HOMESICK

by

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Mary Minnock asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

For Mathilde, Nora, Johanne and Ashlinn.

With all my love.

Chapter 1

Peter Lawlor winked at her. Christina ignored it. She had just put up the final slide of her presentation and she didn't want to be distracted. In any case, it was hard to know with Peter if he was being encouraging or condescending.

'So, to summarise.' She paused to take a drink of water. The room was warm but she didn't want to take her jacket off for fear she might look unprofessional. Russell Hunter, the American CEO of their parent company had flown in expressly for this meeting and despite his casual, unhurried manner, she knew from past experience that very little passed him by. He was a Texan and everything about him was big: his height, his girth, his face, his hands, even his deep, warm voice. Frank, their boss, was hopping around him, anxiously trying to anticipate his every need. The

whole senior management team was there: Tony Sheridan from Business Development, Noel Shanahan, Systems Manager, Peter Lawlor who was in charge of human resources, Frank, the General Manager and, of course, Christina, Financial Director.

'I've outlined the main financial implications of the takeover, both the costs and the benefits.' She pressed a button on the remote control and a new slide with two columns appeared. Suddenly, over the seated heads of the other managers, she noticed a movement behind the glass pane in the boardroom door. The face of Aoife, her assistant, appeared, a frown darkening her features. Christina stopped speaking for a moment. Aoife had her hand on the handle of the door, obviously of two minds about whether or not to interrupt the meeting. She gave her a barely perceptible shake of the head. Whatever it was could wait until the meeting was over. Aoife disappeared.

'On the whole, I see the benefits of this takeover coming mainly from reduced costs in the form of lay-offs but not from expansion into new sales segments.' She turned back to the screen. 'We could end up letting up to twenty percent of the workforce go. I think we should really consider the impacts of this.'

Peter gave her a quizzical smile. 'What's this, Christina Cavanagh worrying about the plight of the workers?' he said. She stared at him. What did he mean? Of course she cared about making people unemployed. She certainly took that into account but dealing with that aspect wasn't part of her job. Her focus was on preserving the financial health and long-term viability of the company. She dealt with the money; it was his job to deal with the people.

'Lay-offs cost money, Peter,' she said evenly. 'And not just in direct financial terms. You've seen yourself how work quality slides when there's talk of redundancies.'

'Aha,' Peter said with an air of having solved a mystery.

His assumptions needled her. She frowned and continued. 'One last point. CCM operates very differently to us. I'm afraid that we might be underestimating the hidden costs of combining the two companies. What I'm saying overall is that we need to proceed with caution.' She switched off the projector and picked up a pile of papers.

'I have copies of the presentation here if you want to examine the figures in greater detail.' She gave each of the men a stapled bundle and sat down. She glanced back at the door. There was no sign of Aoife. She thought about excusing herself for a moment. Her assistant wasn't one for making a fuss unnecessarily.

'That was a very interesting presentation, Christina.' Russell stirred making his seat creak loudly. 'It's an important decision and I'm glad that we are looking at it from all sides before we make it.'

'Indeed, indeed,' Frank said. 'We are all anxious to do the right thing here, Russell. We'll definitely be considering all the angles before we move forward. Now, I think Tony has arranged to take you to visit a couple of our biggest customers, isn't that right, Tony?'

Christina stood up. 'I might leave you then. If anyone has any questions, you know where I am.'

On her way out, she heard Tony making a point. 'Christina's done a great job but honestly, I think she's being pessimistic. I think we can make this work. Buying CCM would mean that we'd be the market leader in the

sector.' She closed the door before she heard anyone respond.

When she got back to her office, Aoife had her head down, working at her desk. It was a good sign. Her son had been seriously ill six months earlier. If he had had a relapse, which was Christina's first thought on seeing Aoife's anxious face, she would surely have left already.

Aoife stood up and rushed towards her as soon as she saw her. The frown was back on her face.

'Is everything all right, Aoife?'

'There was a phone call from your brother Mark during the meeting. It's your mother.'

Her heart thudded against her ribcage.

'He said that she had a stroke. She's in hospital.'

Adrenaline flooded her veins and she froze.

Aoife continued. 'He said to say that she's stable at the moment but for you to call him as soon as you can.'

The relief that she was still alive was immense.

'Thank you, Aoife. I'll call him now.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

'No, I'm fine.' She turned to go to her office but then stopped. 'By the way, thank you for your work on the presentation. Well done.'

At her desk, behind the glass panels that separated her from Aoife and her other work colleagues, she took her mobile phone from the top drawer. She had left it there so she wouldn't be distracted during the presentation. There was a missed call from Mark. She hesitated a second, took a deep breath and pressed redial. He picked up at the first ring.

'Hi, Christina. Did Aoife give you my message?'

'Yes, I heard. Tell me, how is she?'

'She's stable. She's in hospital in Galway; they have her under close observation in case she has a second stroke.'

'What happened?'

'She wasn't feeling great when she went to bed, Dad said. Then, during the night, she got up to get a drink of water and fell in the hall. Luckily, Dad heard it and called an ambulance immediately. They took her to Galway. We were lucky they got her there as quickly as they did.'

'Have you seen her yourself since?'

'Yes, I was just in with her earlier. She's better than I expected; able to sit up in the bed and talk although she's slow and very tired. A bit groggy too although it's hard to tell how much of that is from the sedation and how much is from the stroke.'

'What do the doctors say? Is she going to be OK?'

'It's early days. They haven't finished running all the tests but I get the impression that they're positive enough. She's in good health generally and she's being monitored closely. Hopefully, she'll recover fully from this.'

'It's Friday. I can drive down after work this evening.'

'I don't think there's any need to do that, Christina. It's a long drive in the dark. If you head off fresh in the morning you'd be here by lunchtime.' He paused. 'I know she'd love to see you.'

'OK, I'll be there tomorrow. Tell her I'll come to see her directly. Thanks, Mark.'

She was about to hang up when his voice held her back.

'Hey, it's your birthday tomorrow, isn't it? It's a big one too. We should mark the occasion.'

'Thanks but don't mind about that, it's no big deal. See you.'

She hung up and stood staring out the big window behind her desk. She was on the fifth floor and she could see the expanse of Dublin Bay extending off to the horizon over the top of the lower reception building below her office. The cold February sun glinted on the water creating a carpet of diamonds.

You have to make it, Mam, she thought. You have to be OK. It can't end like this. She took a deep breath and counted the cars passing by on the road below until her heart rate slowed down.

She'd forgotten her birthday. She was supposed to be going to dinner with Steve the following night to celebrate. Now she'd have to cancel. She hoped he wouldn't mind. He was far keener to make a fuss of her fortieth birthday than she was. Birthdays had never been important to her. It was only a day like any other. It seemed like a silly thing to celebrate: being in the world another three hundred and sixty-five days. Maybe it was because there had been little celebration around birthdays when she was a child. With nine of them in the family, they were simple events in her house. Her mother would make a Swiss roll and after dinner, everyone would sing 'Happy Birthday' and that was about the height of it. In Steve's family, birthdays were a big deal, an occasion for a party with decorations and presents and extended family and friends being invited. Was this how things were generally done in Birmingham or was it specific to their family? There was only him and his sister so they had the time and money to organise these kinds of events.

In any case, Steve, normally so easy-going, was determined not to let this birthday pass unmarked. It was her second birthday since they had started going out and the first since he had properly moved into her apartment. Maybe it was just as well that she had a good reason to opt out. That way, she wouldn't disappoint him if she didn't react the way he wanted her to. This whole relationship management business was new to her and she suspected that she wasn't very good at it.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by a knock on the door. She turned around. Frank entered, followed by Russell.

'Everything all right, Christina?' Frank asked.

'Yes, of course. Sorry, I thought the meeting was over. Did you need me for something?'

'I know it's short notice.' Russell placed one of his meaty hands on her shoulder. 'We just called in to ask if you might be available to join Frank and me this evening for dinner with Nick Roche from CCM. You had some interesting ideas at the meeting and I'd like to get your take on things.'

'No hassle if you have other plans, but it would be good to have you there,' Frank added.

She hesitated. It wasn't that she had definite plans for that evening but it would mean not seeing Steve at all for the weekend. On the other hand, it would keep her busy and she wouldn't have to discuss family matters with Steve. Steve was great but she wasn't quite sure if she was ready to let him find out about the messiness that was Cavanagh family life.

'Sure, I think that would be fine. I'd be happy to go.'

'Great. I'll get Susan to give you the details.' Frank said.

'Well then, I'll see y'all later on. Many thanks to y'all.' Russell hitched up his trousers to loosen them and reduce the strain on his braces. The two men left her office and she got back to work.

There was something surprising to Aoife at the idea of Christina having a mother, never mind a brother and a whole family somewhere in the West. She was so self-contained and solitary that Aoife couldn't imagine her doing the normal, ordinary things that people did in families, or at least in families like hers. When she had given Christina the news about her mother's stroke, she had been inscrutable. Anyone else might have said that she didn't care but Aoife knew her boss well enough now to know that she had been shaken. She had gone to her office to phone her brother and after the phone call was over, Aoife had seen her through the glass panels staring out the window, motionless. This wasn't like her. Normally, she never stopped for a minute, she was always busy working on her computer or talking on the phone or examining papers, pen in hand. She was a powerhouse of energy. Nothing escaped her. She could zone in on the key figure in a table or find the one error in a chart after just a quick look. She personified efficiency to an extent that used to be intimidating when she started working for her first – not that she was entirely at ease with her now. But at least now, she knew better what was expected of her and, although she might not be the warmest or friendliest boss in the world, Christina was always fair, and that was good enough for her.

After Frank and the American manager left, she was struck by the lost expression on Christina's face. She had never seen her like that before and her heart pinched in sympathy. She tapped lightly on the door of the office before opening it. 'Christina, is everything all right?'

Instantly, the shutters descended and her usual expression of poised cautiousness returned. 'I'm fine, thank you, Aoife.' She quickly switched on her computer and settled in behind her desk. 'We'd better get back to work. All the time we put into preparing for this meeting means that we fell behind a bit with the day-to-day stuff. We still have to get the monthly sales figures sorted for next week's sales meeting.'

She got the message loud and clear and backtracked immediately. Christina didn't want a personal discussion. 'I'll ask Rory in IT to pull out the data straight away,' she said.

'That'd be great. There were a few issues with last month's figures that I'd like to check.' Christina picked up a blue file from the corner of her desk and opened it.

Aoife backed away quietly and closed the door. She'd been working for Christina for almost four years now and, through trial and error, she had become used to her ways. She kept herself to herself but at least you knew where you stood. When it came to important things, Christina was supportive and helped where she could and she liked her discretion. Like last year, when her son, Cathal, had caught viral meningitis. Her blood still ran cold when she thought about the day the doctor had told her, in that deathly serious voice, to take him to the hospital immediately. She had sat by his little limp body day and night for three days,

terrified of losing him. A week later, after the doctors had reassured her that he was out of danger, she went back to work. They needed the money, what with the mortgage on the new house and her dad in the nursing home. But she couldn't settle, fearful every time she had to leave him. As she struggled with the monthly sales report, trying in vain to keep the figures straight in her head, Christina called her into her office. Her heart was in her throat. She was sure that at best she would be reprimanded, at worst, demoted.

'Aoife, I think you should pack up your things and go home and be with your son,' Christina started. She had been just about to beg for her job when Christina continued. 'Take whatever time it takes and come back when he's fully well again. Of course, you'll be paid in the meantime.'

'But what will you do?' She had been close to tears but her boss's cool reserve forced her to hold them back.

'Don't worry. I'll cope,' she said dryly as if the conversation was already at an end.

'Thank you so much, Christina. I appreciate this so much.'

'It's all right. There's no need for that.' Christina shrugged off the gratitude with a trace of a smile. 'It's not as if you're going to be able to do much in the state you're in.'

She gulped and left the office. It was only a while later that she realised that Christina hadn't asked her specifically how Cathal was. It was this ambiguity that kept a distance between them and prevented them from becoming friends but Aoife liked her despite all that and would do anything for her.

She sighed as she pulled out her swivel chair and got back to work. A few minutes later she looked up to see Susan Morris, the chief executive's secretary, arriving, full of her own self-importance. Susan was one of the most irritating people in the company. Her position had obviously gone to her head and in her more illuminated moments, she seemed to imagine herself joint managing director of the company.

'Hello, Susan.'

'Aoife. I need to have a word with Christina.' She made it sound as if the two of them had matters of major corporate, if not national, importance to discuss.

'Can I help?'

'Thanks.' She gave her a big smile as if to say, that's a good girl, just tell your mother I'm here. 'I'll just pop my head in and talk to Christina directly. It'll be quicker.'

She pretended to be getting something out of the bottom drawer of her desk to hide her smirk when she heard Christina say 'Ah, Susan, for the dinner this evening, I presume. Just leave the details with Aoife. I'm in the middle of something here. Thank you.'

At ten past five, she, as usual, asked Christina if there was anything urgent that needed doing before she left and, as usual, she was told no. She had no idea what time Christina stayed in the office until but every evening she left her working intently and found her in almost the same position the next morning, just wearing different clothes. She glanced outside at the windy, damp evening, buttoned up her coat and felt very thankful to be going home to Gerry and the kids.