of 1918? But the photo-style is wrong for a First World War type. Those men, in their narrow-cut uniforms, are always so rigid and four-square to the camera you could believe their own rifle had been shoved up their back passage. Invariably, they wear a scrubbing brush on their upper lip and, from the lifeless, glassy-eyed way they face the viewer, they look as if they've died and been stuffed. Fionn, by contrast, looks like a prince from a child's storybook. It's all in the hair – which is fairish and longish and wavyish – and the jaw, which is square. He's wearing a leather jacket and faded jeans and is

crouching down in what appears to be a flower bed, and he has a handful of soil, which he's proffering to me with a cheeky smile, *saucy* almost, like he's offering a lot more than –! God Almighty! He's just winked at me! Yes, he winked! His photograph winked! And a silver star pinged from his smile! I can scarcely believe it.

'I can feel your presence!' Jemima suddenly barks, scaring the living daylights out of me. I'd forgotten about her, I was so engrossed in Fionn the Prince and his winking and twinkling.

'I know you're here,' she says. 'And you don't frighten me!'

She's on to me! And I haven't gone near her. More sensitive than she looks.

'Show yourself,' she commands.

I will, missus, oh I will. But not just yet. Your time will have to be bided. Anyway, I appear to be off again, being pulled and stretched ever downwards. I'm in the ground-floor flat now. I can see the street through the living-room window. I'm sensing a lot of love here. And something else . . .

On a sofa, washed by the flickering light of the television (32 inch) is . . . is . . . well, it's a man and a woman, but they're clinging so tightly to each other that for a moment I think they are one and the same, some strange mythological, two-headed, three-legged thing, which is all I need right now. (The fourth leg is there, simply hidden beneath their bodies.)

On the floor are two plates, on which the remains of a hearty dinner can be discerned: potatoes, red meat, gravy, carrots – a mite heavy for June, I would have thought, but what do I know?

The woman – Maeve – now that I can make her out, is blonde and rosy-cheeked, like an angel from a painting. There's a chubby, cheruby freshness about her because she was once a farm girl. She might be living in Dublin now, but the sweet clean air of the countryside still clings to her. This

woman has no fear of mud. Or cow's udders. Or hens going into labour. (Somehow I sense that I've got that slightly wrong.) But this woman fears other things . . .

It's hard to get a look at the man – Matt – because they're interwoven so tightly; his face is almost entirely hidden. Funny enough, they're watching the same gardening programme as Jemima one floor above them. But unlike Jemima, they appear to think it's a marvellous piece of televisual entertainment.

Unexpectedly, I sense the presence of another man here. It's faint but it's enough to send me scooting round the place to check it out. Like the other three flats in the building, there are two bedrooms, but here only one functions as an actual bedroom. The other, the smaller of the two rooms, has been turned into a home-office-cum-skip – a desk and a computer and abandoned sporting goods (walking poles, badminton racquets, riding boots, that type of thing), but nothing on which a person could sleep.

I sniff around a bit more. Two matching Podge and Rodge cups in the kitchen, two matching Tigger cereal bowls, two matching everythings. Whatever this extra male presence is, he doesn't live here. And from the wild, overgrown state of the back garden that you can see from the bedroom window, he doesn't cut the grass either. Back in the living room, I move up close to the angelic Maeve, to introduce myself – being *friendly* – but she starts flapping her arms, like someone swimming on dry land, disentangling herself from Matt. She breaks free of him and sits bolt upright. The blood has drained from her face and her mouth has opened into a big silent O.

Matt, struggling from the couch's saggy embrace to a seated position, is equally distressed. 'Maeve! Maeve. It's only about gardening! Did they say something?' Alarm is written

all over him. Now that I get a better look, I see he's got a young, likeable, confident face, and I suspect that, when he isn't so concerned, he's one of life's smilers.

'No, nothing . . .' Maeve says. 'Sorry, Matt, I just felt . . . no, it's okay, I'm okay.'

They settle – a little uneasily – back into their clinging positions. But I've upset her. I've upset them both and I don't want to do that. I've taken a liking to them; I'm touched by the uncommon tenderness they share.

'All right,' I said (although of course they couldn't hear me), 'I'm going.'

I sit outside on the front step, a little disconsolate. One more time I check the address: 66 Star Street, Dublin 8. A red-bricked Georgian house with a blue front door and a knocker in the shape of a banana. (One of the previous occupants was a fun-loving metal-worker. Everyone hated him.) Yes, the house is definitely red-bricked. Yes, Georgian. Yes, a blue front door. Yes, a knocker in the shape of a banana. I'm in the right place. But I hadn't been warned that so many people live here.

Expect the unexpected, I'd been advised. But this isn't the type of unexpected I'd expected. This is the *wrong* unexpected.

And there's no one I can ask. I've been cut loose, like an agent in deep cover. I'll just have to work it out for myself.

Day 61 . . .

I spent my first evening in 66 Star Street rattling from flat to flat, wondering anxiously which one was mine. Katie's flat was empty. Shortly after my arrival her crew had departed, in a cloud of tension, to some expensive restaurant. In the flat below, while Andrei and Jan cleaned the kitchen, Lydia parked herself at the little desk wedged into a corner of their living room and spent long intense minutes surfing the net. When she went to her bedroom for a snooze and Jan and Andrei retired to their twin-bedded room to study their business management books – such good boys – I descended yet another floor, to Jemima's. I took care to keep myself well clear of her; I didn't want her shouting abuse at me again. But I must admit that I got great entertainment out of toying with the dog, Grudge – if that really is the creature's name. I shimmered before him and he stared in rapt, paralysed amazement. On the spur of the moment I decided to do a little dance and – all credit to him – his big grey head moved in perfect time with me. I undulated faster and faster and twirled above his head, and he did his best to keep up, poor eejit, until he'd mesmerized himself so much he collapsed in a giddy heap, snickering and dog-laughing away to himself. At that point, regretfully, I stopped. It wouldn't do if he vomited.

Then, finally, I returned to Matt and Maeve. It's where I'd wanted to be all along but, professional that I was, I'd thought I'd better explore every avenue. Well, they were explored for the moment at least so, with a clear conscience, I could rejoin the loved-up pair on their sofa.

Whatever show they'd been watching had just ended and Maeve automatically opened her arms to free Matt from her

embrace. He rolled off the couch and on to the floor, then sprang to his feet, like an SAS person entering an enemy embassy. A smooth, slick routine, obviously a frequent one, and luckily the dinner plates that had been there earlier had been removed or else Matt's nice T-shirt would have been stained with gravy.

'Tea?' Matt asked.

'Tea,' Maeve confirmed.

In the little kitchen, Matt put the kettle on and opened a cupboard and was almost brained by the avalanche of biscuits and buns that poured out. He selected two packets – chocolate mini-rolls and chocolate ginger nuts, the mini-rolls were Maeve's favourites, the ginger nuts were his – then he used both his hands to cram the remaining packets back into the cupboard and slammed the door shut very quickly before they could fall out again.

While he was waiting for the kettle to boil, he tore open the ginger nuts and absent-mindedly ate two, barely tasting them. Such a casual attitude to trans-fat and refined sugar led me to suspect that he consumed a fair amount of them, and on closer inspection I noted that he had a hint, the merest . . . oh . . . *whiff* of a suggestion of a tinge of tubbiness. His entire body was padded with a surplus of – honestly – no more than a millimetre of fat. I must insist that this is not a cowardly attempt to break the news that he was a fatso. His stomach was not bursting its way out of his T-shirt, and he only had the one chin and a nice strong one it was too. Yes, perhaps he could have lost a little weight, but it suited him, the way he was. If he were half a stone lighter, he might shrink into someone a little less charming; he might seem too ambitious, too efficacious, his haircut a tad too sharp.

Two spoons of sugar each in their tea and back in to Maeve. A new programme had begun, another favourite of

theirs from what I could gather. A cookery one this time, presented by a personable young man called Neven Maguire. They curled up next to each other and watched scallops being sautéed and drank their tea and made serious inroads into the biscuits. In a spirit of inclusivity, Maeve ate one of Matt's ginger nuts even though they were dark chocolate ones, which she didn't like, and Matt ate one of Maeve's mini-rolls even though they were so sweet they made the hinge of his jaws hurt. They were very, very kind to each other and, in my discombobulated state, this was soothing.

A cynical type might suggest that it was all a little too perfect. But a cynical type would be wrong. Matt and Maeve weren't just acting the part of people who are Very Much In Love. It was the real thing because their heart vibrations were in perfect harmony.

Not everyone knows this but each human heart gives off an electric current that extends outwards from the body to a distance of ten feet. People wonder why they take instant likes or dislikes to people. They assume it's to do with associations: if they meet a short, mono-browed woman, they remember the time that another short, mono-browed woman had helped them get their hairdryer unstuck from a hedge and cannot help but feel warmly to this new, entirely unconnected, short, mono-browed woman. Or the first man who short-changed them was called Carl and from that day forth all Carls were regarded as suspect. But instant likes or dislikes are also the result of the harmony (or disharmony) of heart currents and Matt's and Maeve's hearts Beat As One.

The moment that Matt fell in love with Maeve . . .

That moment had been coming for quite a while, to be honest, and it finally arrived on a bone-cold March morning, roughly four and a quarter years ago, when Maeve was twenty-six and

Matt was twenty-eight. They were on the Dart, and they weren't alone – they were with three others, two girls and a young man, all of them on their way to a one-day training course. The five of them worked at Goliath, a software multinational, where Matt headed up one of the sales teams. Matt was actually Maeve's boss (in fact, he was also the boss of the other three people present), although he never behaved in a particularly bossy way – his style of management was to encourage and praise and he got the best out of his team because they were all – male and female – half in love with him.

The thing was that Matt wasn't even meant to be there. He had a company car so he usually drove to his appointments (he always offered lifts to those less fortunate than him), but on this particular day his car had refused to start, so he had to bundle himself up against the elements and go on the Dart with the rest of them. Often, in the agonizing times that followed, he wondered whether, if his car hadn't been banjaxed, he would have crossed the line from being fond of Maeve to actually being in love with her. But the answer was, of course, yes. He and Maeve were destined for each other; *something* would have happened.

Matt was a city boy, born and bred in Dublin. He'd never been within a hundred yards of a cow. But Maeve had lived on a farm in Galway for the first eighteen years of her life – in fact, her nickname among her co-workers was Farmgirl. She'd recently been 'down home' to help out with the calving and she was full of a life-and-death saga of a calf called Bessie who was born prematurely, then rejected by her mother. Although Matt had less than zero interest in farm stuff, he was drawn in by the story of Bessie's struggle for survival. When Maeve got to the end of the tale and confirmed that Bessie was now 'thriving', he was surprised by how relieved he felt.

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‘It’s a mistake to get too attached to any of the animals?’ he asked.

‘A mistake is right.’ Maeve sighed. ‘I’d a pet pig for a while. Poor Winifred. They took her away to make rashers of her. I won’t make that mistake again. Now I’ve a drake and at least the only thing he’ll die of is natural causes.’

‘A drake?’ Matt asked.

‘A male duck.’

‘I knew that.’ At least, now that she’d said it, he did.

She laughed at his bluster. ‘Oh! You’re *such* a blagger.’

The three other team members stiffened slightly. Easy-going as he was, Matt was still their boss. Was it okay to call him a blagger? But Maeve’s laughter was full of affection for Matt and Matt certainly didn’t seem offended. He and Maeve were twinkling and smiling at each other. In fact, they twinkled and smiled at each other a lot . . .

‘Here, I’ve a photo of him in my wallet,’ Maeve said. ‘Roger. He’s a beauty.’

‘A photo of a duck?’ Matt didn’t know what to make of this; he thought it was very odd but also very funny. ‘This gets better and better. And he’s called Roger? Like, why *Roger*?’

‘He looks like a Roger. No, he really does. I’ll show you.’ Maeve pulled her wallet from her satchel, looking for the photo. But, in her enthusiasm, she accidentally opened her purse and, with an ominous flash of metal, a waterfall of change roared towards the floor of the Dart, coins cracking and bouncing and rolling the full length of the carriage.

All the other passengers tried to pretend that nothing had happened. Those that were hit on the foot by a coin kicked it away or flicked a quick look down just to check that it wasn’t a mouse chewing their shoe, then returned to their texting or their magazine or their newspaper inspection.

‘Oh cripes!’ Maeve stood up and laughed helplessly. ‘There goes my change for the laundrette.’ As if she had a magnetic draw, all thirteen passengers raised their heads, and suddenly Matt saw the power she possessed. Not a swaggering, arrogant power, not the power granted by expensive clothes or glossy make-up – because Maeve’s jeans and Uggs and tangled curls would hardly have bouncers in nightclubs rushing to remove the red rope and usher her forward. What made Maeve so potent was that she expected the best from other people.

She never considered that the strangers around her wouldn’t want to help – and her faith was repaid. Matt watched, transfixed, as nearly everyone in the carriage dropped automatically to their knees, as if they were in the presence of an awe-inspiring deity, scrambling for any coins that they could see. Matt and the others were in there, helping, but so were Lithuanian naturopaths and Syrian kitchen porters and Filipino nurses and Irish schoolboys. They were all on the floor, gathering and walking in a low crouch, like slow-motion Cossacks. ‘Thank you,’ Maeve said, over and over, receiving the returned coins. ‘Thank you, oh thank you, you’re so decent, more power to you, fair play, outstanding, God bless, thanks.’

This is the person I want to be with, Matt found himself thinking. Then he revised it. No, he thought, this is the person I want to *be*.

Two stops later, when Matt and his team got off, Maeve called out, ‘Thanks again, you were very decent,’ and you could have roasted potatoes in the warmth that she left in her slipstream. Matt knew that everyone would go home that evening and relate the story. ‘A two-euro coin hit me on the foot and I thought, feck it, missus, you dropped the money, you get to pick it up, I mean, I’ve had a hard week, but she seemed like a nice person so I did help to pick up the

money, and you know what, I'm happy that I did, I feel good about myself –'

My trip down Matt and Maeve's memory lane is interrupted by sudden activity from two floors above and I scoot up to check it out.

Day 61 . . .

Andrei and Jan had put their textbooks away neatly and were emerging into the hall, casting fearful looks for Lydia. I was still finding it hard to tell them apart – they existed in such a fug of Lydia-fear that their vibrations were quite corrupted. I noted this much: Andrei had astonishing blue eyes which burned with the intensity of a religious zealot's, but he was *not* a religious zealot. Jan also had blue eyes, but his did not burn with the intensity of a religious zealot's. However . . . yes, however . . . he had a prayer-book which he read frequently with some – yes! – *zeal*.

So true what they say: one really cannot judge on appearances.

They equipped themselves with beer and Pringles and took their seats in the living room for *Entourage*. They were mad for *Entourage*. It was their favourite show, one of the high points of their week. They longed to go to America and live an *Entourage* life, with sunshine and cars and, of course, beautiful women, but, above all else, the unbreachable walls of male solidarity.

Silent and worshipful before the television, they didn't hear Lydia enter the room. They only knew she was there when she broke the *Entourage* spell by saying, 'Boys, boys, why so glum?'

'What is glum?' Jan asked anxiously. Instantly, he was sorry he had spoken. Andrei's constant advice was: Do not engage with her.

'What is glum?' Lydia considered. 'Glum is unhappy, sad, downcast, low, gloomy, of little cheer.' She gazed at them with an expression that was intended to seem fond. 'Home-sick, that's what Dr Lydia has diagnosed.' In a voice dripping

with insincere sympathy she asked gently, 'My little dump-
lings, are you missing Minsk?'

Neither boy spoke. Over the past three miserable weeks, they had become familiar with this routine in which Lydia threw about city names ending in 'sk'.

'Minnn.ssskkkk!' Lydia savoured the sound. 'Ssskkkk? Missing it?'

When she got no response, she said in fake surprise, 'Not missing it? But how unpatriotic you are.'

This was too much for Jan, who, every waking moment he was in Ireland, yearned with desperate passion to be back home. 'Irishgirl, we are not from Minsk! We are from Gdansk! Poles, not Belarussians!'

As soon as the words were uttered, Jan wanted to cut out his tongue. Lydia had broken him! Once again he had betrayed the resistance!

Deeply ashamed, he looked at Andrei. *I'm sorry. I'm not as strong as you.*

It's okay, Andrei replied silently. You must not blame yourself. She could destroy even the bravest man.

(Okay, their separate identities are coming into focus for me now. Andrei – older, smarter, stronger. Jan – younger, sweeter, dafter.)

Lydia left, and after a lengthy silence Jan admitted, 'I am glum.'

Several seconds elapsed before Andrei spoke. 'I too am glum.'

Day 61 . . .

Back on the ground floor, it seemed that Matt and Maeve were planning to pop out for a late-night jog. In their bedroom – an Ikean wonderland, the bedside cabinets slightly off-kilter because the assembly instructions in the boxes had been in Czech and Matt said that if he had to go back to Ikea to get the English ones he'd drive himself at high speed into a wall – they undressed, Maeve turning away from Matt as she removed her bra. Immediately, they proceeded to get dressed again, seeming to put on even more clothes than they had already been wearing. Maeve was now covered neck to ankle in grey sweats and Matt was kitted out in jocks, baggy jogging pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Then . . . bafflingly! . . . they got into bed! Why so swaddled? It was a warm night out there.

It suddenly occurred to me that perhaps they were about to play a sexy undressing game. But what was wrong with removing the clothes they'd already been wearing?

I was far from happy at the thought of witnessing whatever strange jiggery-pokery they were about to unleash but I forced myself to linger. I had no choice! It was important to get the lie of the land. Propped up on his pillow, Matt flicked his way through a car magazine, snapping the pages, hungry to see what the next contained, meanwhile on her side of the bed, Maeve read *Pride and Prejudice* . . . and that's all that happened. I lingered some more, noting the hefty little pile of other Jane Austens on Maeve's nightstand – clearly a fan. And I lingered still more, until it became clear that no sexy undressing game was about to kick off.

I must admit to a little relief.

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The only problem with Matt falling in love with Maeve four and a quarter years ago was that Matt already had a girlfriend . . .

Yes, the lovely Natalie. And she really was lovely. Of all the beautiful, brainy girls at Goliath – and there were more than two hundred youthful employees so there were many to choose from – Natalie was the most beautiful, the most brainy of all: smooth brown skin; long, lean thighs; a defiant question mark in her eye; a great facility for her job. (A Belgian national, she was a wonderful advertisement for her famously dull country.)

Matt – smiling, lovable Matt, with the widely acknowledged conviction that he would Go Far – was a partner worthy of the lovely Natalie.

Matt and Nat each headed up a sales team and, lovers though they were, they were also rivals. They competed against each other, gloating (with great good humour, of course) every time they closed a sale of one of Goliath's software packages. 'One less for you, bud.'

So when Maeve joined as a trainee, it was no surprise that Matt, with his glossy girlfriend and his demanding job, barely noticed her. Mind you, Goliath being what it was (a company enjoying exponential growth), new people were appearing round the clock – on the same day that Maeve had started, so had Tarik from Pakistan and Yen-way from Taiwan – so there were always fresh faces enjoying a brainstorming game of ping-pong in the chill room or queueing to partake of the free breakfast granola. It was hard to keep up.

Maeve, friendly and positive, with a musical, rounded accent, was popular among her colleagues, but she still hadn't registered as a meaningful presence on Matt's radar until one night when Matt and Nat were leaving work. They clicked quickly down the shiny marble hallway, black leather foot-

wear flashing, serious tailoring flying, the storm troopers of Sales. Moving in harmony, they powered through Goliath's massive double doors – taking a door each – passing Maeve who was crouched low, unlocking her bike.

‘Goodnight, lads,’ she said.

With perfect synchronicity, Matt and Nat swung their smooth, perfectly shaped heads to see who had spoken and – as one – exploded into uncontrollable laughter.

‘What?’ Maeve asked. Realization dawned and a smile spread across her face. ‘Is it my hat?’

‘Yes!’

Maeve's hat was an orange and pink Inca-patterned knitted helmet. A triangle of yarn covered each ear, woollen plaits fell to her chest and the top came to a sharp point, on which an orange pompom was perched.

‘Is it very bad?’ Maeve was still smiling.

‘Very bad,’ Nat said.

‘But it's all the rage on the Machu Picchu trail and it keeps my ears warm.’ This made all three of them laugh even harder. Then, with a rough rush of metal, Maeve liberated her bike from its chain, hopped on to the saddle and, moving fluidly, freewheeled out into the traffic.

‘She's so sweet.’ Nat sighed. ‘What do you think about her and David? Is it the real thing?’

Matt hadn't a clue. He'd barely noticed Maeve until five minutes ago, much less known that she was going out with David.

‘So much in common.’ Nat smiled fondly. ‘Seeing as they're both Galwegians.’

(David was actually from Manchester – it wasn't necessary to come from Galway to qualify for Galwegian status. It was an umbrella term that implied fondness for falafels, frizzy jumpers and festivals – music, obviously, but comedy, poetry, beer . . . anything would do. If it involved a mud and pints, it

was perfect. If the festival could be combined with a protest march, then so much the better. Indeed, the ideal weekend, a veritable *Utopia* for a Galwegian, was to get caught up in an anti-globalism riot, cracked on the skull with a truncheon and thrown into a police cell for twenty-four hours with a trio of hard-core protesters from Genoa. Galwegians were hardy; they slept like babies on their friends' cold hard floors. Galwegians were proud of being Irish – even when they weren't actually Irish – and they dropped many Irish words into conversation. Much of Goliath's multicultural staff spoke basic Galwegian. A popular phrase was 'Egg choct egg oal?' It meant 'Coming for a drink?')

The funny thing was that at the time Matt coveted David far more than he coveted Maeve.

'I'd love to get David on my team,' he said wistfully.

'You and me both,' Natalie replied.

David was on Godric's team and was Godric's most valuable asset. He was super-brainy, a mathematics whizz, and he could disentangle the knottiest implementation problems. He just kept plugging away, trying things this way, trying things that way, until he'd unlocked and ordered things into a way that worked.

'David could be a team leader himself if he wanted to,' Matt said.

David was probably older than almost everyone else in Goliath, only by a few years, but enough to make him a natural leader. Nevertheless, he resisted all attempts to be steered in the direction of management.

'What do you think the story is?' Matt asked Nat.

'Doesn't want to be pigeon-holed, he said.'

David had packed an awful lot already into his thirty years. He'd travelled all over and done an impressive variety of jobs from teaching physics in Guyana to being

a nanny in a progressive-thinking family in Vancouver.

‘Doesn’t want a “career path”, he told me.’ Nat shook her head and laughed. She couldn’t understand people who didn’t have the same ambition that she did.

‘Very noble of him.’

‘Maybe he’s a little too noble?’

‘Mmmm.’

They were both remembering the incident the previous week when David – always passionate about injustice – became so enraged by pro-Russian coverage of the ongoing war in Chechnya that he printed out the offending article from the Reuters’ site and gathered several acolytes around his desk while he ceremoniously burned the page. It had set off all the smoke alarms.

‘And lucky the sprinklers didn’t start,’ Matt said.

‘He could have destroyed all our machines,’ Nat said.

‘And he didn’t care. Said the principle was more important.’

‘Principle.’ Nat rolled her eyes. ‘For God’s sake.’

After the laughing-at-the-hat incident, Matt knew who Maeve was and a week or so later, when he was driving to work and saw an orange pompom bobbing above the traffic, he was able to say to himself: It’s that Maeve girl, the one with the hat.

On her bike, she wove in and out of lanes until she disappeared from view, then the lights changed and Matt took off and caught up with her. While he was once again stalled in a sea of cars, she was diligently working her way away from him and into the distance, then the lights changed and he lurched forward, closing the gap. It became a pattern. She’d get ahead of him, he’d chase after her, searching for the jaunty orange pompom, then she’d put some distance between them while he clenched his hands on the steering wheel, waiting for the chance to move

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Although she knew nothing about it, he felt they were in a race. His journey to work had never been more fun.

As he approached the busy intersection of Hanlon's Corner he was in the lead. The lights were green, but anxiety that he'd get too far ahead of Maeve made him slow down and the lights obliged by changing to amber. Just as the lights turned red, Maeve whizzed up the inside lane to the head of the traffic and stopped for the briefest moment while making a series of high-speed calculations. Matt could actually feel her judging her speed, the length of time available to her and the distance of the drivers who were gunning their engines, ready for their green light, now that the opposite lights had gone red. Then she shot out into the empty space, looking small and astonishingly brave, like a student squaring up to an army tank. All eyes were on the orange pompom as she raced through the danger zone, and when she reached the safety of the other side Matt was buoyed up with relief and admiration.

The episode made such an impression that when he got in to work he made a special visit to the crowded pod she shared with the other trainees.

'Morning, Miss Maeve. Has anyone ever told you you're an excellent breaker of red lights? So calm, so daring?'

She looked up from her screen, her eyes dancing with amusement. 'Has anyone ever told you you're full of guff?'

'Guff?'

'You know, chat, blather, blarney.'

'Right.' Some Galwegian word, obviously. 'I saw you on the way to work. Crossing Hanlon's Corner when the lights were against you. Nerves of steel.'

'I believe in taking my chances.'

'You're lucky you weren't killed.'

'Fortune favours the bold.'

'You wouldn't catch me cycling in this city.'

‘You should try it. It ennobles the soul.’

‘My soul is noble enough.’

‘Is it now?’ she asked, looking at him, her expression amused.

‘Stop it!’

‘What?’

‘Looking at me like you know something about me that I don’t.’

‘Me?’ She laughed. ‘I know nothing.’

Matt didn’t tell Natalie about the morning he’d raced Maeve to work. There was no need, it was no biggie. The funny thing was that Natalie was just as fond of Maeve as he was and together they’d claimed a sort of ownership of her the way you would an adorable, harmless puppy. At Friday-night drinks in the pub, they made sure they were sitting near her, listening to her melodic accent and the strange words she used. ‘Ganzey’ when she meant sweater – that type of thing.

One Friday evening, Nat swung by Matt’s desk. ‘You ready?’

‘Ten minutes.’

‘See you in the pub. Make sure Maeve’s there.’ And she was gone.

Matt knew better than to ask Nat to wait for him. Nat never wasted time.

When he’d finished, he made his way to Maeve’s pod. ‘Coming for a drink?’

‘A drink?’ Maeve gazed at nothing as she considered. She seemed to disappear inside her head. After a short pause she smiled and said, ‘No, not tonight, Matt.’

‘Why not, Farmgirl?’ He felt, well, he felt quite . . . *rejected*. ‘Off out with your boyfriend?’

‘And what if I am?’ Her tone was light-hearted.

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‘Nothing.’ Matt was assailed by a sudden stab of intense dislike for David. He was so right-on and decent, always supporting causes and organizing charity things and being so *caring*.

‘I’m on the bike,’ Maeve said.

Matt looked blank.

‘I can’t have more than one drink if I’m on the bike,’ she explained. ‘I’d rather have none than one.’

Instantly, Matt shifted his dislike from David to Maeve’s bike, like it was a chaperone keeping him from her.

‘Well, *I’m* going for a drink,’ Matt said, with defiance that he didn’t really understand.

‘More power to you.’

‘*Yes*, more power to me.’

In the pub, Nat asked, ‘Where’s Maeve?’

‘Not coming.’

‘She’s not?’ Nat seemed disproportionately disappointed.

Matt looked at her warily. ‘What’s up?’

‘Maeve’s finishing her training next week.’

‘Already?’

‘Two weeks early. It’s a secret. She’s done really well. I want her on my team.’

But I want her.

‘And she wants to be on Team Nat?’

‘I haven’t asked her. I was going to float it tonight.’

‘So she doesn’t know anything about it yet?’

‘No.’

I’ll get to her first.

When Matt persuaded Pong from Thailand to leave his team for Nat’s and took Maeve for himself, Nat seemed a little shaken by Matt’s treachery. Nevertheless, she raised a glass and declared him ‘a worthy adversary’

In the following weeks, Matt started saying ‘guff’ and ‘more power to you’ and sometimes ‘more power to your elbow’.

‘More power to my elbow?’ Nat laughed. ‘My little Galwegian boy.’

It was her joke. As if she, the lovely Natalie, would ever go out with a Galwegian.

Day 61 . . .

By 11.30 p.m. Star Street had fallen silent. I'd been waiting for Katie to come home and I realized she wasn't going to. I located her across the city, entering a large Victorian house, about to receive a birthday pleasuring from potent Conall.

She was very chatty. The result of large quantities of champagne. Conall was trying, with admirable good humour, to unlock his front door and simultaneously keep Katie upright.

'Who'd beat who in a fight?' Katie was asking. 'Hedge-fund manager or you?'

'Me.' Conall's tone of voice gave me to understand that this line of questioning had been going on for some time.

His fingers circled her arm, as he led them into the house and disabled the alarm.

Katie leaned against a light switch and exclaimed in drunken delight as half the house lit up. 'I do that? Let there be light! No need to hold on to me – I won't fall over.'

'Fall over if you like. It's your birthday.'

'I drank a lot of champagne.' She nodded her head seriously. 'Bit pissed. Could happen.'

Conall steered her to the staircase and together, very slowly, they ascended, Katie having to take frequent pauses to laugh for no reason.

On step four she refused to budge. 'This is a good one! Conall, who'd beat who in a fight? President of the World Bank or you?'

'Me.'

'It's nice to just lean back, you know? Like this.' She allowed all her weight to fall against the arm Conall had around her

waist. ‘You won’t let me fall. Used to do it at school, see how much we trusted someone.’

‘Ups-a-daisy. We’ll keep moving.’

On the ninth step she stopped again. ‘Who’d beat who in a fight? The CEO of Jasmine Foods or you?’

‘Me. With both hands tied behind my back.’

That made her laugh long and wheezily, and all progress halted. ‘Can’t walk and laugh at same time.’

Finally, they reached the landing and he opened the bedroom door. Katie toppled in, made it as far as the bed, lay on her back and stuck one leg up in the air. ‘Take off my boots.’

‘No, leave them on.’

‘Oh? Ooh. Okay. Who’d beat who in a –’

He covered her mouth with his and, after a moment, she ceased her questioning. She would never know who would beat who in a fight, the head of the International Monetary Fund or Conall, but suddenly it no longer seemed important. The birthday pleasuring had begun.

In her wardrobe in Star Street, I compressed myself into a red-soled, peep-toe shoe and accessed some of her memories.

How Katie met Conall . . .

Well, just like Matt and Maeve’s story, this too happened at work. Katie was head publicist at Apex Entertainment Ireland. They called themselves Apex *Entertainment*, because they wanted to seem twenty-first-century and multimedia, but basically they were a record company, the Irish outpost of a much bigger multinational. Katie had been there for five years, welcoming visiting rock stars to Ireland, organizing their interviews, hanging around backstage wearing a laminated pass, then – the most important part of her job as far as she could see – bringing them out on the piss. It was harder

than it sounded, because she was the one who had to remain sober and coherent enough to sign for all the bottles of Cristal, get the artistes home to bed, then show up at her desk at ten o'clock the following morning after four hours' sleep.

If you met her at a christening, you'd probably never guess she worked for a record company. Admittedly, she always wore high heels and sometimes tight jeans but she didn't take cocaine and her thighs were wider than her knees. Despite these impediments, Katie was popular with the visiting rock stars, who referred to her as 'Auntie Katie', which she didn't mind too much. Or 'Mum', which she did. Artistes returning to Ireland greeted her like an old friend and sometimes, late at night, they tried to wrestle her and her thighs into bed, but she knew their heart was never really in it, it was just an instinctive reaction, something they'd been programmed to do in the presence of any woman. She almost always turned them down.

So yes, Katie was working away, not exactly happy but not exactly unhappy either, when a rumour started doing the rounds that the European arm of Apex was going to be cut free from their US owners and sold to the highest bidder, who would promptly sack everyone. But that particular rumour regularly did the rounds, so Katie decided not to bother worrying. She didn't have the same energy she used to have and over the years she'd wasted too much adrenaline and anxiety on disasters that had never had the decency to occur.

Then it really happened. A press release announced that they'd been bought by Sony, who planned to keep Apex as a separate label. The relief engendered by this was short-lived because the next sentence said that Apex would be 'rationalized' by Morehampton Green.

'Who are they?' Tamsin asked. (Low-grade frequency. Not too bright. Wore white lipstick. Long legs, large breasts. Popular with visiting artistes.)

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‘Who cares?’ Katie said. Her frequency had gone haywire, quivering with fear. It wasn’t as though she loved her job but now that there was a chance she might lose it . . .

‘Vultures,’ Danno said, with contempt. (Danno, aged twenty-three. Shrill, fast-vibrating frequency. Needed very little sleep. Always wore black. Could consume copious amounts of cocaine without any apparent ill-effects. Also popular with visiting artistes.)

‘Morehampton Green descend on companies that are underperforming,’ Danno explained. ‘Strip them of their assets, sack most of the staff and leave nothing in their wake but shock and awe.’

‘And what good’s that?’ Katie asked.

‘They make it much more efficient, save loads of money, *the usual*. Normally, Morehampton Green ply their nasty business in South-East Asia, but they’re prepared to make an exception for us.’

‘Decent of them.’

‘What’s going to happen to us, Katie?’ Tamsin asked.

‘I don’t know.’

In a strange hierarchical glitch, Katie didn’t really have a boss. Officially, her manager was Howard Cookman, president of European publicity, but he was based in London and had no interest at all in the Irish end of things, which usually suited Katie just fine because he had a tendency to bore on in an atrocious accent, part LA, part *EastEnders*, about the times he’d met a) Mark Knopfler, b) Simon Le Bon, and c) Debbie Gibson.

Katie had made it a point to protect her little slice of autonomy, but all of a sudden she was sorry. It wasn’t nice being the only grown-up and she yearned for someone with more power than her to come along and promise that everything was going to be okay.

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Alerted by a swishing noise, everyone present (all six of the Public Relations staff and all fourteen of Marketing) turned to the *Star Trek*-style automatic glass doors. It was Graham from Human Resources. Under normal circumstances he exuded smug confident vibrations but today his life force was much reduced.

Silently, he gave a memo to everyone in the room: two brief lines that said a Mr Conall Hathaway would be making contact 'shortly'.

'Who's he?' Katie asked.

'The axe-man sent by our new owners,' Graham said. 'He *is* Morehampton Green.'

'What do you mean, he *is* Morehampton Green?' Danno asked, irate that someone knew more than him.

'I mean Morehampton Green is pretty much a one-man band. He's bound to have a busload of number-crunchers with him but Conall Hathaway makes all the decisions.'

'Control freak,' Danno said, with great contempt.

'Why will he be contacting me?' Tamsin cried.

Graham bowed his head and said nothing.

'To let you know whether you still have a job or not,' Katie deduced. 'Am I right, Graham?'

Graham nodded, with resignation.

'Conall Hathaway? Surely you mean Conall the Barbarian?' said Danno. Danno enjoyed nicknames. (Those on his frequency usually do.)

For two days nothing happened. Everyone continued working as normal, because until something occurred there was always a chance that it mightn't. But on the afternoon of the third day, Danno was in possession of such an important titbit of news to share with his colleagues that the glass doors didn't swish open quickly enough and Danno crashed into them, catching an unpleasant blow to

his right temple. ‘Open, you useless pieces of –’ he yelled, stamping around on the floor, trying to activate whatever needed to be activated. At this point he had the attention of everyone within. Finally, the doors juddered apart and Danno burst into the office, like he’d been spat from a machine.

‘He has the cold dead eyes of a killer!’ Danno declared. ‘He got into the lift with me just now and, I swear, I nearly shat myself.’

‘Who?’

‘Slasher Hathaway. Conall the Barbarian. He’s come to sack us all!’

‘So soon?’ Katie was alarmed. ‘It’s almost indecent.’

‘He’s got several orcs with him, spotty younglings learning his dirty trade, but he’s a hands-on merchant. He’ll be on the prowl,’ Danno warned. ‘Keep a weather eye. We’ll be toast before this day is out.’

Katie eyed him with uncertainty. Danno was a catastrophist; he seemed to thrive on disaster. More than once she’d wondered if he was perhaps addicted to adrenaline, the poor man’s cocaine.

She summoned Audrey. (A vibration that was so muted it was almost apologetic. Reliable, trustworthy, meticulous. Not as popular with visiting artistes as Tamsin or Danno.) ‘Go and check on this Conall character. Be discreet.’

Within minutes, Audrey had reappeared, wearing her hangman’s face. ‘It’s true. He’s in with Graham. They’re going through personnel contracts.’

Katie bit her knuckle. ‘What does he look like?’

After consideration, Audrey said, ‘Cruel.’

‘Christ!’

‘Lean and hungry.’

‘That’s not so bad.’

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‘Lean and hungry *and* cruel.’ Then she added, ‘He’s eating chocolate.’

‘What?’

‘There’s a huge bar of Mint Crisp on the desk and he’s eating it while he’s talking to Graham. Entire rows in one go. Not breaking it into squares or anything.’

‘How huge? A hundred grams? Two hundred grams?’

‘One of those massive ones you can only get in the duty-free. Five hundred grams, I think. You know what, Katie? He’s actually really good-looking. I think I fancy him. I always fancy men who have power over me.’

‘Don’t fancy him,’ Katie said. ‘You think that all a cruel-looking man needs is the love of a good woman and then he won’t be cruel any more. But he stays cruel and you eat your heart out.’ It made her feel old, giving this sort of advice.

‘You might fancy him too,’ Audrey suggested.

‘I won’t fancy him.’

‘Say what you like, but we have no control over these things,’ Audrey warned darkly.

The phone rang: the cars had arrived.

Katie had a moment, a delicious little pinprick of a moment, when she considered just walking away from it all and sparing herself tonight’s ordeal with Knight Ryders and their grumpiness. If she was going to be made redundant anyway . . .

But what if she was one of the ones who got to keep her job?

‘Okay,’ Katie called. ‘Danno, Audrey, saddle up, the cars are here.’

They were off to the Four Seasons to pick up Knight Ryders for tonight’s gig. Knight Ryders were a metal band, a quartet of hoary old rockers who’d survived addiction, divorces, bankruptcy, near-death heart failure, motorbike crashes, internal strife, kiss’n’tell, **Copyrighted Material** from their adopted children and much,

much more. Many of their audience, who paid the high ticket prices, came along not in order to hear their hits from the early seventies, but simply to marvel that all four of them were still alive.

The boys were on their eighth month of a nine-month world tour and they'd been in Ireland for two very long days. Katie's greatest worry was Elijah Knight, lead singer, living legend and proud owner of a second-hand liver (one careful previous owner). He'd been clean and sober for almost a year but whispers had reached Katie's ears that he was wearying of it all. Certainly it was true that every word out of his mouth to Katie was a complaint: the Irish hotel was too chintzy; the Irish press were too fawning; the Irish AA meetings had too little whooping.

Katie or one of her team made it their business to be with him at all times – Tamsin was over there right now – and a 'bodyguard' (i.e. guard) kept watch at night outside his bedroom.

As Katie slid into the back seat of a blacked-out limo, she got a call from Tamsin. 'It's Elijah.'

'What's up?'

'It's time for him to start backcombing his hair, but he's just sitting there with his arms folded, like a child.'

'I'm on my way.' Katie crossed her fingers and said a silent prayer that tonight would not be the night that Elijah Knight went back on the sauce. Not on her watch. If he could just wait until tomorrow, when he and his three big-haired, craggy-faced, liver-damaged *compadres* left for Germany, she'd be very grateful.

The problem, however, was that everything went off fine. With Katie's kindly inveigling, Elijah obediently backcombed his hair until it stood a full

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Ryders played an entire set and none of them had a stroke; they even bowed out of a gratis trip to Dublin's finest brothel.

This meant that when Katie got home at the unexpectedly early hour of 2 a.m. there was room in her head for the reality of her job situation to hit her. She was done for, she abruptly realized. She might as well face it: getting Elijah Knight safely home to bed might have been her last act as Senior PR of Apex Entertainment.

It made sense to get rid of her – of the six PR staff, she was paid the most. Also, a more painful acknowledgement, she was the oldest, and the music business was a young woman's game. I'm thirty-nine, she said to herself, in wonder. Thirty-nine! It's a miracle I've survived this long.

She had to go to sleep now. But how could she? Tomorrow she was going to be sacked and she'd have no money, and in these recessionary days she'd never get another job because she was qualified for nothing except bringing rock stars to nightclubs.

I'm ruined, she thought.

She would lose her flat and her car and her highlights and her personal trainer, even though she had only one session a week, but her time with the behemoth that was Florence was *vital* – without it she mightn't be able to get herself to do any exercise at all.

And, oh, her lovely flat. There wasn't a chance she could keep it. Her mortgage payments were gulp-inducing, even on her current salary. She'd bought at the height of the boom, when cardboard boxes were changing hands for a million euro. She'd paid dearly for every square foot of her home. But how she loved it. It was only small – being an attic conversion, most of her rooms had been short-changed of their corners – but it was cosy and got loads of light and was walking distance from town. Not that she'd ever tested it, not in her shoes.

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The killer was that she'd never meant to work in the music business. Oh why had she, *why*? Because she'd been wildly flattered when they offered her the job, that was why, so flattered that she'd turned a blind eye to the fact that the money wasn't as good as you might have thought. All she'd cared about was that they must have thought she was cool if they wanted to employ her. But she should have taken the job in the government press office instead. Old people weren't mocked in that industry; they were valued, revered for their wisdom. No one cared if you had big thighs. No one cared if you had facial hair (and you were a woman) (not that she had). In fact, they positively *liked* fat ugly spokespeople in politics because they had more credibility.

Ruined, she thought. Yes, *ruined*.

As the night ticked away, her head buzzed with calibrations and calculations: if she let out her flat would she earn enough to cover her mortgage and hairdressing bills? If she got a job in Blockbusters, how would she manage for food? She'd read a thing in the paper about people on the minimum wage: even if they ate the gone-off half-price things in Tesco, they were still perpetually hungry. Co-existing with her appetite was tricky enough on a healthy salary, when even as she had her first bite of something she was worried about the last. How would she cope with genuine hunger?

She wouldn't even be able to afford to kill herself. For the last couple of years, probably since Jason, she'd had a whimsical contingency plan in case life ever became truly unbearable, like the cyanide pills spies used to carry in their teeth in case they were captured. Her cunning notion was that she'd eat herself to death – it happened, people really did it, doctors were forever warning the obese that if they continued with their bad habits they'd snuff it. She'd always thought it be a joyous way to go, gorges to the gills on chocolate cheesecake.

But chocolate cheesecake cost money and she'd need an awful lot of it to administer a fatal dose. Gripped by middle-of-the-night terror she saw what a wasteful fool she'd been all these years. She should have started stockpiling baked goods long before now. But she wasn't a stockpiler. If it was in her flat she ate it. Fact. Nothing lasted more than a day.

All of a sudden her thoughts veered off in an unexpected direction and she began to blame Jason. (Between the ages of thirty-one to thirty-seven, Jason had been her boyfriend. In their sixth year, just as they'd started trying for a baby, they had the tremendous shock of discovering that they were no longer in love. They faked it for almost a year, hoping to rekindle the flame, but they were kaput. Kiboshed. All washed up.)

If she and Jason had got married and had a baby, and if Jason wasn't marrying Donanda the Portuguese stunner instead, she wouldn't have these worries.

But oh no! He had to decide to stop loving Katie and then they had to split up and she had to buy a flat on her own. Well, in fairness, she'd stopped loving him too, but that was *also* Jason's fault because if only he hadn't become unlovable everything would be different.

Her anger filled her stomach, then her chest, until she began having difficulty breathing, and even though it was five past six in the morning and far too late to take a sleeping tablet – Curses! She hadn't had an ounce of sleep! – she had to sit up and turn on the light and get her de-bittering books off the shelf to stop herself from drowning in her own bile.

Gasping, she read a few lines of *My Happiness, My Responsibility*, but it did nothing. She cast it aside and hungrily scanned *The Spiritual Laws of Success*: nonsense, *rubbish!* She was starting to think she'd have to ring for an ambulance when she opened the next book and a line jumped out at her: "The Chinese word for "crisis" also means "opportunity"."

That's what did it.

She felt as if she'd been hacking through dense jungle and suddenly found herself on top of a mountain where the light was clear and the air was thin. A load fell away from her. Yes, her life was over! *Yes*, she was a goner. Unemployed – indeed, possibly unemployable – but her crisis could become her opportunity. Surely she could do something else with her life? Live in Thailand and learn scuba diving? Or, better still, go to India and become enlightened, and when she came back – *if* she came back, hoho – she wouldn't mind being homeless and carless and having to wear terrible shoes and having to do her own motivation to go for a run.

It would all be okay.

Day 60

Sixty-six Star Street remained silent until 5.30 a.m., when Lydia got up. She lurched into the bathroom where she showered – there’s only one word for it – resentfully. She disliked getting wet. She feared the water. (She wasn’t to know this but in a previous life she’d been a meerkat, a creature of the desert and a stranger to moisture. Some traits linger into subsequent lives.)

She reached behind her for her conditioner and her elbow dislodged Andrei’s shower gel from the shelf. No! There was a slippery scramble as she tried to catch it but it leaped from her sudsy grasp and landed on the floor of the shower with an echoey three-bounce clatter. Irkutsk! She didn’t want to wake Andrei or Jan. They were bad enough when they got a full night’s sleep, the miserable bloody pair; they’d be even more stony-faced and grumpy if they were woken prematurely.

God, they were hard work. Not once in three weeks had she seen them laugh. And no one could say she hadn’t made an effort, trying to jolly them along with good-humoured slagging, the kind she employed with all men. But instead of rising to the challenge and giving as good as they got, they were baffled.

And she was stuck with them: it was their lease. In fact, she wondered why they didn’t just tell her to hop it, because it was so obvious that they hated her.

Perhaps it was because her room was laughably small, barely more than a cupboard. (Apparently, it used to be the kitchen – a cramped, walk-in gallery before some mysteri-

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ous previous owner had decided to convert the second bedroom into a bigger kitchen, spacious enough to house a table. All well and good, but it meant that the remaining space was barely deserving of the title ‘room’.)

Lydia suspected – correctly – that the ex-kitchen had been turned down by many viewers before she had shown up. The bed was narrow and short, there was no dressing-table mirror (because there was no dressing table) to drape her string of orange flower-shaped lights around, and there was no wardrobe so most of Lydia’s clothes were kept in boxes under her bed. She also suspected – again correctly; Lydia didn’t get much wrong – that Andrei and Jan had expected she’d bring a woman’s touch to the flat. They were, of course, mistaken. It hadn’t been easy to resist Andrei and his rotas – he was a determined type, and it had taken every ounce of her considerable resolve – but it was important to establish from the get-go who was boss. As soon as she was certain that the lads didn’t *expect* her to clean, then she would fall into line.

Perhaps . . .

In the meantime, the rent was astonishingly reasonable, a massive one hundred euro a week cheaper than her previous billet, and the house was conveniently close to the city centre. And when she’d discovered that the lads hailed from Gdansk, she had been alerted to the excellence of words ending in ‘sk’. Gdansk! She’d enjoyed saying it so much that she’d hit the net, looking for similar city names. And there were loads of them! Tomsk and Omsk, Minsk and Murmansk. She used them a lot. She couldn’t exactly say why, she just liked them. Gdansk was a positive word, because it sort of sounded like ‘thanks’, but all the others, especially Minsk and Irkutsk, sounded like swear words, only far hissier and spicier than the ones she usually called

upon. Minsk! How pissed-off that sounded! It was great. You could scare the bejayzus out of someone if you said it right. Irkutsk! How riled you could seem if you put a bit of effort into the delivery. These were quality swear words that had cost precisely nothing and, in her current cash-strapped circumstances, she was grateful for free pleasures.

All the same, despite the gratis gift of new swear words, she badly missed Sissy and the lovely, large airy flat they'd shared. Hard to believe such luxury now, but she and Sissy *had had a cleaner*. In fairness, she'd only come once a week but it had been enough. Even when the kitchen was very bad, filthy enough for mice to be dancing jigs on the draining board, Lydia had been able to literally blind herself to it because she knew it would be fixed in a day or so.

And Sissy was exactly the same. Sissy didn't care. She would *never* have hit Lydia up with a cleaning rota. Days off were for staying in your pyjamas and huddling under a blanket, watching telly and eating twelve bowls of Coco Pops; they were not for rolling up your sleeves and pulling on rubber gloves and running the hot tap.

But the days of cleaners and wardrobes and a normal flat-mate were in Lydia's past . . . She stood before the bathroom mirror and poured large quantities of a serum designed to combat frizz on to her head. For no matter how impoverished her circumstances, she would never give up her hair. She would go hungry before she did without her serum. She and her wild springy curls were engaged in an ongoing battle of wills. Just because she was short of money was no excuse to simply give in and surrender, like many a lesser woman would have done. Lydia's hair was not her master. No, she was the boss of *it*.

Into the kitchen, where she heaped eight spoonfuls of

instant coffee into a massive mug, which was called Lydia's Mug, and filled it halfway with boiling water, then the rest with tap water. She swallowed it like medicine, gagging slightly on the last mouthful, abandoned the mug on the table, dressed quickly in jeans, trainers and a hoodie, then left.

Down in the street, the morning was sunny but chilly and Lydia made her way to a taxi. A taxi? What kind of flashy minx spurns public transport?

Well, what a surprise when she climbed into the driver's seat! One could be forgiven for thinking she was proposing to hot-wire the vehicle, but when she shoved a key in the ignition it became clear that she owned it and that she was a taxi driver by trade!

It was some sort of generic Toyota, not a good car. Not a bad one either, just one of those unexciting ones that taxi drivers seem to favour. But interestingly, given Lydia's attitude to hygiene in the home, her car was clean and fragrant. She took evident pride in her charabanc.

Amid much static noise, she got on her radio and received word of a fare: picking a man up from the Shelbourne and driving him to the airport.

She did a screechy U-turn and headed towards town, the traffic lights changing to green just as she neared them. 'Gdansk,' she said, with satisfaction, almost smacking her lips with the pleasure of saying it.

The next lights were also green. 'Gdansk.' She nodded her thanks at them.

But when she pulled up outside the Shelbourne and the fare climbed into the back of her car, she saw him do a double-take. *Irkutsk!* she thought.

'You're a girl!' he declared.

'Last time I checked,' she said stonily. *Irkutsk! Irkutsk! Irkutsk!*

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Why a chatty one? Why? When it was so early and she'd had only eight spoonfuls of coffee?

'What's it like?' the fare asked eagerly. 'Being a female taxi driver?'

Her mouth tightened. What did he think it was like? It was exactly like being a male taxi driver, only with gobshites like him asking unanswerable questions at some ungodly hour in the morning.

'How do you deal with trouble?' he asked. The question they all asked. 'If someone won't pay?'

'Can I ask *you* a question?' she asked.

'By all means!' He was delighted by the interplay with this springy-haired little stunner, still damp and fragrant from her early morning shower.

'Have you accepted Christ Jesus into your life as your lord and saviour?'

That shut him up. They drove the rest of the way in silence.

Day 60 . . .

Back at 66 Star Street, people were stirring. Andrei had been awake since 5.35 when Lydia had deliberately dropped something on the bathroom floor, with clattery force. Since she had moved in, he and Jan had been in a state of shock. They had never met a girl like her and the only good thing about her was that she was small. Small enough to fit into the tiny bed in the tiny room.

Andrei stared wistfully into space, remembering the halcyon days with their previous tenant, a Ukrainian electrician-cum-accordion player named Oleksander. Life with him had been so harmonious – because he was never there. He'd spent every night at the much swankier digs of his girlfriend, Viktoriya, and his room at 66 Star Street functioned mostly as his wardrobe. Until Viktoriya had fallen for the charms of an Irishman, a civil servant who held a high-ranking post in the Department of Agriculture, and Oleksander was thrown back on his own resources. He'd endured a succession of sleepless nights with his legs extending six inches over the end of his narrow single bed. When he'd tried to remedy the shortfall by putting a chair there, to rest his heels on, the wooden footboard had cut into his calves, marking him with two livid purple weals which linger to this day. He successfully managed to remove said wooden footboard and the only downside was that the frame of the bed collapsed entirely. His next solution was to sleep with the mattress directly on the floor, but the lumbar region of his back set up a clamour of objections and after thirty-four days of excruciating pain he told Andrei he could take no more.

Lots of people, most of them Polish men, had come to

view the room but without exception declared themselves too big to fit into the bed. They also enjoyed much mirth at the thought of Oleksander Shevchenko (who was a well-known figure; his busking outside Trinity had become almost a tourist landmark) trying to get some shut-eye in such doll-like quarters. So when Irish Lydia arrived Andrei and Jan had been so dazzled by her suitably miniature proportions they entirely neglected to notice that she was an evil little pixie.

Now they were paying the price.

They had endless discussions, when they asked each other: *Why?* Why was she so unpleasant? So lazy? So cruel?

Andrei warned Jan that they might never get answers. It would probably be best, he advised, if they accepted that her sour nature was a fact of life, as inevitable as the rain, like everything else in this damp unpleasant country.

After washing and dressing, the boys descended to the street, where they extended the palms of their hands outwards and expressed lengthy and sarcastic surprise that it wasn't pissing rain, before walking ten minutes to the Luas stop. There they went in different directions, Andrei east to an industrial estate and Jan north to a shopping mall.

Jan liked to say he worked in IT, which in a way he did. He was employed in an enormous supermarket, filling the online orders. His days were spent toiling in the aisles, pushing a massive super-trolley device off which branched twelve baskets, representing twelve different customers, each with a separate grocery list. When he'd located every item on all twelve lists and put them into the correct baskets, he'd deposit the merchandise in the loading area, for the truck to distribute throughout Dublin, then he'd trudge to the printer to pick up another twelve lists, hook twelve new empty baskets to his super-trolley, and commence the

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whole procedure again. He lost track of how many times a day he repeated this exercise.

Andrei also worked in IT. Except that he really did. He drove around the city in a white van, fixing broken computers for office workers. The van itself took up a lot of his thoughts. He was a pragmatic man and it irked him terribly that he was obliged to return it to base every evening, where it idled for fourteen useless hours in a car park, when it could be used for his own purposes – specifically, picking up Rosie. He fantasized about parking outside the house she shared with four other nurses, honking the horn and seeing her skipping down the steps, van-shaped admiration on her heart-shaped face. He had been dating Rosie (an Irish girl, but in all other respects entirely different to evil pixie Lydia) for two months and eight days and thus far she had refused to surrender her virginity to him. Andrei, with his muscles and astonishing blue-eyed good looks, was accustomed to getting his way with the girls but he was genuinely impressed by Rosie's old-fashioned virtue and his initial lust had blossomed into something far more complex.

Day 60 . . .

On the ground floor of 66 Star Street, Matt and Maeve were roused gently from their slumber and welcomed into the day by a Zen alarm clock, a plinky-plonky affair, which sounded like Tibetan goat bells. It started off with isolated peaceful plinks, like an occasional tap on a xylophone, then over ten minutes it built up into a cacophony of delightful chimes. Not very Matt. He seemed more like a man who'd prefer an alarm that behaved like a defibrillator, issuing a discordant BRRRING to make every nerve in his body stand on end and oust him instantly from the bed, to beat his chest in a Tarzan roar. 'Yaaaar! Watch out, world, I'm coming to get you!'

But Maeve wanted the chimes, so Maeve got the chimes. She also got a leisurely breakfast. Matt, I suspect, would have been happy to mindlessly scarf down a Snickers bar while rushing to work, but instead he made tea for Maeve, Maeve made porridge for him, then they sat at their kitchen counter, mirroring each other's actions, checking that the other had honey, orange juice and other breakfast paraphernalia.

On their kitchen windowsill, in a curlicued silver frame, was a photo of them on their wedding day. They glammed up well, the pair of them, I must say. Maeve, in particular. Judging from the picture, they'd gone for a traditional wedding, the full white monty. Maeve's dress was one of those deceptively simple numbers: a slender unadorned fall of heavy satin, from an empire-line bodice. An off-the-shoulder neckline revealed a pair of pretty creamy-skinned shoulders, and a pearl headdress gathered her thick fair hair into a bun from which slinky ringlets escaped, framing her face. She looked like a girl from one of those Jane Austen

novels she seemed so fond of reading. Matt, clutching on to Maeve and gazing at the camera with the expression of a man who has just won the lottery but is trying not to gloat about it, was kitted out in a dark, serious-looking suit. The kind of suit that people wear to sign peace treaties. Evidently, he had tracked down the most impressive rig-out he could find, to convey just how momentous his marriage was to him. (Without wishing to be unkind, there was considerably less of them three years ago, when this photo was taken. Both of them were a lot, well, *narrower*. Clearly, the trans-fat didn't play so *large* – forgive the pun – a part in their lives back then.)

Maeve swallowed the last of her orange juice, Matt clattered his spoon into his empty bowl, they each took their vitamin tablet, knocking it back with a shared glass of water, and – finally – left the flat and prepared to go to work. Matt had a car, polished shoes, a sharp suit and a sharp haircut. Maeve had a bicycle, flavourless chapstick and a pair of cords so unattractive (too big for her and a most unappealing shade of olive-green) that it seemed as if they had been chosen specially for their ugliness.

They kissed and said goodbye. 'Be careful,' Matt said.

Of what? I wondered. Anyone foolhardy enough to negotiate a bicycle through rush-hour traffic could expect admonitions from their nearest and dearest, but, all the same, I knew that coming a cropper at the hand of a careless car was not what Maeve feared. Oh she was definitely scared, don't get me wrong, but I didn't know what of; she was blocking me. All I could tell from looking at her was that she had no fear of being mocked for her crap clothes. *Fascinating*.

Matt stared after Maeve until she was absorbed by the gridlock, then he thought about his car. It was parked so far away that he wondered if he should get a bus to it.

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Day 60 . . .

In Jemima's flat, the dog was suffering no ill-effects from the dizzying he'd received the previous night. Jemima was trying to tempt him to the kitchen but he was playing hard to get. 'Grudge, Grudge, my lovely Grudge.' So it seemed the beast really was called Grudge! How . . . well, how *peculiar*.

Jemima had been washed and dressed since 6.15 a.m. She couldn't abide slugabed behaviour. She hunkered down, her knees cracking like pistol shots, until her face was level with Grudge's sulky one. 'Just because Fionn is coming doesn't mean I'll love you any less,' she said.

All became clear: Grudge was sulking because he'd discovered that 'The Fair One' was due to visit.

'Come and be fed.'

Within moments Grudge was dancing the Dance of Breakfast. A thin-skinned creature, slow to forgive, except when food was involved.

I kept my distance from Jemima. I didn't want to frighten her. Not unless I had to. Nonetheless, her thoughts reached me. She was pulsing on a strong, steady, strident vibration, which fought its way through the clutter of the flat and insisted on attention.

She was thinking with great fondness about the word *grudge*. Such a splendid noun, she thought. So suitable for purpose: you couldn't possibly utter it without your face contorting itself into a sour prune of grudgingness. *Krompir* was another word she savoured; it was Serbian for potato and had a most satisfying chomping sound. Or *bizarre*, possibly her most favourite word of all, a festive, joyous sound, which always brought to mind the jangling of tambourines.

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Grudge was regarded by many as a strange name for a dog, but when people were crass enough to mention this, Jemima's answer was that he had chosen it himself. They'd told her at the pound that his name was Declan but he was no more a Declan than she was. She believed that he should be trusted to make the best choice for himself, so when she got him home – where he wedged himself tightly into a corner and sat, low and mournful, on his paws – Jemima reeled out a long list of high-esteem dog names. Champion? Hero? Rebel? Prince? She watched carefully for a positive reaction but, after each suggestion, Declan growled, 'GGGGrrrrr,' followed by a short little bark which sounded like 'Udge'. Eventually, she heard him: Grudge it was.

They'd warned her in the pound that he was a very damaged dog. There was a lot he couldn't tolerate. Men in wigs. Folk singers. The colour yellow. The smell of hairspray.

But he could be soothed by the rustling of Crunchie wrappers. Girls with red hair. Yorkshire accents. The music of George Michael, though only the earlier stuff (and not Wham! – he abhorred Wham!).

He was a highly strung, mercurial creature, who would require careful handling, but Jemima wasn't daunted. Her philosophy, which she related to the man at the pound, was that a well-balanced dog would always get a home, but it was the poor damaged ones who really needed it.

Entre nous, I'm wondering if I was too quick with my initial judgement of Jemima as a prickly old crone.

His breakfast consumed, Grudge stared at Jemima with melting Malteser eyes, then flicked a few anxious sideways glances around the room. He was a wonderful dog, Jemima thought with pride. More intuitive than most humans. Which wouldn't be difficult, seeing as the vast majority were walking about with their heads stuck up their own fundament.

‘Yes, I feel it too,’ Jemima told Grudge. ‘But we won’t be bowed!’ She whirled around one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and planted her legs wide, like a warrior woman. ‘You hear me?’ she said – nay, *demanded* – glaring hard (but into the wrong corner of the room, God love her). In ringing tones, she repeated, ‘We won’t be bowed!’

Keep your pants on, Jemima. It’s not all about you.

Day 60 . . .

Matt liked to get his daily Act of Kindness out of the way early. As he drove to work, he scanned the streets looking for a chance to do good. At the upcoming bus stop a lone woman was waiting. It was clear that she'd just missed a bus because at this time of day usually dozens of people were gathered, watching each other like hawks, careful not to be left at the back of the melee when the bus eventually did show up.

He opened the passenger window and called out, 'Where are you going?'

Startled, the woman looked up from her texting. A well-upholstered type, bundled into an orange jacket, she was aged roughly between thirty-seven and sixty-six. 'What's it to you?'

'Would you like a lift?'

'With *you*? I can't get into a car with a strange man! Don't you read the papers, son?'

Ouff!

'I'm not a strange man, I'm a nice man.'

'Well, you're hardly going to admit you're an axe-murderer.'

'I'm married. I love my wife. I don't own an axe.'

'Kids?'

'Not yet.'

'I've four.'

'Hop in, you can tell me about them.'

'Yeah and you can show me your axe.'

'I sell software for a living.'

'So did Jack the Ripper.'

'He didn't!'

'Look.' She sighed. 'You might be a lovely lad, in fairness you look like a lovely lad, but I can't make the chance. My kids

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wouldn't even be able to remember what I was wearing to tell the police. And all the recent photographs of me are bad, very jowly. I couldn't have them stuck to the lamp posts around the city. On your way, son.'

Feck.

Dispirited, Matt drove off. His daily Act of Kindness was like a millstone around his neck. It needled him all day long, like an eyelash trapped in his eye. And the days came round so fast, it felt like as soon as he'd achieved one AOK, a brand-new day had dawned and it was time to do another. And woe betide him if he got home in the evening without having Acted Kindly At Least Once During The Day. He was unable to lie to Maeve, and guilt would bounce him back out into the world, forbidding him to return until the needful had been carried out.

It was harder than you'd think to be kind. There were all these bloody rules (Maeve's). Buying the *Big Issues* didn't count: it was too easy. Giving money to a busker didn't count either – not unless you engaged them in chat, praised their playing, made a request and stood and listened to it while displaying bodily appreciation (foot-tapping or head-nodding was acceptable; if you forced yourself to dance, you'd actually have overdone it, although none of the excess could be carried over as credit towards the following day).

The AOK had to cost emotionally. It had to be something he really didn't want to do.

However, going to work didn't count. Funnily enough, Matt usually enjoyed his job at Edios (Easy Does It Office Systems). (He'd moved on from Goliath some time ago.) But this Bank of British Columbia thing was doing his head in. You could say it was his own fault, he acknowledged. The bank had been perfectly happy with their old software system. *Perfectly* happy, until Matt had started stalking them, trying to persuade them

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to change over to Edios. But what was he to do? It was his job to drum up new business. He'd cold-called the bank's Irish office and when they told him to sling it he dusted himself down and called again, then again, and eventually their procurement people had caved and wearily agreed to a meeting. Matt had been triumphant. A face-to-facer might look like merely the start of a process but, as far as he was concerned, it meant the deal was as good as done. That's not to say it was ever easy. The effort of will required from Matt was always enormous, like single-handedly turning round a huge cruise ship. The amount of charm he'd expended selling software over the years would have brought peace to the Middle East. Nevertheless, he was accustomed to getting results.

Except that the Bank of British Columbia were leading him a merry dance. Over the course of the last eight months, they'd flirted and teased and enjoyed innumerable outings at Edios's expense – a seven-hour dinner in one of Dublin's most expensive restaurants, a movie premier, a day at the races. Now they were making noises about Wimbledon tickets – Wimbledon tickets were like gold dust! – and they still had given no indication whether or not they were going to buy the system. Matt knew the names of everyone's wives, girlfriends, children and dogs but, unusually for him, he had no instinct on which way they'd jump.

The bank had requested a meeting, yet another one, for this morning and Matt couldn't think why. He and his team had done five dazzling presentations; every query and question had been answered satisfactorily; he had personally fielded calls at all hours of the day and night during which he'd promised the earth in terms of modifications, back-up and speedy implementation. What more could they want?

Centre Court tickets, probably.

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