

The Belfast Girl

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NOVOA

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This book is dedicated to Geraldine Mullen of Strabane,
Northern Ireland and in loving memory of Mary Gardner
of Long Island, New York.

*“I said nothing for a time,
just ran my fingertips along the edge
of the human-shaped emptiness
that had been left inside me.”*

- Haruki Murakami

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CHAPTER ONE
JANET—BELFAST
DECEMBER 1993

Janet wondered what it was like for other women when they held their child for the first time. She had always imagined a smiling nurse. Joy rolling through her exhausted body. Tom in scrubs, sweaty and beaming at her side. The two of them staring at the small bundle in her arms. A tiny hand in hers.

But Tom wasn't even looking at her or the baby. He was 10 feet away, standing with a skin-headed man in a leather jacket, counting out bills.

And the baby wasn't swaddled in blankets, gazing in silent awe at her new world. She was screeching and flailing around in Janet's arms. With her tiny fists, Kathleen pounded Janet's chest. With each punch, Janet felt the sting of her real message. If she could speak she would be saying: I reject you. You are an imposter. You are not my mother.

She rocked Kathleen from side to side and repeated quietly, 'It's ok. Shush. Everything is going to be ok.'

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Kathleen simply screamed back at her fighting, with all her might, to escape. She wanted back to the girl who was standing a few feet away. The girl was perhaps half Janet's thirty-six years, maybe even younger, and she and the baby had the same oval green eyes, rimmed red with tears.

'Did you bring any of her favorite toys with you? Maybe that might help distract her,' Janet said.

'No, I didn't. Perhaps I should take her for a minute, just to calm her down.' The girl reached out for Kathleen, and Janet immediately stepped back, beyond the girl's reach.

'It's fine,' Janet said.

The girl's arms fell at her sides. Janet turned away, humiliated by her own selfishness. A better person would have let her comfort the baby. But Janet could not allow the girl to hold her daughter again. She could not risk the girl changing her mind.

The girl cast her eyes around the room. 'Didn't you bring a buggy?'

'A what?'

'A stroller,' Tom said, looking up from the count.

'No...we do have a car seat...but I thought I'd just carry her from here to the car.'

'Oh, it's just she likes to be rocked back and forth in her buggy.'

Janet should have known that. All kids love their strollers. She should never have let Tom convince her to wait until they got home to New York before buying one. "What's the point?" he'd said. "We'll be in the car and then on the plane, soon as. We'll have no time for strolling around Belfast anyway. The faster we're out of there the better."

The girl reached out and stroked Kathleen's chubby little arm. 'It's ok. There's no need to be frightened.'

Behind the girl, the father stood biting his fingernails. Slim, pale, and red-haired, he was the picture of Ireland. He kept glancing at the door and then at his watch. Janet

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wondered if he was waiting for someone to burst in or if he was just desperate to leave. She studied the young couple, in their jeans and sweaters, the boy with teenage acne splattered across his chin, his hands in his pockets shifting nervously from one foot to the next, the girl holding a screwed up tissue in her hand, her face contorted, trying to fight back her tears. They were just kids. Why did they have to sell their daughter? How desperate were they? Didn't they have parents of their own to help them?

'What will you tell your families?' Janet blurted out. Tom looked over and scowled. He had warned her to let him do all the talking.

'We'll tell them she's been adopted by a good family. She is going to a good family, isn't she?' the girl said.

'You have nothing to worry about. She will never want for anything.'

'I just want her to have parents that love her.'

'Ouch,' Janet winced as Kathleen tugged angrily on her earring.

The girl stared at Janet, examining her, and Janet immediately averted her gaze. She didn't want to see herself reflected in the girl's eyes. She knew what she looked like—an incompetent fool who had no idea how to soothe a baby—a woman so inadequate she couldn't do the one thing women had done since the dawn of time—a complete failure of a woman.

Then Tom announced it was time to go. Ever the businessman, he paused to shake hands with the skin-headed guy on the successful conclusion of the transaction. He lifted the car seat and made for the door.

'C'mon, we should be leaving,' he said.

The girl suddenly started to hyperventilate, a red rash raced across her forehead, and tears started to roll down her face, fast and thick. It was as if she had just realized what all this had been leading up to. The boy put his hand on the girl's shoulder in an awkward attempt to comfort

her.

Tom, already at the door, motioned for Janet to follow. But she hesitated, staring in shock at the strange swirl of emotions held within the girl's eyes—fear, torment, and just a hint of relief. She looked to Tom for guidance.

'Love, the car's waiting downstairs,' he said.

'Just go,' the girl spluttered between tears.

Janet's shoulder muscles loosened, ever so slightly. They were really doing this. This young couple was really giving them this beautiful, healthy child to bring up as their own. Janet almost giggled in relief, catching the inappropriate laughter before it could escape.

She had never fully believed this moment would come.

When they had started IVF last winter, after nearly two years of disappointments, Janet had thought it was a step forward. IVF had a certainty about it. The moment of conception would be planned, with scientific precision, taking place in the controlled environment of a laboratory and not within the messy accident of her body. That's the story Janet had told herself as she had endured the invasive scans, with a big camera pushed up inside her and moved forcefully around, and the daily injections, the bloating, the headaches, the nausea, the mood swings, and the painful harvesting of her eggs. Throughout that first painful cycle, Janet accepted all the indignities with grace and joy, for each one brought her closer to a child of her own. Not once did she imagine she could put herself through so much and not even have an embryo to implant at the end of it. But that's what happened on the first cycle, and the second and the third. "Poor quality and incompetent embryos," they said. "Another baby lost," Janet heard.

When their fourth cycle finally produced so-called "quality embryos," Janet had felt hopeful once again. But it had been short-lived. Even with a healthy embryo inside her, Janet had failed to get pregnant. And she failed again next time round too.

The turning point had come in the pressure-cooker of

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the doctor's office after that fifth disappointment. With a mass of miracle babies staring down at her, their photos tagged to the wall with notes of gratitude from their joyful parents, Janet had pressed the doctor: 'I don't understand, you keep saying I'm fine. So why didn't I get pregnant when we, finally, implanted fertilized eggs?'

The doctor had shrugged. 'We cannot always explain everything,' she had said in her heavy Polish accent.

'But you said the problem was Tom's sperm swim too slowly. We got the sperm into the eggs and we're still not pregnant. I don't understand.'

'Yours is what we call unexplained infertility,' the doctor had said, as if that were an explanation. 'There are no guarantees. I am afraid we simply must keep trying.'

Janet had stared at her in disbelief, and the truth of the matter had suddenly hit her. It was all just luck. Even the best fertility doctors in the world were mere children tinkering with a complex technology they could barely understand. With all their jargon and protocols, with words like: "controlled ovarian stimulation", "FSH levels", "luteinizing hormone surge", and "hCG triggers" they tried to give the illusion of knowledge and control, while, at the same time, they kept their fingers crossed behind their backs, hoping their dabbling would bear fruit.

A week later, Janet had called the adoption agencies during her lunch hour to request some brochures. And afterwards, she had cried, locked in the toilets at work, for over an hour. She needed to grieve. Again. To accept that she would never share a genetic connection with a child of her own and to sacrifice the part of her which still hoped for that reality.

But when those first brochures had arrived in the mail, with pictures of smiling families on the front and detailed terms and conditions at the back, Janet could never have imagined this: a suitcase full of cash; a transatlantic flight; a dingy motel room in Belfast; a teenage girl in tears; Janet with a boisterous ten-month-old in her arms, about to

walk away with her.

‘Thank you, thank you so much,’ Janet now whispered to the girl. The girl turned away, towards the boy, as a strangled howl exploded from deep within her. At this, Kathleen started to wail even louder and tried to fling herself out of Janet’s arms. Shell-shocked, Janet almost dropped the child. So she tightened her grip, squeezing Kathleen to her chest, encircling her with her arms as if they were a ring of steel. The boy pulled the girl further into him and murmured soft words of comfort in her ear. He didn’t even glance at Kathleen.

Janet stayed rooted to the spot, watching them. Fascinated. Unsure what to do next.

‘C’mon, we don’t have time for this.’ Tom’s bark shook Janet to life. ‘Let’s go. Now.’

Janet took one final look at the young couple and then turned and fled.

Kathleen screeched and beat Janet as she carried her along the narrow hallway. The elevator took an age to come. Finally the doors opened, and Janet and Tom stepped inside with Kathleen. For the first time ever, the three of them were alone together. Janet was shaking. Tom was jabbing the elevator buttons, cursing how slow it was. Kathleen looked terrified. This was not how the first moments with their daughter were supposed to be.

Inside the car, the clock on the dashboard said 4pm. They had been in the motel only half an hour but, in that time, the white afternoon sky had turned a dark grey. Outside, the streets of Belfast rushed by in a blur, and Janet prayed they would get out of Northern Ireland safely.

Like a common thief making a getaway, she kept glancing behind, searching for the police. Wild visions of sirens, hand-cuffs, interview rooms, prison, and, worst of all, some uniformed policewoman tearing Kathleen from her arms flooded Janet’s mind. It was an irrational thought. She knew that. The police wouldn’t come after them. After all, the man driving the car was an off-duty officer—one

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of the dirty cops on Geary's payroll, apparently.

When they pulled up outside their hotel, Tom turned around from the front passenger seat. 'Me and you can go get the bags, Trevor here will keep the car running and watch the baby.'

'No,' Janet replied. 'You and Trevor go. Everything is already packed. You don't need me. I want to stay here with her.' After all this time waiting, there was no way Janet could step out of the car and leave Kathleen behind.

'Fine.'

Tom snapped at Trevor to pull over into a parking spot and ordered him out to help with the luggage. Doors opened and a blast of cold air rushed into the car.

On the radio, the newscaster announced that, after another year of bloodshed, there was some optimism in Belfast today. He said yesterday's date of December 15th, 1993 would go down in history as the day the British and Irish Governments finally recognized the right of the people of Northern Ireland to self-determination. A commentator was saying self-determination meant the people had 'free choice over their own actions without external compulsion.' It sounded completely unrealistic. No one has complete freedom to decide the shape of their lives. Everyone is at the mercy of some external force, Janet thought.

She looked at Kathleen who was still screaming with her entire body. Janet felt the world shrink around her. What was happening outside no longer mattered. Janet's only concern, now, was for her family's safety. She had never before thought of her and Tom like that, as a family. However, their two had just become a three. Finally, people would look at them and see a family, rather than a childless couple approaching their forties, with hope of ever being parents fading fast.

She turned her full attention to Kathleen, filtering out the excited discussions of the radio presenters and all talk of the Downing Street Declaration. She had no idea, nor

did she care, what this famous document meant for this place of Tom's birth. She only cared about what it meant for their escape to the airport where a private plane was waiting to take them to Manchester. Following this supposedly historic announcement, security in the city was tighter than usual. Thankfully, she didn't have to worry about passport control tonight. Even though they would cross a sea from one island to another, they would still be in the same jurisdiction. That would not change anytime soon, no matter how many petrol bombs were thrown in Belfast tonight.

It would be tomorrow, at the airport in Manchester, when they would have to use their fake passports. That morning, Janet had quizzed Tom about it. Was he sure it would work? Would the forgeries stand up to scrutiny? What would they say if they were questioned? He had lost his temper and told her if he was capable of buying a baby, he was capable of buying that baby a passport.

'Let's just say, the man I used forges papers for people who have gone on the run, and they've run far and wide. They've sauntered right past border control officers that should be looking for them. No one will be looking for us.' His voice became softer. 'We'll be ok. We are not criminals. OK, this isn't exactly a conventional adoption, but that young couple wants to give up the child as soon as possible. If we'd gone through an adoption agency, there would have been red tape. I assure you, when we go through immigration, no one will bat an eyelid.'

In the car, Janet stroked a scalding tear from Kathleen's cheek.

'Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral,' she sang in an attempt to quiet the baby. Her mother always said she had an Irish voice, just like her grandmother's. Janet was one quarter Irish. The rest of her family was a mix of Swedish, German and Italian. With auburn hair and grey eyes, Janet had always thought she looked like Greta Garbo, but without the dainty bone structure. Kathleen stared up at her

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suspiciously, the green in her eyes standing strong against her dark mop of black hair. She looked nothing like Janet. But maybe, just maybe, people would think she took after Tom's dark-haired side of the family.

'Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral,' Janet sang over Kathleen's screams. 'Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ral.'

Kathleen suddenly paused for breath and let her taut face unfurl. Confused. Still teetering on the edge of tears. Then she scrunched up her nose once more. Janet braced herself for another angry onslaught. Kathleen opened her mouth into an O and this time...this time she giggled. As she did so, she reached over and grasped Janet's thumb possessively. And with that tiny gesture, the full weight of the motherly love that Janet had been storing up for years came falling down at Kathleen's feet. *I have spread my dreams under your feet; Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

At Belfast airport, Kathleen clung on tight and nuzzled her head into Janet's shoulder as she allowed herself to be lifted from her car seat. Janet glanced over towards Tom. His eyes were misty and his smile was full of surprise and relief.

Together, the three of them walked directly from the car to their private plane, without having to enter the Terminal. Inside the aircraft, Tom fussed putting away the luggage, and Janet sat down with Kathleen and took out a plastic Tupperware of fruit. She held out a piece of apple. Kathleen took it and shoved it into her mouth. Before she was even done chewing the first slice, she lifted her hand up demanding another. Janet offered her a second piece, which Kathleen immediately grabbed. 'You must have been hungry,' Janet whispered.

If it were not for this simple act of handing her fruit, Kathleen would have starved. She was now wholly dependent on Janet and Tom to fulfill even her most basic needs. Janet shifted in her seat feeling the shape of her body stretch to accommodate this new reality. It was a strange, delightful and overwhelming feeling to be so

important, to be needed so.

The doors closed, the engines came alive, and the plane started to move. Effortlessly, they rose up into the night air. Janet felt a swell of excitement surge from somewhere deep within. She and her family were heading home, together. Tom came over and stroked Kathleen's forehead and kissed Janet.

'She's a beautiful wee thing, isn't she?' he said.

Throughout the short flight, Kathleen clung to Janet, as if she was the only one she trusted in this strange new world. By the time they got to the hotel at Manchester airport, Kathleen was dozing in her arms. In the room, she drowsily took a bottle and then fell back asleep.

All night, Janet and Tom lay wide awake, side by side, not speaking, listening to Kathleen in the hotel cot. Even though the sounds of her gentle breaths filled the room, Tom still got up four times to check on her. He smiled over at Janet in the half-light and whispered, 'She's perfect.'

The next morning Janet and Tom got up early. They were both keen to get to the airport and start their journey home to America. Tom turned on the television to the news.

'I want to let her sleep as long as she can, please switch that off,' Janet said.

Tom put the TV on mute and went back to getting dressed while Janet made a bottle for Kathleen. She carefully measured out the formula, trying to remember how long it should take for the milk to be cool enough for Kathleen to drink. Over the past few years Janet had read every fertility book on the market. She always promised herself she would read the parenting books when she got pregnant. She hadn't wanted to jinx things by reading them before. She had thought nine months would be enough time to learn the basics. As it turned out, she'd had six weeks from first finding out about Kathleen until now. Despite the years of waiting, in the end, her gestation as a

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mother wasn't nearly long enough. She lifted the bottle and shook some milk on to her arm. It was still scalding.

'Fuck!' Tom suddenly cried out.

'What?'

'Where's the remote?' He leapt on to the bed, searching for the remote control under the blankets.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing, just...' he jumped up and rushed towards the TV socket. But Janet saw it before he got to pull the plug.

On screen was a young man with jet-black hair and blue eyes, probably no older than twenty. He was pale and hollowed out looking. At the bottom of the screen the ticker read: "Father implores child's kidnappers to return her safely".

'No,' Janet said. 'It can't be.'

There, next to him, tissue in hand, sat a young woman dabbing her eyes. They were the same oval green eyes that were staring up at Janet from the crib. The same eyes that had stared into Janet's yesterday afternoon. On the TV, the girl had her arm around the father in support.

'I'm going to fucking kill Geary,' Tom shouted.

'Did you know about this?'

'No, of course not. I would never have let him convince me if I didn't think both parents wanted it.'

'But who was that boy yesterday? She said he was the father.'

'I don't fucking know.'

Janet caught sight of the remote control on the bedside table. She grabbed it, frantically looking for the mute button. Tom yanked it away from her.

'No.'

'Turn it up Tom, I want to hear.'

'No. We are not doing this. We have a plane to catch. I'm not having you sitting here watching this, getting yourself all wound up.'

'But she sold us their baby and didn't tell him! The police are looking for this child.'

‘They’ll be looking in Belfast, not here. If we get out of England today, we’ll be ok.’

‘But we can’t just fly out as if nothing’s happened. This changes everything.’

‘What, so you want us to give her back? And how do you suppose we do that without getting caught? What would we tell the police? Here, sorry officer, we were going to buy this baby, but now we’ve seen her Daddy crying his fucking eyes out on TV, we’ve had a change of heart. So here she is, and we’ll just be on our way. Oh, and would you mind asking that psycho mother for our money back? No way, darling. If we take her anywhere near Ireland they’ll be consequences for us.’ His voice was low. When he was angry, he reverted back to the menacing Belfast accent of his youth, stripped of all the mid-Atlantic charm he had worked so hard, over twenty years, to cultivate.

Kathleen started to whimper and stretched up towards them. Janet lifted her out of the cot.

‘Really, what do you want us to do? I don’t see a way out of this. But, please, enlighten me if you do,’ Tom said.

Janet looked at Kathleen, smiling in her arms, with the tears of a moment ago still rolling down her face. She glanced at the boy on TV. It was now clear from where Kathleen’s jet-black hair had come.

‘But he must be going wild with worry,’ Janet said. Tom did not respond.

Janet saw the three of them reflected in the mirror. Even Kathleen was still. They looked like actors frozen in position at the end of an act. In those seconds, all possible avenues for where their story might go were open. But a tableau lasts for only a moment before someone shifts and the action begins again.

Kathleen reached up and grabbed Janet’s nose.

‘What are you doing?’ Tom cooed, approaching the two of them. ‘Are you trying to steal mommy’s nose?’

Kathleen looked at him and started to giggle, and then

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she reached up for Janet's nose again, a look of sheer delight on her lovely face. Instinctively, Janet smiled. But then, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of the boy on TV—his despair an unwelcome foil to their happiness.

'Tom, give me that remote.'

'No, love. Don't do this to yourself. You don't need to hear this.'

'You don't get it do you?' Janet walked over to the TV and turned it off. 'We have packing to do. We can't be late for our flight. We don't have time to be watching the television,' she said.

They quickly gathered up their belongings in silence. Janet put away their toiletries. She wrestled with the tiny buttons of the romper suit, so alien in her large hands, as she dressed Kathleen. She checked she had enough diapers in the change bag. She checked again.

Just before they left the hotel room, Tom hugged her.

'This child is ours,' he said 'and we are going to take her with us to America today. What's done is done, and we need to go home now and start our new life as a family.'

They were a family now. They were no longer a childless couple. Childless—a word with so many connotations. For years, Janet had thought of her and Tom that way. But now, thinking about that boy on television, she realized he was childless in a way they never were. He was without a real baby that he had loved for months, not just the promise of a child. She looked at Kathleen snug in the car seat, clutching a plastic sheep Tom had bought her yesterday, studying its shape. It was too late. There was only one thing to do. For Janet was already in love with her too.

CHAPTER TWO
EMMA—BELFAST
DECEMBER 1993

Seven hours after she'd sold Kathleen to the Americans, Emma took up her place on the landing just outside the nursery. She rested her hand on the nursery door, as if she'd just closed it, and she waited. She waited for nearly an hour. Still and silent in the darkness. The dead air trapped in her lungs. And finally he came.

There was a quiet shuffling sound as he opened the front door. Followed by a loud thud. He must have knocked the coat stand into the wall as he passed it. Wordlessly, Emma urged him to go into the living room and put on the TV. But instead he appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking up at her, swaying.

She moved towards him. With a deep exhale, she straightened her back and fixed a quivering smile onto her face. She was ready to give the performance of her seventeen-year-old life.

'How's the baby?' Aiden asked.

'She's fine.' Emma walked to the top of the stairs. 'I

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only just got her down and settled. Don't be waking her.'

'I'll be quiet. I just want to give her a wee kiss,' he advanced towards her. His movements were slow and heavy. The effect of the pills, Emma hoped.

She stepped further down the stairs, meeting him halfway. She kept one trembling hand in her pocket and clenched the banister with the other. 'No,' she stood firmly in his way. 'Let her sleep. I need to go to work soon. And I don't want you setting her off and making me late.'

'Just let me have a wee peek in at her,' he pleaded, giving Emma a smile.

'Fine,' she turned and walked up the stairs. He followed right behind her. The drums of her heart echoed through her rib cage. 'Leave the hall light off. If she sees us she'll start crying again.'

Emma opened the nursery door a fraction, enough for Aiden to see the corner of the cot and the baby sleeping bag stuffed to make it look like there was a child inside. The big teddy bear was strategically placed next to the bars blocking the line of sight to where Kathleen's head should be.

'Awww, my wee dote,' Aiden said. He went to take a step forward.

Emma yanked the door closed on him—perhaps a little too forcefully than she should have. But she couldn't let him go into the nursery. It was too early. He couldn't find out Kathleen wasn't there. Not yet.

'I have half an hour before I need to leave for work,' Emma whispered. 'C'mon down to the kitchen with me. I'll make you a sandwich.'

He gave her a glassy-eyed look that she couldn't read.

'Aye, alright,' he said and turned to make his way back downstairs.

A cold cocktail of relief and fear snaked through Emma's capillaries. She'd passed the first hurdle, but she was still far from safe.

In the kitchen, Aiden sat down at the table and played

lazily with the saltshaker as Emma moved around the kitchen.

‘What did I miss today then?’ he asked.

‘What’s that?’

‘Did she do anything special?’

‘Nothing new.’

Aiden was always doing this, probing her to find out what Kathleen did when he wasn’t around. She was a baby. Most days were pretty much the same as the day before. But Aiden didn’t seem to understand that. He was always marveling at even the tiniest advancement in Kathleen’s development.

‘Well, did she pull herself up against the sofa again today?’

‘Aye she did,’ Emma lied.

‘It’s amazing that she’s already standing, isn’t it?’

‘It is,’ Emma responded distractedly as she buttered the bread. Aiden’s voice sounded far too animated. Shouldn’t he be getting drowsy? Shouldn’t his speech be starting to slur?

‘I might just go up to the bathroom to wash my hands.’ He stood up.

Emma spun around wielding the butter knife like a weapon. A pretty ineffectual one, she imagined, if it came to that. ‘You will not. Since when have you cared about hygiene? You’re just sneaking up to see Kathleen. It was hard enough getting her down the first time. Let her sleep, would ye.’

Obediently, Aiden folded himself into the chair again. Emma turned her back on him and started cutting the cheese. The knife felt chilly next to her sweaty palms. God, when would the drugs take effect? She couldn’t distract him all night. She really did need to get to work. That was a critical element of the plan. The only reason she’d taken that stupid part-time job nearly two months ago was so, when tonight came, she’d have an alibi.

Usually she only worked Friday and Saturday night as

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she had school during the week, but she occasionally worked other nights and then skipped school the next day. The teachers always cut her some slack, given the circumstances.

Aiden had been away on a job with Geary that afternoon, and the official story was Emma had spent the afternoon in the house with Kathleen. What she had really been doing was handing her over to the Americans. After their job, Geary had taken Aiden to the pub. The plan was for him to drop Aiden back home around eleven, nice and drunk, and with a few sleeping pills in him for good measure.

But what if Geary hadn't been able to drug him? Maybe Aiden had been watching him the entire time. Maybe Geary never got an opportunity to slip the pills into Aiden's beer. What if Aiden didn't fall asleep before she had to leave for her nightshift at the care home? What excuse would she give him for not going? She couldn't leave him awake and alone in the house. The risk of him going into Kathleen's room before he went to bed was too great. Had he really looked drugged when he'd come in? Or had she imagined that?

'Was she crabbit the night then?' Aiden asked, still sounding very much awake.

'What's that?' She didn't turn around. The less eye contact they had the better.

'I said, was Kathleen not at herself tonight?'

'No, she's fine.'

'But you said you had trouble getting her down.'

'Do you want mayonnaise on this?'

'Aye, please...Listen, thanks for doing this. I know you need to get off to work soon.'

'That's ok,' Emma turned and forced a smile across her face. "Act normal," Geary had advised. "He can't suspect you."

She went to the fridge for the mayo and finished making the sandwich. Then she filled up the kettle and

took out two cups.

‘Are you having tea with this?’ she asked.

He didn’t respond. She turned to examine him. His head was on the table lying on top of his folded arms.

‘Aiden?’

No response.

She edged towards him and poked him lightly.

‘Aiden,’ she said, more sharply than before.

Still nothing.

She lent down right next to his waxy ear and shouted, ‘Aiden!’

He didn’t flinch.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. 11:20pm. Should she wait five minutes before giving Geary the signal? Just to make sure he was really asleep? No, they didn’t have five minutes. She needed to get to work on time. It had to look like a regular evening.

She tiptoed towards the back door, opened it a creak, and stuck her head out into the winter air. Aiden snorted loudly. She jumped and turned around. He was still folded over the table, still asleep.

She opened the door wider. Down the back alley the red glow of a cigarette bobbed around in the darkness. She waved, and the smoker started walking towards her.

‘He doesn’t suspect anything?’ Geary asked as Emma closed the door behind him.

‘No.’

‘Good work.’ He went to the corner cupboard and took out a bottle of whisky.

‘What are you doing?’

‘What does it look like?’ Geary didn’t even bother to drop his voice to a whisper.

‘Is that a good idea? You’re not supposed to be here, remember?’

‘Don’t worry. I know how to clean up after myself.’ Geary grabbed a glass from the drying rack and poured himself a large shot. ‘And besides, my prints are all over

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this place. Wasn't I here this afternoon picking up Aiden? Am I not here all the time?'

'Fine. But make sure you wash that glass afterwards and put everything away exactly where you found it.'

'Shouldn't you be leaving for work already?'

A couple of months ago, when they'd come up with this plan, Geary had got Emma a part-time job at a care home for the elderly that his sister-in-law managed. During the nightshift, her job mainly consisted of accompanying the residents to and from the toilet or changing the soiled bed sheets of those who didn't call her in time. The whole place stank of peas and bleach and death. She absolutely hated it. But it was the best way to ensure she had an ironclad alibi between the hours of midnight and 7am, which is what she needed.

She ran upstairs to the nursery and removed the T-shirts that she'd stuffed into the tiny sleeping bag a few hours ago. The desolate cot was so grey and bleak in the darkness.

'Don't cry,' she said to herself. 'Remember, this is what you wanted.' She slapped a tear from her face. She needed to arrive at work looking normal. She lifted the teddy bear from the cot and held it to her, letting its softness caress her cheeks. Then she dropped the bear to the floor and fled.

Back in the kitchen, Geary was resting against the counter sipping at his whisky and smoking a fresh cigarette. Relaxed as the summer days are long. He really had a constitution made for crime.

'Did Jonny give you your cut of the money this afternoon?'

'He did.'

'Tidy sum. What are you going to do with it?'

She shrugged. 'Maybe I'll use it to get out of this shithole.'

'Well, remember what I said, our work is only beginning. You need to be on form tomorrow. People

need to believe the kidnapping story. You're going to get a lot of heat over the next few months, and we can't have you raising suspicions by swanning off on some fancy holiday.'

'I'm not an idiot. I know I need to wait a year or so. Don't worry. Now, do you need help carrying him upstairs?'

They planned to leave Aiden in bed and then stage a break-in downstairs so he'd think someone had come in and snatched Kathleen while he lay passed out, apparently too drunk to notice. Aiden would have no clue that he'd conked out from the sleeping pill rather than the booze.

'No. You go. You can't be late. This wee lad doesn't weigh much. I can handle him.'

Emma made her way towards the door and then glanced back at Aiden slouched over the table. This time tomorrow, she thought, they'd be back in this kitchen, and Aiden would be sitting on the same chair, in the same crumpled position. But he'd be awake, and he'd be sobbing. Emma imagined she and Aiden would be exhausted after spending all day at the police station. They probably would have appeared on every TV channel begging Kathleen's kidnappers to return her. And perhaps, by tomorrow night, Aiden might start to realize he'd really lost Kathleen. The child he doted on and adored with all his being. Looking at him now, fast asleep, unaware of the torment she had unleashed upon him, Emma almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

CHAPTER THREE
JANET—LONG ISLAND
MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND 1994

It was three, perhaps four in the morning, and Janet was pacing the hall with Kathleen. She screamed when Janet put her down. She squirmed when Janet held her. She refused the pacifier. She wasn't hungry. She didn't have a dirty diaper. But, still, she cried and complained and combated sleep with everything she had, and there was nothing Janet could do about it.

Tom opened their bedroom door. The orange light from the bedside lamp spilled into the hallway but it didn't touch Janet. She was too far away, at the end of the long corridor, folded into the darkness.

'Love, c'mon back in here would ye?' he said in a loud whisper. 'No point disturbing everybody else.'

Janet rolled her eyes. They rented this house every year for the Memorial Day weekend with three other couples, all friends of Tom's from before he had met Janet. Over the past five years, Janet had spent countless nights, awake

in bed, listening to their friends' kids crying down the hall and the sound of people padding around, preparing bottles, in the kitchen below. They could hardly dare complain now it was finally her turn.

A memory came to her from last summer: her and the other women sitting on the lawn, a child on each of the other's laps, hers completely empty, the sky an unbroken swatch of brightest blue, not a single cloud, nothing to soften the sun's scorching gaze. For two hours, Janet had barely spoken as the others had chatted about their kids—they had eight between the three of them. Eight. They had compared how old they were when they had first started to grasp and crawl and speak. They had talked about their kids' favorite foods and books and TV shows. They had spent forty long minutes talking about a Mr. Bump and Go, how all the kids had all gone through a phase of refusing to go to sleep without him and the frantic, epic searches to find him come bedtime—this much loved toy Janet had never even heard of

Finally, Janet had asked: 'And when did they start eating solids?'

'Four months,' each woman had replied, practically in unison.

'That's interesting,' Janet had muttered. The others shared a vernacular—a special language they all spoke fluently, and Janet had been just a tourist, awkwardly throwing out stock phrases she had picked up along the way. Solids—a word only mothers and dentists used, and she was neither.

'Has anyone read any good books lately?' she'd then asked in an attempt to revert to another language, one she used to know well before infertility took over her world. But all three of them had looked at her absolutely incredulous, and Connie had even laughed out loud.

'Don't worry,' Cynthia had said, 'wait until you join the club, then you'll realize how rare it is to finish a magazine article, never mind a whole book. I'm lucky if I get even a

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few minutes to go to the bathroom.’

The others had nodded in agreement, and the three of them had started swapping stories of showers cut short by screaming babies and days that whooshed by without time for lunch, and Janet had returned to her silent state under the sun’s unrelenting glare.

Afterwards, she had watched them walk ahead of her to the house, the toddlers stumbling, like drunkards, their tiny hands reaching up for the steadying support of their moms who walked lopsided next to them. These women were the sun, the moon, the earth, and the stars for the little people who tottered alongside them. Janet had looked down at the empty space next to her. There had been no small hand grasping for hers. No anchor to hold her in place.

Now, in the darkness of the hallway, Janet felt Kathleen’s weight in every muscle in her tired body. She kissed Kathleen’s cheek and wiped the sweat from her brow. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of herself in the hallway mirror. To the untrained eye, she perhaps now appeared just as knowledgeable as any of the others. She looked like any other member of “the club.” And she had learned a lot in the past five months. She could hold Kathleen with one arm and make up a bottle with the other. She could soothe a bump with an imaginary bandage and a kiss. She could change a diaper in a matter of seconds. She knew at least twenty-five nursery rhymes and the moves to go with them. She knew the soundtrack to *Disney’s Aladdin* backwards. “A whole new world, a new fantastic point of view.” She knew how to clean any fluid, including bodily fluids, off the wall, the carpet, the ceiling—and off her clothes, her skin, her hair. She’d done it. She’d done it all in the past five months. But, as she now clutched Kathleen to her, incapable of getting her to sleep, Janet worried she didn’t have the right instincts, that sixth sense the others seemed to have, the reason people said: “mother knows.” Janet didn’t know. Just as she’d never carried a child inside her, she couldn’t feel the

instinct within telling her the right thing to do.

Janet approached Tom. 'Does she feel hot to you?'

He rested his hand on Kathleen's forehead. 'Not really love.'

'Should I wake Cynthia or Connie? They'll have a thermometer. I forgot to pack one.'

'She doesn't have a fever.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'I ah...'

'Cynthia will know.'

'She's just unsettled with the drive up here today, that's all.'

Kathleen shifted in Janet's arms and let out another sleepy, frustrated moan.

'Maybe we should call Dr. Rudman.'

Tom rolled his eyes. 'Fine, wake Cynthia if you want.'

Cynthia opened her bedroom door on the second knock, as if she'd been primed and ready to pounce when the call for help came.

'I'm sorry,' said Janet.

'Don't worry, is everything ok?'

'I can't get Kathleen to settle. She keeps crying and thrashing around half awake. She's never usually this bad.'

'She might be teething. We had an awful few weeks with Jacob when he was about fourteen months old too.'

'Do you have a thermometer? I think she's got a fever.'

Cynthia went back into the bedroom and reappeared a moment later. When Janet tried to place the thermometer in Kathleen's mouth, her little body stiffened angrily and she thumped Janet in the chest, with a sting that went right to the heart.

'Like this,' Cynthia whispered. She took the thermometer from Janet, held Kathleen's chin between her fingers, and managed to ease it into Kathleen's mouth. Janet studied the angle of the thermometer and the way Cynthia touched Kathleen. How was that different from what she had just tried to do? 'All normal,' Cynthia said

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looking at the temperature.

‘But why does she feel so hot?’

‘It’s a warm night. Take her clothes off and lay her down on top of the covers. If that doesn’t work, come back. I have some infant Tylenol in my bag.’

Janet thanked Cynthia and made her way back along the hall to Tom.

‘Should I try her on the bed between the two of us?’

‘That’s what I suggested an hour ago,’ he said.

She put Kathleen down in the middle of the bed on top of the covers next to Tom. Kathleen wriggled and moaned but she didn’t scream like before. Janet stood up. She pulled off her shirt and unhooked her bra. Three peas fell to the floor and rolled away into the darkness. They must have been from Kathleen’s dinner. She’d have to find them in the morning, if she didn’t step on them first. She got into bed on the other side of Kathleen and propped herself up on a pillow, so she could look down on her daughter.

‘If she still hasn’t settled by the morning, we should take her to see Dr. Rudman,’ Janet said.

‘We’re not driving the length of the Island just because Kathleen’s had a bad night’s sleep.’

‘She might be sick.’

‘Well if she’s sick we should take her to a local doctor. There’s bound to be one on call in town.’

‘No. I don’t trust anyone else.’

Tom let out a long sigh: ‘For God’s sake, not this again. The emergency doctor will hardly ask for a full medical history.’

‘You don’t know that,’ Janet said.

‘Well, if they do, Rudman can fax over the records he made. Isn’t that what we’re paying him for?’

‘Will you lower your voice?’

‘Anyway, she’s not sick. It’s probably just the new surroundings.’ Tom lay down and closed his eyes.

‘I don’t trust anyone else,’ Janet said again.

Tom let out a long, exasperated sigh. 'Fine. If she's no better in the morning we'll phone Rudman.' He reached over and gave Janet's hand a squeeze. 'Now try to get some sleep love.'

Janet stared ahead at the gray shadows on the wall, thinking about that awful day when she'd gone to register Kathleen with a pediatrician, someone a neighbor had recommended not long after they had returned from Belfast. Janet had told the doctor's receptionist the same story they told everyone: a Texan adoption agency, reams of paperwork, an excruciating wait and then, thank the Lord, a Christian girl who had gotten herself in trouble, a rat of a boy who had disappeared, a few difficult months as she'd tried to go it alone and, finally, the sad realization she couldn't bring a child up by herself. A closed adoption. Better for all in the long run. No, they weren't planning on telling Kathleen she was adopted. Perhaps when she's an adult, but not before. Or maybe they'd never tell her. They hadn't decided. They'd warned their friends they must never mention it to their kids. Not ever. They didn't want someone blurting it out by accident. And they expected the doctor not to say anything either. Not ever.

The receptionist had stared at Janet, waiting for her to shut-up.

'OK, you'll need to fill out these forms and we'll need the child's medical records.'

'But she's not registered with any physicians yet. Like I said, we just adopted her.'

'I know but we need her previous medical records.'

'What previous records? She's not even a year old.'

'The agency must have given you an anonymized report with all her medical information.'

'No, they didn't.'

'It's standard procedure.' The girl had eyed Janet with suspicion.

Janet had felt sweat spring to her pores. 'Oh, you mean the medical *report*, of course. I was getting confused. I

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thought you meant...’

‘You do have it then?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘So can I make a copy?’

Janet had felt all eyes in the waiting room staring at her, studying her reaction.

‘No. I mean...I have the papers at home. I’ll come back another time.’

‘Fine. Do you want to take these forms with you to complete at home?’ the receptionist had said, but Janet was already walking, nearly running, out the door.

‘I’ll fix it,’ Tom had said when she’d called him, in tears, from the parking lot. ‘I promise I’ll fix it.’

That night, Janet had sat up all night on the chair in the nursery, somewhere between waking and nightmares, keeping a vigil over Kathleen. What would they do if the receptionist had seen through her, if uniformed officers arrived at their house in the morning? What would they do if Kathleen got sick? What if she had an allergy or a genetic condition they knew nothing about? What if there was an emergency? How could a doctor treat her without any information? How could they have been so selfish, so irresponsible to bring Kathleen into their lives like this? Why hadn’t they thought this through properly? Why hadn’t Tom planned this better? It was his fault. It was all his fault.

A week later, Tom had taken Janet and Kathleen to meet Dr. Rudman. One of Tom’s Russian investors had recommended him. ‘The man knows which questions to ask and which to leave well alone,’ Tom had said. And Dr. Rudman had asked a lot of questions. He had wanted to know if Kathleen was eating well, sleeping through the night, and if she’d had any sniffles recently. But he never once asked about the adoption agency, or papers, or her history. With a deep nausea, Janet watched Tom cradle a screaming Kathleen while Dr. Rudman took several blood samples from her arm and then from her foot. ‘I’m sorry

little one,' he'd said, 'so many tests to do.' At the end, he'd congratulated them on their healthy, bouncing baby and assured them he had all the information he needed to reconstruct her "lost" medical records. As he was walking them to the door, he had given Janet his pager so she could get in touch with him any time she wanted.

'Don't worry, Mrs. O'Connell,' he'd said, 'all my patients are guaranteed the utmost confidentiality.'

In bed in Montauk, Janet now moved Kathleen's black hair away from her sticky forehead. She seemed to be fast asleep now. Finally. She was snoring, almost in time with Tom, snuggled into the nook under his arm. Janet smiled. She eased herself down into the small sliver of bed Kathleen and Tom had left for her.

Whatever trouble had been haunting Kathleen was now gone. It had probably been the heat, or her teeth, or over-exhaustion from the long drive up here today. She was probably fine. But Janet couldn't help worry if something else had been disturbing her, causing her to fight her sleep like that.

Did she dream of them, Janet wondered, the green-eyed girl who sold her and the black-haired boy who was probably still searching? Janet had only seen him for a moment, on television, that morning in Manchester. In the first weeks at home with Kathleen, she had not watched the news. She had not read the papers. Not that it had made the headlines in the US, Tom had assured her. Even so, she had shut herself off from the world. For the past six months, she had devoted herself to Kathleen. She hadn't wanted to know any more about that sad waif of a boy. Forget he even existed.

Janet shifted in bed, curling herself protectively around her daughter, and she let out a long breath, ready for sleep. But when she closed her eyes, there he was, pleading for his daughter's safe return. She could see him. She could hear him. It seemed like she could even touch him, he felt so close. It felt like he was always there. Only, during the

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day, there was so much to distract her. There were lists to write, errands to run, and a fifteen-month-old to attend to. During the day, she could ignore him. The nights, however, were a different matter entirely.

CHAPTER FOUR
EMMA—BELFAST & NEW YORK
JUNE 1994 TO SEPTEMBER 1994

On the weekends, the bar could get lively, busy with people full of the *craic*. But tonight was Tuesday. Only the professional drinkers came in on a Tuesday. In front of her sat a disheveled row of men supping pints in silence. Melancholy hung thick in the air, as it always did.

All of her friends were over in the University Quarter right now celebrating the end of their A-level exams. Emma didn't belong there. She had hardly been to school since Kathleen's "kidnapping". Most of her old classmates were hoping to get into Queens. Except for her best friend Victoria. She had her sights set on art school in Manchester. But Emma's sights reached only as far as tomorrow's plane journey and no further.

She stood in a corner, drying glasses, staring at the drinkers along the bar. They reminded her of her long-dead father. They were lonely, isolated men, incapable of holding down work. Many of them lived off subsidies

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shelled out by the very Government they fought against. At one time, they had been able to give off a certain kind of quiet menace, which had probably made them feel powerful. But they were mere pawns. They would never admit it, but they had been scammed. While these men had been busy creating a distraction in the name of the “cause” their commanders, men like Geary and Aiden’s uncles, had been growing rich on the profits of unchecked organized crime.

The men drank heavily, so much so that they’d often fall off their chairs and slur their speech. But they never lost control, they never said anything they shouldn’t, their facial expression always remained fixed. Emma could only imagine the secret shames they kept stored up inside. You could make an educated guess, but you’d never find a chink in their armor big enough to expose the fleshy mess they hid inside. She studied them, knowing she needed to be more like them.

As the evening passed, the customers filed out one by one, until it reached closing time, and only Jim remained at the bar. Jim was probably in his late forties. He wore the same unkempt wooly jumper every day and sported wildly outdated seventies style side-burns. Night after night, he came and sat at the bar alone, for hours, usually only speaking to order a drink. He was almost always the last customer of the night.

He handed his empty glass to Emma and started pulling on his jacket, which was frayed and torn in several places.

‘Did I hear right? Are you off to America?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Well, good luck girl,’ he said. ‘Here, buy yourself a drink when you get to New York, will you?’ He shoved a five-pound note across the counter towards her. This was a man that sometimes counted out his beer money in pennies and often had to ask for credit until his benefit check came in on a Thursday.

‘Jim, you’re very kind, but I can’t accept that.’

‘Take it,’ he said, staring at a spot to the right of her temple, not meeting her eye.

‘Thank you.’

‘Have a nice life, isn’t that what they say? Well I mean it.’

‘No need to get so dramatic,’ Emma smiled. ‘Sure I’ll see you when I’m back in September. You can only stay a few months as a tourist.’

‘No offense, but I hope I never see you in here again. You’re far better off in America. Get as far away from this hell-hole as fast as possible and don’t look back.’

For three months now, Emma had served this man night after night, and yet she knew practically nothing about him. Not anything real. This was the longest conversation they had ever had.

‘Can I ask you something?’ Emma said, emboldened. ‘Why don’t you ever look me in the eye?’

The whole time they’d been talking he’d looked in her direction, but he never met her gaze.

He stood back, with his hands in his pockets, looking incredibly uncomfortable, his eyes darting around the bar. Perhaps she should have kept her mouth shut.

‘It’s what I’ve been trained to do,’ he eventually said. ‘Words are easy. You can choose what you want to say and how you want to say it. But you’ve no such control over your eyes. They can betray you. They can show you up for who you really are. So we all learned never to look anyone in the eye. I didn’t even know I still did that, I suppose I’m too institutionalized to change.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to pry...’

Jim zipped up his jacket. ‘Go have yourself a great life girl. Of all people, you deserve it.’ And out he walked, leaving Emma alone in the grimy bar.

The next morning, Emma sat at her kitchen table going through the contents of her handbag again to make sure she had everything she might need for the flight, the first

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of her life. Victoria was hovering around, shivering and hugging a cup of coffee, with last night's mascara still thick on her lashes. Emma's mother sat opposite her at the table drinking tea and smoking, dressed in her nightie and flimsy pink dressing gown.

'I don't know how I'll cope, you so far away and me here by myself. My whole family gone,' her mother grumbled. Emma rolled her eyes at Victoria.

Victoria gave Emma's mother a sympathetic look. 'Sure it's only three months Mrs. McCourt. She'll be back in no time.'

'After all that's happened this year, I can't believe you're just taking off for a summer holiday. What if there's a break in the investigation? Don't you want to be here for that?'

'If there's any news, I'll change my flight and come back earlier. Of course I will.' In the six months since Kathleen's disappearance, the police hadn't made a single meaningful breakthrough. Geary's man on the inside was making sure of it. If there were a true break in the investigation, Belfast was the last place Emma wanted to be. 'Now, I gave you Patrick's phone number didn't I?' she said to her mother. Emma had arranged to spend the summer with Patrick Doyle. He was the twenty-one-year-old friend of her cousin. Emma didn't really know Patrick well, but she'd hung about with him around the Falls Road, with her cousins, when they were younger. A few phone calls from her cousin and Patrick had offered to let her crash with him for the summer.

Emma stood up. 'I need to get going,'

'You can't wait to get away from me, can you?'

'Mommy, that's not true. We've been over this.' Outside a car horn beeped. 'That'll be my taxi. Are you going to give me a hug goodbye or what?'

Her mother got up, cigarette still in hand. Emma reached tentatively out, wrapping her arms around her mother in something that just about passed for an

embrace. Under her polyester nightdress her mother's fragile collection of bones stayed stiff and straight.

As Emma gathered up her belongings, her mother cleared away the teacups and started washing them. Victoria grabbed Emma's suitcase and dragged it out the front door, leaving Emma alone with her mother.

'I'll see you soon,' said Emma.

'Aye, look after yourself,' her mother said without turning around.

Emerging bleary eyed out of the Terminal, not really knowing how she had survived the crowded arrivals hall or the daunting business of going through immigration, Emma looked around for Patrick. She quickly found him leaning up against a construction van in the drop off area, the sun lighting his smiling face.

'Welcome to the Big Apple,' he said.

In the van, Emma clung to her backpack and stared out the window. Patrick drove far above the speed limit, skirting between the traffic as if they were in a Hollywood high-speed car chase. Trucks and people carriers lurched at them from all directions. She'd never seen cars so big.

'So we've got this apartment on a third floor walk-up just on the border between Woodside and Astoria,' said Patrick.

'On the border of where and where?'

'It's in Queens. Don't worry it's not too rough. It's no Park Avenue either, but compared to the shithole we grew up in it's not bad at all. And if you like Greek food, well it's the place for you.' Emma suppressed an anguished yelp as they narrowly made it back into their lane before an oncoming truck plowed into them. 'So it's a three bedroom place and, including you, there's ten of us living there. Do you know Jo and Niall Fitzpatrick?' Emma shook her head. 'They're good lads. I was going to put you into their room. Theirs is the only room with a spare bed. It's either that or the living room floor. The sofa's taken.'

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Hope that's ok.'

'I don't mind sharing a room. I'm used to it,' Emma said.

'Aye.' Patrick averted his eyes. 'Right, so...' He trailed off.

Emma tugged at a piece of loose skin on her thumb, ripping it off and leaving a raw pink line all along the nail. 'Umm, just one question, are any of the lads friends with Aiden Kennedy?'

'Nah. They're not that kind,' Patrick said and then quickly added. 'Sorry, I didn't mean anything by that. No offense.'

'None taken.'

'I just meant, they are the kind of lads that wanted to get away from all that sectarian shite. That's why they're here. They wanted to get away from people like the Kennedys constantly trying to recruit them. I don't know Aiden personally. I'm sure he's a good lad.'

'That's fine, I was just curious.'

'Listen, I didn't mean to speak out of turn. The Kennedys must be like family to you, after all you and Aiden have been through.'

'There's no need to explain yourself to me. Aiden and I are still friends, of course. But since Kathleen disappeared, he's gone off the rails. So I try to keep my involvement with him to a minimum these days. That's why I wanted to come away for the summer. To leave all that behind me.'

'I've told the lads not to be asking you about, you know, what happened. I'm sure you've come here for a clean slate, just like the rest of us.'

'Thanks Patrick,' Emma smiled at him, just as he swerved into another lane. But this time she didn't flinch.

When they got to the apartment, Patrick lugged her suitcase up the narrow stairs and kicked the apartment door, which was lying open.

Inside were six guys dotted around smoking and drinking tins of beer.

‘Right, Emma, let me introduce you. That’s John, James, Charlie, Connor.’ Patrick pointed to each one and they gave her a wave and a smile in turn. ‘And those two on the sofa are Jo and Niall who you’ll be sharing with.’

Two big strapping lads with tattooed arms stood up and said hello in strong West Belfast accents. Emma shook their hands and forced a smile on her face.

‘Don’t worry. They look like degenerates but they’re both big pussy cats,’ Patrick assured her. ‘I wanted to ask ye, are ye looking for work?’

‘Yes, definitely.’

‘There’s a pub down the street called *Durty Nellys* that we frequent from time to time.’

‘Try every bloody night,’ Jo cut in.

‘Anyway, the manager’s looking for help over the summer. I told him about you. You used to work in Brennan’s on the Falls didn’t you?’

Emma nodded.

‘Well, as we’re such loyal customers, he said the job’s yours if you want it. It’s cash in hand, and the rent here is practically nothing, so you should be able to save a bit.’

‘Patrick, it’s so good of you to arrange that for me,’ Emma said.

‘Sure it’s no bother. We look after our own here. Now sit yourself down and I’ll get you a beer.’

Joe and Niall moved to make space on the sofa and Emma sat down, sandwiched comfortably between the two.

With tips, and not paying any tax, the money at the bar was more than Emma needed to live on. The lads all worked construction. They got up early and grafted on sites across the city all day, leaving Emma alone in the flat. But she couldn’t stand those long days by herself with nothing to distract her. So when someone mentioned that another Irish girl, Johanna, had gotten a working visa and social security number, Emma borrowed it and headed off

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to Manhattan in search of work.

She found a job in a discount shoe store a few blocks from Washington Square. Becoming someone else was surprisingly easy. It took Emma only a day or so to get used to answering when someone called for Johanna.

She usually went to Washington Square for lunch. Lounging on the concrete, munching on falafel bought from a nearby street vendor, with the Empire State building far off in the background, she'd watch kids playing in the fountain, chess players scamming happy tourists out of a few dollars, a cappella singers busking, and students lazing on towels with their text books lying untouched next to them.

As the summer days went by, Emma felt more and more like she belonged in this crazy milieu, like she had found her place in the world here amongst the construction workers, the Italians, the homeless people, the artists, the Vietnamese, the tourists, the Lebanese, the students, the bankers, the Pakistanis, the musicians, the models and the Mexicans.

And then, all too soon, September came, and it was time for her to go home.

The cheapest way to get to Newark airport was to catch a coach from China Town. Usually, they only took people from the Chinese community, but Patrick and his crew had done renovation work on a restaurant there, and Patrick, ever the charmer, had made friends with the waiters who had hooked Emma up with a spot on the coach.

Patrick drove her to the meeting place just outside the Catholic Church on Mott Street. He parked the van and took her suitcase out of the back.

'I'll wait with you until the bus comes.'

'Patrick it's fine. You have things to do.'

'We're going to miss your Ulster Fry ups on Saturday mornings. Nothing cures a raging hangover quite like one of your breakfasts.'

'Patrick, seriously, you don't have to wait with me.'

Emma was feeling bad enough about having to go back to Belfast, the last thing she needed was some teary goodbye with Patrick on the sidewalk when the bus came. Over the summer, she'd learned the lads, despite their tattoos, shaven heads and borderline alcoholism, were all big softies inside, and Patrick was the worst of all. 'I don't know how to thank you for all you did for me this summer.'

Patrick dug his hands into his pockets and kicked an imaginary stone. 'You know, McCourt, you're a lot nicer than people give you credit for back home.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'You have a reputation for being, how shall I put this, a bit feisty? But you're all right. It's been good sharing with you this summer.' His eyes looked like they were misting over.

'Jesus Patrick, you have to go now.' Emma pushed him into the van.

She watched him drive off, his arm waving like crazy as the van disappeared around the corner. Around her were colorful shop-fronts, with all sorts of plastic tat for sale. All the signs were in Chinese, and there were buckets lined up along the sidewalk piled high with crabs. There were bakeries with trays of dumplings and buns displayed in the window, butchers with sticky, whole, marinated pigs swinging above the counter, and old ladies weaving in and out of the crowds, dragging canvas shopping bags behind them. How strange that this place, with its indecipherable language and unusual smells, should feel more like home to her than Belfast. That she should feel more herself here than she had ever felt before.

The coach arrived and people started putting their luggage into the hold. Emma hung back trying to breathe in as much of the city's magic as possible. The sun was a ball of butter in the sky, and the street was hot and noisy.

'Hey, Irish lady, put your case here,' the driver motioned to her as the rest of the passengers started filing

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into the coach.

Still she hesitated, thinking about the scene waiting for her at home. Her mother, drawn and depressed, the darkness of the Falls Road with its boarded-up shop fronts, tribal graffiti, and soldiers in combat gear and rifles stopping cars. She thought about Aiden coming round her house whenever he felt like it, usually drunk, sometimes high, with that photo album he carried everywhere of “his girls.” The one that was now grubby from him pawing over it so much. She thought about the bar and what Jim had said about hoping she never came back. She thought about the lies she had to tell and the sympathy she had to endure in Ireland. In Belfast, people looked at her like a half person. People defined her not by who she was, but by what she was missing. Emma had a hole the shape of herself carved into her soul and, back home, it was all people could see when they looked at her.

‘Irish lady, we have to go now. People must catch flights.’

‘Ok,’ she said, picking up her case.

Patrick just laughed when she showed up at the apartment in Queens. He handed her the bottle of *Budweiser* he’d been drinking, and she took a giant mouthful and smiled.

‘Boys,’ he shouted as he lifted her suitcase and carried it in to the apartment. ‘Looks like we’ll be harboring an illegal from now on.’

Illegal. A law-breaker. That’s exactly what she was, and she would just have to get used to it.

CHAPTER FIVE
EMMA—NEW YORK
MARCH 1995

Emma heard Larry before she saw him.

‘It’s not my fault you have Sasquatch feet honey.’

‘What’s a “Sast Watch” Daddy?’

‘A big monster that lives in the woods.’

‘I do not have monster feet!’

‘I’m not saying that, but for such a small girl your feet are exceptionally large.’

‘Daddy, I want these ones.’

‘But, I told you, those ones don’t fit you.’

The man sounded like he was about to give up all hope. Emma went to see how she could assist. In the midst of a sea of pink, was a bright-eyed, raven-haired little girl, sitting on a bench swinging her white-socked feet. She looked to be about five or six years old. Another little girl, who looked like a carbon copy of the first save that she was a few years younger, sat in a stroller chewing on a shocking pink sneaker from the display. Between the two, a middle-aged man was crumpled on the ground looking

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utterly defeated.

‘Can I help?’ Emma asked.

He looked up at her. ‘You couldn’t get me a stiff drink, could you?’

‘No, I’m afraid I drank the last of the liquor this morning. It is Monday, after all. But perhaps I can help you with these sizes?’ She sat down on the floor next to him and turned to the little girl. ‘Now, which pair of shoes do I need to find in a dainty princess size for you?’

Relief and gratitude washed over the man’s face.

‘Thank you for this. I bet my ex-wife knew there was going to be a break in the weather today so she orchestrated this whole thing to mess with me. I should be on the golf course right now.’

‘What do you mean?’ Emma asked.

‘Last night, as I was dropping off the girls, she just happened to mention that she’d read about a discount store near Washington Square that was having a sale on Kitty Kit shoes for girls. But it was ending soon, so I’d better bring them today. Of course, she made sure to say all this in front of Meg here, who was just thrilled with the prospect of a shopping trip into the city with Daddy to buy lots of pink crap. Isn’t that right, honey?’

‘It’s not crap Daddy, they are beautiful,’ Meg said with adult seriousness.

Emma smiled. ‘That’s right sweetheart, you tell him.’

Twenty minutes later, Emma was ringing Larry up as the girls ran around the handbag section nearby.

‘Thank you so much,’ he said. ‘You saved my life today. Or you saved Meg’s life and spared me a life-sentence for murder.’

Emma laughed. ‘That’ll be two hundred dollars.’

He handed her his credit card.

‘Are you sure you don’t have a shot of whiskey for me Johanna?’ he said, looking at Emma’s name badge. ‘I think I need it to face the streets of New York with these two. We live all the way out in Jersey City. I’m sure my ex-wife

is sitting at home like some Bond villain, stroking a white cat in glee, thinking of me suffering in the city with these two.'

'But Jersey City's not that far is it?'

'Oh, it's only eight minutes into downtown they'll tell you. Maybe for normal people, but it's a not a journey you should be making with two annoying, unreasonable, little humans clinging to you. Like Charlotte, the youngest, she's just plain lazy. She can walk, but she insisted I bring her in the stroller, which wouldn't be so bad, except Meg walks at the slowest pace known to man. So there I am, with one hand I'm shoving this stroller in front of me along a crowded street, and my other arm is stretched about three feet behind me holding Meg's hand as she dawdles along chatting to herself. Or maybe she's talking to me. I don't know. I don't care at this point. I mean, she's six, there's absolutely nothing she's going to tell me that will change my life, is there? All she'll be saying is totally pointless shit like, "Daddy, taxis are yellow."'

Emma laughed again, imagining this.

'Here's your receipt, there's no money back on sale items but we will exchange any unworn shoes. So, if you get home and the girls decide they don't like what they bought, you can always come back and do the whole thing again.'

'Jesus Christ Johanna, is that a threat?'

'It's not a threat.' Emma paused, letting a tiny subversive smile cross her face. 'It's an invitation.'

Larry blushed a little, and Emma wondered why she was flirting with this man. He wasn't repulsive, but there was certainly nothing handsome about him. He had dark red hair with a pinch of grey around the temples, a high forehead, honey-brown eyes and pale skin. He was about six feet tall and looked like he needed to lose a bit of weight. But, most importantly, he was probably twice her age.

'Thank you for all your help today,' Larry lifted the

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bags, barely meeting her eye. He probably wasn't used to young women teasing him like she'd just done.

Emma watched Larry as he gathered up his raucous daughters and maneuvered his way through the shop, knocking down high heels and boots from the carefully arranged displays as he went. As her eyes followed him all the way out the door, a strange melancholy settled into her chest.

The next morning, when Emma arrived for work fifteen minutes before opening, she found Larry loitering on the sidewalk outside the store.

'Was there a problem with the shoes?' she asked, noticing his hands were empty, save for a paper cup.

'No.' Larry looked down as he traced a circle around the lid of his coffee.

'Do you want to buy some more? We're not open yet, but I'm sure the manager wouldn't mind if you came in now to browse.'

'No, that's ok.' He looked her in the eye. 'I couldn't sleep last night.'

'Ok,' she said slowly.

'I sat up all night trying to figure out a way of asking you out that didn't sound creepy.'

'And what did you come up with?'

'That was it.'

'Oh.'

'Shit, did it sound creepy? Of course it did. I mean, no matter how I ask you it's going to be wrong, I'm forty-three and you're.... how old are you?'

'Nineteen.'

Larry's mouth fell into a downturned O. 'I was kind of hoping you were older and just really knew how to take care of yourself. Never mind, forget I came here.' He went to leave.

Watching his back, lumbering away from her, Emma suddenly felt a sense of panic.

'Just for the record,' she called, 'my answer was yes.'

‘Yes it’s creepy?’ He turned back towards her.

‘No, yes I will go out with you.’

‘Really?’

‘I finish work at six today, if you want to grab dinner together.’ It was her night off from *Durty Nellys*.

‘Definitely.’

‘Good, meet me back here later then.’ Emma walked into the store, leaving him standing in the middle of the sidewalk with a huge grin on his face. It was just dinner. She didn’t have anything else to do this evening anyway. Plus, it felt good being able to bestow joy on another human being, for a change.

As Emma followed the waiter through the French bistro in Soho, she started to think maybe it had been a mistake saying yes to this date. This place looked really fancy. It had large mirrors, a high ceiling, and art deco lighting, and the wait staff were all dressed in black ties and long white aprons. She hoped Larry wasn’t expecting them to go Dutch. Not that she minded paying her own half. It was better that way. But she hadn’t realized he’d take her somewhere so expensive.

‘So what do you recommend?’ she asked studying the menu.

‘For starters, the lobster salad is good and so is the duck foie gras terrine, and, for the main, the steaks here are amazing.’

Emma glanced down at the prices. ‘I might not have a starter. I’m not that hungry,’ she lied.

‘I’ll feel like a big fatty if I get a starter and you don’t, are you sure you won’t join me? And, by the way, this is my treat, to say thanks for your help at the store yesterday with the girls. You were really good with them.’

Emma closed the menu. ‘Everything looks delicious. Why don’t you order for the both of us?’

After Larry had ordered, and the waiter had brought them their drinks, Emma said, ‘So the girls were happy

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with their shoes?’

‘Yeah, they were ecstatic. Too happy in fact. Halfway home, Meg decided she had to put hers on. She couldn’t wait. So there I am unpacking them in the middle of a crowded train full of commuters. There are boxes and shoes and fucking pink tissue paper strewn all over the place, and people are stepping over us like we’re trash. But Meg wouldn’t take no for an answer. She’s very strong willed, or maybe I’m just weak. When you first become a parent you read all these books, as if successful parenting is an exam you can study for, and you think, if I follow all the rules, my kids will be different. I won’t be one of those parents who can’t control their screaming kid in a restaurant. Those people are idiots, you think. But then the kid arrives, and suddenly your whole notion of good parenting changes. Now, if I just make it to the end of the day and the girls are still alive and I’m still reasonably sane, well, that’s a fucking victory right there.’

‘Perhaps that’s why they say that being a parent is the hardest job in the world.’

‘It’s definitely the most stressful job. Before Meg was born, I made the mistake of reading up on Freud’s stages of development. To this day, Freud’s ideas still fucking haunt me. The first stage is called the oral stage. Sounds like it should be fun, right? But it’s terrifying.’

‘Why?’

‘The oral stage is from birth to one year. Freud says a child can become fixated at any point, which can make them become stuck at that stage. So, if they become fixated in the oral stage, they’ll probably become over-dependent on oral-stimulation like smoking, drinking or eating. And I dread to think what other kind of oral-stimulation they could become addicted to. That’s no thought for a father to be having about his daughter, worrying that she grows up to be the girl who blows the entire football team just because I didn’t wean her off the bottle properly. But, thanks to Freud, this is the kind of

shit I now think about.’

Emma stared into her wine. She hoped Larry was wrong, she hoped, no matter what a child experienced in their first year, they could still course-correct. She had to believe that.

‘Did you know that Freud thinks that personality is basically fixed by the time you’re five? I still have a shot with Charlotte, but Meg? I dread to think what living with me and her mother for the first five years of her life did to her.’

‘Did you fight a lot?’

‘No, I’d worry less if Meg had seen us at each other’s throats in a good honest argument. But Lisa’s far too passive aggressive for that. Instead, it’s the thousands of small humiliations and put downs that Meg was witness to that worries me.’

Tiny criticisms were hardly the worst thing a couple could do to each other, Emma thought.

‘How often do you get to see them?’ she asked.

‘About eight days a month, I have them every other weekend and then, during the weeks I haven’t had them for the weekend, I have them on Monday and Tuesday.’

‘It must be hard saying goodbye to them when you leave them back at their mom’s. Do you miss them when they’re not with you?’

Larry thought for a moment. ‘I’m supposed to say yes, aren’t I?’ he said with a small smile.

‘No, you can be honest. I won’t judge you.’ *Who am I to pass judgment on anyone?* she thought.

‘I do miss them. Of course I do. But this part-time father thing isn’t so bad. So many of my friends whine about their kids for hours but then they’ll suddenly do this paranoid turnaround thing and say something like, “oh, but little Jimmy is so wonderful, I just couldn’t imagine my life without him.” Which is such BS. When I was still married, I spent half my time fantasizing about what I’d do if I didn’t have kids, and now I kinda get to live out that

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life for two thirds of the month.’

‘And how’s that working out for you?’

‘Well it’s a Tuesday night, and I’m drinking wine in a nice French restaurant with a beautiful young woman, so I’d say, right now, it’s pretty fucking great.’

Emma looked at Larry’s wide grin and couldn’t help but smile too.

After their appetizers, they had steaks with bordelaise sauce and fries, red wine, and, finally, a huge cheese plate with port, deep in conversation and laughing the whole time.

At some point, much later, Emma became aware that the place had cleared out while she’d been lost in conversation with Larry. The staff were now all lined up along the bar staring at them with a murderous look in their eyes.

‘I guess I should ask for the check,’ Larry glanced at the mob of waiters. ‘Or we might get lynched if we keep these guys here any longer.’

Emma looked at her watch. It was after 11pm. Door to door, it would take her at least an hour to get back home to Astoria. She could just picture the scene waiting for her. The lads would all be drunk, and there would be dirty plates, beer cans, and empty pizza boxes strewn everywhere.

She wondered what Larry’s apartment was like. He’d spent 200 dollars on shoes for his kids the other day, and this restaurant wasn’t cheap, so he must live in a reasonably nice place. At least somewhere with a proper sofa to curl up on that wasn’t occupied by a group of guys chain-smoking in their dirty work clothes.

‘Do you know if they have a pay phone here?’ Emma asked.

‘Why? Is everything ok?’

‘Yeah, everything is fine. I just need to make a quick call.’

‘It’s back there by the restrooms.’

Emma excused herself.

'Please don't pick up. Please don't pick up,' Emma whispered as the phone rang.

'Hullo?'

'Patrick?' She had been hoping the lads were out so she could just leave a message on the answering machine.

'Emma? Is everything ok? Are you still out with the old bloke?'

'Yeah. Listen, I was just calling to let you know that I won't be home tonight.'

'Why? Where are you staying?'

'At Larry's place.' He hadn't yet asked her back to his apartment, but why wouldn't he? He was obviously attracted to her, why else had he asked her out to dinner?

'Is that such a good idea? You hardly know the man.'

'Patrick.'

'Emma you can't just go home with a random man on your first date. It's irresponsible.'

'Seriously? You're lecturing me about responsibility? You, the man who sometimes gets behind the wheel of a car after downing ten pints and who regularly misses a whole week of work because you've been on a five-day bender.'

'There's no need to get defensive Em, I'm just looking out for you.'

'I know you are Patrick,' she said. 'But there's nothing to worry about. I can take care of myself.'

'I'm just saying, we're not in Belfast anymore. You need to be careful.'

Like Belfast is so bloody safe.

'I promise, I will be, and I'll see you tomorrow evening.' She went to put down the phone.

'Hi,' Patrick's voice called out. She lifted the receiver to her ear once more. 'You have my beeper number, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Well, if you want to come home, I don't care what

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time it is or where you are in the tri-state area, just contact me and I'll come get you. And let the old bloke know that if he gives you any funny business, you have a small army of Irish lads at your disposal, so he better be on his best behavior. I will personally kick the shit out of him for you if he does anything you don't want him to.'

'Yes, big bro,' Emma put down the phone. She sometimes wondered what her life might have been like if Patrick Doyle really were her big brother, if things would have turned out differently if he'd been there watching out for her in Belfast.

She sat back down at the table, just as the waiter was handing Larry the credit card slip.

'Thank you,' she said. 'I had a lot of fun tonight.'

Larry folded the check and put it into his pocket, and then he spread his hands on the table, looking like he was unsure where to place them.

'I guess I should get the *maître d* to call two cabs for us.'

'Two cabs?'

'I'm not letting you go off to Queens on the subway by yourself at this time of night. But don't worry, I'll pay.'

'Oh, it's just,' Emma bit her lip unsure if she should go on. What the hell, she might as well just come out with it. 'I thought we'd both be getting the one cab.'

'What? New Jersey via Queens? That doesn't make much sense,'

'That's not what I meant,' she looked him squarely in the eye.

A reddish tone raced across Larry's face. 'Or you could come to my place for a nightcap. Only if you want to. No obligation.'

'Yeah, a nightcap, I'd like that.'

He studied her.

'What's that look?' she asked.

'You really don't have a very good sense of self-preservation, do you? It must be the innocence of youth, you've not yet become hardened by the realities of life.'

‘Oh, my self-preservation instincts are excellent. Believe you me.’

‘I doubt that. You barely know me, I’m twice your size, and yet you’re still happy to come home with me.’

‘I’m five seven, and you’re what, six foot?’

‘Six two.’

‘Still, that doesn’t make you twice my size.’

‘But I’m easily double your weight.’

He did have a middle-aged paunch. But somehow that didn’t put Emma off. She imagined his weight on top of her, crushing her in a reassuring kind of way. She could picture his face above hers, those deep brown eyes looking down at her, those big hands running all over her, his touch just the right balance between strength and softness.

‘Are you trying to put me off going home with you?’

Larry put his head in his hands. ‘I’m an idiot, aren’t I? I’m just always impressed by how courageous women are, taking a chance on us men, when, statistically, we’re like the biggest threat to women-kind,’ and then he added hurriedly, ‘but, just to clarify, I’m no threat. I’m a teddy bear.’

‘I can see that,’ she smiled. ‘Perhaps you’re trying to sabotage this because it’s you that’s worried about getting hurt. But don’t worry Larry, I don’t bite...’ Emma paused and drank down the last of her whisky. ‘Well...only when provoked.’

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