THE GIN SISTERS' PROMISE

Faith Hogan



An Aria Book

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This is for the Scannan Girls and the Beehive Gang – the very best tribe a girl could wish for. It is also for Anne Regan, always a Beehiver – kind, considerate and just lovely.

'There is another world, but it is in this one.'

W.B. Yeats or Paul Éluard

The G(Georgie)I(Iris)N(Nola) Sisters Club

RULES:

1 No boys allowed
2 Always use the Secret Code Knock
3 Never tell the Secrets of the GIN Sisters Club
4 Secret Ice-Cream Fridays
5 Forever Friends

We the

G – Georgie
I – Iris
N – Nola

Sisters solemnly swear to abide by the rules – always.

20th August 1993

Prologue

Ballycove, Ireland, Twenty-Eight Years Ago

The saddest funeral I was ever at. That's what the mourners had whispered as they'd left the remaining Delahayes standing by Iseult's grave. And now, perched at opposite ends of the living room, Iris and Georgie were drowning in their own grief, but it was little Nola – just seven years old – who needed her father the most and there was no way round it; there was nothing left of him to give. He was suffocating when he knew he should be comforting his children.

The cry that emitted from Nola came as gasping gulps, as if she was going under, smothering in the cold waters of despair. She was far too small for her feet to touch the bottom of her grief, far too young to navigate these treacherous waters.

Iris heard her first. The choking sobs startled her from her own wretched melancholy. 'Nola,' she cried, fearing

the worst. Panic gripped her; she couldn't remember seeing Nola since they set off for the funeral earlier. But that wasn't right. Of course she'd seen her. Nola must have sat in the church pew at the end of their row, stood next to her and Georgie by their mother's grave. She must have been there in the car when their father had driven them back to Soldier Hill House.

Sheer horror propelled Iris from the window seat. How could she have forgotten about little Nola? In the hall, Georgie too was racing to find their youngest sister, panic etched across her features, only just edging past the devastating grief overhanging each of them. They crashed into each other at the foot of the stairs.

'Where is she?'

'Oh, God.' Georgie was frantic, her eyes wide, a slight odour of sweat emanating from her clothes, a mixture of the painful day and the near-consuming fear reflected in Iris's eyes. Another gulp came from the alcove, just outside their father's study, and their eyes dropped to the pathetic bundle of dark clothes lying on the floor. Nola. In her best dress, the one their mother picked out for Christmas Day. Maroon velvet, too heavy for a July afternoon, too festive to mourn your mother in.

'He just left me here.' Nola wheezed between disconsolate sobs. 'First Mammy and now Daddy. All I wanted was for him to put his arms around me, like Mammy did, and tell me everything would be all right, but it won't be all right now, will it? It'll never be all right again.'

'Come here.' Iris pulled Nola into her chest roughly. Georgie too fell on top of them, bundling Nola in their

weeping cocoon so she could hardly breathe. But somehow, the familiar scents of her sisters – washing powder, the faintest remains of their mother's perfume, which they'd all applied that morning, and that slightly tangy end-of-day smell that you only got in the summertime – were strangely comforting. 'We're all here together. That's the main thing, Nola. That's all that matters now. We'll be okay. Everything will be fine – you'll see.'

'But you're going to leave. You'll go off and forget about me and then I'll be here alone, with Daddy, and I can't stand it.' She was gulping down the words now, almost hysterical with grief and pain and maybe fear too.

'We're never going to leave you, Nola,' Iris said, 'I promise. How could we possibly ever leave you?'

'We couldn't,' Georgie said solidly in that way she had of saying things that let Nola know she'd never let her down. 'We'll always be the Gin Sisters, remember?' Georgie said using the abbreviation of the initial letters of their names that their father had coined.

'Oh my God, yes! We can make our own little club, just us, with a promise that means we're always going to be together. Nothing will ever come between us.' Iris was flushed, trying hard to make things better for her younger sister. There had been too much sadness already today. She found herself smiling at her own silly idea.

'Really, our own club? The G-I-N Sisters – get it, gin sisters?' Nola scraped her hair from her eyes, drying off some of the tears that stained her cheeks. 'I love that idea.' She breathed out slowly.

'We'll need a constitution.' Georgie pulled a mock-serious

face to make more fun of it. She could always be depended on to be the strong one.

'Yes, Georgie, you can write it up. Now, quick, go and get some paper and a pen, Nola.' Iris fell back on her heels; she'd do anything to make Nola feel better. The poor kid, they were all too young to lose their mother. But Iris felt she had some additional gravity because she had just become a teenager, even if Georgie always tried to rub it in that she was one year older, but Georgie would never be the maternal one among them – they both knew that. Whereas everyone said Iris was cut out to be a wonderful mother someday, and in truth it was the only ambition she had in life.

Beyond the door, she heard the muted sounds of her father shuffling about, and Iris imagined him filling up a tumbler of whiskey and slouching in the large armchair with that photograph of their mother that he'd taken long before they'd ever had children or, it seemed, worries. Still, it was better that he was here and not down in the distillery where it seemed he could lose track of time entirely. Delahaye Distillery, his life's work, was becoming an all-consuming distraction, maybe his only way to cling on at this stage.

'And no boys.' Georgie was scribbling down the club rules to Nola's subdued delight. Georgie already knew that Iris was in love with a boy called Myles who didn't even know she existed and probably never would.

'Eugh, of course no boys.' Nola scrunched up her face.

'And ice-cream every Friday.' Iris tried to make her voice sound as if she really could be happy again one day.

'Just for us,' Nola said on a breath that was still ragged,

but at least her little body had stopped shaking. 'And you'll never leave me?'

'We promise we'll never leave you,' Georgie and Iris chorused together. Anything else was unthinkable.

1

London, November, Present

Iris closed her front door behind her with a kick that felt like a final exclamation mark on a very long day. It had been that way for a while. Her sister Georgie would probably say that work should fulfil you but, Iris thought irritably, not everyone could be as lucky as Georgie when it came to finding a career that could jam up all the other cracks in her life. She pushed the notion of her sister from her mind as quickly as it had arrived. It was automatic now. She didn't waste time thinking of either of them anymore. What was the point when there was no forgiving or forgetting the hurt they'd caused her all those years ago? It was much better not to think of them at all.

Iris groaned. Her head was throbbing. She wasn't tired, just irritated with another day like every other. She was sick to the back teeth of reminding people to turn up to dental appointments they didn't want to keep. She was bored of having the same conversations about the cost of root canals

and crowns and children's braces. Becoming a receptionist at a busy London dental practice probably wasn't anyone's burning ambition. It was a job, a way to make a living – nothing more, and if she could afford to throw in the towel she would have left years ago. But someone needed to earn a steady wage in the house. In fairness, her employers were generous with her wages and a hefty Christmas bonus was always thrown in to keep her there for another year. Maybe she was expecting too much from life.

She was early. She'd meant to stop off at the fish market – they were having homemade fish and chips for dinner. Myles's favourite. She hoped it would pull him out of the distanced silence he'd put between them over the last few weeks. But in the rush to catch her morning train, she had forgotten her purse and so she'd come directly home.

Though she didn't think so at the time, later, she wondered if maybe she knew that this was it. The day she'd dreaded since the very first day of her marriage to him.

His bag stood ready at the foot of the stairs. Myles was a cameraman, freelance for a news channel. It paid a pittance but gave him access to all the big news stories and held a certain glamour he'd leaned on more these last few years, now that his looks were beginning to fade.

'Iris.' He stopped, dead still in the hallway, as if he'd been confronted by a raging lion on the savannah instead of his wife home from work on a wet and miserable Wednesday afternoon. 'I…' he started. 'You're early. I wasn't expecting you yet. I'm…'

'Yes?' Iris waited, working to keep her face blank while the words *please, please, please don't do this* exploded in

her mind. Iris folded her arms about herself. Perhaps it would stop her trembling when she heard the worst. Of course, she knew what it was. It was a woman – younger, prettier and probably with enough money to make up for the loss of the house and their savings that leaving her would cause him.

'I'm leaving you. I've met someone else.' His words were faltering, but she hardly noticed because it felt as if the world had already started to spin away from her. 'She's called Amanda… She's—'

'Please, Myles, please don't do this. Don't leave me for some bit of skirt that's going to be by the wayside in a matter of weeks. Come on, we can work through this…' She was pleading, but she might as well have been reciting a shopping list, because he just went on gathering up his belongings. His keys. His watch. And then in the kitchen, he hovered for a minute before picking up four of the fresh scones she'd baked that morning. She watched him, wordlessly now, because she'd run out of things to say, or was it that she didn't know where to start or where to end?

'It's not like *that*… This is different.' He dragged a hand through his hair. For a moment, his expression seemed to dip into something like anguish and Iris experienced a dart of panic. Could he really be in love with someone else?

'I'm begging you, Myles, please, don't do this. What do you want me to do? I'll do anything, anything for you to stay.' She was shrieking, unable to control either the words or the desperation. Hysteria pummelled against her ribcage where her heart should have been.

His restraint silenced her, suddenly, as if a plug had been

pulled from the very heart of her. And for a moment, the only sound in her world was the low buzz of the refrigerator.

'You need me, Myles, don't you see?' She took a step closer to him, and tried not to notice that he took a step back from her. 'This is us, Myles.' She waved her hand around their little semi. 'Twenty-three years of us! We're meant to be together. Think of everything I've given up for you, everything—'

'Oh, please, Iris, I'm sick and tired of hearing the same old saga. No-one asked you to follow me to London or to cut your family out of our lives.' He spun around with a look of pure disgust as his eyes travelled over her. She felt the power going from her legs, could hardly stand straight beneath his loathing stare. 'That was all you, all your doing. We might have been millionaires if your old man included us in his will, but that's never likely to happen now, is it?' He shook his head, as if it had been that simple, when they both knew there was so much more to it all than that. There was so much more to them. 'And as for those crazy sisters of yours – you can't blame me for falling out with them.'

'All right, all right, let's forget Georgie and Nola. This isn't about them; it's about us. Look at how far we've come. Most couples don't make it past…' She stopped, because suddenly, she knew there was something else. Something she hadn't figured into this scenario in all the times she'd played it out in her worst nightmares. If it was possible to imagine anything worse than Myles leaving her, she had a feeling that there was even worse to come.

'No. I can't do this anymore. Iris, there's something you should know…' His voice became almost a whisper and

she had to lean forward to hear him properly. 'Amanda is pregnant.'

It felt as if she'd been slapped across her face. She reeled backwards and fell against the wall, felt herself drift slowly towards the ground. Could you actually die of shock? Or of a truly, truly breaking heart? 'Pregnant? How on earth could that be?' Myles wasn't ready to be a father. He'd told her that so often, it was like a mantra. It was always next year, or the year after, or after I get this job finished or when we have more money. Of course, there were times when she had pined for a child, but she told herself nothing was more important to her than Myles.

'We are having a baby.' He said it so simply, he might as well have been talking about the football results.

'But…' She felt the words that she had intended to say trickle away from her. Myles was going to be a father. It had all been for nothing. It was the annihilation of her very soul. She let her body go, floated up above it and watched as it fell about her like a puddle to the floor. Pathetic. He bent and picked up his bag, stepped over her, like someone else's rubbish on the pavement. He stood for a second that could have lasted a lifetime or might not have happened at all. And then he was gone.

The house was desolately quiet. The hours somehow drew themselves out into days and then one week fell into a second and there was still no contact from him. The stillness clawed at her imagination. Here, in the pristine tidiness of a life spent ignoring the ever-widening gap between hope

and acceptance, it seemed as if the silence was taunting her. Could she really go on like this forever? She was still a young woman, just forty. Forty, had seemed to be ancient to her when her own mother died of septicaemia all those years ago, but now, women her age were starting companies, starting families, starting over. Women her age were looking forward, but all Iris could do was look back.

She played her relationship with Myles over in her mind from that very first day. She'd had a crush on him long before he ever noticed her, but then at the village fete, it seemed the sun shone extra bright and he'd ambled up to the Delahaye Distillery table. Iris still felt butterflies in her stomach when she thought about that first time he'd walked her home and kissed her at the gate. Long and lingering, much too grown up for her age. She'd been a kid, just sixteen and never been kissed. God, how had they ended up here?

He'd been gone a month and still wretchedness flooded her; it felt as if she was drowning most days. And strangely, she knew, the worst part wasn't losing Myles, rather it was the fact that he'd betrayed her so badly. A baby. She had always wanted a family but somehow, for Myles, there had never been a *right* time. Today she rolled out of bed after midday and staggered towards the hall mirror. She examined her reflection: prematurely grey hair, pallid complexion – the most fresh air she got these days was rushing for the London Underground. She tried smiling, but it didn't seem to fit her anymore, rather it was an unnatural use of her muscles, which had gotten out of the habit of joyfulness. She'd even lost weight, not that she needed to, but her wedding ring slid up and down her finger now as

if it too wanted to get away from her. What did it matter if she faded away, miserable and alone, really? She should reach out; she should have people to reach out to. Wasn't that what you did in times of crisis: find a shoulder to lean on, share your misery and halve it in the process? Friends and family. Hah!

She hadn't really made any close female friends over the years, or none that had actually stuck. Her own fault. She'd become jealous and distrustful of any woman coming too close to Myles. As for family, Georgie and Nola were the last people she'd call; she wouldn't give them the satisfaction of turning their backs on her as she had so willingly done to them all those years ago. They hadn't spoken in ten years, not since that disastrous party at the family distillery when they'd had the mother of all fallings-out. Perhaps, she should have reached out to them, just as her father had reached out to her a few months earlier. They were *In Touch*. Something she'd never expected would happen again, but the letters he'd started to send her months earlier had found a chink in the armour she'd worn against her family for the last two decades. They had graduated to phone calls. God, who'd have thought these would become the highlight of her otherwise empty life?

Outside, a tapping noise broke into her miserable thoughts. She looked out the window to see a crow, digging in the eaves opposite, as if he might eventually come across nuggets of gold. Iris found herself wishing he might find something worthwhile. His beak went up and down, *tap, tap, tap, tap,* and all the while dark, voluminous clouds loomed heavier over the rooftops with each passing minute. That

meant only one thing. London weather was nothing like in Ballycove, Ireland; everything – even the storms – were far more civilised here. Why was it that after so many years, she still compared the two places and always Ballycove came out the best? She sighed, flicking across the lock on the window – not that it was likely to so much as rattle. This little semi hadn't enough personality to make a sound she couldn't identify.

It would have to be sold, of course. Wasn't that what happened when people got divorced? It had been her home for the past twenty-plus years and despite its lack of character, the thought of losing it made her heart ache.

Or maybe Myles would want to buy her out of it somehow. Suddenly, she wasn't sure that she wanted to hand it over to Myles and the new family he was embarking on – not that he'd suggested it yet. As far as Iris had managed to glean from his Facebook page, he was living with this woman, Amanda Prescott.

Sometimes she saw her whole situation with terrible clarity. What if her sisters had been right all along? All those years, when she'd believed they were jealous, maybe Nola hadn't wanted to take him for herself and maybe Georgie really had seen him steal from the distillery? Perversely, that only made her hate them all the more. Well, at least it was unlikely she'd be running into Georgie or Nola anytime soon.

As Georgie Delahaye approached the shiny glass doors of Sandstone and Mellon, she felt a pleasant fizzing sensation

in her stomach. Today was the day. She was a shoo-in for the job. God knows, she'd sacrificed enough for it. She had aced the interview last week. She knew even as she walked out of that room that it was a done deal. Getting this would make her the youngest director at the table and the only woman among a board of men who, in her opinion, bore their privilege far too lightly. Of course, it was easy when you'd been to public school and sailed into every opportunity in life with the doors held open for you by the guy who went before.

No such nepotism for Georgie Delahaye. It took staking her claim in the world of London marketing with a bespoke award-winning campaign for a jewellery company that was years before its time. Her campaign had sent the fashion world into a tizzy and made Sandstone and Mellon the new 'must-have' marketing firm for the world's biggest brands. And, she thought as she saw her reflection in the glass wall that separated her office from the grunt workers beyond, she hadn't lost her bite. She threw her shoulders back. She was walking on air this morning, buoyed up by the certain knowledge that in a very short time they'd be making the announcement to the whole company. And rightly so – she was still coming up with the most innovative campaigns and the snappiest lines, still had the canniest ability to sniff out a market where buyers hardly knew they needed what she wanted to sell them. And she had loved it, every single second. But somehow, she knew she wouldn't miss it.

She didn't want to pitch anymore, fighting off the snapping of younger, hungrier marketing executives biting at her heels. She had put in her time swimming with the sharks and now

she was ready to take her place on the boat – or in this case, a corner office, long lunches and watching other people do the dirty work for once.

She'd just sat at her desk when her online diary pinged. Almost time, not that she needed to be reminded. Georgie checked her reflection in the little silver plate she'd won last year. She kept it buried in her desk drawer – what else was she supposed to do with it? Second place in the industry awards was hardly worth hanging on a wall. It was almost an insult. She rubbed her tongue along the surface of her teeth and flicked her hair from around her collar. She stood up, pulling her body up by that invisible string that made her feel six inches taller and then she marched into Paul Mellon's office.

'So?' They both knew what this was about, but she kept her features neutral as if it didn't much matter to her either way. Of course Paul Mellon had known for years that she wanted to run this company. This promotion was rightfully hers. Even if they'd gone through the motions of leaving the interviews open so others could apply, it was a formality. There was no-one else with her experience, her track record or indeed her proven dedication to the company.

'Sit down,' he said, his voice as cold as usual. Although she knew from overhearing some of the temp staff that he fraternised with work colleagues, between them it had always been strictly professional. 'Georgie.' He clicked closed whatever computer files he was working on before turning to give her his full attention. He cleared his throat, as if gearing up for a performance that had to carry far beyond the two of them. A light tap on the door made her turn and

obvious relief flooded his features when Cole StJohn took a seat beside her. It was then that something close to a warning bell began to sound out in her gut. 'Good of you to join us, Cole.' Mellon looked across at the young man at her side as if he'd just been thrown a life jacket.

'Is something wrong?' Georgie asked, keeping her voice clear and unconcerned. 'Has something happened?' Because, suddenly, it seemed that she could only have been brought here for the most devastating news. 'Is the company folding?' But of course, she knew, it couldn't be that. They'd had their most successful year on record, due in no small part to her securing two of the biggest accounts they'd ever had on their books.

'No. Nothing has happened. I just wanted to have a chat with you before I go out and make the announcement about appointing our new director to the board.'

'Ah.' She exhaled a relieved sigh. 'I see.' Although she didn't see, not really. After all, giving someone a job – or rather, giving them the promotion they deserved above anyone else – hardly called for legal assistance, did it? 'So, you've crossed all the T's and dotted all the I's?' It was funny, but she'd thought this moment would be euphoric but now she was here it felt like a bit of an anticlimax. 'So, shall we tell them together? I hope there's going to be bubbly – it is a Friday afternoon after all…' Then suddenly something in Paul's eyes stopped her mid-flow.

'I'm afraid you weren't successful in your application to be made a director, Georgie.' His voice dipped and she supposed it was meant to sound sympathetic or maybe supportive, but it didn't. It sounded patronising. 'It's just… we had to give

it to the best man for the job and the interview showed us that—'

'The best *man*?'

'Well, no,' Cole butted in quickly. 'I think what he means is the best candidate.'

'Now, we want to acknowledge the sterling work you do for the company, so we're putting together a very attractive package that's going to mean a considerable increase in your salary, additional leave allocation and of course a bigger number of accounts for you to call your own. You'll also get another assistant on your team and…'

'I'm sorry.' She put her hand up to stop him talking – whatever he was saying was just white noise to her at this point. 'I'm sorry, but let me get this right: you're not actually making me a director?'

'No. We're not.' He held eye contact with her for too long, as if he'd practised this moment all week. She imagined him now, in front of his bathroom mirror going over the words, giving them exactly the right weighting and firmness while remaining empathetic.

'Well, bra-bloody-vo.' She began to slow clap.

'I'm sorry?' He leaned forward, his brow folding in confusion.

'I mean it. You've done a marvellous job in passing on the bad news. And, Cole, obviously you pulled the short straw this morning. Damage limitations? Never an easy task.' She shook her head bitterly. 'So, it'll be all the boys around the table for the foreseeable, right?'

'We haven't told the successful candidate yet, but yes, it's—'

'What are your reasons for this?'

Cole cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry, but it was a fair decision, based not just on the interview but also on each candidate's track records.'

She took a deep breath and forced herself to remain calm. She would not shout. She would not give the lemmings outside the satisfaction; instead her voice remained dangerously low. 'How can it be fair when we both know that nobody here has worked harder to make this business more successful than I have? Nobody has pulled off the genius campaigns that have brought ten times more business to our doors than you could have dreamed of when I started out here.'

'You've been an exemplary employee. Dedicated and talented, it's just—'

'It's just what?' She stood up, her hands on her hips. She'd always seen him for what he really was: a little man who couldn't see past the fact that she wasn't wearing trousers like him, or hadn't gone to quite the right school. She managed not to say this, managed to keep her cool because she knew Cole was there to take down and use any comments she made against her. She wasn't giving him that sort of ammunition.

'You're not a team player, Georgie. You never have been. Your assistants never last any longer than six months and—'

'Yes, because they are mostly the worst imbeciles who I have to train from scratch, but when they leave me they actually know something about marketing. My assistants have all gone on to work in the best jobs in London, thanks to the training I've given them.'

Paul stood up too, and his voice took on a new, steely tone. 'Some of them have left here virtually traumatised by you.'

'Is it my fault that you keep sending me oversensitive ninnies?' she spat, remembering all the assistants she'd had over the years. But then a smidge of doubt crept in. Had she been a complete and utter bitch? No. It was exactly what Paul wanted, for her to cave in with some sort of misplaced guilt. A man wouldn't have to feel guilty for being brilliant at his job, so why should she? She dug her fingernails into the palms of her hands. It wasn't true, she told herself. Every one of them reminded her of her sisters: content to stay in their own lane, leaving the heavy duty lifting to people like Georgie.

She felt a treacherous tremor at the back of her throat, as if the hurt her sisters had inflicted on her might spill over into this present moment in the form of tears. She had convinced herself she'd gotten over this. Iris's complete and utter betrayal of their whole family when she turned her back on them for a man who would happily have robbed them blind given half a chance and Nola's letting her down when she'd gone out on a limb for her – it was all so long ago. She'd left this pain behind when she'd walked away from them at what was meant to be a centenary *celebration* for her father's distillery. She took a deep breath, steadied herself and pushed the pain they'd caused her from her mind. She couldn't let them ruin this, too.

'And then, there's the way you treat the rest of your colleagues, always shutting them down in meetings if they dare to disagree with you. You've managed to insult each

and every one of them over the years, whether you realise it or not.'

'It's business,' Georgie barked. 'This is the real world, not some lovey-dovey kindergarten that we're running here. For God's sake, if they can't take a strong woman's opinion maybe they should go and get jobs as church wardens or lollipop ladies.' She walked towards the expanse of glass, beyond which stretched a view across the city she had envied for as long as she had worked here.

'Yes. I think you said something like that to one of your assistants before and we all know where that ended up,' Cole snapped, reminding her suddenly of those days they'd spent in the employment court. In spite of his easy smile, he was not a man to be trifled with.

'The insurance covered all of that and I've fulfilled the mediation requirement down to the very last letter.'

'Still doing the therapy?' Paul smirked, but she could easily rise above this. Even now, she wouldn't allow him to goad her, even if she badly wanted to take a swipe at him about accounts lost and office affairs that were hardly discreet, much less professional.

'I want a review of the interview process and a reversal of this decision.' She kept her voice low, just menacing enough to raise the tension further in the air between them so that it felt like even the slightest movement could set off a bomb that could blow the whole company apart. She waited, staring out as London packed up for the weekend in the streets and buildings far below her.

'That's not going to happen,' Paul said, his voice icy and his eyes boring through her like steel. 'The decision has been

made, it's been ratified and our legal team have been with us through every single stage in the process.'

Georgie surveyed Cole's reflection in the glass. He was sitting far too confidently for her to question the legitimacy of Paul's words. 'I see. So, it's all sewn up nice and neat.' She mentally flipped through the various options open to her at this point. She couldn't bear the idea of having to go back out and face her colleagues knowing that some whippersnapper had taken her seat at the table. 'I could just leave,' she said then, a little absently.

'Yes. You could,' Paul said, and in that one devastating moment, she knew that was exactly what he was hoping she would do.

Nola looked out the café window. Raining. Again. Why did it always start just as she was finishing her shift? The last of the evening crowd were shuffling into coats, and an old man who couldn't afford it was leaving her a tip. Nola watched three office girls, gossiping in a corner – she could have been one of them instead of delivering their coffee and depending on their tips. If Georgie had come through for her all those years ago, would she be in a nice safe office job now, wearing a smart suit and sitting on a comfortable pension? Probably. Would she have been happy? *Well, what is happy anyway?* she thought. At least she'd have had security, a future. She wiped the counter fiercely. No point thinking of what might have been… but damn Georgie, anyway.

Shalib, the owner, was deep in concentration, counting up the day's takings. A mini cab pulled up outside, disgorging

a shrieking hen party arriving for the nightly performance of *Guys on Tour*. Distracted, Shalib looked up at them, scowled, and started counting the sheaf of notes again.

Nola turned to gaze back out of the window. She'd applied for the job in this shabby café precisely because it was next to the little theatre that looked like it might one day be one of those hidden London gems. Nola didn't want to think about how long ago that was exactly. It was meant to be a filler, between acting jobs, but she was still waiting tables, serving coffee to smart office workers while her own dreams died a little more with every passing hour. These days the nearest she got to show business was a customer commenting on how much she resembled someone who used to be on the telly. Nola had lost the heart to tell them that it *was* her, Nola Delahaye, who had once been famous enough to be recognised from her part in one of the country's most popular soaps. Meanwhile, next door, the Stockton Playhouse had changed hands twice and hadn't staged anything more arty that a drama summer camp for disadvantaged kids about a year ago. She sighed. The nine-hour shift she'd just completed was enough to suck the soul out of Laurence Olivier, never mind Nola, who'd happily sacrifice her eye teeth for a bit part at this stage.

And she was getting older. Maggie, her agent, put it bluntly, when she phoned for her regular badgering session; '*Frankly, Nola, you're too old. They all want Saoirse Ronan and you're never going to be that package.*'

'I'm sure she didn't mean it like that,' Shalib said when she told him about the conversation, her face etched with misery. Dear Shalib, he listened patiently every time she

wanted to let off steam about the career that had so easily slipped through her fingers. But even Shalib must be sick and tired of listening to her talking about what her life had been like once. The parts she'd turned down, the people she'd met and the parties she'd attended. She only talked about it because otherwise it felt as if it had never really happened at all. He handed her a cup of extra-strong coffee. It was like heavily scented aromatic sludge but she drank it, welcoming the tingling shock of caffeine hitting her system.

'I'm not giving up.'

'I never said you should, but you should listen to your agent. This idea of trying another way to be involved in the industry you want to be a part of? It might be sensible.'

'But I've spent a fortune on acting classes – I'm meant to be in show business; it's what I'm trained in.'

'And you still can be.' He smiled and his kind eyes wrinkled into a thousand familiar lines. 'Don't all actors just want to be directors anyway? What is the difference which part of the elephant you begin to wash, so long as he's clean at the end?'

Nola gave a reluctant smile. 'Oh, Shalib, you are funny.' But the truth was, if Nola could have got a job in any part of a theatre, she'd have taken it in a flash – after all, when it came to cleaning tables, who wouldn't prefer to be wiping down in the Barbican?

'It's only funny because it's true,' he said, touching the side of his nose. 'London is changing; the world is changing. When my father came here, things were simple. He worked and saved and managed to scrape enough together to start this café. Now my children are—'

'I know you're really proud of them,' and Nola thought it was lovely that they were both doing so well in their chosen careers, 'but I still don't want to give up on my dream…'

'That's not what I meant. When you started here, the theatres in this area, they put on plays, proper plays. And I know some of them were *only* community productions.' He gave an awkward little cough because at that stage, Nola wouldn't consider doing an acting job that wasn't paying some small amount. God, times had changed. How many others had taken those opportunities and were working in the West End now, she wondered? 'Now, it's all strip clubs and peep shows. The culture is gone and it's not coming back here anytime soon.'

'You're right. Of course, you're right.'

He shrugged sadly. 'I don't want to be. But I have to say it, because otherwise you could spend years waiting for something that isn't going to come knocking on any door around here.'

'I know that,' she said, and what had been biting away at her thoughts for ages became as real as the tables and chairs in the café. Suddenly the dainty cup seemed to weigh a tonne, and she no more had the strength to hold it in her hand than she had the courage to face the alternative future that seemed determined to pan out before her. How could it be that one moment you had everything you'd ever dreamed of and the next it could slip through your fingers like water? She wiped away a stinging tear from her eye. This was what defeat felt like: heavy, empty, crushing her from the inside out. Really, deep down, she knew it was over. It was either keep going as she was and slowly wither into a tragic

has-been, or do something to break out of this prison she'd managed to build for herself.

Shalib cleared his throat loudly to break into her thoughts and bring her back to the present moment. He handed her an umbrella from beneath the counter. It was time to call it a day. And with that thought, she stepped out into the rain.

She woke the next morning to more rain and four bills she could not afford to pay. She would be thirty-five years old in a few days' time. Thirty-five years old, and what had she to show for it? A waitressing job that covered her rent and would never allow her to see any more of the world than the Tube could take her. Her acting career had peaked in her twenties with a starring role on Britain's second-most-watched soap opera. Things could have been so different, if she'd set her cap at something else all those years ago. She was too old to change track now.

Wallowing in her bitterness was a luxury she couldn't afford. Her TV career was over; that was just that. Her character had died under the crushing weight of a falling toilet. And yes, she'd heard every joke going – truly, the sh*t really had hit the fan. She didn't even pretend to laugh anymore. Since that less than glittering finale her greatest achievement was three words in an overplayed series of television adverts for teabags. Ugh, even thinking about that and the court case that followed just made her fists curl. She had thought she'd be a poster girl for pay equality, pave the way for more serious roles, give her some much-needed gravity. How naïve she'd been. Far from elevating her character, it had only emptied her bank account and made her the most unemployable actress in London. She

wanted to thump the crumbling plaster of her bedsit wall. She stopped herself for fear of whacking right through to the rap-music-loving weed-smokers next door.

She sat there, letting her thoughts roll over endlessly in her mind until she wanted to scream with the sheer waste that was her life. As her tea grew colder, instead of dreaming as she once had of the glittering promise that seemed to lie before her, she descended into the now familiar regrets that had taken up residence in her mind. It seemed as if those thoughts had not only moved in, but redecorated every room, so there was no longer space for anything but bitterness at what had slipped away.

What if she had married Oliver Hughes? She'd be a *Fabulous London Housewife* now, with a show streaming to millions of viewers around the world like bloody Carly Miller with her fake boobs and her terracotta tan. Except he had dumped Nola along with everyone else when her career had hit rock bottom. Mind you, she knew now, looking back, that she hadn't loved Oliver Hughes, and she couldn't imagine having to put up with him for the rest of her days. No. That thought actually cheered her. Even here, with the constantly dripping bathroom tap and draughts that felt as if they were sneaking in directly from Siberia, Nola knew she was better off. She might spend the rest of her days having '*tea for me*' called after her in the street, thanks to that rotten advertising job, but it was better than tying herself up to the dry vacancy of a man she didn't love just for a shot at C-list television 'stardom'.

It took almost a week to push back the advancing bleakness that seemed to constantly shadow her these days. It was as

if it was waiting for a moment of careless vulnerability to strike, engulfing her in a depression she wasn't sure she had the ammunition to defeat. Oddly, at times like this over the last couple of years, work felt almost like a respite.

Then, one morning shone sunny and dry through the gauzy curtains of Nola's bedroom window. At around ten o'clock that Tuesday, something seemed to click and she felt a little better, as if she was ready to take life on again in some small way, rather than just lie there and take its punches. Maybe it was just fleeting optimism, but, in that moment, she settled on a course of action. She would go and have things out with Maggie. Obviously, they just needed to reset her portfolio, pitch her towards older parts. She'd march into Maggie's office and tell her it was time to get serious. Or perhaps it was time to get a new agent.

Nola plucked her green velvet cape from the hook on her bathroom door, which doubled up as most of her wardrobe space. She dithered over wearing the bright green beret to match, knowing it brought up her eyes, but the last thing she wanted was to look as if she'd made too much of an effort. She decided that her best approach was to be as nice as she could, while still driving home her point. As she sipped her morning tea, she wished she had a little of her sister Georgie's fire in her belly.

Funny, but for a moment, it almost felt as if Georgie were standing next to her, cheering her on as she would have when they were kids. That thought alone brought an overwhelming sadness over Nola and she felt as if she might cry, but she fought hard to keep it at bay – the last thing she needed today was an attack of the waterworks. It would get her precisely

nowhere with Maggie. Instead, she bit her bottom lip and squeezed her eyes shut, determined that her estrangement from her family, the intense dislike that had festered between them over the years, would actually propel her to tackle Maggie with even greater strength, not hold her back.

Her sisters only lived a few miles apart from each other as the crow flies. Of course, in reality they lived in completely different worlds. She, here in her dingy little bedsit with her low-paid job might as well have been living on a different planet to Georgie,who had a sky-high apartment in one of the city's fanciest blocks, or Iris, who was settled into domestic bliss with Myles in a cosy suburb, whose address she'd tried hard to forget over the years.

She wasn't jealous as such, but it was hard not compare the lives they'd all made for themselves. There was no getting away from the fact that of the three of them, she was the big failure – Iris and Georgie had managed to get everything they'd set their hearts on. But it wasn't her petty envy that had meant they hadn't spoken in years. No, that was their fault entirely.

Damn it. She'd upset herself now. There was nothing for it but to wipe her eyes, and tug the beret on. Drawing her hair about her face, she pushed up the corners of her mouth into a smile and hoped by the time she got to Waterloo, her expression might actually look as if she hadn't a care in the world.

Shining Light Theatrical Agency was a one-woman show. Maggie had set up her office in the back recess of a former

hotel where the rent was cheap and the natural daylight scarce. The office always looked as if it was in a state of turmoil. Maggie's desk, a too-small Victorian writing table, was bordered on both sides by long orange Formica-topped catering tables. Every space, except – Nola presumed – Maggie's chair, was covered with old newspapers and manila file folders that looked as out of date as the flocked wallpaper that covered two and a half walls.

The lady herself sat primly behind her desk and today, assessing her in a strangely remote way, Nola thought she could have played a good queen, if only circumstances were different. She had the poise for it, even if her cheap peroxide hair and everywoman features fell short. That was the thing about Maggie Strip: what defined her was all of this. She loved being a theatre agent because, essentially, it was the only thing that made her stand out from a million other women who lacked any sort of talent or charm to mark them out as special.

'I don't have you in the diary.' She glanced at a suspiciously empty page before her when Nola sat on the seat opposite, having removed a stack of papers first.

'No, I was just passing.' Nola smiled what she hoped was sweetly. 'It seemed a shame to just walk by when I haven't seen you for so long.'

'Humph.' Maggie took the coffee that Nola had purchased for her from the vendor on the street and stirred it deliberately before sipping it.

'Anyway, now that I'm here, I wondered if we might have a rethink about how we're going to pitch me for the coming season.'

'Look, Nola, there's no easy way to say this, but—'

'Don't say a word; just let me do the talking for once.' Nola smiled with a degree of calm she certainly didn't feel. 'I've been thinking about roles that have come up over the last year and I think I know the problem. It's my Irish accent, isn't it? I can't do the British twang, not well enough to fool the English, but I could do the French accent – *mais oui?* We could change my name, get new head shots done, I could reinvent myself: Sophie Du Paris or Isabella D'Ville or…'

'It's…' For the first time ever Maggie actually looked startled.

'It's bloody genius, I know, isn't it?'

'That's not what I was going to say.'

'Oh?' Nola felt that delicate ball of hope inside her begin to crumble, softly, achingly.

'What is it they say? It's not you, it's me.' Maggie laughed, that gravelly sound that gave away her habit of smoking forty a day for more years than she'd care to admit.

'Oh, God.' All Nola could think was, *She's dropping me. I'm finished. Please don't do this.*

'I'm going to retire. Maybe not this very minute, but certainly this year. It's time. I've met a nice man and we have plans.' She smiled now and it did something odd to her face. It transformed her. 'He has a bar. In Spain.' She threw her hands up in the air as if it was all still a revelation to her. 'And I'm going to move there in a few weeks, so…'

'But you can't. You're my agent, my only hope…' The words were out before she had a chance to stop them and then she began to cry, huge big ugly sobs that no Frenchwoman would ever turn out.

'I'm afraid I can, and I am.' Maggie sat back and waited for the crying to stop, which eventually it did.

'I…' Nola was working hard to pull herself together. 'I'm happy for you. Congratulations.' And maybe in a way she was, because the old girl deserved her shot at contentment too. 'How exciting for you,' she managed finally, because of course, she could see now, the change in Maggie was more than just a new pair of earrings or some piece of gossip she was dying to share. This was what happiness looked like in someone who'd given up on it.

'Thank you.' She smiled and leaned forward. 'I'm actually trying to make my way through my client list to tell everyone and some of them have been not so nice.'

'Do you have a plan for the… er business?' Nola asked, because if Maggie's clients worked as infrequently as Nola did, there wouldn't be much of a business to leave behind.

'Not really. I don't own anything – this place belonged to an aunt of mine, but it's just one room and her son is going to let it out, I think. He'll be delighted if he can make some money on the place for a change.'

'And your clients – has anyone asked if they can take over the books?'

'Hah.' It was a high-pitched sound that cut through Nola like glass. The pain must have showed on Nola's face, because Maggie hastily rearranged her features and had the grace to look sheepish. 'Sorry. No. I'm afraid not. I did contact a few people I know, but most of them are in the same boat, looking for a way out, not looking to make their own ships even more likely to sink.'

'So, that's that,' whispered Nola. She was officially

without an agent. The only connection she had to the world she so desperately wanted to be a part of had been severed and there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

'Oh, darling, maybe it's time to give up on it, don't you think? I mean, I told you from the start, it's a dog fight just getting that first job and then from there, for as long as you're trying to get work, every single round of auditions, it's like you're starting over every time. Perhaps you could see this as your chance to try something new or different?'

'But I don't know what else to do,' Nola wailed. 'Don't you see? This is the only thing I have that's worth anything to me.'

'Oh dear, I knew this would happen eventually.'

Nola stared at her. 'What does that mean?'

'It means that you haven't been listening to me, over the years, when I've tried to manage your career.'

Nola snorted. 'What career? Since I was dropped from the soap, you got me one job in an advert that still bloody haunts me and paid enough money to get my hair styled and take a couple of days' holidays in Barcelona. That's it!'

'Well, I tried to manage your expectations, planning for the eventuality that has turned out to be the case. I have suggested a million times over that you go back and get some sort of formal training: hairdressing, make-up, costume design or even mending—'

'I thought you meant go back and take more acting classes!' Nola sobbed again.

Now it was Maggie's turn to stare at Nola. 'Why on earth would I suggest that?'

'Because you're a bloody actors' agent! If I'd wanted to be

a hairdresser to begin with I wouldn't have come knocking on your door, would I?'

'Look, you're upset, but this isn't the end of the world. You have to see it as a new beginning.' Maggie got up from behind her desk and placed Nola's beret on top of her head and shepherded her towards the door.

'I was coming over to suggest that we try and pitch me differently, and now it's all over. My life is over,' Nola said between heaving sobs.

'For goodness' sake, don't be so melodramatic,' Maggie snapped. 'It's just a job, and not even that most of the time. You need to get on with life. This thing, this career that you've set your heart on, it's clearly not for you.' Nola stood in the doorway, tears rolling down her cheeks, her dreams disintegrating before her eyes. Maggie looked at her now, held her eyes before she spoke. 'Listen to me: you're not an actress anymore. You had your shot, and now it's over. It's brutal, but better to hear it now than in a decade's time. Go home, Nola, make a new plan and start living a life that has a chance of leading you somewhere better.'