



Three women.  
Three birthdays.

Cathy Kelly

# The Year that Changed Everything

‘Warm, witty and wise’

MARIAN KEYES

# The Year that Changed Everything

*Also by Cathy Kelly*

Woman to Woman  
She's the One  
Never Too Late  
Someone Like You  
What She Wants  
Just Between Us  
Best of Friends  
Always and Forever  
Past Secrets  
Lessons in Heartbreak  
Once in a Lifetime  
The Perfect Holiday  
Homecoming  
The House on Willow Street  
The Honey Queen  
It Started With Paris  
Between Sisters  
Secrets of a Happy Marriage

The Year  
that Changed  
Everything

Cathy Kelly



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*For Mum, with huge love and lots of laughs.*



## PART ONE

*The Birthday*

*The first Saturday in June*



## *Callie*

Outside the great sash windows, party lights snaked around the sycamores beside her bathroom, and even from two floors up, the pulse of party music could be heard.

The neighbours would hate it – the flash Reynolds family showing off again, Callie Reynolds thought with a grimace, standing ready in her dress and shoes, wishing fifty wasn't a birthday people felt that a person had to celebrate.

She'd have been happy with a small dinner, but no. Jason, who always wanted the biggest and best, had organised this highly expensive, three-ring circus.

'You deserve it,' he'd told her earlier that day, as he'd proudly surveyed scurrying waiters and watched the party organiser ticking off cases of expensive wine. 'We've worked hard for this life.'

Callie had leaned into her handsome husband – everyone said they were a stunning couple – and murmured thank you.

Mentally, she was thinking: *but what if, after all the hard work, you find you don't really like this life after all?*

Still bathed in the party lights, Callie locked the door of her glamorous cream marble bathroom. Bending down, she reached under the sink right to the back of the bottom of the cupboard to find the small cosmetics bag stuffed behind the spare shower gels and old bottles of fake tan. It was an ancient bag, chosen on purpose because Poppy, her teenage daughter, was unlikely to riffle through it on one of her forays into Callie's cabinets in search of make-up.

Since Poppy had turned fourteen, she had grown tall, nearly

as tall as her mother, and was no longer even vaguely pleased with ordinary cosmetics, wanting instead to use her mother's wildly expensive Chantecaille stuff, which Callie herself felt guilty about using.

A full make-up bag of Chantecaille could keep a family of four fed for a month and still have enough left over for take-away pizza.

'I got you lovely MAC stuff,' Callie protested the last time she found that Poppy had whipped her foundation, primer and pressed powder and had broken the latter.

Poppy, who had her father's colouring and his utter self-belief, had flicked her long, dark hair out of her perfectly made-up eyes. 'Your stuff is nicer and I don't see why I can't share it,' she said with the entitled air that shocked Callie.

*Where is my lovely, sweet daughter and what have you done with her?* Callie wondered.

In the past six months since the radical conversion from Beloved Child into Daughter-From-Hell, Callie had tried everything in her maternal arsenal: withholding pocket money; loss of phone privileges; and the When I Was Your Age talk.

The When I Was Your Age talk had backfired the most.

'That was years ago, the seventies,' said Poppy dismissively, as if the seventies were on a par with the Jurassic period. 'This is like, now?'

Callie had ground her teeth. Poppy's generation had no clue what life had been like for Callie growing up, or for Poppy's father, Jason. Sometimes, when she thought of how having so little had given Jason and herself such drive and determination, Callie went with: '*if you get too many things too young, Poppy, what values are you learning?*'

The prepubescent Poppy, the one who loved animals, seals and sparkly nail varnish, might have teared up or let her bottom lip wobble at having upset her mum. The new, unimproved Poppy just rolled her eyes, went back to her phone and ignored her mother for the rest of the day, which was obviously

what she was assiduously learning in school from the handful of other, equally privileged kids she was now palling around with.

Not having a clue how to handle this new, tempestuous child was partly to blame for Callie's need of the occasional Xanax.

Her oldest friend, Mary Butler, a real pal from her modelling days who'd lived in Canada for years and had three daughters older than Poppy, often said:

*I know it seems counter-intuitive, but making us want to kill them is a part of teenagers' growing up. It's how we let them fly the nest, because there comes a point where you think you might just smother them in their sleep when they've accused you of being passive-aggressive four times in one day and then demanded to know if you've handwashed their pink sweater.*

Mary was in her late fifties, older and wiser, no longer caught up in the hormonal maelstrom of perimenopause. Mary had three girls in college. She was not, Callie reflected, dealing with a daughter currently behaving like a particularly venal child from *Game of Thrones*.

From being around people like Mary, Callie had always assumed that when a person hit fifty, all knowledge flowed into them, automatically. But she was wrong. Because today, Callie Reynolds was fifty. *Fifty!* And she didn't seem to know anything more than she ever had.

All the books on menopause seemed to say her Inner Goddess would be along soon, bringing wisdom, new sex appeal and the glow of a new life, which was an Inner Goddess guarantee. Ha! That was a cosmic joke, for sure. Staring at herself in the mirror, Callie firmly believed that her blasted Inner Goddess had run off and had left the stand-in, Inner Crone, in her place.

Crone had dry skin, got irritable, cried at the drop of a hat and sometimes sweated so much in bed she wondered when Jason would start asking if he could sleep in the shallow end.

Crone snapped at her husband – not that he was around much these days, possibly because Crone was not experiencing the much-vaunted sexual surge but more of a sexual Saharan drought.

Plus, the anti-Inner Goddess wanted a daughter who appreciated what she had and didn't order stuff from the internet with Crone's credit card without asking.

Finally, Inner Crone missed her family and tended to cry when she thought of them. Which was the other reason Callie needed the odd Xanax.

It was ten years since she'd seen her mother, her brother or Aunt Phil. *Ten years.* They should have been at this party. But they weren't. Because of Jason, and the row and . . .

Feeling the panic rise, Callie unzipped the little bag and popped a pill out of its packet. She washed down the Xanax with some water and took a deep breath.

The Inner Goddess would probably suggest dealing with the family rift as well as talking to Jason about how they really needed to spend more time together as a couple. She'd advise a book on healing herbs and how to get through the tricky teenage years, and to take up meditation.

But Crone liked chemicals to block out the pain because it was easier.

Callie could hear music throbbing from the party two floors below and knew she had to hurry. Quickly, she took stock of herself in the mirror: golden blonde hair perfect, the charcoal silk shift dress with its modern Jackson Pollock-style pattern on the front caressed collarbones nearly as slender as those of the teenage models on which it had been photographed in the magazines.

At least collarbones never got fat, unlike waists.

She'd had her hair blow-dried but made her own face up. After those early years as a model, Callie knew what worked. She knew other people saw beauty – full lips, her face a perfect

oval and eyes that someone had once described as huge misty grey orbs that dominated her face. She, who'd been the skinny little kid in school with the weirdly big mouth, now saw only flaws: the lines, the inevitable sag of her jawline, and a tiredness no multivitamin could shift.

'Like a Greek goddess with mysterious eyes, as if all the world's knowledge is upon those slender shoulders . . .' someone had once written about her.

Jason had teased her about it, but she knew that, secretly, he'd been pleased.

'Greek indeed,' he'd joked, 'when we both know you're pure Ballyglen.'

Callie had known he was pleased because normally he never mentioned their home town, having long since brushed its rural dust from his handmade shoes.

Their glamorous detached mansion in Dublin was a far cry from their council homes in Ballyglen, a small East coast town with no industry anymore, no jobs, and her family—

*Stop thinking about the past!*

She slicked on another sweep of lip gloss.

There had been little joking from her husband this week as the planner had consulted with Callie about the party. Jason, whose idea the blasted thing was, had been distant, on the phone a lot of the time hidden away in his study when he wasn't at work.

Callie, whose perimenopausal emotional barometer was set to 'high alert' anyway, sensed him moving away emotionally.

Worse, Poppy had gone into overdrive in teenage cattiness, a type of meanness that must register on some Teenage Richter Scale of Narkiness somewhere.

'Are you wearing *that*?' she had asked her mother earlier in the week, spying the shift dress on its hanger.

'Yes,' said Callie, summoning all her patience, waiting for what Poppy and her friends called 'the burn' – a caustic remark that hurt as much as raw flames.

'You wear that, it'll look like the eighties threw up on you,' said Poppy. 'Plus, the waist is in, you know, Mum.'

There it was – the burn.

Her friend Mary, who was as all-knowing as Google, had warned her that the teenage era was tough.

*'Remember when you were the most fabulous Mummy in the world, small people snuggled up to you on the couch and said you were beautiful?' Mary emailed gently, when Poppy hit thirteen. 'That's over. OVAH. You are now the thing Poppy tests her claws on, like a cat scratcher, only mobile. You've got to start reining her in, Callie, because it's Armageddon time and she will pick on you, not Jason. You are going to be the cat scratcher.'*

Mary had been right so far.

Mild acne and raging hormones that made Poppy question Callie's every word both hit at the same time.

*Armageddon*, Callie thought, shell-shocked.

Poppy had fallen in with a different crowd at school, the gang with rich parents, the ultra-entitled gang who were always demanding money.

'Do you remember that Christmas she wanted Santa Claus to give her presents to poor children?' Callie asked Jason one morning.

'Yeah,' muttered Jason, scanning his iPad and barely listening.

'Where has that person gone?' Callie said earnestly.

Jason didn't answer, his attention already elsewhere. Jason thought that as long as the family had plenty of money, that was all that mattered. Growing up poor could do that to a person. Once, she'd been the same.

But now . . . now she was afraid her beloved Poppy was becoming someone else: someone who knew the cost of everything and, truly, the value of absolutely nothing. A child of the wealthy who had nothing with which to compare her life. No memories of jam sandwiches for dinner all week, no recall of not having proper school shoes.

In giving their daughter everything she ever wanted, Callie wondered if she and Jason had damaged her by making Poppy spoiled.

Not that Jason thought so: he thought Poppy hung the moon.

But Callie, though she adored her daughter, worried and she was determined to teach Poppy the right things again.

First, she had to get through tonight – this enormous, entirely unwanted fiftieth birthday party that Jason had insisted on throwing for her.

‘People will expect it from us,’ Jason had said. ‘We’ve got an image to maintain, honey.’

Callie was sick of their damned image.

Sure, it seemed like Callie Reynolds had it all: the big house, the rich and glamorous businessman husband who never strayed, the looks of a former model, an interesting past, and a tall, beautiful daughter any mother would be proud of.

Yet it wasn’t perfect. Nothing ever really was. Real life was not like the pretend world on some people’s Instagram. Where was the Instagram that said ‘My Not So Damn Perfect Life’, with no happy-glow filters?

Jason had certainly pulled out all the stops, which meant a giant drinks party for two hundred people with the catering kitchen in the basement full of sous-chefs prepping for the plating of chocolate surprise bombes, tiny amandine biscuits shaped like stars, sashimi, sushi, cod and chips, Anjou pigeon (*watch out for shot*, warned the waiters and waitresses) and fat round pieces of beef that had been made into the most luxurious beef burgers ever. If any of the guests had an allergy, or even felt they might like to have an allergy on fashionable grounds, it would be catered for. There wasn’t a bag of Peruvian black quinoa or a tin of organic matcha tea to be had within a ten-block radius, just in case.

Holding her stomach in, Callie slowly made her way into the party, knocked sideways by expensive perfumes and the noisy clatter of hundreds of people drinking cocktails perfected by a mixologist.

'Fabulous party,' said someone, and a face Callie barely recognised from the newspaper air-kissed her. 'The house is divine.'

Callie beamed her photograph smile.

'Yes, it's lovely,' she said, poise in motion now that the Xanax had kicked in nicely and had chemically flattened her worries about Poppy or guilt over her family's absence at this party. 'Jason has such incredible ideas for the house.'

It was easier than saying that Jason was a nightmare when it came to the notion of improving everything he owned.

Everything had to be the best or most expensive. Like the recent renovation.

Thanks to endless months of building works on the mansion in the embassy belt, a huge basement had been dug for an extension which opened up to a three-storey conservatory complete with a walkway around the highest floor, at ground level, where tropical plants grew, and solar panels in the giant glass panes made the whole thing work.

She didn't explain that her husband knew zilch about exotic plants.

He'd actually got the idea from an article in the *Financial Times*'s *How To Spend It* magazine about a billionaire who had a greenhouse in Manhattan where he grew all manner of exotic things.

'*Cyrtorchilum Dasyglossum* orchids,' he'd read out, admiring a photo of a yellow orchid with delicately ruffled petals.

His elocution and command of the Latin words were impressive for a man who'd grown up in a council estate not too far from Callie's own in a big county town, and whose knowledge of plants was confined to his mam's dahlias.

But Jason was a quick learner. He could now talk exotic

plants with the best of them. He expected Callie to do the same, as well as look just as beautiful all the time.

Unlike those husbands who died a little when their wives went to the shops wielding credit cards, Jason was always urging Callie to buy clothes.

'I want you looking good, sexy,' he'd say.

She could hardly complain, and yet lately she felt more like another *thing* in Jason's life. His wife, to add to the Ferrari and the yacht.

'Do enjoy yourself,' Callie said to the guest now and she moved as if something vital was happening somewhere and she must race off. It was her fiftieth birthday party, after all, and the hostess needed to be all over the place, a handy excuse when it came to conversing with some of the guests, who were clearly a rent-a-celeb crowd drummed up by the party planner.

Callie moved on through the beautiful grey reception room that soared up to a vast glass and steel structure which had guests admiring it all.

She could see her husband in the distance, surrounded by friends as if it was his fiftieth birthday party and not hers. But then Jason drew people to him with the magnetism of the handsome and charismatic. He was tall, even among the statuesque, Pilates- or barre-toned Amazons in heels who were flirting with him.

She had no idea how he'd grown so tall: his own father, now long dead, had been wizened, but then that was due to smoking untipped cigarettes for years and thinking pints of beer and greasy pub sausages and chips were nourishment. Jason was dark, with that Spanish/Irish combination of raven blue-black hair, blue Irish eyes and skin that tanned when he so much as looked at the sun. Tonight, he was wearing a suit of such a dark navy that it appeared almost black. He looked like a movie star: an almost unreal presence among the rest of the guests.

'We were flying over Monument Valley and the pilot took

us really low. It was awesome. Nothing can do justice to that landscape, but flying over it comes pretty close,' he was saying, his voice at the same time husky – which was natural – and exquisitely modulated to sound posh Irish – which was *not* natural but the result of years of voice lessons.

His audience were more women than men. Jason was a rainmaker when it came to money and men loved that. Loved being close to someone who'd managed to buck recessions, the closing of tax loopholes, currency drops and world economic fluctuations to stay rich and grow richer. But tonight, it was a predominantly female crowd.

'There she is, my beautiful wife,' said Jason, spotting her and drawing her close. He was annoyed at her late arrival, she could tell from the glitter of his eyes. He was a stickler for punctuality, but he would never say a word. For the crowd, he kissed her lightly on the mouth.

The crowd purred and Jason smiled: he loved the limelight.

'Nice dress,' he whispered only for her and she felt the pressure of his fingers moving gently up the dress to caress the underside of her breast.

'I needed to look perfect for you, darling,' she said for the benefit of the audience, the knowledge that Jason approved of this dress, of how she looked, calming her along with the Xanax. When did she become this insecure? She hated it. Hated how her sex drive had plummeted and how intimacy had become a chore.

What if the Inner Crone drove her husband away?

He was a good man, despite his ferocious need for more: more money, more things, more prestige.

Now, his fingers traced a line along the skin of her exposed collarbone as if they were alone and the crowd of women all sighed a little at such romance.

'Where were you, Cal?' he muttered so nobody could hear. 'I thought I'd have to send out a search party. Someone keeps groping my backside.'

Callie grinned at the thought of her Alpha-male husband complaining about being groped.

'Now I'm here, I'll keep your admirers in check,' she said, shooting a glance around at his harem and wondering who was drunk this early in the evening and feeling up the host. 'I was checking on Poppy.'

'Happy?'

'Oh, fine. I'd like to think she's miserable she's not down here, but she insists it's all wrinklies and she'd have no credibility if she came to it.'

'Made her point and now she has to stick to it,' Jason said with a hint of pride.

Poppy was in her room with four girls from school and Brenda, who was the family housekeeper and Callie's closest confidante apart from Mary, was keeping an eye on them and feeding them.

'Daft kid, she'll be sorry one day, missing all this.' He gestured around the room and in the process, let go of his wife, which was her signal to mingle.

She didn't touch any of the cocktails, knowing that alcohol and Xanax were an unfortunate mix.

'Callie, it's a beautiful party and you are beautiful in that dress.'

The speaker was small, pretty, had short curling dark hair and, unlike most of the guests, was a real friend who'd known Callie for a long time.

'Evelyn, I'm so glad you could come!'

Evelyn was the first wife of Jason's long-time business partner, Rob.

She was a dear friend. They met twice a week at Pilates classes and giggled together over whether their pelvic floors had hit the basement yet. With Evelyn, Callie didn't have to pretend to be the super-rich, super-happy ex-model wife. She could merely be herself and discuss hot flushes, where this

excess waist flap was coming from, and wonder where their sexual reawakening had got to. Before Mary had gone to Canada, the three of them had gone to Pilates together.

‘You look lovely too, Ev. Red really suits you,’ said Callie, admiring Evelyn’s red jersey dress, which they’d shopped for together. She pulled her friend into a hug.

Rob and Jason had been thick as thieves ever since they’d got out of a big City firm and set up their own hedge fund brokerage. They weren’t hedgies anymore, they told everyone. They did lots of things, mainly private property investment, which was very complex, the way Jason explained it.

‘Oh, just a bit of this and a bit of that,’ as Jason said expansively when anyone asked.

Callie didn’t ask anymore.

Evelyn and Rob were now divorced. She’d finally thrown Rob out of the house when his sleeping around had got too much for her.

‘I put up with so much for the kids, because I didn’t want them to have divorced parents, but hey, he’s never around anyway, always “working”,’ she’d said bitterly to Callie at the time. ‘Which means screwing his newest girlfriend.’

Six years on, Evelyn and Callie were still friends and it had been a bone of contention between Jason and Callie when she insisted on inviting Evelyn to the party.

‘Rob’s coming with Anka,’ Jason had said, jaw clenched. ‘We don’t want a scene.’

Anka was the girlfriend who’d stuck: the clichéd, much younger, tall blonde with ski-jump Slavic cheekbones, a fragile beauty and no apparent issues with waist flap.

She was also very sweet, was now Rob’s fiancée and the mother of his latest child.

‘So? They meet all the time over the children. Evelyn doesn’t blame Anka – she likes her. Anka’s great with the children. And Evelyn’s my friend,’ Callie said, even though she rarely argued with Jason.

He got bored by arguments: he just ignored them and walked out of the room. Argument over – simple.

‘You don’t understand . . .’ he began, actually engaging, for once, sounding on the verge of anger. ‘Rob’s coming. He’s part of what pays for all this.’

With his hands spread, he gestured to the huge house around them, all decorated by an interior designer in paints more expensive than La Prairie face cream, filled with flowers and with staff to make sure Callie didn’t have to lift a finger. ‘Rob and Ev squabble with each other,’ he went on. ‘I hate it.’

Then he’d walked out.

‘No sign of Rob or Anka,’ said Evelyn now, looking around. She never said a word against her ex-husband’s new partner. Rob had strayed. The fault was his and she tried to be nice to her replacement.

Callie felt huge pity for Evelyn. She didn’t know how she’d cope if Jason was unfaithful to her. But then he never played around. She was damn sure of it. He was devoted to her, even if he wasn’t the sort of husband who massaged her feet at night and said: ‘how was your day?’

You couldn’t have everything.

‘If they’re not here yet, they’re not coming. I’m glad they’re not,’ said Callie now. ‘Rob must be ill. He never misses any of Jason’s parties but silver lining and all that, you can relax. Well, a bit,’ she amended, looking round the house with its quota of done-up partygoers ready for a night out.

‘Plenty of our well-dressed pack here’ sighed Evelyn, ‘who all want to know am I seeing anyone else.’

She wasn’t, as Callie knew.

The market for older women did not take into account maturity, wisdom or a sense of humour. The buyers were looking for firm flesh, thighs that had never seen cellulite and faces free from wrinkles. Sometimes Callie wanted to hit Rob for hurting her beloved friend so much.

'Is Poppy here?' Evelyn asked.

'Upstairs watching films with some friends,' said Callie, trying not to mind.

Evelyn did not have teenage girls. She had sons, who were kinder, it seemed.

'I'm going up there now to make sure everything's OK,' said Callie. 'I know Brenda keeps looking in, but I'm freaked out over thoughts of them drinking, after . . . you know.'

She'd already told Evelyn about the empty bottle of Beluga vodka she'd found under Poppy's bed last month, filched from the freezer. The row had been pyrotechnic.

She'd grounded Poppy for two weeks, but Jason, who was a fan of the 'chip off the old block' school of parenting, had only laughed and said: 'Kids are going to drink, Callie. At least it was good stuff.'

It wasn't that simple, Callie wanted to shriek. Genetics mattered. The age at which kids started to drink mattered. But Jason liked to think that being clever could get you past all that stuff. It had worked for him. But not for her brother, her drug-addict brother whom she hadn't seen for ten years. Poppy had those genes too.

Callie had hidden the anxiety and had another Xanax.

Jason refused to be serious about it all, which made her furious. After all, he'd grown up in the same area where she'd grown up, the not-so-lovely streets of Ballyglen's council estates where some people hadn't worked in years and where a hardened contingent considered drinking a full-time occupation.

She did not want that for Poppy. Binge drinking was the start of it. Expensive vodka or cheap beer: it didn't matter. All the same path, a path to risky choices that could affect her life.

Eventually, Callie managed to leave the room, and went through the corridor the hired-in catering staff were using to access the specially designed catering kitchen. She slipped up the stairs and came out in the back hall, then into the actual

family kitchen. There she found Brenda, who'd looked after the house for them for twenty years.

Poppy was in the kitchen with Brenda and another girl from school, Zara, and they were busily loading up two trays with pizzas, soft drinks, and tiny desserts from the caterers.

Poppy had her mother's mysterious eyes, and was wearing a vest top, leggings and a pink shirt from Callie's own wardrobe. The time upstairs had given the girls a chance to pile on the make-up at drag-queen levels, so that Poppy was now caked in cosmetics that made her look far older than fourteen. Callie bit her tongue.

'Hello girls,' she said brightly and she went over to her daughter, about to pop a kiss on Poppy's forehead until she remembered, again, that it wasn't cool to kiss your daughter when one of her friends was present.

'Hi Mum,' said Poppy, in a voice that said *don't touch*.

'Hello Zara,' Callie said to the other girl, doing her impersonation of a totally happy and cool mother. She was really good at the old impersonations these days. 'This all looks completely yummy.'

'Hi Callie,' said Zara, 'thanks. It's totally delish.'

Callie remembered her mother's friends and how she'd always called them Mrs: Mrs this or Mrs that. Nowadays all her daughter's friends called her Callie and called Jason 'Jase', which he found wildly amusing.

'Nice pizzas,' Callie said now. She had to stop thinking about how things used to be when she was growing up. Was this another offshoot of being fifty – thinking about the past all the time? 'Your home-made ones?' she asked Brenda.

'Course,' said Brenda, finishing arranging the tray.

'How's it going downstairs at Help the Aged?' said Poppy to her mother.

'Great,' said Callie. 'We're not that old, you know.'

'Says you, Ms Fifty!' taunted Poppy. 'If I was fifty, I wouldn't let people know and have a party.'

Callie grinned and she and Brenda exchanged another glance. Brenda knew quite well that Callie hadn't really wanted this party. Mind you, Brenda wasn't too keen either. She didn't like the sort of parties Jason gave. Someone would undoubtedly set up shop in one of the loos and do lines of coke, which both Callie and Brenda disapproved of.

Brenda opened the door for Poppy and let the two teenagers go up to Poppy's huge bedroom where three other girls were waiting.

'Is she all right?' asked Callie.

'Behind the sniping, she's in brilliant form,' said Brenda. 'Stop worrying about her. You're a good mother, enough already. D'ya want a cup of tea or do you have to go back down to party central and schmooze?'

'I'd love one,' said Callie, sitting down on one of the kitchen stools. 'It's full of people I don't know and you know how hopeless I am with names. I'm calling everyone "darling" out of desperation. I honestly have no idea what Jason said to that party planner, but for every four people I know, there are another twenty-five I've never seen in my life. And they're not just people Jason's trying to impress – they're supposed to be there for me. "An aspirational guest list", as the planner said,' Callie finished.

'You should have put your foot down about going away for a nice weekend instead,' Brenda pointed out. Brenda had very firm views on how everything should be done and on how Callie should deal with Jason.

Brenda and Jason had a love/hate relationship. They were like scorpions in a brandy glass – circling, each with their stinging tail arched. Jason knew the house would not run like clockwork without Brenda and he knew that his wife both loved and would be lost without her. However, Brenda did not do deference and Jason liked deference from the people he paid.

He pretended to laugh when Brenda called him 'the master'

out of mischief, but secretly, both she and Callie knew it drove him mad.

'The party will be over eventually.' Callie looked at the kitchen clock. 'Only another few hours to go. By then the stragglers will be so drunk, nobody will notice that I've gone to bed.'

Brenda laughed. 'You hungry? Bet you haven't eaten. I've got some more of the caterers' desserts in the fridge. Tiny chocolate things that look as if fairies made them and elves decorated them. Hold on.'

One of the waitresses appeared.

'Mrs Reynolds, there are some . . . er, people at the door for your husband.'

Brenda and Callie exchanged confused glances. Anyone with an invitation to the party would just come in, having cleared the very heavy security on the gate. Anyone without an invitation would have been sent packing.

'I'll go,' said Brenda.

'Er . . .' The young waitress shuffled a bit. 'They asked specifically for Mr Reynolds, but we can't find him so they asked for you next,' she said, eyes on the floor.

'It's the staff of Tiffany's,' joked Brenda. 'Go with her,' she told the waitress, 'in case she needs help carrying the loot or if it's Aerosmith come to do a special birthday gig and she faints.'

Callie laughed out loud.

They were waiting in the hall, not Aerosmith, but about seven men and one woman, some in police uniforms and some in plain clothes. Callie's hand flew to her throat.

*Ma. Aunt Phil, Freddie,* she thought.

She'd walked out of her old life a long time ago. Twenty-five years since she'd left Ballyglen. Ten years since she'd seen her mother, Pat, her aunt, Phil, or her brother, Freddie. Ten years since the huge argument. What might have happened to them?

'Mrs Reynolds?' said a man of her own age; tall, lean, with glasses and an intelligent face.

'Yes,' she replied, feeling weak.

'Detective Superintendent John Hughes of the Garda Bureau of Fraud Investigation. We're here to speak to your husband and we have a warrant to search your house.'

He handed Callie a piece of paper but she didn't take it.

She stared at him, not understanding.

'This . . . this is my party,' she stammered, looking around at the waitress, now rapidly disappearing.

Callie saw the hall filled with flowers and giant lit candles, all perfect scene-setting for the modern art that hung on the walls.

Relief returned. Not her family.

'It's my fiftieth birthday party. My husband is a businessman, Jason Reynolds. You obviously have the wrong house.'

She waited for the detective to say something about it being a mistake, but he gestured to the pieces of paper.

'It's not the wrong house,' he said and there was something about his voice that made Callie feel more frightened than weak.

She looked at the first piece of paper for an address and saw it all printed perfectly before her: their address, Jason's name. She'd never seen a search warrant before and it looked so ordinary: ordinary and dangerous. She felt her legs shake the way they'd shaken when she first stood in front of a camera, before she'd learned to handle her nerves and the anxiety.

'Where is your husband?'

'Downstairs,' said Callie. 'We're having a party . . .'

'The guests need to go,' said the detective.

'What?' asked Callie. She knew she sounded stupid but her brain, normally sharp, had hit slow-motion. 'No, really,' she said again in desperation, 'there must be some mistake, you are in the wrong house, you can't be talking about my husband.'

'Jason Reynolds,' said the policeman. 'That's your husband's name?'

'Yes.'

‘And you are Claire Reynolds?’

Callie nodded. Nobody called her Claire anymore, not since she had turned into Callie years ago, when she’d sloughed off her past and turned into someone totally different.

‘We need to locate your husband.’

‘Why?’

The detective looked at her slowly and she thought she could see pity in his eyes. ‘To help us with our enquiries,’ he said smoothly, which she felt was not the whole truth. His men began to move, some downstairs.

‘Does your husband have an office here?’ asked another man.

The unreality of it all began to sink in. The police were here to search her house. To talk to her husband. They must have got it wrong, but it was still happening, like a movie when the wrong people were targeted.

Shock made her want to sit down, but she had to stay strong. Poppy was upstairs with her girlfriends, Brenda was in the kitchen making tea and there were three hundred people downstairs drinking cocktails and nibbling blackened cod, tiny exquisite burgers, sashimi.

A door opened and Brenda marched through. Callie felt a sigh of relief. Brenda would sort it out. Tell the police that Jason Reynolds could not be the person they were looking for.

‘What is it?’ she said, looking at Callie then looking at the policemen who were leaving the hall speedily.

‘You are?’

‘Brenda Lyons, Mrs Reynolds’ friend and housekeeper.’ She put an arm around Callie. ‘And you?’

‘Detective Superintendent John Hughes, GBFI, Garda Bureau of Fraud Investigation.’ He handed out a card to Callie.

‘Right,’ said Brenda with a sigh.

Callie didn’t have time to think why Brenda wasn’t in the slightest bit surprised.

‘There are five teenage girls upstairs,’ Brenda said.

‘I’ll go up,’ said the female officer in uniform.

'I think I need to come, as does Mrs Reynolds. We can't upset the girls. But first . . .' She looked back at the detective superintendent. 'What's the plan?' she said as if they were discussing something quite normal instead of a team of police detectives coming into Callie's house late at night at her actual fiftieth birthday party.

Callie stared at her old friend in horror.

'We are here to arrest Jason Reynolds and search the house,' said the officer calmly and this time Callie felt her knees go totally and everything went hazy and then blank.

When she woke up, she was sitting on one of the squashy chairs in the kitchen.

'Lucky they caught you,' said Brenda, waving a glass of brandy in front of Callie's nose.

'Was that a dream, did that really happen?' said Callie.

'No dream,' said Brenda bitterly. 'All true. At this exact moment, there are police officers getting everyone out of your house, carefully taking every computer and every bit of paper with them and they're searching the whole place.'

'Oh God,' said Callie. 'No,' she said, pushing the brandy away. 'You know I don't like spirits.'

'I know you don't like spirits, but drink this because you are going to need it.'

Brenda held the brandy glass up to Callie's mouth and made her drink it, like Callie used to make Poppy drink things out of a beaker cup when Poppy was a baby.

Her baby.

'Where's Poppy?' she said in alarm.

'It's fine for the moment, I got one of the waitresses to go up there and the female Garda is there too. I've told her there's something strange going on but the police are here to fix it and you're sorting it out, and will be up in a minute. The men are not going near her room until you are ready to be there and supervise, but to be honest I'd say get out of here pronto, both of

you. We need to get you and Poppy somewhere safe before the story hits the media.' Brenda appeared to be thinking about it. 'I don't even know if you can bring your clothes or what,' she added in a very matter-of-fact tone. 'They're not the Criminal Assets Bureau, so they can't impound it all or anything, but when the Fraud Squad come, they're going to be looking at every asset in terms of legal redress.'

'What story? This is a mistake, surely? Jason will sue.'

Brenda patted her hand tenderly.

'Callie, the Fraud Squad don't make mistakes.'

'But us? Jason's a businessman.'

'Drink,' was all Brenda would say.

Callie shuddered as she finished the rest of the brandy. She hated all strong spirits.

'What do we do now?' she said, making herself come back into the world again.

Everything still felt very unreal. She wanted another Xanax, a whole one, and to go to bed and find out this was all a dream.

'You prepare yourself for the next shock,' said Brenda, patting her hand.

'I'm not preparing for any shocks until I have Jason beside me and I find out what the hell is going on,' said Callie, as the alcohol hit her system, putting fire in the hold. 'The embarrassment,' she went on.

The people at the party knew all the gossip columnists in the country. Everyone would be writing about this. Jason would go mental. 'Where is Jason? I hope he's trying to turn the police away.'

Brenda perched on the edge of the armchair.

'That's what you needed the brandy for,' she said.

Callie stared up at her.

'They can't find Jason.'

'What?'

'I really hate to be the one to tell you, lovie, but he's done a runner.'

Callie felt the world shift around her.

The words were slow coming out: 'He can't have gone. Why would he go?'

The look Brenda gave her was pitying and Callie flinched under it.

'The most likely excuse is that he's run because he's guilty of whatever they are accusing him,' Brenda said. 'Which is why you and Poppy need to get out of here now with whatever you can. I don't know what Jason was doing, but the game is up, Callie, and you need to be out of it.'

'What do you mean *what he was doing?*' said Callie fiercely.

'For heaven's sake, Callie, you must have figured it out now. I always had my suspicions. Nobody else was making money during the recession except your husband. Nobody else bounced back so quickly. Did you not find that weird?'

'No!'

'Come on,' said Brenda. 'You're a clever woman. I thought you knew his business wasn't entirely kosher. We can talk about this another time, but now, we need to get those girls home, get you and Poppy out of the house and . . .' Brenda stopped for a minute. 'Could we take the Range Rover? It might be confiscated. Whose name is it in? Probably the company's, so you can't take it. Right, we need taxis to get the girls home or, better still, I'll ring their parents.'

Callie watched, mute, as Brenda thought out loud, running through the various permutations and combinations of keeping her daughter out of this crisis.

'I am not running,' began Callie. 'I am going to stay here and wait until Jason comes back from wherever he is and fixes it all—'

'Fixes it? This won't be fixed. Tomorrow morning, every newspaper in the country is going to be at your door wanting to know all about it,' said Brenda harshly. 'Wake up, Callie. I am your friend and I am telling you it's all over. You have to get out. Now. For your sake and for Poppy's.'

Poppy.

'More brandy,' said Callie, Brenda's words beginning to penetrate. 'I need another one.'

'Not a good idea—' began Brenda.

'I don't care,' hissed Callie. 'I need something.'

Brenda watched silently as Callie half filled the brandy glass and downed it, wincing as it burned.

Callie stood up and looked around her kitchen, the cosy kitchen that she'd insisted on decorating herself. The rest of the house was where Jason had supervised the interior décor, places that were fit for proving to people how rich, successful and gracious the Reynolds family were. It was nothing like the home she'd grown up in, a small terraced council house in Ballyglen, where the whole Sheridan family of four, and her aunt, had lived.

Callie felt an ache deep in her heart.

*I wish my family were here. I wish my mother was here.*

## *Sam*

Early on the morning of her fortieth birthday, Sam Kennedy was woken up by the phone, and not by her beloved Baby Bean pressing a foot or an elbow into her bladder, which had been the case for the past few months.

She struggled out of her cosy cocoon of duvet, disentangling herself from Ted's long warm leg which was comfortably entwined with her own, and answered.

'Happy birthday, Samantha!' said her mother.

'Who's phoning at this hour on a Saturday?' groaned Ted, pulling his pillow over his sleek dark head, and then, remembering what day it was, pulling it off. 'Happy fortieth birthday, honey,' he said, putting an arm around his wife's very pregnant body and kissing her gently on the shoulder through the curtain of her long tangle of untameable caramel curls. 'Love you.' He leaned down and kissed her bump, covered with an unsexy floral nightie. 'Love you, Bean.'

Sam never stopped loving the gesture: Ted bending from his great height to kiss her and her belly with complete adoration. He was six foot two to Sam's five foot three and their wedding photos had made her realise how incongruous they might have looked together had Sam not been addicted to very high heels. With a four-inch heel, her pocket Venus body in a simple lace dress had looked just right beside her long, lean husband. Up close, her head fitted perfectly against his broad chest and if he sometimes whirled her round with her feet off the floor, nobody noticed.

'Love you, too,' Sam murmured now.

'Samantha, are you still there?' Her mother's voice sounded irritated at having been made to wait.

'Yes, and thank you for calling, Mother,' Sam said into the phone, not mentioning that pregnant women longed for their Saturday morning lie-in.

'You sound odd. I hope you're not getting maudlin about your age,' her mother went on in the cool tones that commanded respect in St Margaret's School for Girls, where she'd reigned as headmistress for thirty years. 'Age is merely a number.'

*Six-thirty on a Saturday is merely a number, too*, thought Sam but didn't say it.

Instead, she mildly pointed out: 'I was asleep.'

'Right. I trust you're well and have a good day planned,' said her mother with the same formality she probably used to address the school's board of governors. 'Again, happy birthday. Here's your father. Goodbye.'

With that unmatural sign-off, the phone was handed over.

'Happy birthday, lovie. Sorry for the early call but . . .'

'I get it, Dad,' said Sam, warmly. 'Early morning swim? The garden?'

Her parents lived close to Dublin Bay, where hardy souls swam in all weathers, Sam's mother among them.

'The former,' her father said. They'd communicated this way for years: Sam would speak and he'd answer in the 'yes/no/absolutely' code that was hardly Enigma-machine-quality but worked for them.

Her dad, Liam, was as mild, chatty and forbearing as her mother, Jean, was cool, uncommunicative and distant. It was one of the great mysteries of Sam's life as to how the two of them had ever married. That they'd stayed married, she put down to the social mores of the times and some concept both parents had about staying together for their daughters.

Nobody talked about the ice-cold rows between her parents when she'd been growing up, and now, this part of life appeared to have been airbrushed out of family history. It was

like the fridge magnet said: *If anyone asks, pretend we come from a nice, normal family.*

Only she and Joanne, her younger sister, talked about the past now.

Their parents' marriage of opposites had made Sam determined to be nothing like her mother and to marry a man she adored, rather than one she merely tolerated.

She'd succeeded. Nestling closer to her beloved Ted in bed, she thought that, yet again, being with him should feature in the number one slot on her daily gratitude list.

'How are you feeling and how's the little baba?' her father asked.

'Wriggling,' said Sam, putting a hand automatically on her hugely swollen belly and smiling, another automatic move. She'd been smiling since she'd found out that she was pregnant, which was astonishing because, after three failed IVF cycles in her early thirties, she'd assumed that babies were out of the question.

Ted had been smiling pretty much non-stop too, a giant grin that brought out that dimple in his otherwise acutely masculine face, a dimple Sam really hoped their baby would inherit.

After many painful years of longing, they'd finally somehow come to terms with the fact that they were going to be child-free people, and that a dog/cat/hamster was the answer – or so everyone said.

They would deal with the grief, they would not let it part them. They would do their best to move on.

'Let's be happy with each other,' they'd agreed.

So they'd got two dogs, Ted began the marathon running that had been put on hold during years of planned babymaking schedules (the fertility-drug years) and Sam filled her weekends with botanical watercolours and the odd yoga class, so she could learn again to love the body she'd felt had betrayed her.

And then suddenly, the previously infertile Sam had become pregnant.

Incredibly, miraculously pregnant with no help from anyone apart from Ted.

'Last dash of the ovaries,' said her GP. 'Evolution is incredible. If you haven't given birth by a certain age, your body can launch into action.'

'Wow,' Sam had said, which was almost all she'd said since she'd gone to the GP to discuss her strange tiredness and morning nausea, thinking there must be a medical reason other than the obvious.

On the phone, Dad said it was a good sign the baby was a week late.

'All first babies are late and the later they are, the smarter they are. I can't remember what site I read it on, but it's true.' Liam spent hours consulting the internet every day on pregnancy issues. 'I was going to drop round later with your birthday present,' he added.

'I'd love that. We'll be here. Ted's going to walk the dogs, but I plan to tidy the kitchen cupboards.'

'Ah, love, not on your birthday,' begged her father. 'Watch old movies and drink hot chocolate. That's the right sort of plan. Do you have marshmallows? I'll bring some.'

'Just like old times,' said Sam, smiling into the phone.

When her father had hung up, Ted nuzzled into her.

'Happy birthday, sexy pregnant lady,' he said, sliding up her nightie to stroke her bare belly.

Baby Bean wriggled and they both gasped to feel Sam's small guest poke an elbow up.

'Incredible,' said Ted, marvelling.

'I know,' agreed Sam, stroking her belly gently. 'Incredible.'

Ted swung out of bed.

'I'll let the dogs out and bring you tea. Camomile and apple? Earl Grey?'

Sam considered it. 'Earl Grey. Anymore camomile and I'll turn into a camomile lawn.'

She used to love her morning coffee but had given it up as

soon as she'd learned she was pregnant – not that a certain amount of caffeine was necessarily bad in pregnancy. But Sam had spent too long wishing and praying for this child to do anything but turn her body into a temple until he or she was born. This was the legacy of every failed pregnancy test: a fear of doing something, anything, to hurt her baby.

She snuggled back down into the bed and talked nonsense to Baby Bean. She did that a lot now – running commentaries, telling the baby what she was doing and how she couldn't wait to do it all with Baby Bean.

'Grandpa will be over later with a present for me, baba. It's my birthday today! You're my best birthday present, though.'

Ted returned with a cup of Earl Grey tea for her. Sam took a sip. She'd never been able to touch it pre-pregnancy, but now she wasn't drinking coffee and the idea of milk in tea made her want to gag, Earl Grey, black, no lemon, was perfect.

He got back into bed with her and gently stroked her shoulder.

'Sleep?' he asked.

'Bean is undecided about whether to be a footballer or a gymnast,' Sam sighed. 'Lots of moving and kicking. I don't know what that means. Oh, but Dad says that late babies are smarter.'

'Aren't you clever,' crooned Ted to her bump.

He'd been amazing all through her pregnancy: kind no matter how ratty she'd got and perfectly happy to sit on the side of the bath rubbing her back as she soaked in the water. No matter how enormous she'd become – and boy, she was enormous now – he'd still told her every day how gorgeous she was.

'Now that your dad's got that new bit of information, there's still time to start that blog about baby advice,' Ted suggested.

Sam loved this game. She started first.

'Number one, people need to know that babies who are carried low can be boys/girls/llamas.'

'Or that fish is good and bad for you, simultaneously,' added Ted.

They laughed.

By now, forty-one weeks into her first pregnancy, Sam and Ted had come to the conclusion that everyone on the planet believed themselves to be an expert in babies.

And that they all had advice they wanted to impart – whether Sam or Ted wanted to listen or not.

*'Don't eat fish – mercury kills babies.'*

*'Eat fish – it's good for their brains.'*

*'One glass of wine occasionally relaxes you. I'm sure the World Health Organisation said that. Or was it my sister . . .?'*

*'Your baby will be born with Foetal Alcohol Syndrome if you so much as smell alcohol from more than a distance of four feet. I saw it on the Discovery Channel.'*

*'Natural births are the best for mother and baby. Who wants drugs in their poor baby's system?'*

*'Ask for the drugs early on, like, really early on. If you don't get them in time, you'll scream and the pain . . .'*

*'You're carrying low – definitely a girl.'*

*'You're carrying low – a boy, for sure!'*

'Go back to sleep, Sam. You need to rest,' Ted said. But Sam felt wide awake now. She knew she'd never get back to sleep for even a few minutes.

'Dogs still out the back?'

'Yes. Four magpies in the garden – did you not hear the orgy of barking? The neighbours will love us for dragging them out of their hangovers at this early hour on a Saturday.'

*Four magpies*, Sam thought, hauling herself out of the bed to hit the bathroom for her first of many trips of the day. Was she having a boy? Three magpies meant you were having a girl, four meant a boy. If she saw five magpies, Sam wondered if a silver baby would slither out.

From all the painful birth stories she'd been told, she hoped slithering out was part of it all.

They'd asked not to be told the sex of the baby. 'It's not long until we'll know and it's life's biggest secret,' she said to Ted. 'Let's wait.'

'I thought life's biggest secret was whether there is life on another planet,' said Ted, deadpan. 'OK, you win. No asking the radiographer if they can see a willy or not.'

The spare bedroom was turned into a nursery decorated in a riot of yellows and white and Ted, whose father had a lathe, had slaved over a handmade cot.

She wriggled her feet into her slippers after the bathroom. It was a long time since she'd been able to see her feet, much less bend down to pull on shoes.

'You try and snooze,' she said, kissing Ted on the head as he rearranged the pillows.

She went into their tiny kitchen to make toast with honey – she could eat it for the Olympics. Also ice cream. Gallons of it.

Being pregnant had made her ravenous. Nobody had mentioned that, although she'd been told of women who'd licked coal or consumed Marmite by the bucket.

She had no idea how she was going to get the baby weight off, but from the size of her rear end, which was admittedly hard to see in their wardrobe mirror, Sam was pretty sure it wasn't all baby.

When she'd confided this to Joanne, her sister had laughed and said, 'It'll come off: sleep deprivation does that to you.'

'I hope you're joking,' said Sam, because she knew how shattered Joanne had been when she'd had three children one after the other.

'I am not joking, not remotely.'

Joanne smiled with the Mona-Lisa-like smile which implied that, for once, the younger sister knew something the older one didn't.

Sam looked into the back garden to see if Dixie and Horace, the two small, bitsa-everything rescue dogs on whom she and Ted lavished their affection, had finished their morning run

around the garden where they barked at birds, gave worms the evil eye and peed liberally in order to remind all other creatures that this was their territory.

But the dogs were busy and, knowing their lap of investigation could take some time, and because her lower back ached strangely, Sam sat down on a kitchen chair.

She hoped the dogs would be fine with the baby and they'd been playing crying baby noises whenever they fed them, as per internet advice, so the dogs would associate the baby with the loveliness of dinner, which was one of the highlights of Dixie and Horace's day. Pavlov's bell version of getting the dogs ready for the new arrival.

'Do you think it will work?' Sam had asked anxiously.

'Course. The worst crime they'll commit is to try to slobber kisses on the baby or clamber onto your lap for breastfeeding,' Ted teased. 'They'll adjust.'

He'd been raised with dogs and was relaxed around them. In contrast, Sam's mother had an allergy, or so she said, and no animal had ever graced Sam's childhood home.

On the hard kitchen chair, Sam moved to try to find a comfortable position.

The ache was getting weirdly lower and deeper. Was this a sign that the baby was moving into the birth canal? she wondered.

Some women said pregnancy made them feel at one with their body: Sam, who had spent years having her hormones artificially manipulated in order to stimulate a pregnancy that never came, no longer felt as if she had a clue what was going on with hers. Which worried her, although she hadn't breathed a word of this to anyone. The baby fear, that something would go wrong to stop her having this child because her body had failed before, was too ridiculous to voice out loud.

And there was another fear, one that loomed bigger each day: in all those years of trying to get pregnant, she'd barely allowed herself to imagine becoming an actual parent.

Now she wondered how on earth she could be a proper mother. Because she had no experience of how a warm, kind motherly figure behaved.

'Happy birthday, Sam!'

Ted appeared in his T-shirt and boxers, his body marathon-lean and tanned from sunny evenings spent in the garden sanding and painting the crib.

He'd been in a vintage Rolling Stones T-shirt and jeans at the college party where they'd met, a night when Ted said he was walking her home to keep her safe.

'I can keep myself safe, thank you very much,' snapped Sam.

Ted had grinned and walked her home anyway.

'You were like an angry pixie, those eyes flashing at me and I just couldn't keep away,' he'd said later, when they were inseparable, Sam's prickly defences long since lowered.

'Honey.' He leaned down and kissed her. 'I couldn't sleep and it's not fair that you're up alone on your birthday.' With a flourish, he put a small box on the table in front of her and stood back proudly. 'It's a really small gift,' he explained. 'Tiny so I can get you a proper something when the baby is born or you can enjoy going out shopping with me, because forty is a special birthday. You should have diamonds and—'

Sam opened the box, gasped suddenly and stared at the interior blankly.

Ted squinted at her. 'You don't like? They're gold-plated earrings. The gold will rub off, it always does, and I can return them if you'd like, but I know you like purple stones and—'

'Ted!'

'You really hate them?' Ted picked up the box and looked at the contents critically. 'I thought you'd hate it more if I spent money buying any proper jewellery without you—'

'My waters have just broken,' hissed Sam, as she felt the surge of liquid move from a trickle to a flood. 'I love the present, Ted, but we need to go to the hospital. I can't have the

baby on the kitchen floor – it's not clean enough with the dogs, and the baby will get kennel cough or dog flu or something . . .’

‘Your waters have broken?’ repeated Ted, not sounding like someone with a PhD in data analytics.

He sat down beside her, then immediately got up again as if someone had switched his brain off and then back on, and all the circuits were recalibrating.

‘Right. OK. Will I time your contractions or . . .?’

Her reliable, steadfast husband stared at her as if all rational thought had been sucked out of him and he wanted her to tell him what to do.

‘Get me to the hospital,’ she whispered.

Stopping only to ring the doorbell next door so they could tell their neighbour, Cynthia, that Operation Baby was ON and would she go in and take the dogs, as agreed, Ted helped Sam into the car.

Despite several strong buzzes on her doorbell, Cynthia didn't appear.

‘She's in the shower,’ said Shazz, Cynthia's twenty-three-year-old daughter, coming out onto the shared driveway still in her skimpy denim cut-offs and a leather-look bra top worn with a net top, her short pale pink hair fluffed up into a halo round her head. Definitely just in from the night before.

‘Good luck, Sam, it'll be fine,’ said Shazz, draping her beautiful, fake-tanned self over the car door and flattening Sam with the scents of fags, booze, club and not-been-to-bedness.

‘How do you know it'll be fine?’ demanded Sam, her politeness filter entirely knocked out by the knowledge that Baby Bean wanted out and there were no medical professionals around to help.

‘I've seen it on the soaps,’ said Shazz thoughtfully. ‘It'll work out. Babies are, er . . . you know – natural.’

‘The soaps aren't real!’ Sam yelled. ‘And it's scary. Imagine giving birth right now. Big baby.’ She lowered her voice and pointed downwards. ‘Small exit.’

'Yeuch.' Shazz took a step back, thinking about it. 'That's going to mess it all up down there, right? In the lady garden palace.' She shuddered.

For a brief moment, Sam thought about her own lady garden palace and getting the baby out of it. She'd watched lots of Discovery TV birthing shows and right now, she was scared.

Ted got into the car.

'Hospital bag!' Sam reminded him.

He got the bag.

Looking right and left like a racing driver, Ted whizzed through every red light on the way to the maternity hospital. Beside him, Sam panted and screeched with a combination of nerves and pain.

Another wave hit her. This was not what she'd anticipated, not this searing pain that felt as if it would rip her in two. Plus, she might kill Ted before they got to the hospital. He kept going over speed bumps too fast.

That was the problem, she decided grimly as the pain receded. She was having a baby with an idiot. An idiot who loved his computer, thought the sun shone out of the Tipperary hurling team's collective backsides and had no idea what women had to go through in life. Any of it.

Women understood pain. Or women *were* pain . . . ? Something like that. She'd read it on Pinterest.

Another pain bloomed inside her.

'Drive faster!' she hissed.

Ted broke all the speed limits and, at last, they slid to a halt in front of the Rotunda Hospital in the ambulance bay.

As she was put into a wheelchair at the hospital door, she was half sobbing. 'My waters broke an hour ago and the baby's coming,' she said.

A nurse shooed Ted off to park properly because he wasn't allowed to abandon the car in the ambulance bay.

'I am going to have this baby here and now!' went on Sam,

watching with dismay as her husband left. She loved him. She'd been so horrible to him . . . he couldn't go—

'You probably won't give birth this quickly on your first,' soothed the nurse. 'Let's see how you're doing.'

'No, it's a week overdue, it's coming very soon, I can feel it,' said Sam, who was not feeling remotely soothed.

'Everyone thinks that, but it's a first baby and they take time.'

'No, I do know,' said Sam wildly. 'I'm giving birth now, here and now! Get me into the delivery room!'

'All right, pet, let's check out how dilated you are.'

Somehow, assisted by two nurses, and a midwife with an even more soothing voice, Sam got onto a bed.

'It's coming!' she shrieked as another pain hit her.

'It's not,' said the midwife calmly as she emerged from between Sam's legs. 'You're only three centimetres dilated.'

'Three!'

Three centimetres would not let a Barbie doll emerge. Barbie's insanely perky bosoms would get stuck.

'Yes, only three, I'm sorry, Sam,' said the midwife with the awareness of a professional who'd delivered enough babies to know that smugness in delivery rooms did not help anyone.

Three was nothing, Sam knew. *Nothing*. How could she be in this pain with no sign of a child appearing? What was next? Red-hot pokers of pain?

Ted came back from parking the car as another contraction ripped through Sam.

'Darling,' he said, taking her hand.

'Don't darling me!' she yelled, fear coming out as rage. 'If you ever think you are coming near me again with that . . . that *thing*, you have another thing coming!'

'But . . . but . . . we want this baby,' muttered Ted, who had read all the baby books with mentions of fury bouncing off the walls in the delivery suite. But not his Sam, surely?

After this long journey of IVF, he was going to help, hold Sam's hand, man the phone.

Not get screamed at.

'Relax, dear,' whispered the midwife to Ted. 'They all say things like that. In fact, that's mild. No sex forever or having their bits chopped off is what some partners hear in these rooms, but afterwards, it's OK, you wait and see.'

'It's her birthday,' Ted said, desperately trying to shift the conversation on from parts of his anatomy he did not want to discuss with strange women. 'She's forty.'

'We know, she's an elderly primigravida.'

'I am not elderly!' said Sam, who had nothing wrong with her hearing even if it felt as if a giant wriggling emu with a bowling ball for a head was trying to emerge from her body, *sideways*. This could not be normal. There must be something wrong.

'Not old, just old to have your first one,' soothed the midwife. 'Once you're thirty-five or older, they call you elderly.'

'I'm forty today,' Sam said, tearfully. 'That's not elderly. Life begins at forty: everyone says it.'

'Happy birthday!' said the midwife, who was thirty-nine, and hoped so too.

Four hours later, two more centimetres dilated and a lot of screaming at Ted, interspersed with sobbing and saying sorry because she loved him, Sam thought she might just be going mad with pain. Nobody told her it would be like this or that it would take this long.

When people said '*I was in labour for sixteen hours*', she'd thought it was exaggeration, not reality. Like saying 'I didn't sleep a wink last night', or 'I lost all that weight without doing anything'.

A whopping big baby-birthing fib.

But in this case, it seemed as if it was true.

Doing his best to be helpful, Ted extracted Sam's birth plan from the hospital bag.

The birth plan was full of ideas for the perfect birth and

involved soft music – they'd done a track list and it was on both of their phones – no drugs in case they affected the baby and, if possible, Ted to cut the cord.

The birth plan was a paean to glorious natural childbirth.

The woman in the prenatal class had praised their approach, telling them how it was better for Baby to be shoved, drug-free, into the world.

So Ted innocently handed the sheaf of paper to Sam, who sent it flying as another contraction hit her.

'Jesus, the pain!' she roared.

'Breathe,' said Ted, watching as the birth plan scattered all over the floor.

'I can't,' gasped Sam as she felt as if her insides were being torn apart. 'I must have been mad with all that breathing crap. Screw breathing. Where's the anaesthetist?'

'The one on call is in theatre with an emergency caesarean,' said the midwife.

Sam stopped grabbing the bed bars long enough to grab Ted.

'Find him,' she hissed, in a voice uncannily like that of the little girl from *The Exorcist*, 'and bring him to me.'

'I can't,' said Ted, shocked at seeing his wife behaving like someone possessed.

'Dr Lennox will be along soon.'

'I need him now.'

'Dr Lennox is a she.'

'Does she have kids?' growled Sam.

'Yes.'

'Then beg her, she knows what this is like.'

'She had twins first time.'

'I don't care if she gave birth to two fully grown hippos without medical intervention, I need her and her bag of drugs. Please.'

'But your birth plan,' went on Ted, thinking that perhaps it was his job to make Sam stick with the plan she'd wanted for

so long. ‘You know we don’t want drugs for this delivery and I have your music ready to go—’

He ignored the warning looks on the midwife’s and nurses’ faces who had seen all of this played out many times before.

‘Babies don’t read the birth plan,’ began the younger nurse, who was used to shattered husbands, men who came in all gung-ho and went home, bruised and traumatised wrecks. ‘You never really know how a delivery is going to progress.’

Sam launched into Ted: ‘If *you* are having this baby, *you* can do it without drugs, but *I* am having it, *I* am trying to pass a bowling ball from an orifice that has never had a bowling ball emerge from it before, and *I* want everything! ALL the drugs! Everything in the hospital.’

There was nothing close for Sam to throw but Ted ducked just in case.

This was nothing like the Sam he knew and loved.

Two more hours elapsed with just pain and the anticipation of it in Sam’s landscape.

‘I love you,’ Ted kept saying.

‘I know,’ she said when she wasn’t in actual pain.

She was tearful and sweaty, and in her saner moments, wondered how people appeared in celebrity magazines at the hospital door a day after giving birth, all groomed and perfect.

She had seen herself in the bathroom mirror when she’d been trying the ‘keep walking and let gravity help’ method. She was puce in the face, sweating and her hair was a greaseball. A month left alone in Sephora with a crack team of beauticians would not make her look good ever again.

‘I keep thinking the baby’s going to come, but it doesn’t,’ she said wearily to Ted, who was half hugging her, half holding her up. ‘I know they say long first labours are normal, but this can’t be normal? They’re not telling us something.’

She began to cry again.

‘We don’t know what normal is here,’ Ted said manfully. He

was being ultra-careful in case he upset the balance between possessed wife and crying wife, the latter being upsetting but easier to handle.

The young nurse arrived back in the room to check the foetal heart rate and Sam's cervix.

'You're fully dilated!' she said, peeping up from between Sam's legs.

'You see, nobody knows when a baby wants to make an entrance.'

'My baby's coming?' said Sam, almost shocked.

'Your baby is coming,' smiled the nurse.

Within minutes, it was all action and still no anaesthetist.

Ted was, to his delight, up the head end of the bed because he wasn't sure he could cope with the whole baby emerging from the birth canal end, no matter how much he and Sam had discussed how this was important for both of them.

Instead, he remembered his friend, Lorcan, who'd said: 'It does something to you, mate, seeing her producing a baby out of *down there*. Can take a while to get over it, uh, sexually.'

Sam screamed, pushed, and nearly ripped a hole in Ted's hand as she pushed their baby into the world.

'Push,' said the midwife at the right times.

Sam pushed, feeling every tendon straining, every bit of her body ripping.

Despite the noise of machines and other women giving birth, screaming too, there were moments when she felt suspended in time – lost between pain, joy and anxiety and, above all, that wild primal desire to birth her baby safely.

Women had been doing it since the beginning of time, she had to do this. Couldn't fail.

*Now, now, now, please let it be now . . .*

And then, the last push—

The baby let out a little bleat and Ted began to cry too.

'A little girl,' said the midwife with pride and Sam began to cry, tears of joy and exhaustion.

'Good breath sounds, pinking up,' said the paediatrician, swooping in.

When she was finally put in Sam's arms, Baby Bean – seven pounds exactly and scoring a perfect Apgar score – was the most infinitely precious creature her parents had ever seen.

Almost afraid to touch this little person, astonished that she had grown this child inside her body, Sam touched the tiny fingers with awe. The baby's little nails were translucent, her fingers tiny but perfect. Even with some of the film of childbirth over her, she was exquisite.

Her lovely eyelids were so delicate, like petals draped over blue eyes that stared up at Sam as if she could see her perfectly.

'She's ours,' said Sam, staring at her baby.

'She's beautiful,' said Ted, and Sam looked up to see his eyes brimming with tears and the trails of more tears down his face. 'Just beautiful. I never thought this would happen,' he said, choking the words out, 'and look at her: perfect and ours and we get to bring her home, bring her up. We are a family . . .'

At that moment, something strange happened to Sam.

Something that made her feel fiercely protective, deeply in love and terrified all at the same time.

This tiny little being was hers to take care of.

She would kill for her baby.

'Mummy loves you with all her heart and will injure anyone who tries to hurt you,' she murmured into the baby's fragile skull with its covering of downy dark hair.

Suddenly, she understood all those nature programmes where lonely leopard mothers risked taking down bigger animals all for their cubs, where birds flew across dangerous deserts to sip water at deadly waterholes surrounded by predators so they could regurgitate the water later to keep their tiny baby birds alive.

She would rip out the throat of anything, anyone, who hurt her baby. Anyone.

And then, the great love and the great sense of protectiveness

were overwhelmed by another, fearful thought. The one that had been stalking her.

All her life, she had been in charge. The woman people went to when they wanted a task accomplished and fast.

Suddenly she didn't feel any of those things. Not organised, not competent.

She had a tiny baby in her arms. In a couple of days, maybe even *the next day*, she and Ted were going to bring this tiny creature home.

Sam had simply no idea how to do this. No mental template from her own childhood.

How could *she* now become a proper mother with no background to help her with what was supposed to be the most natural thing in the world?

On her fortieth birthday, cradling her new baby, Sam made a wish.

*Please let me learn how to be a good mother. Please.*