

# Chapter 1

Grand Canal, Dublin, Ireland: 53.3309°N 6.2588°W

Even after she'd put her luggage in the tiny boot of the convertible, Deira still wasn't sure if she was going to go through with it. Which was crazy, she told herself, because this was the easy bit. The harder part had been the previous night, when she'd walked into the dimly lit underground car park and waited for the Audi to unlock automatically. Even as she'd told herself that nobody would take any notice of her, she'd expected one of the residents to suddenly appear and ask her what the hell she was doing. But the one person already there, a young man in head-to-toe Lycra, was more concerned with unchaining his bike than with Deira's actions.

Nevertheless, the familiar click as she slid her hand along the driver's door was comforting. So was lowering herself into the driver's seat and finding that it still moved automatically to her favoured position when she pressed the memory button. She'd been afraid it would have changed. But there was no lingering scent of an unknown perfume or a different shampoo. No sense that someone else had taken her place. Nothing at all was different. Her heartbeat slowed down. Everything felt normal. Easy. Right.

Driving slowly out of the apartment complex, she'd told herself that her criminal career was off to a good start.

Of course she had a key, which surely meant that taking the Audi wasn't actually a criminal act, no matter how anyone else might see it; but she wasn't supposed to be here, doing this. Deira didn't care. She was past caring. And being back in the car was comforting in a way she hadn't expected. So it was worth it.

Now, as she slammed the boot closed and walked back into the granite mews overlooking the canal, she felt a sudden rush of tears fill her eyes and clamped down hard on her jaw to try to stop them falling. It didn't matter that she was tired of crying; the slightest thing still set her off, blubbing uncontrollably and embarrassing both her and anyone around her. She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand. If for no other reason than the sake of her skin, she needed to get over it. Her complexion was ruined from the salt of her ever-present tears.

She glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall and released a slow breath. Unless she was going to chicken out at the last minute, she'd have to leave soon. After all the trouble she'd gone to, missing the ferry would be a complete disaster.

But instead of picking up her keys and bag and heading back outside, she put a pod in the coffee machine and made herself an Americano. She sipped it slowly as she studied the tickets in front of her, making doubly sure that she had the right date. It would be idiotic of her to go on the wrong day, but over the last couple of months she'd done so many idiotic things that she didn't trust herself any more. She recalled the phone calls, the emails and – worst of all – the scene in the office, and she shuddered. She'd been made a

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fool of, but she knew she'd been a fool too. And that was hard to take.

She put the tickets back in her bag. She had the right date. She wasn't a complete idiot, no matter what other people might think.

Although the trip had been booked nine months previously, she'd totally forgotten about it until the direct debit for the balance had resulted in her account being overdrawn. She hadn't even realised she'd gone into the red until her bank card had been declined at her hairdresser's. It had been one more humiliation added to all the others. Naturally she'd burst into tears again.

It had been Gavin who'd first suggested taking the car to France, confessing a need to drive a stylish convertible along some decent motorways before people judged him a sad old fart and passed comments about his virility and the size of his penis.

Deira had laughed when he said that, and wrapped her arms around him.

'Nobody would think that of you, ever,' she'd told him. 'They wouldn't dare.'

Because Gavin Boyer looked at least a decade younger than his fifty-seven years. True, his hair, once even darker than Deira's, was now almost entirely silver-grey, but that only made him appear even more distinguished than when he was younger. He was still tall and broad, and even if his waist was thicker than it had been in his twenties and thirties, he'd managed to maintain his athletic build. Rather unfairly, in Deira's view, he achieved this without any great effort other than golf twice a week and an occasional visit to the swimming pool of the nearby gym. Metabolism, he'd say airily, when

she complained that, at seventeen years younger, she put on weight simply by looking at a packet of biscuits. He made no comment at all about her monthly trip to the hairdresser to have her own increasing number of greys covered with an approximation of her natural chestnut brown.

Definitely not fair, she thought now. But life wasn't fair, was it? Because if it was, she wouldn't be standing here with a rapidly cooling cup of coffee in her hand wondering if he would set the police on her when he got home.

She took a sip of the coffee. There was no need to worry. He wouldn't set the police on her because he wouldn't know that the car was gone until the end of the following week, and even then he wouldn't know she was the one who'd taken it. Besides, even if he did suspect her, she'd be miles away and there'd be nothing he could do about it. Interpol would hardly worry about a missing car, after all.

She shook her head. Car thief. Interpol. None of that was part of her life. France was supposed to have been a holiday. For both of them.

Their original plan had been to explore Brittany for a few days before heading to Paris. Deira had told Gavin that if he was going to indulge in his dream of open-top cruising down the motorway, she wanted to be able to say she'd driven around the French capital in a sports car with the warm wind in her hair. When he'd looked at her in bewilderment, she'd explained that one of her late mother's favourite songs had been the haunting 'Ballad of Lucy Jordan', in which a thirty-seven-year-old woman feels so trapped in her life that she knows she'll never get to do just that. When Deira was old enough to understand the lyrics, she'd sympathised with Lucy Jordan and wondered if her mother had ever felt the same

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way. Now approaching her own fortieth birthday, she'd visited Paris on a number of occasions but had never driven an open-top car around the city's streets – and had never particularly wanted to until the day they'd collected the convertible.

Until recently, she would have felt enraged at the notion that any woman would feel washed up by the age of thirty-seven. But she'd come to realise that there was more to it than how you felt, and she knew there were things she'd previously considered unimportant that she'd never have the chance to do. And that, more than anything else, was why she'd cried every single day for the past two months.

She glanced at the clock again. She knew she was cutting it fine. It was a three-hour drive to Ringaskiddy, and she was supposed to be at the ferry terminal forty minutes before the ship sailed. Unless she was going to abandon her plan, she had to leave now. Yet something was holding her back. She wasn't sure exactly what. A reluctance to commit herself to all the driving? The knowledge that she was poking a hornets' nest? Fear of what people would say?

'If he rings, it's a sign and I won't go,' she said out loud, even as she knew he wouldn't ring, and that if he did, she'd be in a panic to get the car back before he realised it was gone. Even thinking about him ringing was a sign of her weakness, not her strength. Anyhow, she didn't believe in signs or omens, good or bad.

Life was life, she often said to her friend Tillie, who had a more open view on random signals as pointers for making important decisions. Seeing a white feather floating on the air or a sudden shaft of sunlight on a dismal day didn't mean anything more than the fact that a bird had flown by or there was a momentary break in the clouds. Tillie would shake her

head and tell her that she needed to be in touch with her inner self a bit more. But Deira was afraid of her inner self. She wasn't sure it was a part of her that needed being in touch with at all.

Maybe the very fact that her account had been debited without her actually noticing it was a cosmic sign. Perhaps the fact that she'd had no problem taking the car was a sign too. Or the sign could simply be that the sun was shining in a clear blue sky and the drive would be lovely.

On the other hand, it was always possible there would be something on the way to Cork that would make her come to her senses and turn around again.

'Plenty of signs on the road to Cork,' she muttered as she picked up the car keys. 'Mostly telling you about motorway exits.'

She slung her bag over her shoulder, set the alarm and walked outside.

The morning air had warmed up and the bright sunlight dazzled off the canal water as she sat in the driver's seat and lowered the roof of the car. Truth was, she rarely drove it with the roof down. She lived in Ireland, after all. There was always a good chance that a torrential downpour would arrive out of the blue. And even on the sunniest of days, the wind-chill factor meant that it wasn't always ideal for open-top driving.

But today was perfect.

So maybe that was the sign.

Deira wondered if she should call Gillian and tell her what she was doing. But if she did, her older sister would want to know when she'd decided to make this trip and who she was

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going with and why she hadn't said anything before and . . . No, talking to Gill would definitely be a sign, Deira thought. A sign that I've lost my mind completely.

She started the car and pulled away from the kerb. Her phone rang almost at once, and her heart began to beat wildly.

'Are you on your way?' asked Tillie.

'I've just set off.'

'You'll be late.'

'No I won't.'

'No phone calls?'

'No,' said Deira.

'Everything will be fine,' said Tillie. 'Have fun.'

She waited for Tillie to remind her not to do anything crazy, but when she didn't, Deira simply replied that she'd do her best to have a good time.

'You deserve to,' said Tillie. 'I'll send you positive vibes and keep in touch.'

'Thanks.' Deira ended the call and continued to follow the canal before turning onto the industrialised Naas Road. The traffic on a Saturday morning wasn't too heavy, and she nudged her speed up a little. Her hair whipped across her face and she tucked it behind her ears. My life hasn't been wasted, she told herself, as she thought again of Lucy Jordan. It really hasn't.

And yet as she drove on, she was regretting once again the choices she'd made and the decisions she'd taken that now meant that, in ways she'd pretended to herself didn't matter, the last thirteen years of her life *had* been entirely wasted. There was no point in thinking otherwise. Nothing could change it. That was the thing. Not taking the car, not driving to Paris, not telling herself that forty was the new

thirty. What had happened had happened and the worst part of it all was that she'd been complicit in it. Which really did make her an absolute, utter, complete fool.

'Of course you're not a fool.'

Tillie's words, spoken when Deira had first broken the news to her, came back to her.

'Yes I am,' Deira had told her. 'I'm the same kind of fool that all women are. Thinking they're doing what they're doing because that's what they want when really it's just because they're in love with the wrong man.'

Tillie had hugged her then.

And Deira had felt the rage and the hurt ball up inside her so tightly that she literally doubled over with the pain of it.

She felt it again now. A horrible feeling in the centre of her stomach. And the pain higher up too, the one that had made her think she might be having a heart attack. But she knew she wasn't. She knew it was simply her anger at being played. At allowing herself to be played.

She was angrier with herself than with him.

She blamed herself more than him.

But she blamed him too, and that was why she was going away and taking the damn car with her.



# Chapter 2

Ringaskiddy, Ireland: 51.8304°N 8.3219°W

Grace Garvey was already at Ringaskiddy. She'd driven from Dublin the previous night because that was what she and Ken had always done in the years when they'd taken the children on their annual camping holiday to Brittany. Drive down the night before, stay in a guest house near the port and wake up refreshed and ready for the sailing. Also, Ken would say, there was no need to worry about breakdowns or anything slowing them down en route if they went ahead of time. They were where they needed to be.

Only once had Grace pointed out that if they had a breakdown in Ireland they'd be in big trouble regardless, given that they usually had at least a two-hour drive after getting off the ferry at Roscoff. But Ken had shaken his head and told her not to be a drama queen. Even though he was the one who made their annual holiday into a drama, planning it down to the finest detail and fuming if things didn't go exactly to his meticulous plan.

Grace always did her best to ensure that nothing interfered with the plan, without him ever being aware of it. Ken was a man who became stressed when things didn't turn out the way he wanted. This stressed Grace out too, although the

children, Aline, Fionn and Regan, never seemed to notice the undercurrent of tension that surrounded the house in the week leading up to their departure. All they cared about was arriving at that year's chosen campsite and having a good time.

And despite the stress that Ken placed upon himself, their family holidays invariably were good times. Grace's memories of them were precious.

She sat on the bed in Portview House – the same guest house they'd used all their lives – and opened the laptop she'd brought with her. Ken's laptop. She hadn't intended to bring it, but at the very last minute, she'd gone back inside the house and grabbed it. She could have emailed the documents to herself, but she'd decided that perhaps the laptop might have hidden information on it that she might need. She hadn't yet found anything, other than the sent email she'd received three months earlier. And she didn't need to read that again. But having the laptop, knowing that it was Ken's, was important to her.

She gazed indecisively at the folder entitled *The Big Anniversary Treasure Hunt*. She'd opened it when he'd first sent the email and then closed it again, not willing to be part of a plan that she'd known nothing about. And not willing to have him tell her what to do. Not when he'd done something so truly dreadful that he'd shaken her faith in everything they'd had together. But here, now, she couldn't help herself.

She clicked on the folder. It contained eight documents, each with an individual title:

*Nantes*

*La Rochelle*

*Bordeaux*

*Pamplona*

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*Alcalá de Henares*

*Toledo*

*Granada*

*Cartagena*

Each document was locked by a password. Grace had tried a couple of random passwords on them without any success. Then she'd concentrated on the Nantes document, because it was the first in the itinerary that he'd set out, bombarding it with memorable dates and other significant combinations. Frustrated by her failure, she'd moved on to La Rochelle. After her third incorrect guess, she'd got a message saying that she had seven further attempts before being locked out. She'd stopped then. Even if she wasn't sure she wanted to see the contents of the document, she didn't want to be locked out yet.

She'd gone back to the Nantes document, where it appeared she had as many guesses at the password as she liked, possibly because it was the first of the collection. That would be typical of Ken. Break her in easily before making things progressively more difficult. But she could almost feel his disgust at her not having been able to figure it out straight away. He'd known by the time he'd sent the email that he wouldn't be with her to help. So why hadn't he left her some sort of clue to start her off?

Maybe he had, she thought. And maybe she was too stupid to spot it.

Had he considered at all that she might not play his silly game? Or had he always known she'd do what he wanted no matter how ridiculous?

She snapped the lid of the laptop closed. Her brain was too frazzled to work on the passwords now. It was focused

on getting to the port and boarding the ferry, as though Ken was sitting beside her telling her not to shilly-shally. He'd always made sure they arrived at the terminal exactly two and a half hours before the sailing. Once they'd even been the first car in the queue, which had pleased him no end. Grace didn't need to be first in the queue. But she didn't want to be late either.

There was no chance of her being late. She could see the ship from her bedroom window, tall and white against the blue sky and teal-green sea. She knew it was far too early to leave, no matter what Ken's voice was telling her.

She put the laptop into her overnight case and went downstairs.

Claire Dolan, the owner of Portview House, smiled at her and asked if she was planning to leave already.

'You'll need me out of the room shortly,' replied Grace.

Claire told her that there was no rush and that she was welcome to use the living room for as long as she liked. 'I know you've been coming here for years and you're accustomed to travelling, but it's the first time you've done it on your own,' she said. 'So take your time.'

'I'll be fine,' Grace assured her. 'There's no need to worry about me.'

There was an infinitesimal moment of awkwardness before Claire reached out and gave her a little hug, one arm around Grace's bony shoulder. 'I know you're a strong woman,' she said gently, 'but I'm sure it's been hard. I was surprised, to be honest, when you made the booking. I didn't think you'd want to go by yourself.'

'I hadn't planned to be by myself.' Grace gave her a rueful smile. 'My friend Elaine was supposed to come with me. But

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then her daughter went into a very early labour and her baby was poorly for a while, so I told her not to even think about me but to go to Megan. She lives in Canada.' Grace shrugged, as though Canada explained everything.

'Are you a hundred per cent sure you'll be OK on your own, though?' asked Claire.

Grace nodded. 'Absolutely,' she said, in a voice that was free of any doubt.

She'd said the same to her elder daughter, Aline, when she'd asked Grace that question too.

'I'm sure you'll manage,' agreed Aline, who'd dropped in on her way home from work to see how her mother was doing. 'But all that driving without anyone to share . . . I'm sure Dad didn't expect you to do it alone. He'd have imagined one of us would be with you. Maybe even all of us, like before. You could wait until that was a possibility. I don't want you to get too tired, and there's really no rush to—'

'I won't get tired,' insisted Grace. 'None of the stages are that long. And you know quite well that it would be impossible to get everyone together again this year. So I'm doing it and that's that.'

'It's asking a lot of yourself. Especially when—'

'When what?' Grace's clear blue eyes hardened as she interrupted her daughter again.

'When you're grieving.'

'I'm not grieving!' The words had come out more forcefully than she'd meant and she registered the dismay on Aline's face. 'I mean, yes, I'm grieving but I'm . . .' She was going to say she was too angry – and perhaps too guilty – to grieve, but she knew that would freak Aline out even more. 'I'm

doing it for closure,' she said, quietly confident that she'd pressed the right button. Aline was big into closure. She'd had a closure evening for Ken before Fionn and Regan had left the country; they'd gone through his vast library of books, picked one each and then read a chapter out loud to each other. She'd played video clips of him at all their graduations, as well as at the family dinner for Grace's sixtieth birthday, where he'd called her his constant light. And then she'd recited 'My Memory Library' by Sarah Blackstone

Grace had smiled throughout, but her heart hadn't been in it, especially during Aline's recitation of a poem Grace knew Ken would have dismissed as sentimental nonsense. Ken had never liked poems that rhymed. So while her children were reading and reciting, she'd been remembering the week after Aline's graduation, when her daughter had packed her textbooks into a big box and donated them to a local education centre, saying that it was important to have them out of the house and in her past. Ken had been furious with her. He'd said that she'd need to reference them in the future even though she had her degree. She'd mentioned Google. He'd fumed quietly. Ken hadn't believed much in closure either. Until, perhaps, he had.

Aline celebrated birthdays and Christmas and Easter as waypoints in her life, always talking about marking new beginnings (tautology, Ken said, and when Aline asked what he meant, he told her to look it up. On Google, if it makes you feel better, he added). But even if their tastes in books and poetry differed, Aline and Ken were more like each other than they knew, mused Grace. Both of them brimming with self-confidence, both of them believing their way was the right way. Neither of them thinking of the consequences of

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their actions on other people, always expecting they'd fall into line.

'I care about you.' Aline broke into her thoughts. 'We all do. We don't want anything to happen to you.'

'Things happen all the time,' said Grace, which elicited an even more shocked expression from Aline. 'But I'll be fine. I'm more worried about you guys, to be honest.'

'It's been really hard, but I've dealt with it,' said Aline. 'So have Fionn and Regan. I'm not sure you have, Mum.'

'I have. Honestly,' Grace lied.

'I'd be happier if Elaine was going with you.' Aline wasn't at all convinced by her mother's words.

'So would I,' said Grace, although that was probably a lie too. 'But she has other priorities. I'll be fine. Anyhow,' she added, 'I'll FaceTime you from all my destinations and let you know how it's going. You can keep me up to date too.'

'I guess so.'

'I'll be fine,' said Grace again.

She wasn't going to tell her daughter that there was a part of her that *wanted* to do the trip by herself. Aline would have been even more hurt by that. And, like the rest of them, she'd been hurt enough already. But since Grace had decided to make this journey, nobody was going to stop her. Despite some initial misgivings, she was looking forward to driving off the ferry in France and doing her own thing, as much as she could given the schedule he'd laid out for her and the requests he'd made.

'You couldn't simply leave it,' she murmured. 'You still have to organise me.'

She'd never acknowledged before how much Ken's desire to be in charge bothered her. Especially his determination to

plan their holidays. Her own working life had been ruled by timetables and plans, which should have made it a pleasure, really, to leave the arrangements to him. But he never chose to fly to a destination. On a plane, she would inevitably have known more than him. She'd been a senior cabin crew member after all. She could have made things easier for them. But he didn't want her to. She knew nothing about ferries.

However, despite the stress he brought to it, Ken had been good at organising holidays. The children loved taking the ferry and the freedom of the campsites in France. They loved the excitement of living in a tent, and later, in a mobile home, enjoying the basic nature of it. So despite occasionally feeling aggrieved at her lack of input, Grace went with the flow.

She'd always been good at going with the flow.

Now she walked into the colourful garden of the guest house and gazed out over the ocean. The sun was higher in the sky and had turned the sea to a deep azure blue. It was a perfect day for the crossing. A perfect day to travel.