

'Aisling is one of the finest comic creations of all time'

MARIAN KEYES

Aisling and the CITY

IF SHE CAN
MAKE IT THERE,
SHE'LL MAKE IT
ANYWHERE

'That rare, precious thing: a
fictional character you care about
like a friend. It's a joy to spend
time with Aisling again'

LISA MCGEE, CREATOR
OF *DERRY GIRLS*

**Emer McLysaght
& Sarah Breen**



Aisling and the City

Praise for the *Aisling* series

‘A fictional creature now as beloved by Irish women as anyone who comes from the pens of Marian Keyes or Maeve Binchy, two other writers whose work could also be said to sum up the essential experience of being an Irish woman.’

LIA HYNES, *SUNDAY INDEPENDENT*

‘Emer McLysaght and Sarah Breen can look into their hearts and know exactly what the women of Ireland want.’

IRISH INDEPENDENT

‘The literary equivalent of lightning in a bottle. Aisling is a tremendous creation: fun, warm, charming, kind . . . Breen and McLysaght have a canny knack of hitting on emotional truths.

A brilliantly breezy, companionable read.’

TANYA SWEENEY, *IRISH INDEPENDENT*

‘A charming creation. Aisling seems on course to match the longevity of her masculine polar opposite Ross O’Carroll Kelly.’

IRISH MAIL ON SUNDAY

‘Utterly gorgeous ... so funny and relatable and sweet and uplifting. Aisling is one of the finest comic creations of all time ... if you haven’t read the three prequels, then DO IT NOW!’

MARIAN KEYES

‘Soul soothing – I laughed on every page.’

SOPHIE WHITE, *SUNDAY INDEPENDENT*

‘A tribute to the warmth, charm and resilience of modern Irish women, Aisling is well on her way to becoming one of the most beloved characters in Irish literature.’

IRISH INDEPENDENT

‘Aisling’s voice leaps off the page. It’s this depth of character and eye for detail that make comparisons with the Bridget Jones series spot on.’

THE INDEPENDENT

‘Aisling is the best of us, the sort of person the world needs.’

LAURA KENNEDY, *THE IRISH TIMES*

‘Emer McLysaght and Sarah Breen offer their many readers a safe, convivial, unceremonious berth in challenging times.’

HILARY FANNIN, *THE IRISH TIMES*

‘A fictional creature now as beloved by Irish women as anyone who comes from the pens of Marian Keyes or Maeve Binchy.’

SUNDAY INDEPENDENT

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Emer McLysaght and Sarah Breen are co-authors of the *Aisling* series. *Oh My God, What a Complete Aisling* was the best-selling fiction title of 2017 and its sequel, *The Importance of Being Aisling*, won the award for best popular fiction book at the 2018 Irish Book Awards. The third book in the series, *Once, Twice, Three Times an Aisling*, won the same award the following year. Combined, the *Aisling* books have sold more than 300,000 copies to date.

Emer has worked extensively in journalism and radio and is a columnist at the *Irish Times*. She knows the N7 like the back of her hand and lives in Dublin 8.

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Emer McLysaght & Sarah Breen

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*In loving memory of Kathleen Patterson,
1922–2021*

PROLOGUE

Ballygobbard, 2005

‘Oh my God, I can’t believe Eamon let you have it. He definitely knows you’re not fifteen yet, Aisling. Here, give it to me and I’ll stick it in.’

I pass Majella the box. We’ve been obsessed with *Coyote Ugly* since it came out five years ago and have been dedicating all of our Hail Marys at assembly to Eamon Filan getting it into the little shelf of DVD rentals at the back of the shop. We briefly had access to a pirated copy that Maj’s father, Shem, stumbled across at a car boot sale, but he ended up sticking it in the windscreen of his HiAce to confuse speed cameras. It was no great loss, really, because the sound pairing was off and it was hard to fully appreciate all the sexy bar dancing and drink spraying when the picture had a slightly purple tinge.

‘I just pointed out that LeAnn Rimes was on the back, and seeing as Eamon is a big country and western fan, he figured there couldn’t be that much filth in it.’

‘Little does he know,’ Majella cackles, kicking off her school shoes.

We both fell in love with New York after watching the film for the first time at a sleepover in Maeve Hennessey's house. The Hennesseys have *The Channels* and have been to Trabolgan on holidays twice. We were so taken with it that me and Maj would sometimes climb onto the roof of Majella's garage to warble 'Can't Fight the Moonlight' and imagine we were wearing leather bra tops and lace-up hipsters looking out over the lights of New York City rather than a field full of cattle and an old billboard advertising liver fluke dosage.

'I still think Violet reminds me of you a bit, Ais,' Majella says generously. 'At the beginning, anyway, when she just arrives in the city and she's all shy and doesn't want to shift the Australian fella.'

I blush furiously. She's referring to the fact that I recently turned down Turlough McGrath at the Knock Musical Society fundraiser in the Mountrath. I just don't fancy him. Now, if he had a Summer Bay accent and a boy-band haircut like the fella in *Coyote Ugly* it would be a different story. But all he has is an outrageous case of BO and tiny hands. Luckily he was quickly distracted by a row on the dancefloor over raffle tickets. In fairness, the peach and pink ones did look very similar. It was sort of ingenious to be getting people from Ballygobbard to play the Sharks and people from Knocknamanagh to play the Jets, although not one of them could do a New York accent. At least the GAA rivalry added to the tension, according to reports from dress rehearsals. Majella had tried out for the role of Maria but had to settle for Woman Number Two Dancing Beside Bodega.

'Do you think we'll ever get to live in New York and dance on a bar and bate the heads off lads who annoy us?' Majella

sighs as a shot of the skyline fills the screen. All those tall buildings. It's hard to believe it's a real place.

'Maybe someday.' As much as I love the idea of it, I struggle to imagine myself ever dancing on a bar anywhere in the world. I have enough trouble trying to heave myself over the gate of the calving shed. To leave Ballygobbard and live in New York seems almost too glamorous and exotic and out of reach. Although, Majella's aunt from Oughterard moved over in the 1980s and managed to make a nice life for herself, God rest her soul. Maj has the Tommy Hilfiger jumpers to prove it.

'We'd have to go together,' I say sternly.

'And live together, obviously. Some place with a flat roof.'

'A view of Central Park would be nice too.'

'Oh and we'd have to have a rubbish chute – a *garbage* chute. For our pizza boxes, like. And drink from red cups and play beer pong.'

'Deffo. Hey, do you think Westlife ever tour there?'

Majella groans and shifts over on the couch. 'If you're going to live in New York and work in Coyote Ugly, you're going to have to stop sweating the small stuff. Like missing a Westlife concert!' She starts giggling. 'Be more Majella for a change.'

'What are you on about?' I say in mock annoyance. 'I'm very happy being Aisling, thank you very much. There's plenty of Aislings in New York. They have camogie teams and everything. I'd fit right in. Maybe I could even be the New York Rose.'

Majella picks up one of the good cushions and fires it at me. 'Just don't forget me when you're going, okay?'

CHAPTER 1

It's a balmy July evening when Majella asks me to come up and help her pack, but I'm expecting more clothes, to be honest.

'Where's the rest of it, Maj?' I poke the little piles of colourful Lycra and red lace she has dotted all over the double bed. There isn't even a sarong floating around. 'This is mostly bikinis. What are you going to wear when you're not sunning yourself?'

'That's what the underwear is for,' she shouts with a cackle from the en suite, where she's up to her neck in Veet or fake tan, or probably both. 'It's our honeymoon, remember.'

'You'll have to come up for air at some stage, though. What are you going to wear at dinnertime?'

'Ah, I have an LBD on the clothes-horse. And there's a pashmina somewhere in case it gets cold at night.'

I know the pashmina she's talking about. I loaned it to her two years ago for her cousin Trina's baby shower. The theme was *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and it's the perfect shade of blue. I've been collecting pashminas since I was seventeen, so no one was surprised when I produced it. You can never have too many, especially with friends like Maj, who like to hang on to them or leave them on minibuses.

‘Hey, did you bring those magic packing yokes?’ she calls.

‘I did, of course,’ I say, heaving them out of my bag. I’m proud to say I was an early adopter of packing cubes, having first spotted them in a captivating demonstration at Bloom. Two years later everyone was on to them. Majella nearly bought her own set but I convinced her to just use mine in the end. ‘I don’t think you’re going to need them, though. The point of them is to save space and you’re bringing half nothing.’

‘It’s not the *Titanic* we’re going on, Ais. It’s a party boat – there’s no dressing up for dinner or any of that craic. No icebergs either, fingers crossed.’

‘How are Pablo’s sleep terrors this week?’ I drag her big case out from under the bed and get to work. Majella had no idea her new husband had a deeply ingrained phobia of open water when she booked them an all-inclusive cruise on the Med as a surprise for their proper honeymoon. (In the three months they’ve been married they’ve already gone on a mini-moon to Venice as well as spending the June Bank Holiday weekend at Francis Brennan’s hotel in Kerry. I’m more jealous about that than the cruise, to be honest. She swears she saw the brother in the distance when they were out petting a falcon one day.)

‘Last night was grand, but, Jesus, on Friday he woke up with such a scream I was sure Carol must have heard. I texted her at three in the morning to say that I’d caught my toe in the door, but she was out for the count, thank God.’

Carol Boland, my good friend and business partner in BallyGoBrunch, lives above our cafe, and below Pablo and Maj. I’d say she’s invested in ear-plugs at this stage. In fact, I

know she has because she asked me for recommendations one day when we were prepping sausage rolls to go along with Sumira Singh's pakoras for bingo night at the nursing home. It was when Pablo found out that the cruise was paid for in full and non-refundable, I think. I could hear the shrieks myself from inside the walk-in fridge.

'The craythur,' I say sympathetically when Majella finally appears in the en suite door wrapped in a towel, her hair freshly dyed on her never-ending quest for the perfect shade of red. It's so violent it's borderline purple. 'How does someone from Tenerife end up with a fear of the water?'

'He never stops surprising me,' she says dreamily, examining her eyebrows in the mirror on the back of her wardrobe door. A SuperValu-tokens number if ever I saw one.

'You must be excited, are you?'

'Oh, you've no idea, Ais. The ship has six pools, a casino and something like thirty-seven bars. Everything is paid for up front, so if we don't come home with gout I'll be disappointed.'

She's now firing all her bits into the cubes in such a haphazard fashion that I have to look away. It never ceases to amaze me that we have been inseparable since Baby Infants and yet managed to turn out so different.

I'm actually the reason Majella and Pablo found each other in the first place. Well, me and John, my ex-boyfriend. We were getting some winter sun in Playa de las Americas two years ago when he and Pablo met in an Irish pub and struck up such a friendship that Pab moved here to Ballygobbard the minute his Lada died and he was forced to pack in his taxi business. I think John may have possibly talked up Ballygobbard

a bit too much and definitely didn't mention that its nickname is 'Ballygobackwards'. Although we have a couple of decent pubs, the Scouts' den, a Chinese and now Mammy's eco farm, it's not exactly a thriving metropolis. But it's home, and I love it, and now Pablo does too, against all the odds and despite the lack of sun.

'Tenerife is my blood and BGB is my heart,' he cries any time he has three pints instead of his limit of two. John is from Knocknamanagh and Pablo has always enjoyed the playacting and the rivalry, even though he still can't watch the hurling without shrieking. When Pablo and Majella met in the Ard Rí Hotel sparks flew. I thought sparks were flying between me and John again recently too, but at Majella's wedding he told me he was moving to Dubai with Megan the primary school teacher and that they were engaged. It felt exactly like the time Sinead McGrath kicked me in the gut with her big size eight feet when I played camogie briefly with the BGB Gaels. I was winded.

'Any reply back from James, Ais?' Majella snaps me out of it and I tense slightly at the sound of his name. James Matthews. The English builder project-managing a few jobs around Ballygobard. I fell into a relationship with him after trying and failing to just have a fling. We even moved in together, right in this building, in the apartment across the hall from Carol's. We tried to make it work. I bought the good knives, the cushions, the candles. Made us a lovely little home. I even bought a bar cart. But no matter how much I bought or what I did, it just wouldn't click, even though he always put the toilet seat down and defrosted my windscreen for me on bitter mornings. And, God, he was good-looking.

The curly hair. The flecks of paint and cement on his forearms. The posh accent. But it wasn't working. So I called it off. But if I'm being honest, part of the reason was that John was back around, being good to me, good to Mammy and good to my brother Paul when he was going through a bad patch. For a minute I thought it was all going to finally come right between us. John was my first boyfriend. My first love. A long time ago I'd pinned everything on him, thought I had my whole life figured out with him – and a massive utility room in a new build at the centre of it. But at first he couldn't commit and we broke up. And then we got back together, but nothing much had changed and it wasn't right that time either. And now I'm back at home living with Mammy and Paul wondering if maybe it's me who's the problem. Why haven't either of these relationships gone the whole hog? Sadhbh says I need to stop being such a serial monogamist and see what's out there. Date around. It's easy for her to say – she's going out with a stunning musician; one of Ireland's biggest rides, I'd say. There's even a rumour going around that Mad Tom has a girlfriend.

As well as being my ex, James is also my landlord, and Majella's too, since his company owns the building my café and her apartment are in. I'm after finding a wasp nest in the storage shed out the back, and I've been putting off ringing him to see if one of his local lads could get rid of it for me. I've an awful fear of wasps since I picked up a warm can of Lilt at my brother Paul's confirmation and got a bad sting on the tongue. But I'd say I'm low on James's list of priorities now, after breaking his heart and what have you. It's all so awkward. Sometimes I wish I could just push a button and be

beamed into a different life, just like in that *Quantum Leap* thing that Daddy used to love.

'I didn't ring him yet. Maybe I'd rather take my chances with the wasps?' I grimace at her.

'Understandable. Get Carol to give him a call, bird? She'll get it sorted,' Majella suggests, flinging two armfuls of shoes into the case. There's slippers and everything going in but she doesn't give a shite.

'Yeah, I think you might be right.'

When I first met Carol she was this meek middle-aged woman, a housewife trapped under the thumb of her bullying husband, Marty Boland, the local butcher. Today she's not only second in command at BallyGoBrunch, she's also in charge of our menu, at the helm of the catering arm of the business and always coming up with exciting ways to attract new customers and keep our current ones happy. She's a powerhouse and so capable that I sometimes feel like I'm getting under her feet when I'm there. As much as I love the office side of things – the admin, the ordering, dotting the i's and crossing the t's – being a small business owner is harder than I ever imagined. But between us, we've turned the café into a real hit and put BGB firmly on the map. Instagrammers like to come down from Dublin to take flat-lay photos of the sausage-meat salad before heading off to pose with one of the alpacas at Mammy's eco farm. It's not something anyone could ever have predicted.

'Right,' Majella says, heaving two bulging wash bags into the case and flipping the lid closed. Thanks to the shoes and her make-up, it's suddenly looking stuffed to the gills. 'This is where you come in, Ais. I need you to sit on it and I'll zip.

Come on, good woman. Pablo is already packed and outside listening to his hypnosis tracks.'

I get up and do the honours.

After dropping the newlyweds to the Timoney's bus stop and making them promise to bring me home at least one souvenir fridge magnet for my collection, I pop into Filan's for a packet of French Fancies. The café closes early on a Sunday and I normally bring home any leftover cakes, but the vanilla slices Carol made today nearly walked out the door. Mammy won't mind, though – she has a soft spot for anything Mr Kipling does. Daddy was the same. A demon for a French Fancy or a slice of Battenberg if it was going.

When I arrive into the kitchen, Mammy and Constance Swinford, her partner in ShayMar Eco Farm and all-round Camilla Parker-Bowles clone, are sitting at the kitchen table poring over one of the glossy weekend supplements.

'There's tea in the pot, love,' Mammy says, peering down at the magazine through her bifocals, when I make a beeline for the kettle.

'It's a terrible invasion of privacy, really, isn't it?' Constance honks, tilting the page towards the light. She used to run Garbally Stud before she sold it and it became a fancy events venue, and she still brays at an ear-splitting volume in her signature posh accent whether she's in a confined space or out on the racecourse.

'What is?' I ask, grabbing a mug from the press.

Mammy looks up. 'It's Emilia Coburn's honeymoon,' she

says. 'The pictures are in the paper. And the husband, what's his name?'

Emilia Coburn is an Irish actress-slash-massive-international-movie-star, who just so happens to have roots here in Ballygobbard. Or Knocknamanagh, depending who you're talking to. The whole parish is very fond of her. She even got married here in May on the same day as Majella's wedding, which led to one of the most stressful and nerve-wracking weeks of my life. I was Maj's one and only bridesmaid as well as the chief nibbles caterer at Emilia's do. My heart still races just thinking about all the running around I had to do to pull everything off. Never again.

'Her husband is Ben Dixon, Mammy, he's the new James Bond,' I say, tipping the French Fancies onto a plate. 'He's also one of the most famous men in the world. What about him?'

'He's absolutely starkers, dear,' Constance shrieks, waving the paper at me.

Just then my phone starts to ring. And the name flashing on the screen is Mandy Blumenthal.

CHAPTER 2

‘**A** isling, honey! How are things in my favourite rural backwater?’

I bristle immediately and am just about to inform Mandy that Ballygobbard actually got its first pedestrian crossing since she was last here and Filan’s now has a self-service takeaway coffee machine, but she doesn’t even let me answer.

‘Lemme run something by you, doll. NO. TAKE FORTY-THIRD OVER TO SEVENTH – I AM NOT SITTING IN YOUR FUCKING FART FUG FOR ANOTHER FIFTEEN BLOCKS. CRACK A WINDOW, FOR CHRISSAKES.’

She’s roared so loudly straight into the phone that Mammy sticks her nose out into the hall to investigate and That Bloody Cat lifts its head from the pile of coats it’s taken to sleeping on. The cat has gotten a bit old and baggy and Mammy lets it sleep wherever it wants, while constantly giving out about it to me. She’s been wanting to pick up those coats for weeks but doesn’t want to ‘put the cat out’, so instead she complains to me about it as well as the cat hairs on the towels in the hot press. I wave Mammy away and mouth a ‘sorry’ at the cat. She has us all under the thumb. Under the paw.

‘Mandy. Are you alright there? You’re still on the phone to me.’

'Hi, honey. I'm in a taxi. My driver hit a moron tourist yesterday so I'm here with JABBA THE STINK trying to get uptown.'

I hear a string of expletives in the background and assume the taxi driver has taken a break from his enthusiastic farting to tell her what he thinks of her. It sounds just like the New York I know and love. I've been there twice so I'm practically a local. I tell everyone who's going to bring an extra suitcase for the shopping at the outlets. You can't beat the look on someone's face on Christmas morning when they open a Michael Kors wallet or a GAP hoodie and you tell them it came all the way from the Big Apple. You can nearly smell the glamour. You just don't get that with online shopping.

'How are you, Mandy?'

I can't fathom why she's ringing me. She was the event planner for Emilia and Ben's wedding and essentially my boss after she hired me to do the catering. She'd go through me if she heard me calling her a 'planner', though. 'I don't plan events, I *engineer* them' is a Mandy line me and Maj are still knocking craic out of, in our best American accents, after a few wines.

'I got a proposal for you, Aisling.'

I sink down onto the stairs, eliciting a disgusted meow from the cat, who was obviously planning on relocating there after her time in the coats.

'Okay,' I say warily. I don't know if my nerves are up to another celebrity wedding in BGB. We all ended up in a lock-in in Maguire's after the last one, and I had to get up the next morning to collect some BallyGoBrunch trays from the venue. I got Terry Crowley, the taxi driver, to bring me because

I was one hundred per cent over the limit and I like to give each drink two hours to get out of my system. Terry wasn't much better, and it was only when I got into the passenger seat and inhaled that I remembered he'd been standing on a bar stool singing 'Spencil Hill' only a few hours earlier.

'I got a job for you,' Mandy continues.

'Ah, Mandy, you're very good but the town has barely recovered, and I need a break from NDAs and celebrity food allergies.' Jennifer Lawrence can't have cheese. What kind of a life is that at all?

'Okay but it's a *different* town I'm talking about,' Mandy teases as she roars a list of expletives at old Cabbage Arse the Cab Driver, and a cacophony of horns drowns out her next sentence.

'What did you say, Mandy? I missed that?'

Maybe she's got a client in Dublin. Maybe Ryan Tubridy is going to make an honest woman out of a glossy-haired brunette. Maybe Enya is throwing a birthday party and I'd get to nose around the inside of the castle and see what kind of toilet roll she uses and if she has chargers and wires sticking out from under couches and tables everywhere like a normal person.

'New York, Aisling. I got a job for you in New York.'

There's a few seconds of silence and all I can hear is the cars honking and what sounds like a trumpeting fart, but surely he's not *that* brazen?

'Oh!' is all I can manage back at her, wondering how on earth she expects me to provide BallyGoBrunch catering at an event in New York. Carol's sausage rolls travel well, but I'm not sure they'd make it across the Atlantic.

'I know it's a little sudden, but I can get you in on an L-1 seeing as you're already basically an employee and I think you'd be perfect for it.'

'L-1?'

'Visa, honey.'

'A visa? What kind of event is it that I'd need you to get me a visa? And what would you have me doing?'

Although, I must say I'm glad she's thinking about paperwork right out the gate. Majella's cousin Kieran went to New York illegally fifteen years ago and he's never been home since in case they won't let him back in. Now, he's married to an American girl and everything, and they live in upstate New York with a double garage, so I think he'd be grand, but I also think he's glad of the excuse to avoid bringing the wife home and being accused of notions when he calls a footpath a 'sidewalk'. Auntie Siobhan would never let him live it down, and sure doesn't she love her annual trip over with the empty suitcase?

'It's not an event, Aisling.' I can hear Mandy struggling out the door of the cab and the hustle and bustle of the street around her. 'Well, it's events plural, I guess. I want you to come and work for me, full time. Here. Move to New York.'

I've never been so aware that I'm sitting on our echoey stairs in our hall in BGB as I try to take in what Mandy's just said. Move to New York City. Live in New York City? It's an overwhelming thought. And I just renewed my car tax.

'I know it's a lot to take in, Aisling, but I've got a vacant position on my executive team and I need someone with excellent organisational skills. I saw the way you juggled everything at the Coburn-Dixon wedding. You've got your

head screwed on and you're detail-oriented as fuck. COMING THROUGH!'

I try to imagine whatever poor sod dared to get in Mandy's way as she barrels up the street in her signature black suit, probably on another call on another phone as well as the one she's on with me. She seizes on my silence with some more persuasive chat.

'You have itchy feet. I could tell when I was over there. And that handsome mute has left town?'

John had met Mandy a couple of times over the course of Ben and Emilia's wedding and was struck dumb by her on each occasion. She is loud, in fairness. And Americans always seem louder when they're outside their own setting.

'John? Yeah, he's gone to Dubai. But, sure, he's nothing to do with me.'

'Okay, honey. Sure.' Mandy didn't miss a trick. 'Look, I'm offering you a very competitive package. It's basically a nine-to-five with some extra hours here and there. Great salary. Lots of perks. Some travel. You'd be stepping right into prep for the Christmas season – party, party, party!'

The mention of Christmas puts a dagger of unease through my stomach. Imagine doing Christmas away from home? Only the third one since Daddy died. Mandy is still going, though.

'The chance to progress next year too. And, of course, insurance and benefits.'

I'm glad she mentioned the insurance. The health system in America terrifies me. Obviously, I wouldn't dream of getting on a plane without travel insurance, but you do hear horror stories, like the child from Mayo who broke his ankle

at Harry Potter World and was handed a hospital bill for thirty grand. He didn't even get the obligatory picture with a pint of Butterbeer.

'Listen, Mandy, I'm very flattered and thanks for thinking of me but –'

'Honey, this is a chance to work with the best of the best. I'm not sure if I'm being clear here, but you'd be my right-hand woman. If you want to live out your days selling pig meat to farmers, that's fine, but you're wasting your talent in Bumfuck, Ireland.'

I take umbrage at that. 'They've actually put in a pedestrian crossing since you were here –'

She barely pauses, though. 'An offer like this is some once-in-a-lifetime shit. Anyway, I have a two o'clock and –'

'Oh, is it two there? I was just doing the maths.' Despite all the chat about jobs and moving I wasn't about to pass up an opportunity to ask about the time difference and the weather. 'And it's roasting, I suppose?'

'It's New York in July.' Mandy sighs. 'The air is soup.' Then she chuckles and repeats, aping me, 'Rooostin'. They will die for that accent over here. Promise me you'll think about it?'

My stomach is already in knots thinking about it. It's like an angel dropped out of the sky and offered me a dream job on a platter, but at the same time, I almost wish she hadn't even said it to me. If I didn't know the offer was out there, I wouldn't have to think about it and address it and decide on it. I'm already imagining myself strutting into a rooftop bar and ordering a cocktail and opening my curtains to a view of the Empire State Building. I might even get to put my rubbish down a chute.

'I'm going to have my assistant, Aubrey, email you with more details about the financial package and the role. I need this position filled by the last week in August, okay, sweets? It's balls to the wall here for fall and winter, what with the holidays and New Year's. You can take forty-eight hours to think it over but then I need an answer. Gotta go.'

I've dealt with Aubrey over email before. I can tell she's not the same kind of Aubrey as my Uncle Aubrey who lives in Roscommon and is on his second wife, despite not having a tooth in his head. New York Aubrey is big into 'actioning' things and once accidentally CCed me on a snippy email to her sister about room assignments and a bachelorette party in Las Vegas. To be honest, after organising Majella's hen I could sympathise with her over having little patience for Brianna's demands for a suite with a balcony.

Mandy hangs up and I'm left sitting on the stairs as That Bloody Cat stalks over to express her disgust at whatever it is I am or am not doing to appease her. I stand up to let her onto the step, but after considering it for two seconds she slinks away as Mammy sticks her head out of the kitchen.

'What was that about, pet?'

CHAPTER 3

My heart is racing as I brush past Mammy into the kitchen, more or less deaf to her question. I plonk down into the chair Constance Swinford's arse has just vacated. I can hear the rumble of her Range Rover chugging away up the yard towards the yurt resort, where a gang from Google are learning how to milk cows and make brown bread in the name of team building.

Mandy Blumenthal just offered me a job. Mandy Blumenthal just offered me a job *in New York*. An *executive* job.

The knots in my stomach start to unfurl and are replaced by unmistakable bubbles of excitement. As much as Ballygobbar is my home, I loved living up in Dublin with Sadhbh and Elaine and the convenience of being able to walk into a clothes shop at the drop of a hat. There's a lot to be said for city living as long as you don't think too much about the air quality or the provenance of your milk. My brain begins to fizz as the possibilities roll through my mind. Mandy's executive team. A financial package! Maybe I'll have a corner office with a view of Central Park and a door with my name on it, or an assistant to fire my dry cleaning at and make bring me bagels with a 'schmear'. When Mandy was here, I made sure to mention that I have a standing appointment to have my

hair blow-dried every Saturday morning by Sharon at Strong Stuff. That's very New York – I'm sure she remembers.

'Are you listening to me, Aisling? Now, I'm not being nosy, but did I hear you say something about Visa?' Mammy asks, pushing the last French Fancy at me. 'Because don't mind them, now, trying to get you to take out another credit card. One is plenty.'

'It wasn't the bank, Mammy – it was Mandy Blumenthal.'

'The wedding planner? The American?'

'Yeah.' I'm in such a daze I can barely get the words out. Mandy did Kim Kardashian's wedding to Kris Humphries. She was in the running to do Kim's wedding to Kanye too, until the other planner undercut her quote by 20K and said they'd throw in a flower wall. Mandy punched a door when she was telling me so it's safe to say she's not over it.

'Ringing from America! And what time is it over there?'

'Just gone two.'

'She doesn't owe you money, does she?'

Not only did Mandy pay me in full the day after the wedding, she also made sure to give all the servers a nice tip. I thought it was a classy touch.

'She wasn't ringing about money,' I say, shaking my head, 'she was talking about a work visa. She offered me a job in her company.'

'Well now, isn't that –'

'It's in New York, Mammy.'

The plate she's holding tilts and the last French Fancy slides on to the floor.

Sadhbh screams so loud when I tell her an hour later that I have to put my phone down my jumper to muffle it in case she wakes That Bloody Cat.

‘Did you say yes? Please tell me you said yes, Aisling?’

‘Shhhh!’ I admonish her. ‘I told her I’d think about it. She said I had forty-eight hours and hung up on me. Very Mandy of her.’

‘What’s there to think about? You’ll love it so much! I’m going to be in New York myself from September.’

Sadhbh is currently in LA because her boyfriend, Don Shields, is the singer in The Peigs, Ireland’s most successful export since Guinness. They’re really gaining ground in the States and just did the song for the new James Bond film, which is why Ben Dixon and Don are now besties. It’s a massive deal – apparently Beyoncé was very put out she didn’t get the nod. Sadhbh and the whole gang are going to be relocating to New York for a while, though, and using it as a base for their big upcoming US arena tour. She looks after social media for the band but she has plenty of spare time for gallivanting. That’s her second favourite activity after shopping and followed closely by breakfast cacao ceremonies. She sent me some cacao in the post to try and get me involved but I ended up just putting it in my porridge. It’s no great shakes.

‘Let me guess,’ she says, not even hiding the smile in her voice, ‘you have to do a pros and cons list first?’

She knows me well, which is not really surprising considering we’ve been friends for two years, have shared a flat and have gone on several minibreaks together, including an unforgettable weekend in Berlin. I chew the end of my pen and scan the page in front of me.

‘Read it out, come on.’

'Okay,' I say, taking a deep breath. 'Pros first. One. It's an exciting job.'

'Working for – no, working *with* one of the top event planners in the city? Understatement of the century. If you meet Tina Fey before me, I will kill you. Next?'

'Two. I'll be an executive. I've never been an executive before. Doesn't it sound very fancy?'

'Yes! And you will kill it, Ais! You completely ran the show at PensionsPlus, not that any of those boring fucks upstairs would acknowledge it.' Sadhbh had worked in HR at PensionsPlus before she swapped a lifetime of reminding men to wear deodorant for travelling the world with a rock band, which, to be fair, might also involve some deodorant chat.

'Three?'

'Well, like, it's New York! The Big Apple. The city that never sleeps. Me and Maj always said we'd love to live there some-day. And now Mandy is offering me a visa. It's the dream.'

I suppose I thought it was too late for that. I wonder what Majella will say.

'Exactly, Ais!' It sounds like Sadhbh is pacing now. 'The energy there is incredible. You can be anything, do anything! You could have your own company this time next year if you meet the right people and make some good connections. And, of course, they love the Irish.'

'I have been before, you know. Twice.'

'Yes, but hanging out in the M&M's Store and going to the outlets isn't the same as living there, Aisling.'

'I've met the Naked Cowboy, as well you know,' I retort. She's seen the pictures. Majella was being inappropriate behind his underpants.

'Next pro, please.'

'Four. The dollar is so handy to convert to euro. I can do it in my head.'

'Next!'

'Five. Well ... you and Don will be there too.'

'Yes! And we'll be there for six months at least. Well, based there, anyway. Although, obviously, technically I'll be on tour, so I'll be living on a bus with a load of stinky lads half the time. Urgh. I'm trying to get them sponsored by Sure for Men.'

Old habits die hard. But a lot of girls, Majella especially, would cut Sadhbh's throat in her sleep to swap places with her. 'You make it sound like you're going around in a HiAce, Sadhbhy.' I laugh. 'The bus has a hot tub according to the last picture you sent.'

Don was in it wearing a cowboy hat and not much else. Majella actually started crying, even though she was only just back from her minimoon and her literal husband was in the next room ironing their sheets. She's been a massive fan of The Peigs, Don especially, since before they made it big and never lets them forget it. Pablo is nearly as bad as her now after the band made a surprise appearance at their wedding.

'But I'll be coming back to the city loads, and we can hang out! Oh, we're not getting an apartment, though, so I won't be able to offer you a bed or a couch. We'll just be based in hotel rooms while we're there.'

'Oh, well, I'd be getting my own place, like. Executive job, executive living!'

'Oh la-di-da, la-di-da!' Sadhbh laughs.

'Any messages, concierge?' I say in my best Constance Swinford accent. A smile has crept into my voice and, of

course, Sadhbh cops it immediately and squeals again.

'Oh my God, Aisling, you're really thinking about doing this, aren't you?'

'I am,' I admit quietly. 'The timing just feels ... right.'

She says nothing. She knows what I mean. After everything with James, and then John leaving with Megan after getting my hopes up, I could do with a fresh start. And I've finally used the last of my free No7 vouchers, which have been like a noose around my neck for weeks.

'Okay, let's leave the pros.'

'Are you sure? I have at least seventeen more.'

'I've heard enough. Let's do a perfunctory run through your cons just to get them out of the way,' Sadhbh says, all business. 'And please don't say American chocolate.'

I cross it off the list. It tastes like sick.

'I know Hershey's tastes like sick,' she admits, 'but New York is the greatest city in the world. In the year of our Lord 2021, you can get a purple Snack delivered to your door in under an hour, I promise.'

'I'd have to work over Christmas because of all the events. I don't think I could come home, like.'

'Christmas in New York? Come on, Aisling, that could easily be in the pros. Imagine ice-skating at Rockefeller Centre in the snow.'

I've only been ice-skating once, for Louise Heneghan's hen, and the only reason I didn't die was I never let go of the little penguin with the handles that you push around. It's unnatural to put all your body weight on two blades.

'Okay, well, after that, I suppose, the main one is the café.' I can feel tears pricking my eyes just thinking about turning

my back on it. BallyGoBrunch is my pride and joy. I built it from nothing. And our health-and-safety record is flawless. The last inspector was so impressed she took pictures to use in a case study.

'I know how much of yourself you've poured into it,' Sadhbh says gently, 'and you've made it such a success. But you don't want to burn out because of it. And think of it like this: BallyGoBrunch is what got you this job offer from Mandy in the first place. It might be a stepping stone to greater things. You've said plenty of times that Carol would be well able to take it over. Why don't you offer it to her and see what she says? It doesn't have to be forever.'

'Yeah, that's what I was thinking,' I say. 'The lease is up next month anyway, and I think it would be easier all round if her name was on it and not mine.'

'Give New York six months, and if you're not loving it, just go home. Ballygobbard will be there waiting for you. It's not like you won't be able to go back.'

'Do you think a driver will be part of the executive package? Mandy has one. Well, had. He might be in jail now. He hit a tourist.'

Sadhbh squeals. 'I don't know, but it sounds like you're on your way to making your mind up. This is so exciting! Oh my God, we're going to have the best craic. Watch out New York.' She's giddy now. I'm getting a bit giddy myself.

'Well, there's also the small matter of the gang here. Mammy. Paul. Majella and the girls. Can I really leave them all? Would I not be abandoning Mammy?' In fairness, Mammy pulled herself together fairly quickly after I explained the offer was more than just catering another wedding. She said she

thought it was a mighty opportunity and never imagined we'd have an executive in the family.

'Ais, every single person you've mentioned there only wants the best for you. Your mum is flying it with the eco farm. No offence, but she probably barely has time to think about you. Paul is back on his feet and in the house to keep an eye on her. And don't tell me Majella won't be taking advantage of her teacher's holidays. She'll be over visiting every chance she gets.'

It's true. She has Aer Lingus vouchers coming out her ears after the wedding.

'Look, talk to Carol. Take a look at the job offer. Google "Central Park in autumn" and start packing! You'd be mad to pass up this opportunity.'

CHAPTER 4

When I arrive at BallyGoBrunch the next morning Carol Boland is already hard at it in the kitchen. Since we outsourced production of her famous sausages she's been flat out coming up with new and progressively madder things to do with them. The original sausage rolls are still our bestseller, but her Roll of the Day has a cult following that Skippy Brennan of Solas FM described as 'worrying' in a special show about congestion at the new roundabout in Knock. One of the lads who worked with James Matthews got so hooked he even had his own T-shirt made with the Carol Boland Sausages logo on it. The likes we got on Instagram that day were off the charts. He still comes in any time he's within sniffing distance of the N7.

'Something smells good,' I call, flipping over the Open sign and turning on the coffee machine. I love the café first thing in the morning before our early customers, most of them dairy farmers, have had a chance to drag muck in all over the floor. It's like they don't even see the recessed industrial-pile entrance mat I had specially installed to counteract all the wellies.

'Morning, Ais,' Carol says, emerging from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. 'Fancy a sample? Cheddar and Marmite today. I've a few ends ready for you.'

She knows I love the crispy bits, and normally I'd take the hand off her, but my stomach has been churning since I woke up. What if she says no to my proposal? What if she says yes?

'I'm alright for the moment,' I say, swallowing hard. 'Actually, while I have you, Carol, there was something I wanted to ask you.'

Her eyes widen slightly. 'Of course. Is everything alright, love?'

'Yeah, yeah, everything's fine, I just –'

I almost have it out of my mouth when the door opens and Dr Maher comes flying in, his signature bright-green raincoat billowing out behind him. I often wonder if he's been wearing the same one for thirty years or if he has a wardrobe of them like that lad who owns Facebook and the grey T-shirts. I've thought about asking him but his bedside manner isn't up to much.

'Morning, Dr Maher. Americano with three sugars?' I say cheerfully, flicking on the grinder. 'The Roll of the Day is just out of the oven too.'

I wait for the nod but he just looks back at me blankly. I wonder if he's finally lost it. Majella said she was in for her pill prescription last month and he put the blood pressure cuff on his own arm and started pumping away. She didn't say anything because it was 120/80 and he seemed happy enough with that. He does Zumba with Mags and is in impressive shape for a man who must surely be pushing seventy-five at this stage.

'Are you okay, Declan?' He's not Carol's GP so she can get away with calling him by his first name. I couldn't do it myself. The man does my smears.

'I said just a pop sock,' he replies, looking exasperated. I rack my brains trying to remember if that was Carol's dessert special yesterday. She's on top of all the latest Pinterest trends, and half the time I can't make head nor tail of the names. I found the Frozen Hot Chocolate particularly difficult to comprehend, but every teenager in the parish came in for one, so who am I to complain?

'A pop sock?' Carol replies. 'Are you alright, Declan? Did you drive out yourself or is Trish with you?'

At the mention of his wife's name Dr Maher seems to snap out of whatever episode he's having and, without ordering anything at all, he turns on his heel and heads for the door, nearly catching the coat in it on the way out.

Carol raises her eyebrows at me. 'Has he been into the medicine cabinet or what?'

'I hope not. He has a walk-in surgery on a Monday morning.'

'What were you going to ask me, Aisling?'

My throat starts to feel tight. But I blurt it out before I can talk myself out of it. 'I was wondering if you'd like to temporarily, or for a while anyway, maybe six months, take over my job and the lease on this place?' I say, almost holding my breath.

Carol doesn't react for a second and then lets out an unmerciful sigh, fanning herself with the tea towel she keeps stuffed in her apron pocket. 'Christ, Aisling, I don't know why but you had me worried there. I thought you were going to give me my marching orders or make me go at that godforsaken wasp nest. What's going on? Why do you want out of the lease? Are you unhappy here?'

I'm about to launch into the whole story when three white vans pull in to the car park. Carol takes one look at them and

immediately heads for the takeaway counter. She knows what they want, and what they want is Carol Boland Sausage baps.

'I'll tell you the whole story when it quietens down. It's a good thing, promise,' I hiss, pasting on a smile as the door opens and a rake of builders in high-vis vests and Snickers trousers pile in.

Of course, we're mopping the floor at 6 p.m. by the time I've explained the whole story about Mandy and the phone call and the executive package. We were run off our feet all day, not helped by the fact that Noel, the kitchen porter, had to leave at lunchtime after mislaying his glasses only for them to turn up baked into a sausage and leek quiche. For luck Susie Ó Súilleabháin, the optometrist in Knock, was able to squeeze him in for an emergency appointment, otherwise we'd be short-staffed for a week. Honestly, life in New York would probably feel like a holiday after all this.

'Aisling, I've been turning it over in my head all day since you mentioned it and, do you know, I'd be thrilled to take you up on your offer,' Carol says emphatically, leaning on her mop. 'I'd love the challenge myself, and I'd be happy to do it knowing you'd still keep your share of the business. I think a move to New York would do you the world of good. And, sure, BallyGoBrunch won't be going anywhere if you change your mind and decide to come home. We can get the solicitor to put it all there in black and white. Once I get someone to do payroll and the office bits and take on a part-timer for

the counter, we should be fine. That's assuming Noel doesn't deep-fry his new contact lenses or something.'

I didn't know how much I wanted her to say yes until I heard it.

'Do you really mean it?' I shriek. 'It wouldn't be too much of a burden on you?'

Carol smiles. 'This café has given me a life I never knew I could have,' she says. We both know what she's talking about. Before she left Marty, she had no independence, no money, nothing. He wouldn't even let her drive. And he used her grandmother's sausage recipe to make a name for himself in what happens to be a very competitive industry and never gave her a jot of credit for all the work she did behind the scenes. I can feel the rage rising up inside me just thinking about it.

'Well, if you're sure?'

'I'm sure, Aisling. And I'm delighted for you. You're going to New York! How exciting!'

After Carol leaves, I let the excitement levels come down long enough to pop into the office and put through an order for toilet roll and disposable gloves. Then I do up a quick email to my solicitor to sort out the legal side of things. I'm surprised to see Majella's name in my inbox. Emailing? And from her honeymoon? She'd be barely out of Barcelona Port today – that's if she managed to get Pablo on board the ship in the first place. I click Open.

Well bird,

I tried to WhatsApp you but the signal is shite and there's no Wi-Fi so the only way to get in touch is this computer in the 'business suite'. It's two dollars a minute so I have to type fast. Scamming bastards! So I had to use a box of antihistamines to sedate Pablo long enough to get him on board the ship. He wasn't a happy bunny when he came round but we'd left the port by then so what could he do. We're the youngest people here by about forty years. Not the party vibe I was expecting, and the bikinis I bought from Nasty Gal are getting a few looks. We went to a magic show in the ballroom last night. An auld wan started crying when she thought her husband was sawn in half. This morning there's a rumour going around that people are getting sick. Our room is feckin' tiny, like a hot press, and the bed is as narrow. We're only small and we ended up sleeping top to tail. On our honeymoon! At least Pab didn't have any terrors last night. 'I'm living my nightmare, mi amore,' he says. I'm off to drink them out of mimosas now. What's it doing at home? Rain? Any news?

Maj

No time like the present. And I don't want her to hear it from anyone else. So I tell her.

CHAPTER 5

It's two weeks later when I eventually get a free evening to visit Daddy's grave, and I'm feeling very guilty about it. I bring the little trowel and the foam kneeling pad with me in case there's any weeding to be done. They're floral ones from a set I bought for Mother's Day last year in Knock Garden Centre. But, of course, Mammy has the place looking ship-shape. Although, even her weekly visits can't keep the headstone completely free of bird shite, thanks to the little tree that leans over it.

The sun is warm on my back as I work the scrubbing brush over the letters that spell out his name, and I fill Daddy in on all the news.

'Wait till you hear this – I got a job in New York. I'm going to be an executive at Mandy Blumenthal Event Architects. She's sorting out the visa for me and everything. Can you believe it, Daddy? I'm going to live there and have a subway card and go for brunches and be able to talk about flying in on the red-eye.'

I've thought a lot about the brunches but not a huge amount about who I'll be having them with when Sadhbh is out of town. Everyone in BGB is falling over themselves telling me they can put me in touch with this friend and that