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It Started With Paris

Written by Cathy Kelly

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It Started With Paris

Cathy Kelly



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Prologue

Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing.

GOETHE

He had the engagement ring in his pocket. He was terrified it would fall out – all through the ride up in the Eiffel Tower lift, with people pressing against him, he thought of what he'd do if he lost it. Proposals on the Eiffel Tower should not be memorable because of the would-be groom crawling around on the floor feeling for a ring box.

No, the memorability was the venue, with Paris sparkling around them, with other people smiling at the joy of it all. Paris was the city of love – not the city of *I had the ring and it fell out someplace – let's find it, for heaven's sake!*

Ever since they had got out of the cab, smiling with relief because the Parisian cab drivers were all racing-car drivers at heart, he'd been clutching the box in a death grip, having secretly taken it from its hiding place in the camera holdall.

Too distracted by the sights to notice, she kept beaming at him, her cheeks flushed the same colour as her peony-pink scarf. Even cold and with a runny nose that was taking a pack of tissues an hour, she was beautiful.

Doe-eyed, his mother had called her, and as usual, his mother was right.

She did have the look of a deer, but a happy deer. A deer who grazed in Santa's paddock and who expected all things in life to be magical.

Even among the Parisian beauties, with their hauteur and their chic clothes, people still looked at her admiringly: she wasn't tall,

but she was slender, with the bearing of someone who'd done ballet for years and still walked as if she was about to go on stage in her teenage dance school corps. And she was his. His girlfriend, his about-to-be fiancée ...

He said a fleeting prayer, something he hadn't done in years, and asked for help. *Let her say yes, please.*

He'd told nobody he was going to ask her to be his wife.

Not his father, though he'd nearly said it to his mother, because he'd been sure she'd hug him and say, 'Go ahead, I love her like a daughter, you know that.'

His friends might say that he had loads of time to settle down, but then they'd have recalled how luminous she was, easy-going as a person and easy on the eye, and how clever she was yet never showing off her cleverness.

None of those were the reasons he was asking her to be his wife. He simply loved her and had done ever since they'd met all those years before when they'd been put at the same table in junior infants school.

Turning those big dark eyes on him, she'd shown him her new-fangled eraser with the strawberry scent and gravely told him he could borrow it any time because she liked the dots on his face.

'Freckles,' he'd informed her. 'You get freckles when you're special.'

'My daddy says I'm special but I don't have fleckles,' she'd said, sounding shocked at this betrayal.

'I'll draw some on,' he'd said, getting out his pencil.

The first two freckles had hurt too much so he'd stopped and hugged her the way his mother hugged him.

'Will you be my best friend?' she'd asked him, sniffing.

She'd had him at her feet then and ever since.

The Eiffel Tower lift came to a discreet halt; holding the ring box in one hand as if it was a grenade, he managed with his height and big frame to make a space for her to get out without being squashed. The tourists in Paris were maniacs, he decided: all mad to see everything *first*.

'Thanks, love,' she said when they finally made it out of the lift. 'I thought I was going to be flattened.'

She hugged his arm and he felt the surge of protectiveness he always felt for her, even though she was anything but a fragile

little flower of a person. Small or not, she had plenty of toughness in her.

‘Look,’ she said now, holding his free hand and racing over to the railings to gaze at Paris spread out in front of them. It was as if the tower were the centre of the universe.

He looked and saw nothing.

Let her say yes. Let it be like a movie where she loves it and says yes and the other tourists clap. She could say no, she might say we’re too young and we have plans and—

A tour guide was pointing out the different arrondissements and areas of interest to a group, and she was listening in.

A Spanish couple asked him if he’d take a photo of them with their camera. Looking over to where she was eavesdropping on the tour guide, he saw her grin and wink at him. This was always happening to him. With his tall frame, smiling, charming face and the chestnut hair that looked as if someone had just ruffled it, he was the picture of honesty.

Afterwards they walked around the observation deck and she pointed out landmarks.

‘Do you think that’s where our hotel is?’ she asked, squinting.

Their hotel wasn’t the bijou beauty near central Paris they’d been promised. The bedroom was bijou all right, so bijou it was easier to climb over the bed to get to the door than risk your kneecaps on the bed frame.

And it was near central Paris only if you happened to be an Olympic athlete gearing up for a run. But now was not the moment to ruin things with such matters.

Unable to take it any more, he grabbed her by the waist to stop her, turned her to face him, then sank to his knees. The box – *thank you!* – was now in his pocket and he pulled it out, held it up the way he’d seen it done in the movies a hundred times, and said, ‘My darling, will you—’

‘YES!’ she shrieked, throwing herself at him and hugging him. With him kneeling down, there was a reversal of their usual height difference and she had to angle her head to kiss him.

‘Really?’ he said, hardly believing. He knew she loved him, but *this* – this was everything, and they were young and—

‘Yes, yes, yes!!!’ she said, and then kissed him as though he were dying and she needed to bring him back to life.

He sank into the embrace and felt his heart pulse with sheer joy.

She'd said yes.

Touristy approval emanated from the crowd and people began to clap and shout approval. Someone was taking pictures, but he didn't care at this intrusion into their moment.

'You will?'

'I will. Show me, show me.'

He opened the box with its antique diamond ring inside: an emerald-cut diamond surrounded by two rows of tiny diamond-ettes or whatever they were called when they were incredibly small and probably not big enough to qualify as actual diamonds. He'd spent two months searching antique jewellery shops all over Waterford and even Cork, trying to find the perfect ring for the woman he loved.

She breathed in and held out one small hand, and he slid the ring slowly on to her finger. It was the right size, he was sure; he'd measured one of her costume jewellery rings, and according to the ring guidelines it was a J. 'Perfect for this delicate ring,' the jeweller had said happily as he'd pushed it a quarter of the way down his own little finger and tried to see it through her eyes.

'I love it,' she said in wonder, one hand still on his shoulder, the other held aloft as the ring caught the Parisian sunshine.

The Spanish couple came up and asked if they wanted them to take their photo.

'You make a handsome pair,' said the man.

So they posed with the Parisian skyline in the background, arms around each other's waists and her left hand held proudly out to the camera to show off her engagement ring.

Other people looked on in approval at the tall, strong man with the messy hair and the slender girl in jeans and pristine white tennis shoes, her silky dark hair worn in a ponytail. They looked good together, they fitted somehow.

'You will have beautiful children,' said the Spanish man, smiling as he handed back the camera.

They both laughed at the thought.

Children!

That was years off.

'Who will we tell first?' he asked, when the crowd had dwindled and it was just them again.

She looked thoughtful. As he watched her, he realised he still had that gloriously joyous feeling inside. He'd known she'd say yes – he knew her so well – but even so ... she'd said *yes*. *Yes!*

He'd never forget this moment, ever.

One

Love is a flower which turns into fruit at marriage.

FINNISH PROVERB

At her desk on the fifth floor of the mermaid-green glass office block where Eclipse Films had their offices, Leila Martin sniffed the rose tea that her assistant Ilona had carried in for them both on a tray.

It smelled beautiful; even the packaging was beautiful: 1940s pretty, with a china cup painted in watercolours on the front and swirls of steam emerging, tiny roses drawn in the swirls.

‘You’ll love it!’ said Ilona, arriving back in the modern office, this time with her arms full of notepad and tablet. Ilona was always bringing things in to her boss: chocolates, biscuits, a Hungarian herbal tea her mother swore by but that smelled like cat litter mixed with patio yard sweepings.

If Leila didn’t know better, she’d swear Ilona was trying to cheer her up. But then Ilona knew – because Leila had told her firmly – that Leila had absolutely no need of cheering up.

It was business as usual at Eclipse. Leila Martin wanted people to know that she didn’t do heartbreak or any of that type of thing. She was pretty sure she had them all fooled.

She stared back at her rose tea.

It was healthy, too. Probably lowered stress levels or boosted immune systems or did *something* proved in scientific tests by a fleet of people with PhDs coming out their ears. It just wasn’t coffee.

Worse, it wasn’t coffee like Leila’s favourite cup of the day, which used to be the one her husband brought her in bed in the

morning and which she could hear him brewing in the classic espresso maker that shook volcanically on the top of the stove and was probably the oldest thing in their apartment.

Since Tynan had left, no coffee tasted right.

Nothing tasted right.

Six months of having to do it herself and Leila still couldn't make it just the way he had. How could a person go their whole life making their own coffee, enjoying drinking it in trendy cafés, and then fall in love with their husband's coffee, so that when he left her for another woman and another city, she was practically allergic to the taste of anything else? It made no sense at all.

When she'd been fifteen and living in the country town of Bridgeport, she and her best friend, Katy, had adored the very concept of coffee, spending their pocket money ordering skinny cappuccinos and Americanos in the café near Poppy Lane, where Leila lived.

Katy lived on the outskirts of Waterford city, a stone's throw from Bridgeport. Leila hadn't been able to wait to get out of what she considered a desperate backwater and live in the big city. Fifteen years later, both the city and coffee left a bitter taste in her mouth.

'A flatte's quite nice,' Katy had urged the last time she'd been up in Dublin for a weekend with Leila. They'd found seats in a smart café and Katy was running a finger up and down the menu, dithering over syrups and double shots.

'No,' Leila said gloomily, 'I hate flattés. All that milk. I don't know what it was about that damn French coffee maker yoke, but it worked for him. Not for me. He jinxed it. I'm back on the tea. Builder's tea, Earl Grey – you name it. Has anyone ever checked whether a marriage break-up has a chemical effect on your taste buds? That's the only answer. Or else he's got a wax dummy of me in London and he's sticking pins into its mouth.'

It sounded so ridiculous, they both laughed: the thought of the slick, modern Tynan believing in any sort of religious practice, including voodoo. He was an atheist, believed in nothing but the dollar, he said, which used to annoy the hell out of Katy, given that the Irish currency was the euro.

'If there's any wax dummy to be made, you should be the one making it,' Katy said.

The two women had been best friends since they were in

primary school. Both on the short side, one blonde, one brunette, and a force to be reckoned with when together, the partnership felt a bit lopsided to Leila these days. Katy was gloriously happy with her first love and Leila was very much unhappy.

Worse, Leila knew Katy thought she should be *rejoicing* that someone as disloyal as Tynan had walked out of her life and their one-year marriage.

Katy had said that – and more. The statute of limitations on criticising appalling husbands was somehow up now that six months had passed. Katy wanted her friend to move on. Unfortunately, moving on was proving harder than she had hoped, and both of them knew that Leila would take the cheating Tynan back in an instant should he turn up on her doorstep repentant.

So Katy comforted during late-night phone calls, mopped up tears via supportive text messages and tried to hold off on criticising because the once-strong Leila Martin had been made vulnerable and fragile by love.

That day, Leila ordered green tea and they settled in cosy coffee shop chairs to talk about the only thing Leila ever wanted to talk about.

‘I know this sounds ridiculous now, but when we got married, it felt safe, final. As if the years of dating all the wrong guys were over and at last I’d come home to Tynan. He was The One. And – this is almost the worst bit, Katy – I pushed him to get married. He’d have been happy the way things were, living together, no bit of paper to show we were officially man and wife.’

Katy, who’d heard it all before, patted Leila’s knee in solidarity.

‘We all do dumb things for love,’ she said, a variation on her previous themes. ‘And he wasn’t The One. The One doesn’t dump you for a twenty-something with thighs skinnier than her knees.’

Sometimes this made Leila laugh. Not today. She barely heard, lost in reliving her mistakes. It was such a relief to be able to talk about her pain. Pretending she was utterly fine when she was in work was making recovery even harder.

‘I rushed us both into it because I wanted to be with him so much. I wanted him to be mine. If only I’d taken it more slowly, waited ...’

She’d been sure that Tynan wanted the same things in life as she had: he’d swung her round on their wedding day with the band playing a cheesy version of ‘It Had To Be You’ and he’d had

eyes for nobody but his blonde bride, whose face was lit up in a way that owed nothing to the careful application of cosmetics. They'd been so happy; she'd have bet her life on it.

How had she not seen?

'You OK, Leila?' Katy said. 'You've gone off into the Twilight Zone.'

'Yeah.' Leila nodded. She managed a half-smile for her best friend. 'Thanks for listening. You should be charging. What's the going rate for counselling these days? Sixty quid an hour? You deserve to be paid for sitting through this, because I can't tell anyone else or they'd think I'd totally lost my marbles. This is not how people expect me to behave.'

With everyone else – her colleagues, her mother, her sister Susie, who had enough on her own plate as it was – she smiled stoically and murmured that it was his decision and she was fine, really. It was what she thought people wanted to hear from a strong, ambitious woman of twenty-nine with a brilliant career.

She couldn't say that Tynan had made her feel like the crazy teenager she'd never been, and that she'd run blindly into his arms, convinced he was her destiny. He was loving, sexy, handsome, funny, kind – he'd even bought her the perfect coffee maker.

'You should stop trying to pretend it doesn't hurt,' Katy said. 'It doesn't make you look weak to say you're upset. I'm sure Bill Gates would cry if his wife dumped him.'

'Bill Gates is far too smart to have married someone who'd dump him,' Leila retorted. 'I have never felt like a loser before, but I feel like one now. And I still want him. That makes it worse.'

'Listen!' said Katy sternly. 'If Tynan could run out on you like that for some young hipster girl he met through work, then he wasn't good enough for you in the first place. Better you find out now rather than ten years down the line. He's done you a favour. In a few years, you'd be throwing *him* out.'

Would she? Leila wondered sadly. She could never have seen a time when that would happen. He was like a force of nature, a passionate, devil-may-care man who'd come into her life like a tornado. She'd never have thrown him out. She loved him too much.

He'd taken his stuff and nearly all of Leila's self-confidence. Would she ever get it back? Who knew? But for now, she was off men. In fact, not just for now – for ever.

A few weeks ago, on the six-month anniversary of Tynan's leaving, Leila had thrown out the little French coffee maker and started on an odyssey into herbal teas. As grand gestures went, it wasn't much, but it was a start.

Now, at her desk, she stared at the rose tea whose virtues Ilona had extolled.

'It's my favourite,' she'd said, a trace of her exotic Hungarian accent in her voice. 'Jasmine is lovely, but the proper stuff is expensive and rose is calming, don't you think?'

At twenty-three, Ilona looked up to her boss and mentor with unflinching devotion, despite the fact that Leila was only six years her senior. Leila had taken her on as junior in the publicity department two years ago. Ilona's grammar had still been a bit shaky and she'd worried about her ability to write proper emails, but she'd wanted desperately to progress in the company.

What would Ilona think if she knew that the boss she admired was not a strong professional woman but someone who'd felt entirely broken for the past six months?

Of course, she would never know. Nobody would know.

We wanted different things, Leila had told people blandly.

Ilona started running through their to-do list.

They'd been busy since Leila arrived at nine on the dot, even though she had been out late the night before at a work event. Leila Martin had not become one of the most valued members of Eclipse Films' staff by taking time off.

She was good at what she did – managing director Eamonn Devlin wouldn't have hired her otherwise. She had worked hard to get where she was, devoting hours to the job and giving up weekends when required. Plus she looked like a magazine illustration of a successful media PR, with a wardrobe of chic trousers and elegant silk shirts or T-shirts, and never a streaked blonde hair out of place. While careful not to outshine whichever star she was accompanying, she had indefinable style and looked smart enough to make people notice her.

This morning, fifth on the to-do list was an email from a young actress's manager setting out her hotel requirements for when she arrived in Dublin to attend the premiere of a movie that was barely a nod away from straight-to-video in Leila's opinion.

'*Yellow orchids, not white*,' she read out. 'White is so last

century, isn't it, Ilona? *Muslin curtains on the windows in her suite.*'

'I'll check what sort of curtains they have in the presidential suite in the Centennial,' said Ilona, pen poised over her notebook.

'They can swap to muslin, no problem,' Leila said. 'When the white orchid/muslin curtain/Zen garden on the terrace thing was big, they bought lots. Plus, I think they have enough Zen white sand in the basement to make one hell of a sandcastle. Phone Sergio and kindly ask him if housekeeping can get the muslin curtains up. Right, next.'

'Omigod, you know everything,' said Ilona admiringly.

'No,' said Leila. 'It's only that you get used to being asked for crazy stuff.'

They continued to run through the list of requests relating to every detail of the actress's visit. It was one of those aspects of a publicity director's job that could be very time-consuming and required vast diplomatic skills. Publicising films for Eclipse was a joy in so many ways: Leila spent time in the film world, met some of the world's most fascinating and talented actors, directors and producers and saw them without their public masks on.

The true professionals flew into the country, did their job with sparkling expertise, and flew out again without having requested more than wheat- and lactose-free meals in their hotel suites, approval on big interviews, and sometimes a driver for the day to see some of the sights.

And then there were the people who were determined to prove that they were so special, normal rules didn't apply.

Hideously expensive scented candles, vintage champagne on every available surface, and new Frette four-thousand-euro-a-pair sheets were commonplace among this tribe. Ditto raw food/green juices on call 24/7, rare fruits, and calorific desserts that might not be touched but that had to be there just in case the juicing got boring.

However, there were limits. When one would-be star demanded that Eclipse supply puppies to cavort at her photo shoot, Leila put her foot down. She would not allow anyone to indulge themselves at the expense of animals. A phone call to the manager of the star in question had done the trick. 'Tell her we follow ethical PETA rules,' Leila told him calmly. It worked a treat. Nobody wanted to get on the wrong side of PETA.

Drugs were another no-no.

‘Not on our dime or our time,’ Eamonn Devlin said to his team when a wild young actor – not in an Eclipse movie at that moment, thankfully – broke up a hotel room in Paris while under the influence of crystal meth. ‘Anyone who wants it can source their own coke/OxyContin/whatever.’

When Devlin spoke, people listened.

Muslin curtains and specific flowers, however, were perfectly commonplace.

‘*Irish music CDs, for Irish atmosphere/dancing,*’ read Leila in amusement. ‘This is sweet, really. You’ll have to get an iPod and download some jigs and reels.’

Ilona blinked at her.

‘Sorry – ask Marc or Sinead,’ Leila said. ‘You’ve turned into such an Irish girl, I forget you’re Hungarian and don’t know all our insane ways.’

‘Not insane,’ Ilona replied. ‘I’m proud to be Irish. Or I will be, in another year.’

‘You need to have the Irish dancing part of the induction, then,’ Leila said solemnly. ‘I Irish-danced for eight years and have all the medals. I’ll show you sometime.’

It wasn’t easy, but she managed not to grin. Ilona, who never quite knew whether Leila was joking or not, gaped at her wide-eyed.

‘OK, I’m kidding. I have a few Irish dancing medals, but neither love nor money would get me to dance now. I was never *Riverdance* quality. I was one of the ones who shuffled down the back of the line for the complicated treble steps. I got the medals out of pity.

‘Right, back to the list. A choice of mineral water and Coke Zero. This is almost easy, Ilona. No temperatures for the drinks, no requirements for specially imported vodka or newly installed toilet seats. This girl is either a nice, classy person or else nobody’s told her what some folks ask for. She might be one of the normal ones – or as normal as you can be when you’re famous all around the planet and get papped as soon as you step outside your home without full make-up.’ Leila grinned. ‘I’m so glad I work on this side of that world and not the star side.’

‘Me too,’ agreed Ilona fervently.

Once they’d finished working their way through Leila’s to-do

list, Ilona headed off with her notepad and Leila turned to her computer, already filling up with a dizzying number of emails. It was almost a pleasure to come across spam in her inbox – at least those messages she could just bin, not bothering with a reply. If only they were all spam, she thought wistfully.

At half five that evening, one hundred and fifty miles south-west of the Eclipse offices in their modern glass office block, Susie Martin left the hospital in Waterford, got into her car and drove off slowly in the direction of Bridgeport. She always found hospitals vaguely scary, even when she wasn't sitting in A&E waiting for news of her mother after a serious car accident. Coffee from the machine in the waiting area had helped, but even so, she felt shaky and not herself. Seeing her mother bruised and in shock had added to the stress of watching people with cuts, broken bones and pale, pained faces waiting alongside her.

Still in a state of anxiety, Susie waited till she got back to the outskirts of the city and one of the parking slots at a small convenience store before she rang her sister.

Leila never failed to take her calls, but Susie always had the feeling that she was interrupting her sister's life: a life full of movie stars, premieres and important meetings. Susie herself kept her phone on silent when she was at work in the telecoms call centre, although she left it on her desk in case Jack's school or Mollsie, the childminder, rang. At home in the evening a caller might interrupt her helping Jack with one of his senior infants projects – like making a dinosaur out of kitchen paper cylinders, tinfoil and recycled bits and bobs – but that was it. No one would ever ring her and find that she couldn't talk at that exact moment because she was running a press conference for a Hollywood A-lister with thirty journalists and a cadre of TV reporters in attendance. Leila's life was big, while hers ... hers was very normal.

Instantly Susie felt the surge of guilt at even thinking such a thing. Her life contained Jack: precious, joyous, special Jack. The light of her life.

But the guilt couldn't stop the knowledge that she was lonely. Lonely for the sister she'd once been so close to before Tynan had wrenched Leila away. And lonely at the thought that she'd never feel romantic love again, because she willingly gave most of her

time to her precious son, the rest to her mum, and that left no time over to even think of having a man in her life.

Plus, men her age didn't exactly line up to date single mothers, did they? They were avoiding women with ticking biological clocks, not leaping into relationships with ready-made mothers who couldn't fly off to Barcelona for a weekend just for the fun of it.

She unclicked her seat belt and sat waiting while her sister's phone rang.

'Susie,' answered Leila in surprise.

'It's Mum,' said Susie, not bothering with formalities, 'she was in a car accident.'

She heard the sharp intake of breath.

'Is she—?'

'She's OK. Very lucky, the doctor said.' Susie got out of the car and went into the store, phone clamped to her ear. 'She's fractured her hip.'

'Oh God ...' muttered her sister.

'Her poor face is all bruised – which obviously isn't the worst thing, but she looks so terrible. Some old fella in an ancient Fiat ploughed into her at a red light. He wasn't going very fast or it would have been a lot worse. She's pretty shaken up, though.'

'Poor Mum,' said Leila weakly, and Susie could hear the huskiness of tears in her sister's voice.

Susie picked up a shopping basket. Hurrying through the store, she grabbed some milk and groceries for dinner, although who knew when she'd be eating, because first she had pick up her mother's dog and then drive to the childminder's to collect Jack. She threw in a jumbo bar of chocolate as well. That was the low-carb, low-sugar diet out the window.

'Susie, are you listening?' said Leila.

'It's a bad line,' Susie replied, realising Leila had been asking questions. 'I'm stressed,' she added with some irritation. 'It's my half-day at work, so I had to get Jack picked up from school while I was at the hospital. Before I collect him, I have to go over to Mum's to get Pixie, as I promised that we'd have her while Mum's in hospital. So I have to walk the damn dog too, *and* she'll probably eat the couch if she's left on her own because Mum lets her do whatever she wants ...'

'I'm sorry,' said Leila quietly. 'I know you have to do everything.'

You're brilliant, Susie. You really are. I'll be there to see her as soon as I can. What are they going to do? Is she going to be OK?'

'I think so,' Susie said, still testy and hating herself for it. She and Leila had once been so close – like twins, people used to say – and now she was snapping at her sister. 'Sorry, I'm a bit shaky,' she added out of guilt. 'They're doing X-rays because she'll need surgery and probably a pin inserted. They won't say exactly till the orthopaedic team decide. She was on a trolley for ages and was in agony until they finally gave her an injection.'

'Oh, Susie, poor Mum,' Leila said, and began to cry. 'If I ring the hospital now, will I be able to talk to her, do you think?'

'I don't know,' Susie said. 'She didn't have her mobile. You can ring the nurses' station, but I don't think they'll bring the phone to the bed—'

Leila appeared to have stopped listening, because she interrupted.

'I think she'd be asleep due to the meds,' she said. 'I'll talk to the nurses.'

'You could try, but she might be in surgery. I'm not going in again tonight. They said they'll phone me afterwards. I have to get Jack. He's never slept over at Mollsie's.'

'Mollsie?'

'My childminder,' said Susie, with a certain grimness. Even the girl at the desk beside her at work, a girl who lived for partying, knew Mollsie's name. Susie's sister, Jack's godmother, didn't.

Susie felt the familiar anger flood her, anger fanned by the fear and anxiety of a day spent in hospital worrying. 'I can't believe you didn't remember that, Leila. Mollsie and Mum are the people who help me with Jack. There *is* nobody else.'

For a second there was silence on the phone.

Susie hadn't meant the statement to sound quite so stark: that she was alone with a small child because his father hadn't been interested, and that her once best friend, her sister, wasn't around for her any more.

But it was said now, it couldn't be unsaid, and she wasn't sorry.

She understood that Leila was broken-hearted, but Tynan had taken Leila away from Susie and their mum long before he'd run off. And though he was gone, Leila still hadn't come back to them.

'It's five forty-five now,' Leila was saying awkwardly. 'I'll leave

the office in half an hour, go home to pick up some things and I can be at the hospital by nine.'

Susie sighed to herself. Leila had always hated being in the wrong, so she was simply ignoring her sister's comments.

Fine.

'Mum won't be able to talk to you,' she said evenly. 'She could be in surgery.'

'I think—' began Leila.

Susie was at the cash desk now.

'I have to go, Leila. Bye.'

'Bye,' said Leila, but Susie had already pushed the 'end' button, so her sister was left talking to dead air.

There were a few missed calls on Susie's phone when she got back to the car. One from a work friend and two from Mollsie telling her that Jack was fine and not to worry. Jack loved his mother's half-day, when she could pick him up from school instead of Mollsie and they'd have an adventure: the park in summer or hot chocolate and a DVD snuggled up in front of the fire on wintry afternoons.

The stress of the day blasted through her, and Susie sat in her parked car and wept.

She was only thirty-one, and yet sometimes she felt ancient. Compared to the other single women at work, she *was* ancient. Most of the people in the call centre were young, doing this job as a stopgap. They had wild weekends, booked amazing holidays on the Internet and came back with stories of trips to places she'd only seen in photos.

Susie spent her money shopping wisely for food, buying clothes in cheap shops, saving up for Christmas and their rare holidays. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a wild weekend – probably with Leila and Katy before Tynan had come along.

When Jack was asleep, long eyelashes sweeping over still chubby cheeks, she looked at him with such love and gratefulness that he was in her life. Yet this small boy with his hopes and dreams was her responsibility, and there was no one with whom to share it. She wouldn't trade her life with Jack for the world, but it was tough sometimes, no doubt about it.

And lonely. She'd felt lonely ever since Tynan had come into her sister's life. Susie had taken one look at him – all lean and

handsome, carefully styled so as to give the impression that he'd just flung on his clothes, though she could tell he'd spent hours in the bathroom fixing his hair, practising his moody look – and known he'd break Leila's heart.

He'd tried to charm Susie that first time they met in Bridgeport.

'How come a gorgeous girl like you isn't beating men off with a stick?' he'd asked, patting her knee in a way that was half affectionate, half flirtatious.

'I've a big stick,' she'd said grimly. 'I've beaten them all away. All the losers and users, anyway.'

Tynan had looked at her thoughtfully. He was too clever to rise to her comment, but she could tell that he knew she'd assigned him to the loser and user category.

He'd flicked his charm on to her mother then, and afterwards Susie had warned Leila about him.

'He'll dump you, Leila,' she'd said earnestly. 'You're not even yourself around him. It's like you're ... like you're someone else, someone you think he'd like. You can't change yourself for a guy.'

Her eyes had taken in the un-Leila-like tight black jeans and spindly heels, the clingy top, the rock-chick tousled hair and more eye make-up than normal.

'I like how I look,' Leila had said furiously. 'You're just jealous because I've finally found someone and you haven't.'

The sisters had stared at each other in sudden silence. They didn't do harsh words in the Martin family. Dolores spoke gently to everyone. Nobody screamed or yelled at anyone else. The sun was never allowed to set on anger. But this, this was something different, something nasty brought in by damn Tynan.

Susie knew her sister might eventually forgive her for what she'd said. But when Tynan had done exactly what she'd known he would, Susie hadn't felt any happiness that this horrible man was gone from Leila's life. She'd felt only the loss of the sister who'd never come back to cry on her shoulder and say 'I'm sorry, I know you wanted what was best for me.'

That loneliness was the hardest thing to bear.

Leila bit her lip and stared out of her office window at the Dublin skyline. Down below was buzzing with people already leaving offices for home. In the distance, it was still bright enough that she could see the Wicklow mountains, a faded purple blur where

she and Tynan had once climbed the Sugar Loaf with some of his friends.

She wouldn't cry. All she'd been doing lately was crying, and she wasn't going to start in the office just because Susie had made her feel guilty on purpose. It wasn't her fault that her job was miles away from Waterford and that she couldn't nip over to take care of Jack at a moment's notice.

She had a full-time job, a career. Susie had to understand that.

Then she thought of her mother lying on a trolley in hospital, scared and in pain, and she had to bite her lip really hard. Susie was there for Mum and Mum was there for Susie and Jack.

Leila wasn't there for anybody any more. Tynan had managed to drive a wedge between her and her family, and Leila had been in too much pain to fix it. Now, she didn't know how.

Eamonn Devlin looked up as Leila burst into his office.

'What's wrong?' he said, instantly interpreting the expression on her face.

'My mother's had a car accident. I have to go home right now. I know I'm leaving you in the lurch with the *Octagon Rising* movie people coming into town—'

Devlin held up one big tanned hand. A week's skiing in France had made him look more piratical than ever. His dark skin, combined with coal-black hair and eyes, had made Leila wonder the first day she'd met him if he'd be able to carry off hoop earrings and a parrot on one shoulder. He was tall, well built in a rugby player sort of way, and devastatingly handsome – and he knew it, using it to great effect with visiting talent.

More than one actress had wanted to succumb to Devlin's charm, but Leila was pretty sure he was too canny to actually have a fling with an actress. That way madness lay – and probably a one-way ticket to the Antarctic office. If Eclipse *had* an Antarctic office.

Right now, he studied Leila carefully through the long dark lashes on those black eyes. She often wondered if he could see through her carefully constructed persona to the person underneath, the woman cowering behind the carapace of professionalism, the woman on the verge of crying at her desk every day. But no, how could he? She was a good actress.

‘No worries, Leila,’ he said calmly. ‘You go. Ilona can take over for a couple of days, can’t she?’

Leila nodded. Ilona was clever and dedicated. She’d love the chance to run things in her boss’s absence.

‘I can brief her, but really, she’s good to go on her own,’ she said. ‘We’ll have to fight to keep her, you know. She’ll want to progress in the industry.’

‘She’s not you, Leila,’ Devlin said brusquely. ‘Update me with how long you’ll be away, right?’

‘Right.’ Leila saluted, swivelled on her heel and walked out.

Eamonn Devlin watched as she left, expensive suit jacket and trousers finished off to perfection by the even more expensive heels. He often wondered how she walked mile after mile in those damn platform things. It was a short woman thing, he decided. Determination that no boss would tower over her.

Did she know that *she* was the one he’d do anything to keep? Probably not.

He caught one last glimpse of her blonde hair falling in a curtain down her back before the door closed, hiding her from sight. Apparently she had it blow-dried professionally several times a week. Or so he’d read in a magazine profile. One of those ‘how I manage to do what I do’ articles, where she’d sounded lively, fun and wildly efficient, professing to love clever black ensembles and spicing up her clothes with big architectural jewellery. Perfect nails and hair completed the package, along with her BlackBerry and all the latest technology in her big career-woman bag. All in all, it came across as a carefully crafted lie to cover up the real person, the sort of construct only a rather brilliant publicist could pull off.

The piece, which had been written before her husband left, was accompanied by a photo of her in trendy designer clothes, sitting on a beige velvet couch in a hotel, wedding and engagement ring prominently displayed. With the gorgeous hair and clothes, she’d looked the part, but neither the articles nor the photo captured who Leila really was: funny, kind, brilliant at what she did, so lovely to that sweet Hungarian girl she was mentoring.

Few people could smile as warmly as Leila. Her face lit up and those rounded hazel eyes shone with happiness or humour. Since that bastard of a husband had left her, though, there hadn’t been much smiling.

She was in serious pain, even though she thought she was hiding it. He wished he could do something, but she wouldn't accept help. Any help. Especially not his. He was the boss; it wouldn't be right.

Devlin turned his head back to the figures on his computer. Women: impossible. There was nothing more to be said.

On a small housing estate in Waterford, five hours later than planned, Susie finally parked with an excitable Pixie in the front, clambering down to the footwell and back up on to the seat, a routine she'd kept up since Susie had put her in the car.

'Stop!' Susie begged. It wasn't that she didn't like dogs, but she felt so close to the edge already, and having to babysit Pixie, who didn't appear to understand either the word 'no' or the concept of doing her business outside, was really the final straw.

Somehow she clipped the dog's lead back on and led her up Mollsie's neat front path with its perfect grass verge and nicely trimmed shrubs lining the way.

She'd barely got to the door before Mollsie opened it.

Mollsie was everyone's idea of what the perfect childminder should look like: neat and tidy as her garden, her face an oval of warmth and eyes that missed nothing but shone with kindness. Nobody ever noticed what Mollsie wore or how her curly grey hair was styled. Such things were secondary to the sweetness of her personality.

'You sure you don't mind the dog?' said Susie, almost sinking against the door with exhaustion.

'I love dogs,' Mollsie said, reaching out to rub Pixie's ears. 'Jack will be thrilled to see you, won't he?' she said to the dog, who instantly fell, like everybody else, under Mollsie's spell and threw herself with delight against her new friend's legs.

'Come on in and have some supper. You must be worn out.'

'No,' said Susie. 'I don't want to intrude. I thought if Pixie went into the garden she might pee or something ...'

'Great plan. Now, you have to eat. I have chicken pie heating and some mash with cream. I know it's not the diet food you like,' Mollsie added, leading the way, 'but you need nourishment after the day you've had. Tell me everything.'

'Mum!' Jack launched himself out of the kitchen at his mother. Then he stopped. 'Pixie!'

‘We’re going to be minding her while Granny’s in hospital,’ Susie said tiredly.

‘Amazing!’ said Jack, on his knees and receiving a thorough Pixie face-wash.

At least someone would be happy to have the dog in their apartment, Susie thought, though how she’d manage during the day was another story.

‘What sort of a dog is she?’ asked Mollsie fondly.

‘Spaniel, a bit of something else ... wildly disobedient ... Is there a name for a dog like that?’

‘Normal,’ pronounced Mollsie.

Susie relaxed as Mollsie ushered them all back into the kitchen, let the dog out for an exploratory sniff of the garden and began to heat food for Susie, all the time keeping up a stream of idle chit-chat about how broken hips were much easier to sort out now and her mother would be back on her feet in no time.

Jack snuggled up beside Susie as she sat on the couch.

He was a beautiful child, everyone said so: with Susie’s fair hair, but almond-shaped brown eyes and olive skin that made him look like a creature from a fairy tale. He was a good kid too, but despite Mollsie’s best efforts, he’d got stressed because his mother was late. Susie did her best never to be late. She was determined that, though Jack might lack a father, he wouldn’t miss out on anything else. Jack ate the best of everything and had much more expensive clothes than anything Susie wore.

‘He tells me everything, you know,’ Mollsie laughingly told Susie early on. ‘Some people are astonished by that, but with kids, it all comes out. Arguments, crisps for dinner, you name it.’

‘No crisps for dinner or arguments in our house,’ Susie grinned. ‘Except when Jack won’t eat his vegetables.’

Mollsie pretended surprise. ‘He tells me he eats vegetables all the time at home and that’s why he doesn’t have to eat so many here.’

Jack giggled. ‘I hate green things.’

‘You don’t say,’ said his mother, smiling.

Susie rarely even had a cup of tea at Mollsie’s, aware that the older woman tried to look after both the children in her care and their parents. But tonight, the thought of chicken pie and someone to cook it for her was too much.

As Susie ate, even Pixie calmed down after killing a sock and lay quietly on the couch.

‘There’s holes in it now,’ Jack said, holding the sock up gingerly as Pixie admired her handiwork proudly.

‘There were holes in it before,’ Mollie said, ‘so it’s fine.’

Finally Susie rounded up her son and the dog and said goodbye.

‘See you tomorrow,’ she said.

Jack hugged Mollie.

‘I can take care of him for you at the weekend when you’re visiting your mother,’ Mollie said. ‘And Pixie can come too. Not when I’ve other children, I’m afraid, but she’s safe with Jack, isn’t she?’

‘Safe with Jack, yes. She loves him. Unsafe with socks and shoes,’ Susie said ruefully, already wondering how long it would take her to Pixie-proof the apartment. ‘Thank you, Mollie.’

As they drove off, Mollie stood at the door watching the car. She’d taken care of many children over the years, and there were always a few parents who wriggled their way into her heart. Susie was one of those. She had an air about her of someone who’d been let down and was so determined that it wasn’t going to happen again that she would never let the circumstances arise.

But, Mollie thought as she closed her door against the winter night, everyone needed help. No woman was an island.