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Too Hot to Handle

Written by Katie Agnew

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Too Hot to Handle

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Prologue

Shepherd's Bush, London, 2003

'Don't look so sad,' he said. 'Who knows the future, eh?'

He hesitated at the door and looked back at the young woman with what she hoped was affection, but could easily have been guilt or discomfort. Her stomach lurched with love and desire, and her heart reached out desperately for the tail end of hope. For a moment she thought he was going to say something more, something that she could cling onto for dear life once he was gone, but all he said was, 'You are very, very beautiful. Extraordinarily beautiful. You do know that, don't you?'

Then he looked away again, raised his hand in a casual gesture of goodbye and disappeared down the dark stairwell.

'And if I call you tomorrow?' she cried out after him, hearing the desperation in her own voice. Knowing this was her last chance.

Silence.

'You won't answer? If I call? You won't answer, will you? Will you?!'

Silence.

She knew she sounded weak. Pathetic. It was all she could do not to run down the steps after him. Finally she heard the bang of the heavy door that led out to the street, the knife twisted in her heart and this time she knew he'd

gone. Maybe he'd be back, she tried to console herself. He'd always come back before. For three years he'd been breaking her heart, leaving, and then regretting his decision. He'd always return – eventually – telling her that he'd made a mistake and that he still loved her. But for some reason tonight felt different. The sex, which had always been so good, had felt wrong. He wouldn't look her in the eye and he'd touched her too roughly. There had been no tenderness from him, although everything she'd given had been offered with her whole heart, and now she felt used, abandoned and cheap.

The woman pulled her thin dressing gown around her shivering body and slumped to the floor. She could still feel his fingertips on her flesh and smell his aftershave on her skin. When she licked her lips they tingled from where his stubble had grazed her. Somehow the physical evidence that he really had been here, just five minutes earlier, made her loneliness all the more acute. Why had she done it again? She'd ripped that gaping, bleeding wound right back open and the pain was unbearable. Every time he called, or more often just turned up at her door at midnight, her heart would leap and she'd think, 'This time. This time he's here to stay.'

Why wouldn't she think that? Every time he left, she kept telling him not to come back unless it meant something. No, unless it meant *everything*! So, when he did return, she'd give herself to him completely and utterly – body, heart, mind, soul. Her body he took gladly, hungrily, desperately. The rest of her? Well, that he had left unclaimed.

It was the middle of the night and even London was deathly quiet. She lay there on the cold kitchen tiles, sobbing, as night turned to day, with no one to comfort her, no answers, no future and no past that made any sense. She'd given it all to him and now he wasn't there.

When she called the following day he didn't answer. Not the day after that, nor the day after that. Somewhere deep down she knew he'd never answer her calls again.

The young woman spent her days in a daze. Sometimes she'd sleep for twenty hours; sometimes she couldn't sleep at all. She barely ate. When the phone rang she jumped, ran to see who it was and then felt her heart plummet to the pit of her stomach when she saw the caller ID and realised that, of course, it wasn't him. When her family or friends rang she ignored them. When the post arrived, she'd check for a handwritten envelope in his writing. And when it wasn't there, she left the rest lying on the floor for her flatmate to deal with. She lost her job. The job she'd worked so hard to get. The one that had given her a sense of achievement and purpose. She didn't care. She felt nothing.

Her friends made an appointment for her to see a doctor. They told her she wasn't well. They talked to her; no, they talked *at* her, about depression. But she didn't let their words penetrate her brain. She knew she wasn't depressed. She was heartbroken, she'd lost her soul mate, and no pill would make that better. She didn't go to the appointment. One day her mother stood outside her flat for seven hours in the rain. She rang and rang, buzzed the buzzer, cried and waited. The young woman didn't let her in. She was too ashamed. It was enough to live in the shadow of the pain without having to see it reflected in her mother's eyes. Her mum wasn't a strong woman. The girl didn't want anyone else to get broken, so she pulled the pillow over her head and went to sleep. When she woke up it was dark and her mother had gone.

She wished for him on every stray eyelash, every crack of the pavement, every black cat that crossed her path. Her birthday came and went. He didn't call. He didn't send a

card. Her savings ran out. She missed the rent. She had to sell her car.

One day she found herself walking down his street. There were removal men there, packing up a life she didn't recognise. A woman, slightly older than she was, stood on the steps, chatting happily to the men. She was tall, blonde and beautiful. What's more, she looked bubbly, bright and animated. She smiled a lot. His wife was not how he'd described her at all. 'Reasonably attractive, I suppose,' he'd said grudgingly when pushed. 'But nothing special.' God, what an idiot she'd been. What a gullible, naive fool to believe the clichés of a cheating husband! She'd felt so sorry for him when he'd explained that his wife had become cold, unfeeling and moody. That she had no sense of humour any more, that she never laughed at his jokes or appreciated any of the gifts, holidays and clothes he'd bought for her. She'd lost her looks, she had no interest in going out and sex repulsed her. Was it any wonder he'd strayed? He was a sensitive, passionate man, trapped in a dead, loveless marriage. The knowledge that his wife was such an unfeeling bitch had made the young woman try even harder to be funny, sexy, outgoing and grateful to compensate for what he was missing at home. It had been her role to make him happy. But who was looking after her happiness?

And now here was this wife – beautiful, smiley and apparently full of joie de vivre – and if she hadn't been standing in *his* doorway, wearing *his* blue cashmere sweater, the young woman would never have recognised her. The young woman couldn't drag her eyes away. She stood transfixed, on the road where he lived, watching his life unfold and move on without her. He wasn't leaving, was he? He was moving house. The weight of his lies was almost too much to bear.

His wife turned round then, to pass a box to the men,

and that's when she noticed. It hit her in the stomach like a boxer's blow. His wife was pregnant. This was the wife he didn't sleep with, the one who had a separate bedroom, who had 'trapped' him with the first child (a mistake, incidentally, that he swore he'd never make again). This was the wife whom he said he had to stay with for 'complicated financial reasons only' and she was very definitely, quite heavily pregnant. The young woman's knees buckled beneath her, her mouth opened to sob but no sound came out. A fist clamped her heart, tightened its grip until she could barely breathe from the pain. And then … nothing. The numbness took over. Finally all hope was gone. Her fingertips let go of the rope. Sometimes, when one life begins, another ends.

Now the young woman sat cross-legged on the crumpled bed sheets and studied her reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall opposite. She was naked but for a man's white shirt. His shirt. All she had left. She remembered his last words to her: 'You are very, very beautiful. Extraordinarily beautiful.' They were the emptiest words she had ever heard. Maybe she *was* beautiful. But it was not all she was.

A fluke of nature had placed her features in such a way that at whatever angle her face was studied it was pleasing to look at. Her long, auburn hair – her 'trademark' – tumbled over her bare shoulders in glossy waves. Beneath her heavy fringe, cat's eyes, the colour of emeralds, shone out. But so what? Beauty meant nothing. Her own face held no fascination for her now. It bored her almost as much as the thoughts in her head. She knew she had done nothing to deserve her looks. She was just lucky. Or maybe she was cursed. All beauty did was stop people from looking at what was inside.

She unwound her long legs and pulled the shirt round her chilled naked skin. She ran herself a deep bath and poured herself a tumbler of neat vodka. The pills she'd taken earlier

had numbed her senses and left her feeling woozy, as if she wasn't really there at all. It felt like she was watching herself in her own movie. Finally, the grief that had paralysed her for the past few months had gone. And it was such a relief. All she'd had to do was to make a decision to let it go. If only she'd realised it weeks, months, years ago she could have saved herself so much torment. All that was left of the crucifying pain was a dull ache somewhere deep below the numbness.

The water was a little too hot and she winced as she slid down under the bubbles. She downed the last of her drink and placed the glass on the edge of the bath. And then she reached for the knife.

This was not a cry for help. She had cried and cried. She had left long, desperate messages on his voicemail. But he had never come. Nor was she doing this for revenge. She didn't need him to feel her pain. He was immune to it, she realised now. This was not about anybody else. She was on her own. That was what life had taught her. No one would save her. So she was saving herself. All she wanted was for it to be over. She'd made her decision and now she would be free.

There was no hesitation as the blade slashed deep into the fragile skin on the inside of her wrist. And then she cut open the other wrist. Her head spun. The room faded to a blur. She wondered if he would come to her funeral. It was her very last thought and, of course, she gave it to him. A tear trickled down her cheek. And then it was gone, washed away with the memories, the disillusion and the disappointment, by the blood-red water that engulfed her.

In the bedroom her mobile phone was ringing. It stopped and then rang again, and again, and again. But there was no living soul to answer the call.

PART ONE

The Journey

1

Eight years later … Temple Bar, Dublin

Molly's eyes felt gritty and sore from a combination of tiredness and the furniture polish that she'd accidentally rubbed into them over the course of the morning. She opened the heavy, brocade curtains of Room 237 and let the hazy winter sunrise seep its half-light into the room. She sang to herself as she worked. She liked the old ones best. Songs she could really belt out. And ones where the lyrics made sense to her. Today she had a Tracy Chapman song in her head: a song about a girl whose dad drank too much and whose mother had gone. A song about a girl who had no choice but to leave school and work to feed her family. It was a song about lost dreams and dead ends and it spoke directly to her.

She sang. She stripped the sheets, the pillowcases and the bedspread and then dumped them in the laundry cart. She sang. She made the vast bed – 800-thread-count Egyptian sheets, hospital corners, pillows arranged just so – and although her back ached, and her eyes itched, and her feet throbbed, and she'd been up since 3.30 a.m., just to get here on time, she sang, sang, sang. Room 238, 239, 240 …

People said she had a good voice but she was too shy to use it much in public, so it was here, in the big, old, grand, empty rooms of the Dublin Court Hotel that she sang. Her nan said she should go on *The X Factor* but her

nan was ridiculously biased and, anyway, no one would want to watch the likes of Molly Costello on their box.

She never looked in the mirror as she sang, even though the hotel rooms were full of them – huge, ornate, gilt-framed ones. She wasn't a vain girl, and didn't care much for her own reflection, although her nan, bless her, always said Molly was the prettiest of her thirteen granddaughters. Molly thought that was nonsense. *Knew* it was nonsense. Yes, she had been blessed with thick, dark hair, that when it was wet looked completely black. But hadn't they all? And Molly's was so poker-straight that it never bounced like Cheryl Cole's. Cousin Sinead was the one with the ebony curls down to her waist. And yes, Molly's eyes were the same green as her mam's had been. But it was cousin Niamh's jade eyes that could melt a man's heart from fifty metres. Molly was slim and curvy but she was also short – barely five foot two even if she pulled herself up to her absolute tallest. Molly's legs were exactly five and a half inches shorter than cousin Maggie's. They'd measured them once with Uncle Bernie's metal tape measure and laughed their heads off at the discrepancy. In fact, Maggie's legs were so long that Molly had to trot to keep up with her.

Molly had good, clear skin. But her complexion was so deathly pale that she looked like a ghost now in the winter months. She wondered if she would go properly brown if she went somewhere hot. What a colour her sister Nula had been when she'd come back from Tenerife this summer! Ach, what Molly wouldn't give for Nula's olive skin. Nula's face was always so beautifully tanned – she visited a solarium – and she was always so perfectly made-up that she reminded Molly of those gorgeous girls who worked behind the cosmetic counters at Brown Thomas department store. Sometimes Molly wanted to reach out and stroke her sister's

cheek, just to check that she was real. She didn't look like the rest of them any more. She looked classy. Rich.

But Molly would never have the nerve to touch Nula. Of all the girls in the family, her eldest sister was by far the scariest. There were three years and a gulf a million miles wide between them. Nula was already married, for the love of God, and had her second baby on the way. She had a nice semi-detached house in Swords, a respectable middle-class suburb beyond the city's greenbelt. Her new-build house had three bedrooms, a neat little garden, and was full of IKEA furniture and the latest gadgets.

Nula had a handsome husband called David, who was gentle, quietly spoken and dressed in suits or golfing clothes. He was a graduate of Trinity College and he had a good job in insurance. Molly thought he seemed nice enough but he was such a grown-up that she never had the confidence to hold a proper conversation with him. David made Molly feel like a kid, which she guessed she probably was. Nula had a brand new car of her own in the drive, and so many shoes that Molly never saw her in the same pair twice any more. This was the only thing Molly was truly envious of. Oh, to own all those divine shoes! Nula's house was a far cry from where they'd grown up. But Nula didn't talk about anything as distasteful as Balymun any more. Not now she was so classy. Nor did she visit her siblings who still lived there. To be honest, Molly couldn't blame Nula for that. Who wouldn't want to escape from their family?

Molly carried on singing, glanced at her watch, realised she was running two minutes behind schedule, tutted, pushed the laundry cart out of Room 240 and carried on down the corridor.

Room 240, 241, 242 … Finally, she was on the last room. It was ten to ten in the morning. When she finished it, she'd

have until four p.m. free, when the late shift started. Well, not 'free' exactly. It took her an hour to get home, by the time she walked to the bus stop, waited for the darned thing to arrive and then walked home at the other end. When she got back to the flat, her dad would invariably be asleep on the couch in the cramped living room, either sleeping off a night shift or a hangover, depending on whether or not he was in employment that week.

As the eldest girl still living at home, it was Molly's job to tidy up the mess left from the three younger children. Shane, Joey and Caitlin had to get themselves ready for school in the morning with Molly at work, and their daddy asleep. They did well enough but the tiny kitchen was always a bombsite when Molly got back, and then there were beds to make, clothes to wash and school uniforms to be ironed. They might be poor, they might come from Traveller stock, and they might have no mammy, but Molly wasn't having anyone saying that the Costello kids were dirty. She still remembered the day at school, aged about twelve, when one of the older, popular boys had come up to her with a bar of soap. In full view and earshot of everybody, he'd handed her the soap and said, 'There, Molly Costello, I think you might want to use this. We can smell you from all the way down at the chemistry block, you stinking gippo.'

She'd been used to the insults – tinker, knacker, didicoy, pikey, gippo – but that particular incident had hurt her the most. It was so humiliating, so public! And her friends had just stood there and let it happen. Worse, they'd shrunk back into the crowd, as if they were ashamed to be associated with her. It still haunted her now. She remembered how the tears of shame had burned her cheeks, as she'd run down the corridor, with all those kids holding their noses and laughing at her as she'd passed. There was no way she

was going to let her younger sister or brothers go through that, so now she made sure they always looked neat (even if their clothes were second hand). Molly smiled, briefly, as she remembered how Nula had cracked an egg over that same boy's head the very next day. Yup, Nula was scary, and completely untouchable, but she had a heart of gold hidden somewhere under all that make-up.

Their da, Francis Costello, was a Traveller. At least he had been until he met their mam and she'd persuaded him somehow to settle down in Dublin. But the fact he lived in a high-rise flat didn't make him any the less of a Pavee. He still spoke the Cant (the language of the Irish Traveller) when he was drunk, and on the rare occasions he was sober, when he did at least attempt to speak English, his accent was so thick that Molly often had to translate what he was saying to people. Molly had mixed feelings about her gypsy heritage. She felt one part proud and different, one part outsider and alien. Her da's family had disowned him when he'd married her mam. They saw it as an insult that he'd married an outsider; they thought he'd turned his back on his culture, traditions, community and family. Francis's father had publicly denounced him and over time he'd lost contact with his entire family, even his twin brother. So, as the third child born to the Costellos of Balymun, Molly had never even met her Pavee relatives. To them, she was a crossbreed. But the kids at school never let her forget her roots. It always felt like being a Costello meant not really fitting in anywhere.

It wasn't surprising really, the way her da had turned out. He was still spat at in the street sometimes. There were bars that didn't let him in. The neighbours treated him, at best, with caution and, at worst, with open disdain. He'd never really been to school so he didn't read or write well. It made

getting work difficult for him. And then, when Molly's mam had died, so unexpectedly and so painfully young, he'd been left heartbroken and lost in a world he didn't really understand, with six motherless bairns to clothe and feed and love. Molly remembered that he had tried to take care of them at first but in the end his sadness, loneliness and self-pity had won. Now, her da was nothing but a useless drunk. It was a terrible thing to think about her own father but there was no denying it was true. He was more of a burden than a help these days and if it hadn't been for Nan (mammy's mammy) the Costello children would have been taken into care years ago.

As it was, the others had escaped the minute they could – Nula had moved into David's riverside flat at seventeen (that girl had known how to work her charms on the opposite sex from an early age), and Liam had left for England to work in construction a week after his sixteenth birthday. Now they were lucky if they got a phone call from him at Christmas and they never knew if he was living in Liverpool, Bristol or Dubai! Only Molly had stayed at home, knowing she couldn't leave the younger ones alone with their dad. But Shane was almost seventeen now. And he'd done so well at school, even staying on to do his exams, that he made Molly feel proud. He was almost a man, she supposed – already taller and stronger than their father. Next year Shane would go to college and then it would be down to him. But Shane was smart and level-headed so Molly had no doubt that her younger brother would succeed in life without any help from her.

The twins were the problem. Caitlin and Joey were a year younger than Shane. Caitlin was young for her age and painfully shy. She didn't have many friends and she relied heavily on Molly for support. Joey, on the other hand, had

more than his fair share of confidence. Unlike his sister, he also had plenty of friends – just not the type of friends that would do him any good. Joey had got into a bad crowd lately and kept getting into trouble with the Garda. Just minor stuff – throwing stones at cars, setting litter bins on fire, smoking weed at the bus stop – but it was enough to make Molly fret about where the hell Joey was headed in life. The twins were too much for their nan. She was getting old now and she should be putting her feet up, not having to go down to the police station to collect Joey in the middle of the night.

So there was Molly Costello, twenty-one years old – a straight-A student who could have gone to any university of her choice, according to her disappointed teachers – still cleaning rooms at the Dublin Court Hotel, still living at home, being a mother to her younger siblings and a housewife to her drunken dad. She wasn't one to feel sorry for herself, or to compare herself to others, but sometimes Molly had to wonder if life was fair, especially when she saw the girls her age who stayed at the hotel with their swishy hair, their beautiful clothes, their high-heeled shoes and nothing to do all day but go shopping on Grafton Street with their daddy's credit cards.

Molly shut the door to Room 242, wiped the sweat from her brow and took a deep breath. There, the first part of her day was done. Now it was time to get back to Balymun, tidy the flat, go to the supermarket, make lunch for her dad and sandwiches for Shane and the twins, ready for them to eat when they got home from school. Then it would be back onto the bus into the city centre ready for the late shift. She'd work until eight, get home again at nine and do more housework until she finally collapsed into the bed she shared with Caitlin at around half past ten. At three-thirty a.m.

the alarm would go off and Groundhog Day would begin all over again. Was it any wonder she was dead on her feet this morning?

In the staff locker room Molly chatted to the other girls. The maids were mainly Eastern European and their lives seemed to be as hectic and exhausting as Molly's, so there was a shared camaraderie in the locker room, despite the differences in the girls' backgrounds. Molly changed out of her uniform and back into her jeans and anorak. She let her long hair down and applied some lip balm to her chapped lips – it was the nearest she got to wearing make-up. What was the point of making an effort? Whom did Molly Costello have to impress? She called goodbye to the girls, told them she'd see them later, threw her backpack over one shoulder and let herself out the staff exit at the back of the hotel.

It was a cold, damp December morning in Dublin. Temple Bar was busy with Christmas shoppers, who wrapped their coats around their bodies against the wind and kept their faces cast down at the pavement to protect themselves as best they could from the freezing drizzle. Molly shivered in her thin anorak and wished she'd worn her good winter coat instead. She didn't know why she left it hanging on the back of her door, unworn. It just seemed too good to waste on the Number Four bus. But where else was she going to wear it? She never went out anywhere except to work and she was freezing in this stupid cast-off of Nula's.

Molly cast her own face downwards and made her way round the side of the hotel. She always crossed the road before she passed the hotel's grand front entrance. She did it instinctively, out of respect. Molly was a chambermaid and had no place walking in the path of hotel guests as they arrived in their taxis from the train station and the airport. She looked up briefly and waved to Billy, the doorman, from

across the street. He was standing just outside the foyer, ever so smart in his dark green uniform, holding a large golf umbrella, bearing the hotel logo, to shield the arriving and departing guests from the rain. He nodded in recognition and smiled but couldn't wave back. They all knew their positions in the hotel hierarchy and it wouldn't be right for the doorman to be seen waving to an off-duty chambermaid, despite the fact he was her cousin, and the one who'd got her the job in the first place.

Molly started to look away from the foyer but something in the corner of her eye made her turn back round to look for a second time. An elderly gentleman stood outside the hotel, just beyond Billy. Molly was used to seeing classy-looking businessmen at the hotel but this man was different. He wore a pale linen suit, a panama hat, tan brogues and a serene smile on his tanned face. He had no overcoat and yet seemed completely oblivious to the cold and the rain. His hair, which was thick and long enough to poke out from beneath his hat, was white and fluffy and Molly could see, even from across the street, that his eyes were unusually pale. He was tall, although he stooped a little, and broad-shouldered. He had the air of someone very, very important. Molly wondered if he might be famous. There was something vaguely familiar about his warm, open face but she couldn't pinpoint exactly where she'd seen him before. Not at the hotel, she didn't think. She would have remembered him. He was so unusual that she felt sure she would never have forgotten this guest.

The man stood smiling, almost glowing, in his pale linen clothes. In the sea of grey shoppers, he stood out like some sort of angel. He looked completely at odds with his surroundings and yet, Molly thought, it was everybody else who looked *wrong*. Molly hesitated, mesmerised by the stranger.

She watched as he placed his brown leather briefcase on the damp pavement and took a mobile phone out of his inside jacket pocket. He looked just like the man from that advert when she was a kid. Yes, she remembered – the Man from Del Monte! Molly smiled to herself, took one last look at the fascinating elderly gentleman and hoped that maybe she'd see him again when she came back for the late shift. She dragged her eyes away a little reluctantly and started on down the street.

She'd barely taken two steps when she heard a commotion across the road. As she turned round she could hear Billy shout, 'Oi! Stop, you thieving toe-rag!' And then she saw the skinheaded youth, with a brown leather briefcase in his arms, running straight towards her. Molly didn't really have time to think. She just stretched out her leg, hooked her foot around the lad's shin, held it there for a moment so that she knew she'd got him properly, and then she watched him fall, bam, right on his stupid, ugly face, before he had a chance to put his arms up to protect himself. It was a manoeuvre she'd used plenty of times on her younger brothers and, as always, it worked a treat. The briefcase skidded across the wet pavement. As Molly ran towards it, the thief started scrambling to his feet. He had blood gushing from his nose and he was *not* happy with Molly.

'Leave that alone, you fecking little bitch,' he shouted at her. 'You touch that and I'll kill you, you hear me? I'll fecking kill you.'

Molly wasn't scared of boys like this – with their skinheads, their scars, their tattoos and their piercings. She'd grown up surrounded by them, been to school with them, been bullied and taunted and harassed by them her whole damned life. They annoyed the hell out of her. But they certainly didn't scare her. She ignored him and grabbed for the

briefcase, elbowing him in the stomach as she did so. The boy was younger than her, and skinny as a malnourished greyhound, but he was a good deal taller and stronger than Molly. He grabbed her by the hair, jerked her head right back so hard that her neck clicked. He punched her in the side of the ribs, grabbed her hands, and tried to prise her fingers off the case so hard that she thought he might break them. She could feel her nails snapping off at the quick as she desperately tried to hold onto it. Then, just as her grip began to loosen, Billy was there, laying into the lad and pulling him off Molly.

Molly found herself in the middle of a three-way street brawl. Billy and the thief were trading punches and kicks so viciously and violently that she had to put the briefcase over her head to protect herself. Still, she got caught in the middle a few times, punched and stamped on, mainly by the thief but also by an over-zealous Billy. Every time the yob got the chance, he'd try to grab the case back from Molly. She tried to get to her feet and back away but he came after her and this time he gave her one almighty punch straight to the face. After that it was a blur. Molly could hear shouting, and the hideous crunching sound of knuckles on bone, but her head was spinning and she was on the ground and people were calling out, 'Are you OK there, darlin'? Do you need an ambulance, pet?'

It took a while for the world to stop spinning and for Molly to catch her breath and open her one good eye (the other one had already swollen up so badly that she couldn't see out of it). She looked up. Above her, peering down with grave faces of concern were Billy and the man in the panama hat.

'It's OK, I'm not dead,' said Molly, trying to force a reassuring smile. 'And I think I've still got all my teeth. Did

you get him? The thieving bugger?' she asked Billy hopefully.

Billy shook his head forlornly. 'The fecking scrawny little weasel managed to wriggle out of my grip,' he said through gritted teeth, obviously gutted to have let the thief get away.

Molly felt for him. He was so proud of his job and here he was now, bruised, battered and defeated with his uniform all torn.

'Ach well, not to worry.' Molly struggled to sit up. 'He'll get his comeuppance. The likes of him always do and at least I managed to hold onto this.'

She handed the now rather battered brown leather briefcase to the elderly gentleman.

'I really am quite stuck for words, young lady,' said the gentleman in the most beautifully polished, old-fashioned and campest English accent that Molly had ever heard. 'And if you knew me, you would also know that that is a most unusual occurrence.'

He doffed his hat at her and bowed. 'Gabriel Abbot,' he said. 'And I am for ever at your service, Miss …?'

'Molly,' she grinned through her pain. 'Molly Costello.'

Gabriel Abbot. Why was that name familiar?

'Well, Miss Molly Costello, how can I ever repay you? This briefcase is very, very dear to me. And the contents are quite irreplaceable. No, no, don't try to get up, my dear. There's an ambulance on its way.'

'Ach, don't go worrying about me,' Molly said. 'It's not the first time I've got myself beaten up and I'm certain it won't be the last. Mr Abbot here hasn't met my daddy, has he, Billy?'

'No, I doubt very much Mr Abbot has ever met the likes of your da,' said Billy with a grimace. Molly's dad was not popular with her mother's side of the family.

After that it all got a bit blurry again. The paramedics arrived and Molly drifted in and out of consciousness as she was put on a stretcher, into the ambulance and then taken to hospital. Hours later, still aching and mildly concussed, Molly was sitting in her hospital bed, wondering if her throbbing head could cope with watching a bit of telly. She'd had her eyebrow stitched, her fingers put in splints, X-rays done on her ribs (which were thankfully not broken, just badly bruised), and now it was over she was thinking that it had been a dramatic way of getting a few hours' rest, and avoiding the late shift.

'You've got a visitor here, Molly,' said one of the nurses, disturbing her from her thoughts.

Molly looked up, expecting to see her nan. But instead, there was Mr Gabriel Abbot, still in his pale suit, carrying the largest bunch of pink lilies Molly had ever seen. He sat on the edge of her bed for a while, poured her water, offered her posh chocolates, asked her about her job and her family. He told her that he owned a hotel on a tropical island in the Caribbean, that he'd been in Dublin on business, and that tomorrow he was heading back to the sunshine. He kept telling her how eternally grateful he would be to her and repeatedly asked her if he could give her a reward.

'Ah, get away,' she scoffed. 'I didn't do it for a reward, Mr Abbot. I did it because it was the right thing to do. Anyone would've done what I did if they'd been standing in my shoes.'

'No, Molly.' Mr Abbot shook his head. 'Unfortunately that couldn't be further from the truth.'

When he left, he handed Molly his business card and made her promise if there was ever anything he could do for her then she was to get in touch. He touched her gently on the top of her head before he left and the compassionate

look in those pale blue eyes told her that he meant every word he said.

The card was green with a modern sketch of a palm tree on it. The writing said:

Paradise
Boutique Hotel
St Barthélemy, French West Indies
Mr Gabriel Abbot Esquire, Proprietor

It was three weeks later that it happened: the week between Christmas and New Year. Things had been going from bad to worse. Joey's behaviour had spiralled out of control. He'd been in a fight, he'd been caught shoplifting, the Garda had stopped him and his gang again, vandalising a graveyard this time – ach, the shame of it! – while completely plastered and out of their tiny minds on God knows what drugs. Then, finally, he'd been caught joyriding a stolen car, also while drunk and high. Joey Costello had spent Christmas on remand at St Patrick's Young Offender's Institute and Molly was going out of her mind with worry.

Meanwhile, Francis Costello dealt with his son's incarceration by losing his job – again – and rolling in paralytic after another twelve-hour drinking session. Molly had had enough.

'You can see where our Joey gets it, can't you, da?' she said as he tripped over the rug and crashed into the mantelpiece.

Molly stared, disgusted, as her father swayed unsteadily in front of her, gripping the mantelpiece for support. His clothes were stained and soiled. He stank of stale booze and cigarettes. His eyes rolled in his head and his tongue darted in and out of his open mouth as if he could neither focus nor speak. He lifted his finger up to point at Molly, obviously