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THE
RÚIN

DERVLA
McTIERNAN

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To Kenny, my partner in crime. Thank you for the Thursday nights, for the log-lines, and the laughs.

Ní scéal rúin é más fios do thriúr é.

An Irish saying, meaning ‘it’s not a secret if a third person knows about it’.

The title of my book can be read in English, or can be given its Irish meaning. In Irish, Rúin means something hidden, a mystery, or a secret, but the word also has a long history as a term of endearment.

Dervla McTiernan

Mayo, Ireland

February 1993

PROLOGUE

Cormac leaned forward to peer through the windscreen, then nearly cracked his head on the steering wheel as the car bounced through another pothole. Shite. There was no sign of the house, and he'd been searching for over an hour. He could barely read house names or numbers in the settling gloom. Maybe the whole thing was some kind of first-week hazing ritual. If it had been Dwyer who'd sent him he would have been sure of it. Dwyer was the sort of bastard who was forever telling jokes, jokes with an edge to them and usually a target. But it had been Marcus Tully who'd called him in off traffic duty, barely looking up from his newspaper as he handed Cormac the post-it note that was now stuck to his dashboard.

Dower House, Monagaraun Road, Kilmore. Maude Blake. Tully's handwriting, unlike the man himself, was tidy and perfectly legible. His muttered instruction had given Cormac the impression that the call was for some sort of minor domestic. Cormac hadn't asked any questions; he'd been concentrating too hard on trying to look like he knew what he was doing. It turned out that Kilmore was a blink-and-you-miss it kind of village, with a church, a mart, a tiny primary school, and two pubs. The Monagaraun Road was forty miles long, and pocked with a bare scattering of farmhouses and bungalows, none of which bore any resemblance to a dower house.

Cormac pulled in at the next gap in the hedgerow, and sat for a moment. He was sweating. The heater was broken – the only settings were off and furnace – and given the temperature outside, he'd chosen furnace. Christ. The car

was a nightmare, with a clutch that made threatening sounds every time he changed gear, and a faint but persistent smell of vomit from the back seat. Even the radio was in bits, its wires hanging loose, waiting for a fix.

It could be a piss-take. The whole thing, giving him a phantom address, a squad car that was falling apart. In which case he should give up now. Drive back. Pretend that he'd known all along and had spent the last couple of hours eating his lunch. On the other hand, what if this was a real call and he arrived back without even having found the house? No. He had to find the damn place, or be absolutely sure it didn't exist. His best option might be to try one of the village pubs – there was a fifty-fifty chance he would get real directions that wouldn't send him into the nearest bog. Cormac released the hand-brake and started a slow drive back towards the village. He was about a kilometre out when he spotted two crumbling stone gateposts, almost hidden behind a thick layer of ivy. The gate they'd once supported was long gone. Cormac pulled into the gateway. His headlights illuminated a drive that was little more than mud and weeds. It was lined with mature sycamore trees, overgrown now, their bare branches meshing overhead.

Deep ruts had been dug through the soil by the recent passage of a tractor. He'd seen the drive before, on a previous pass, had taken it to be an access track for farmland and dismissed it. But those sycamores and the gateposts suggested something else. Hundred-year-old trees, planted to offer an elegant entrance to the parkland of some grand estate. An estate meant a dower house, or at least the chance of one.

Cormac moved the car forward another few metres and peered through the windscreen. He couldn't see a house, but the tractor marks petered out halfway down the visible drive. Was there a farm gate there in a break in the trees? Maybe. Beyond that the driveway continued, and curved, and the tree

line blocked whatever it might lead to. Cormac put the car into gear and started down the drive. He drove at a steady pace, aiming to keep his tyres out of ruts where he could, and he made it without getting bogged down, following the drive until it swung abruptly to the right and opened out to form a parking area in front of an old Georgian house.

At first glance the house seemed to be in complete darkness, and it was obvious the place was in disrepair. A broken gutter was spewing dirty rainwater down one side of the facade. Paint was peeling and stained and all but one of the windows of the first floor were boarded up. The ground floor windows were in better shape, and Cormac thought he could see a dim glow coming from a room to the left of the front door. He felt only relief that he'd found the bloody place, that he wouldn't have to go back to the station hat-in-hand, looking as clueless as he felt. He got out of the car and walked through the rain to the front door. It opened before he reached it, and was held ajar just enough for him to see that the person behind it was a girl. She was a teenager, fourteen or maybe fifteen. Dark hair. Slight.

'Why are you by yourself?' she asked, before he had a chance to speak.

'Sorry?'

'I thought you always come out in pairs. You know, with a partner.'

'Not always,' was all he could think of to say. He couldn't very well tell her that Marcus Tully would rather sit on his fat arse eating chips and reading the *Daily Star* than get into a squad car and drive out in this weather for a domestic. He took his ID from his pocket and showed it to her. 'I'm Garda Cormac Reilly,' he said.

She looked at his ID, then back at his face. 'You're very young,' she said doubtfully.

'I suppose I am.' He swallowed his smile. Fifteen, and she spoke like his mother.

‘Come in out of the rain,’ she said after a further pause, during which the water that had pooled on top of his hat started to drip down the back of his neck.

The hall was huge, the pitch pine-panelled ceilings at least four metres high. The other end of the hall held an ornate returning staircase. It must have been grand and beautiful once but what struck Cormac was the smell. Damp hung in the air, there was an underlying hint of something nastier, and the place was bloody freezing. The girl was waiting for him, her face grave.

‘Are your mum or dad home?’ he asked.

‘My little brother is in the drawing room,’ she said, gesturing to an open door leading off the hall. Looking past her, Cormac could see that there was a fire lit in the grate, and the small figure of a very young boy sitting on bare wooden floor in front of it, turning the pages of a book.

‘Your mum?’ he asked again.

‘In her room,’ she said, and pointed towards the stairs. She turned and took a step towards the drawing room, then spoke to the little boy. ‘Jack, stay here. I’m going upstairs with the garda for a minute, but I’ll be back really quickly, okay?’ The little boy raised his head at her voice, but said nothing. She shut the door and turned and walked up the stairs, leaving Cormac to follow.

As they climbed the smell of damp became stronger. Wallpaper peeled away from the walls in long strips. The upstairs landing was in almost complete darkness, and as they took the last step Cormac reached automatically for the light switch. Nothing happened.

The girl kept walking. ‘There’s no power,’ she said. ‘Don’t worry. There are candles in Mother’s room.’

She led him along the dark corridor to a room where a glimmer of light leaked under the door. She opened the door without knocking and held it for him. He stepped past her.

The room was sparsely furnished, with little more than a double bed and an antique wardrobe. The floorboards were bare. The fireplace was black and empty and the room was very cold, but the woman on the bed had no need of the blankets that were pulled up past her bare feet. She was dead. Very obviously dead, her eyes open and staring at the ceiling.

‘Jesus.’ Cormac took a stumbling step into the room. He looked back at the girl, then at the woman on the bed. ‘Jesus,’ he said again. Despite knowing she was dead, he found himself walking to her and checking her neck for a pulse. Her skin was cold to the touch, and he wiped his hand reflexively on his pants, then realised what he was doing and hoped the girl hadn’t seen him. ‘This is your mum?’ he asked.

She was inside the room now, but she stared fixedly away from the tableau on the bed, and nodded stiffly in response to his question.

Cormac looked down at the corpse. Her arms and legs were skeletal, her hair lank and greasy. The top sheet was grubby and thin and through it he could see the outline of her body. There was a dark stain at the apex of her legs where death had caused her bowels to open. The smell of sour body odour and faeces was thick despite the frigid air. Cause of death seemed obvious. An empty vodka bottle stood beside a guttering candle on the bedside table. A shoelace was tied around the woman’s left arm, and on the floor lay an empty syringe. There were deep scratches on her arms. Track marks? He’d never seen them before. In the crook of her exposed left elbow was a single pin-prick mark and a smear of dried blood.

Cormac turned from the body and walked in three quick steps to the girl. He took her by the arm. ‘Come on,’ he said. He pulled the door closed behind them and walked her to the top of the stairs.

‘That woman’s your mum?’

She nodded again. She had very dark eyes. They dominated her pale, frightened face as she looked up at him.

‘There’s no one else, no one to take care of you? Who called the police?’

‘I did. From the village, this morning. When I brought Jack to school.’

‘This morning? You’ve been here all day?’

She said nothing. He stood, paralysed by indecision, until he noticed that she was shivering. Shock. Or maybe just the cold. She was dressed for it, in jeans, boots and what looked like layers of jumpers, but it was bloody freezing in the house, as cold inside as out.

‘Come on downstairs,’ he said, and this time she followed him as he led the way down the stairs and back to the drawing room. The little boy climbed carefully to his feet as they entered. When the girl chose a seat he settled himself into her lap, and they turned matching pairs of dark eyes in Cormac’s direction. He took a seat himself, and leaned forward to talk to them, trying to look as reassuring as possible.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked. He felt like a fool, felt like the worst possible person to be here in this moment. How were you supposed to handle traumatised children? Two years in Templemore had not equipped him for this.

‘I’m Maude, and this is Jack.’

The boy struck him as very young, although he must be five at least if he’d started school. He was sandy haired and solemn faced; Cormac could see the smudge of an old bruise on his cheek. Both children seemed thin, the girl in particular.

‘Maude,’ Cormac said quietly. ‘Do you know how your mum died?’

She dropped her gaze to the floor.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘That’s okay.’

Maude drew the little boy closer and he softened against her, his eyelids drooping a little.

‘I’ll need to call some people, you understand? People who will come and take care of your mum’s body. People who will take care of you and Jack.’

Her face tightened with anxiety and she glanced towards the dark windows. ‘But you won’t leave us here? It’s getting late. I think you should just bring us with you now, you can bring us to the hospital if you like. To Castlebar.’

‘The hospital?’

She nodded, her face pinched. ‘A doctor should examine Jack.’

The little boy was falling asleep on Maude’s lap, his head resting against her shoulder.

‘He’s sick?’ Cormac asked.

‘He’s hurt.’

‘Okay. Okay Maude. I can bring you to a doctor, of course, but I’ll need to call a social worker. Do you have a family doctor? Maybe in Kilmore?’

But she was shaking her head violently now, disturbing her little brother. ‘Jack needs to see a real doctor, okay? Like in a hospital.’ She must have read the doubt in his face. ‘You won’t get the social in Kilmore at this time. There’s no social worker on at night. No one ’til the morning. And then what’ll you do with us? If you bring us to Castlebar you’ll get them no problem. And Jack can be properly looked after.’

Cormac hesitated. She was afraid, that was obvious. She was only a child, and her mother was dead upstairs. Was that all it was? More than enough for most kids. What was he supposed to do now? He couldn’t just pack two children into the back of his squad car, a car that still smelled of vomit due to a half-arsed clean out from a Saturday night arrest. On the other hand, she was probably right that there’d be no social workers in Kilmore at this stage of the evening.

‘I’ll radio the station,’ he said in the end. ‘See what my sergeant thinks.’

Maude just stared back at him, real worry in her eyes, and in the same moment Cormac remembered the broken radio. *Shite*. She was looking at him as if all her hopes were pinned to his response and she expected the worst. God she was thin. And very young. She had pulled the sleeves of her jumper so that they were halfway down her hands, and the fingers of her right hand were worrying at a loose strand of wool. He could hardly leave them here.

‘Castlebar it is so,’ he said.

She didn’t smile, didn’t say or do anything, but he could see the relief in her eyes, and he felt a little more confident.

‘Do you have some things you’d like to bring with you? Have you pyjamas, or maybe a favourite toy for Jack?’

Maude pointed behind him and he turned, noticing for the first time two small schoolbags leaning against the wall beside the door.

‘I packed our stuff already,’ she said. ‘We don’t need anything else.’

Jesus. Cormac swallowed hard against a wave of emotion. There was something so utterly pathetic about the two little bags.

‘Right so,’ he said, rising. ‘Can I take the little lad for you?’

She shook her head, then stood and cradled the boy so that his legs were either side of her waist. She was stronger than she looked; she carried him easily. Cormac took an old blanket from the back of his chair, picked up the two bags from their places by the door, then led the way out of the house. He laid the blanket over the smelly back seat, and Maude put Jack down, letting him lie flat before settling in beside him and putting one hand protectively on his back. Cormac drove them carefully down the drive, conscious now of every bump and jolt and afraid that Jack would be hurt by the rough progress.

They didn’t speak again for what felt like a long time.

‘How is Jack hurt, Maude?’

She had kept her hand against the little boy’s back, to prevent him from falling off the back seat in his sleep. Now she stroked his sandy hair back from his face. ‘He has some bruises,’ she said, after a pause.

‘Did someone hurt him? Did someone hurt you?’

‘I’m fine. I can take care of myself.’

She didn’t say anything more. Should he push her? No. He might fuck it up, say the wrong thing. Scare her or traumatise her. But how the hell had this happened? How had two children been left to rot in a freezing, empty house with someone as far gone as their mother must have been? He looked at Maude in the rear-view mirror.

‘Jack doesn’t have a dad,’ she said, looking very tired as she spoke. ‘There’s no name on his birth certificate. Can you please tell them? If they know he’s an orphan, then he can be adopted. He should have a proper family.’

‘I’m sure you’ll be kept together,’ Cormac said, then cursed himself inwardly. A five-year-old like Jack would have no trouble finding a home. A fifteen-year-old girl was a different prospect. Placing them together? That would take a miracle.

In the rear-view mirror he saw Maude give a slight smile, but the smile was a sad one and she said nothing. She didn’t speak again on the long drive to Castlebar. When he pulled into the emergency area she woke Jack, quieting his protests and coaxing him from the car. She picked him up again when he started to cry, and walked with him towards the sliding doors.

The waiting room held the usual mix of the genuinely ill, the drunk, and the stupid. Seats were taken by a trio of teenage boys who looked like they would fit at least two of the three categories. The heaters were on too high, and the muggy warmth was unpleasant. The triage nurse was absorbed in paperwork as Cormac shepherded the children

towards her, but a flash of his ID and an edited explanation saw them brought through the A&E double doors and into the assessment area.

Maude followed the nurse to a curtained off bed and gently sat Jack down on it. He clutched at her hand.

‘Is there a loo?’ Maude asked the nurse.

‘Just down the corridor there. First left and it’s on your right.’

Jack started crying again as Maude untangled her hand and walked away.

‘Now be a good brave boy,’ the nurse said. ‘Your sister will be back in a minute.’ But Jack lowered his head and wept, his tears horribly silent, his small body limp. Cormac took a little hand in his and gave it a gentle squeeze. He tried to distract the boy. Told him stories and talked hurling and superheroes as the nurse took off Jack’s clothes and put him in a hospital gown. Tried not to show his horror at the black and blue bruising that ran up Jack’s spine, at the swollen contusion above his left hip. Then the doctor came and Cormac had to step back as he examined the little boy. Cormac stood there, his arms folded and his eyes bleak. And all the time, Jack cried his silent tears and ignored them.

It was a long time before Cormac realised that Maude had not come back. And some time later before he thought to check for her. A full two hours passed before an agitated Tully arrived and they did a proper search of the ground floor bathrooms, the café and the public wards, and realised that she probably wasn’t in the hospital. In the end, that was the only search that was ever carried out for fifteen-year-old Maude Blake. She was labelled a runaway, and with no family to notice or care that she was gone, the system forgot her. Eventually, Cormac Reilly forgot her too.

Galway, Ireland

Saturday 16 March 2013

CHAPTER ONE

It was two hours into the day shift when Aisling finished her last chart and signed out, which meant she had the dressing room to herself. She took her time in the shower, letting the hot water ease the tension in her shoulders and lower back. She took her time too getting dressed. The solitude was a balm, and for once she was in no hurry to leave the hospital. She was sitting on the bench, dressed, but with her wet hair still wrapped in a towel, when Mary Dooley broke the peace by pushing the door open hard, and entering the room while still calling to someone over her shoulder. When she saw Aisling she let the door swing shut, then turned, and pointed to her back. Her blonde pony-tail was stuck to her top with blood-streaked vomit. An acrid, metallic smell reached Aisling from across the room, and she felt a solid punch of nausea. *Jesus*. The smell of vomit hadn't hit her like that since she was a first-year intern.

'Never turn your back on them,' said Mary. 'I swear.'

She un-peeled her scrubs top carefully, and dropped it into the waiting laundry basket. The long-sleeved top she'd worn underneath went straight into the bin. Every female doctor Aisling knew bought those tops in packets of five from Dunnes Stores. They were cheap and warm, and once you'd been puked on (happened more than you'd think) or a blood bag exploded on you (not common but once was enough), you really didn't want to wear that top again, no matter how well washed.

'Shouldn't have left surgery,' Aisling said. 'You'd be out of that stuff by now.'

‘What stuff?’ asked Mary. ‘You mean actual medicine, looking after people?’ She went to her locker, took out her towel and shampoo, and held them in one hand, half-turning to talk to Aisling as she pushed each runner off using the toe of the other foot.

‘Exactly.’

‘I’m well off out of it. All that obsessing over test scores, assessments; putting socks in my knickers so the consultants forget I’m a woman.’ She smiled. ‘Now I just have nice relaxing night shifts in A&E to worry about.’

Aisling rolled her shoulders, freeing the remaining tension from her muscles. ‘How was it?’

‘Shite,’ said Mary, as she balled up her scrubs pants and threw them neatly into the laundry basket. She grimaced. ‘Apart from the usual, we had two suicide attempts. One of them was only fourteen.’

‘Ah God, Mary. I’m sorry.’

Mary nodded. ‘He tried to hang himself. Made the rope too short so he didn’t break his neck, and he can’t have been hanging long or he would be dead. His mother walked in on him, cut him down. He’s in a coma now.’

‘Brain damage?’ Aisling asked.

Mary shrugged. There was a shadow behind her blue eyes. ‘I suppose we’ll see.’

Aisling made for the mirror and the sole crappy hairdryer. She didn’t want to go home, but she couldn’t put it off forever. She’d dried her hair, and was pulling on her puffa and boots when Mary emerged from the shower and started to dress.

‘Are you coming tonight?’ Mary asked. ‘You’re finished nights now, right?’ Her voice was muffled by the T-shirt she was pulling over her head.

It took Aisling a minute to remember, then it came back. Mary’s boyfriend, Derek – dental student by day, band

member by night – had a gig in the Róisín Dubh every second Saturday night. *Bugger*. ‘I’m off for the weekend,’ she said. ‘We might come. But I think Jack said something about a work thing.’ She couldn’t face Róisín’s; the music, the drink, the shouting to be heard. And she needed to talk to Jack in private. They needed space to think. To figure out what to do.

Mary wagged a finger at her. ‘They’ll be brilliant,’ she said. ‘You’ll miss out.’ But she let it go, and launched instead into a rundown of patients she’d seen and assholes she’d put manners on during her fourteen-hour night shift in Galway University Hospital, Accident & Emergency. Aisling leaned back against her locker and listened, enjoying Mary’s delivery, though she’d heard the jokes before.

She should feel good. It had been a hard week – long hours, lots of politics – but she’d done well, and it should have felt good to come out ahead, and to have nothing but Jack to look forward to all weekend.

When she finally left the hospital the sun was fully up. For once the clouds had cleared, and the sky was a bright, hard blue. Some of the puddles were still frozen, and she picked her way around patches of ice as she made her way up University Road towards the city. She was overtaken by a group of students. There was a lot of foot traffic – more than usual for this time on a Saturday morning.

Of course. Sunday was Paddy’s Day. She’d forgotten. Town would be packed. This year there was going to be an evening parade. Quay Street pubs would have their doors wide open, and the street would be so full of people that the drinkers – an enthusiastic mix of students and tourists – would almost be able to convince themselves that they weren’t semi-hypothermic. Aisling shivered reflexively. She just wanted to get home.

She let herself into their little place in the Claddagh half an hour later. They had been renting the two-storey terrace for nearly two years, and she loved it, despite the dodgy heating and dated décor. It was close to the city, close to the sea and walking distance from work. Best of all, it felt like home. The cosiness of the small rooms felt like an embrace after the sterility of the hospital.

Jack was awake – she could smell coffee, and bacon, and the heating was on.

‘Jack?’

‘Kitchen,’ he called.

He was making breakfast – he had rashers in the pan, and toast in the toaster – and he smiled at her as she came in. ‘How was work?’

She leaned against the doorframe and watched him, the words she’d carried around all day growing heavier and heavier in her mouth, until she finally spilled them out on the floor.

‘I’m pregnant.’

‘Ha ha, funny.’ Jack didn’t look up from rummaging in the bottom kitchen drawer. ‘Have you seen the tinfoil? I think it’s fallen down the back.’ He got down on his knees, started to lift the drawer out.

‘Jack.’

He caught the tone of her voice and turned to her.

‘You’re pregnant.’ Shock widened his eyes, slackened his mouth, so that he looked like a stranger.

Slowly Aisling nodded her head.

He closed his eyes. ‘Jesus, Ash.’

Aisling turned and left the room. She walked on autopilot to their bedroom. The bed was still unmade. She started straightening the sheets. He never made the bed. Not ever. Had he ever once, since they moved in together, even washed the bloody sheets?

‘Aisling.’ He was standing at the door, watching her.

‘You didn’t make the bed,’ she said. ‘Again.’

‘Aisling, seriously. Just – how did this happen?’

She very deliberately tucked the sheet over, then straightened out a wrinkle, before turning to him. ‘I don’t know, Jack. How do you think these things happen?’

He wiped his hand across his mouth, looking grey-faced. Then he said, ‘But you’ve been on the pill.’

Aisling walked past him, then pushed the door open into the bathroom. She rummaged in her washbag, taking out her pill packet. Every day of the month so far had been neatly punched out – she was only three days into the next cycle.

She handed the packet to him. ‘I threw the other one out. It’s in the bathroom bin probably, so you can check if you want. Of course I could have been throwing the pills into the toilet. As you know, it’s always been my dream to get pregnant at twenty-five. Isn’t that what I’ve been working for?’ She left him at the door and went to the bed, lying down on the sheets she’d just straightened, turning away from him. She wanted to climb under the covers, pull them over her head, and hide from the world.

‘For fuck’s sake Aisling. I’m not suggesting you got pregnant on purpose. I’m just ... trying to get my head around this. I know you’re careful. I mean, we’re careful. Ash. Aisling.’ He walked over, climbed onto the bed, and pulled her gently towards him.

She resisted, shaking her head, her eyes closed. She thought of all the times she’d worked a long shift, maybe been on call the next day, gone for a few drinks and dinner with friends on the way home. She always took her pill, sure, but how many times had it been forty-eight hours between pills, or more? That made a difference, particularly at the beginning of a cycle. She kept her eyes closed. She couldn’t look at him. But he was lying down now, pulling her against him, curling

himself around her protectively. His left arm came around her so that her head rested against him; with his right hand he wiped a tear from her face.

‘What are we going to do?’ she whispered, without opening her eyes.

He hugged her a little tighter, said nothing.

Then, eventually, ‘You’re sure?’

‘I did a test, at the hospital. I never had a period. I just realised this morning that I was three days into the next packet and still no bleed. So I did the test. A urine test first, which was negative. But it was one of the hospital ones; they’re not very sensitive. So I did a blood test. Put it through the system under a different name. And it came back positive. I’m pregnant, Jack. I mean, barely, barely pregnant. But I am. What the fuck are we going to do?’

His arms tightened around her again, his lips brushed her hair. ‘I suppose we’ll just have to make it work, Ash. We’re not the first to be in this situation. We won’t be the last. At least we love each other.’ His voice grew in confidence as he spoke. ‘We’re not babies. Jesus, Americans get married at twenty-five all the time, the crazy bastards.’ There was a laugh in his voice now, that Jack-joy that always made her happy. ‘We’ve got good jobs. The hospital will have to give you maternity leave. We’ve got this little place. Or we could rent somewhere bigger.’ He hugged her closer. ‘We can absolutely do this.’

Oh Jesus. ‘Jack,’ her voice was aching with unshed tears. She turned to him, pushed backwards so there was enough distance between them that they could see each other. ‘I don’t want to be a mother. At least, I don’t want to be a mother now.’ His dark eyes held hers; there was a patch of stray stubble on his chin. His left arm was still under her, his jumper warm and scratchy under her cheek. She put her hand against his chest. ‘I want to be a surgeon. I have to be

a surgeon. If I get pregnant now, then I can forget about it. They'll never, never, never give a training spot to a pregnant girl, to a mother.'

'They can't stop you. You're right up there – what, third in the country at the moment? They can't refuse you.'

'They can. There's the interview. They can just say I'm psychologically unsuited and that will be the end of it.'

'They can't do that. You'd sue them.'

She shook her head. 'Sue a consultant in Ireland and you'll never get another job in a hospital. You know that as well as I do.'

He half rolled away from her, so that he was lying on the flat of his back, his left arm still holding her, his right hand running through his hair. 'Fuck.'

'Yeah.'

They were quiet for a time. Aisling found herself listening to the distant sounds of traffic at the end of their street. If she was standing outside she'd be able to hear the waves crashing, but up here, in their bedroom, she only ever heard the sounds of the city. It was a little cold in their room. She felt it creeping in the gap between her jeans and her top, where her jumper had ridden up. She wanted to curl up to Jack, to pull the quilt up over them, close her eyes, and let all of this disappear.

'We need to talk about options,' she said.

'Yeah.' His voice was flat.

She took a deep breath. 'I can't have a baby and be a surgeon; even if I got a training spot for next year, I wouldn't be able to do it. It's three years of crazy hours, moving every three to six months. You'd have to be alone here with the ... the baby, and I'd only be able to get home the odd weekend.' She paused, breathed in again. 'If I gave up on surgery I could try for the GP scheme. They say that can be family friendly. If I got in I could get credit for the hospital time I've already

put in; then I'd just need to get a training contract with a GP practice here in Galway, maybe even arrange to do the two years training over three, so I could work part-time.'

He rolled back towards her, his expression quiet, waiting. She felt claustrophobic. The conversation was moving too quickly. She'd gotten here before she was ready.

'Or we could talk about Liverpool.'

'Is that where they do it?' Jack asked.

'Liverpool. Or Manchester. I think that's where most people go.'

'Right.' He stroked a strand of hair back from her face. 'Would it hurt you? I mean, are there risks?'

Aisling closed her eyes. Her head ached with the effort of holding back her tears. She didn't want to be in charge. Didn't want to be the one with all the information. Would she have to make this decision? And if she did, would he ever forgive her?

'It's very early. I'd just have to take a couple of pills probably. Mifepristone. I'd have to stay in the UK overnight, in case there were any complications. Then we could come home. I'd have to have a scan later, to make sure everything was okay.'

'Could we have the scan here, or would we have to go back to Britain?'

'Jesus Jack, I don't know. I haven't thought about all that.'

'Right. Sorry. I'm just trying to ...' He let his voice trail off.

He was still holding her, but she rolled away from him, stood up. She took one of his old sweatshirts from the wardrobe and pulled it over her head. It was too big, but it was warm.

'I might make tea.'

'Okay,' he said.

But she didn't go down, just leaned against the door jam, head bowed.

He closed his eyes. Opened them. Looked at her, and she ached at the dearness of him.

‘I know what I’m supposed to say. I know that this is supposed to be your decision, and I’m just supposed to support you. Maybe it has to be that way. But it feels wrong. It just feels wrong, Aisling. For me to sit back and leave the hard stuff to you, then pat you on the head and say “I’ve got your back darlin’,” This should be something we decide together.’

She smiled at him then. A small smile. Then let it drop.

Jack being Jack, he knew why. He’d always been able to read her, far better than she could read him. ‘What if I want to keep it, and you don’t?’

She shook her head, said nothing.

‘Yeah. See, then it’s your decision again.’ A long pause. ‘But what does that do to us?’

‘I don’t know.’ Her voice was very quiet, not much more than a whisper.

‘Can we wait awhile? Talk about it?’

She nodded. ‘A little. We can wait a little.’

They ate breakfast together, and made stuttering small talk. Jack wasn’t working – he never worked weekends – so he said he would do the food shop, and when she woke they could just stay in, cook something together. He didn’t say he wanted to talk some more, though he obviously did. By the end of the meal she was fighting against sleep, fatigue pulling at her in unfamiliar ways. It was always a struggle getting back to normal after a week of night shifts, and she told herself this time was no different. Jack kissed her before she went upstairs, and gave her a long hug, but said nothing.

Aisling used the bathroom, brushed her teeth and splashed water on her face. She was already half asleep as she stripped, too tired to do anything but leave her clothes where they lay and pull the previous night’s t-shirt over her head. And then

she slept, long and hard, and woke, disoriented, to a dark bedroom.

‘Jack?’ No answer.

It was cold. The house was very quiet. She pulled on Jack’s old sweatshirt from where it lay at the foot of the bed, and went downstairs. No Jack. The oven clock told her it was nearly nine o’clock. She had slept so late, far later than usual, had missed the whole day. She checked the fridge – nothing, except leftover rashers. Jack must not have shopped after all. Would he want to go out? After almost ten hours of sleep the idea was no more appealing. Aisling took a rasher and ate it cold, standing in the kitchen, then went to put on the heating, and the kettle. She made tea and toast and watched television, but by ten o’clock there was still no Jack.

Aisling turned off the television and sat in the silent living room. Looked at her phone, and picked it up.

Text me to let me know you’re all right, ok?

She let her eyes wander around the room, taking in all the paraphernalia of their daily lives, all the little signs that a childless couple lived in this house. There was dirt on the hearth, where Jack had left his hiking boots to dry the day before. The hearth was cold now, and grey with ash. There was no fireguard. The remnants of the previous weekend’s newspapers were stacked haphazardly on the coffee table. At the other end of the room they’d pushed an old dining table up against a wall, installed a narrow Ikea bookshelf in the little space that was left. That was where she worked, where she should be working now. Her laptop and the pile of textbooks sat there, waiting for her. She turned away, lay back on the couch and stared at the ceiling. There was no space in this little room for toys. How would they squeeze a buggy into the narrow hall? The spare bedroom had a bed, buried under their ski gear, dumped after their January trip, and two baskets of laundry. What would they do, clear it out,

move in a cot? Or move house altogether? Her hand strayed to her stomach. If they did this there would be no chance to try to for a fellowship in the States. No paediatric surgery. No surgery full stop. Never again to feel that clarity and focus as her scalpel pressed down. Aisling sat up abruptly, turned the television on again, stared at it without seeing anything. She didn't want this pregnancy. Guilt rose again at the thought and with it a matching, overwhelming anger. Aisling thought of the years she had spent working towards her goals, of everything she had overcome to get this far, and clenched her fists hard enough that her nails bit into the palms of her hands. If it were possible she would have lit that guilt on fire, burned it out of herself from the inside out. Why shouldn't she put her life first, instead of sacrificing her future for what was nothing more than a scrap of biological material, now busy, cells dividing, inside her?

She gave up at eleven, feeling more tired than she would have thought possible after a day asleep, and climbed the stairs slowly to bed. She would never sleep, not after a week of night shifts. Was Jack that upset, that angry, that he went out and left no note, made no attempt to change their plans? That didn't feel like him. Maybe he'd just met friends, and his phone had died. She stood for a moment in the bathroom, toothbrush in hand, and stared at her reflection. She turned to one side. Her stomach was flat, unassuming. She pushed it out so that it curved, smoothed her t-shirt over the bump. For a moment she could see it; a warm body curled in her lap, a soft hand to her cheek. Later, a laughing Jack with a boy on his shoulders. Aisling closed her eyes. No. Just no.

In bed, she thought again about calling him, then decided against it. If he needed the time to himself, then fine. They had tomorrow to talk, to catch up. He needed space, and she needed rest, and tomorrow they could make a more sensible job of it.

The deep weariness she felt translated only slowly into sleepiness, and she tossed and turned for a couple of hours before sinking into a disturbed sleep. She woke the following morning to an empty bed. It was dark in the bedroom, and it took her a moment to remember that she was at home, and not in the on-call room. She turned and groped across her bedside table toward the glow of her phone's battery light. It was 9.30 a.m. and fingers of weak morning light were starting to creep in at the edges of the curtains. It was very warm in the room; she'd forgotten to turn the heating off before she went to bed, and the timer was broken. Shite. And then she heard the doorbell, followed by a brisk knocking at the door. Still half-asleep, Aisling climbed out of bed, pulling a jumper of Jack's over her head, and pushing her feet into Uggs, before she went down the stairs. She opened the door to two gardaí, standing on the porch in the early morning light. It was another bright day – scudding white clouds buffeted overhead in an otherwise blue sky. Two gardaí, one older, overweight. He looked her up and down as if she were inappropriately dressed for a function. The younger one, a woman, had a nicer face.

Aisling folded her arms. 'Can I help you?'

'Can I ask your name?' the older man asked.

'Um, I'm Aisling Conroy.' She wondered vaguely if she was supposed to just give her name, or if she should have asked to see their ID or something.

He looked down at his notebook. 'And Jack Blake lives at this address?'

'He's not here at the moment,' Aisling said. She felt the first trickle of fear.

'Are you a relation of Jack's?'

The female guard was shivering, but trying to hide it. She stared straight at Aisling, as if she were determined not to break eye contact. Aisling returned her attention to the man.

‘I’m his girlfriend. His partner. We live together.’ She half-glanced over her shoulder into the house, feeling increasingly uneasy. ‘What’s this about?’

And now they were silent, both of them, exchanging meaningful glances as if urging the other to take the lead. Finally, the young woman turned back towards her and stepped forward, taking Aisling gently by the upper arm.

‘I’m very sorry Aisling, so very sorry,’ she said.