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The Heart Whisperer

Written by Ella Griffin

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The Heart Whisperer

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Prologue

The woman looked out at Claire from a long-forgotten sunny afternoon. Her hair was the burnished copper of an expensive saucepan. She wore a man's blue and white striped shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a white cheesecloth skirt. The hem was tucked up into the waistband to reveal her long pale legs. Her feet were bare. She was using an upturned tennis racket as a cricket bat, bending over it, grinning up through the curtain of her hair, waiting for the ball.

Claire looked a lot like the woman in the photograph. They both had the same almost translucent Irish skin. The same cinnamon-coloured hair. The same wide, dark green eyes. The same fair eyebrows and eyelashes. But the woman was a fraction taller and half a stone lighter. Her hair was straight and silky, not a tangle of curls. She didn't have a small gap between her top front teeth or a blur of freckles across her nose and cheekbones. And there were other differences too – ones that a camera couldn't capture. Claire's life was going nowhere but the woman had everything to live for. And though they were both thirty-three, Maura would never make it to thirty-four. And that was Claire's fault.

Part One

1

Mossy, Claire's ancient Citroën 2CV, shuddered, backfired twice, then shot past a cyclist on the Ranelagh Road. Ray saw his outraged face in the wing mirror before it disappeared in a cartoon puff of blue exhaust fumes. Claire gripped the steering wheel. 'Are you sure you didn't have plans?'

'Sure I'm sure.' Till an hour ago, Ray had plans that included Liza, the blonde yoga teacher who was still asleep when Claire had finally given up texting him and climbed up the fire escape to tap on his window.

'It's an emergency,' he had said, hurrying Liza back into her clothes. 'My best friend. Death in the family.' Which was true, though the death had happened twenty-seven years ago.

Mossy shot past a coach that was pulling away from a bus-stop. Ray's foot pumped an imaginary brake pedal and something caught under his heel. It was a broken windscreen wiper, the rubber frayed, the spindly metal arm gritty with rust.

He picked up the other one. 'BTW, these are supposed to be on the outside of the car.'

'FYI, they were, until some gouger pulled them off last week. Why is Mossy such a magnet for delinquents?'

Ray didn't know where to begin. The heat was activating his tequila hangover and Mossy's BO, a gut-churning blend of petrol fumes and vegetative matter from the sagging soft top. He tried to roll down his window but the handle was stuck so he switched to breathing through his mouth.

Claire turned around and stared at him as if they were sitting on a sofa and not belted into a rusting metal death-trap hurtling through suburban Dublin. 'You're panting.'

'I'm fine,' he croaked.

'Oh God,' Claire looked back at the road and bit her lip. 'I wish Nick wasn't going to be there. I could handle this if it was just me and Dad.'

Her hair had that obstreperous look it always got when she was upset. Her narrow shoulders were hunched up so far they were practically touching her ears. Ray was glad he was here and not on the road with his mobile turning into a fiery little brick in his hand while he tried to talk her down off the ceiling. Birthdays were hard for Claire but he'd get her through this. No matter where he was, he always did.

They swung off the Milltown Road, clipping a kerb, and he watched the familiar, neat rows of the semi-d's slip past. Hawthorn Crescent, Hawthorn Close, Hawthorn Lane. Nothing had changed.

There was the low wall by the bus-stop where he used to wait for Claire after school, and the narrow laneway that led across a football field to the railway tracks where they used to smoke. And there was Lennon's corner shop where Ray had once been caught by Beaky Lennon sneaking a tin of beans he'd taken from his mother's cupboard on to a shelf. Reverse shoplifting. Jesus, he hadn't thought of that for years.

A couple of bikes were flung on the grass beneath the chestnut tree on the green in front of the row of shops, and two figures were starfished on the grass where he and Claire used to lie on hot summer days when there was nothing to do.

Nostalgia, sharp as a fish-hook, caught in his throat. Nearly twenty years had flashed past. How had that happened?

He flipped the sun visor down and peered into the speckled mirror. There were two faint lines running from the side of his nose to the corners of his mouth but he looked pretty good for someone who'd only had four hours' sleep.

Claire pulled over and switched the engine off and they sat listening to a dog barking and the distant whine of a lawnmower. The sound of the suburbs, Ray thought. He looked across the road and there was his old house. He half expected to see his father's Corolla in the drive but his folks had moved to Malaga fifteen years ago.

'You could have warned me that there were Dora the Explorer curtains in my bedroom window.' He glanced at Claire. Not even a smile. 'You want me to come in with you?'

She shook her head and opened the door but stayed where she was, zipping her small gold locket back and forth on its chain and staring into her lap.

'I've got a new one for you!' Ray drummed on the dashboard with the broken wipers and sang the chorus of 'Addicted to Love', changing the words to 'you're a duck with a glove'.

'Ha, ha,' Claire said very quietly.

'That's got to be worth three "ha"s.'

'Ha!' she whispered.

Claire closed the front door and let the atmosphere of the house settle round her. The trailing ivy on the porch had swallowed up all the June sunshine and the narrow hall was murky. She always felt sorry for the house – it had been cheated of the life it should have had. Years of sadness and silence seemed to have soaked into the peeling paint and the faded carpets. Almost nothing had been changed since her mother had opened this door for the last time.

Her dad was standing at the kitchen window. Claire had given him plenty of new shirts over the years but today he was wearing the old blue one with frayed cuffs. His long, thinning grey hair was caught under the collar. There was a tiny piece of tissue stuck to his chin. He must have cut himself shaving.

'Dad!' He didn't move. 'Dad!'

'Sorry. I was listening to something on the radio.' He pulled an earphone out of his ear. He smiled and his grey eyes met hers for a moment and then dipped away and she felt a low ache under her ribs. The spreading bruise of guilt. 'Do you want some tea?' He held up his cup. 'I just made some.'

'Nick will be waiting, we should go.' She took his mug. It was full but stone cold. 'I've got Ray with me.'

'Ray,' he said vaguely, as if he was having trouble placing him. Sometimes Claire worried that her dad was losing his memory, then she reminded herself that he'd been like this for most of her life. There, but not really *there*.

He went over to the sink and gathered up a bunch of lilac that was on the draining board. He always brought her mother flowers, even after all this time. 'I don't suppose Nicholas would like it if I brought Dog,' he said. There was a sudden scrabbling of claws on the lino and a huge, shaggy grey head appeared from under the table. Claire backed away to the door. Dog had moved in twelve years ago, two weeks after she had moved out. Some kids had tied him to a shopping trolley with a bent coat hanger and he'd been crashing around the supermarket car park damaging the cars and scaring the customers. Her dad had untied him and they'd been inseparable ever since.

Dog looked as if he should be gnawing a huge bone in front of a baronial fireplace instead of lurking in a small suburban kitchen. He yawned and stretched and Claire inched a little farther out into the hall, but he didn't even bother to look at her. Dog had stopped trying to win her over years ago. Instead he ambled over to her dad and tucked his head under his arm for a cuddle and Claire wondered, again, why her dad was able to show more affection to a hairy lurcher than he was to his children.

Kelly stood a little way off beneath a stand of trees to give the Dillons space. They were queuing at the end of a long row of upright headstones like people waiting in a bank teller's line.

Nick was at the front, the peonies she'd picked from their garden a blaze of crimson against his white shirt. His dad was standing a few feet behind him holding a bunch of wilting lilac. Then there was Nick's sister Claire, tugging at her tangle of red hair, shifting from foot to foot in her too-short grey dress and her too-high strappy sandals. Claire hadn't brought flowers. She'd brought the guy who was hanging round the gate of the cemetery dressed from head to foot in black.

'This is Ray,' she'd said in the awkward moment when they'd met outside and Kelly had thought, 'No way!' Her old college room mate, Haru, used to have a screen saver of Ray Devine. 'Smoke Covered Horses' had, as they said, been big in Japan. They'd broken up a few years back but he was still rocking the bad boy look with the Aviators and the carefully messed-up black hair. When she was at high school, he was exactly the kind

of guy she'd daydreamed about but she'd grown out of that pretty fast.

Kelly had gotten pretty good at guessing what kind of places people lived in and she was willing to bet her last dollar that his had black sheets and Helmut Newton nudes and framed pictures of himself in the bathroom.

She looked at her husband with his close-cut sandy hair and his broad, solid back and her heart did a little flip of relief and gratitude. There was nothing boyish about Nick. He was all man.

Nick put the peonies down by the headstone, relieved to be free of them. There was something mawkish about bringing flowers when he could hardly bear to be here at all. He turned away and walked over to where Kelly was waiting. Just looking at her in her light linen dress with her long, dark hair loose was like having a long, cool drink of water. 'Hi,' he said.

'Hi.' She slid her sunglasses down so he could see her eyes.

'Wherever she is,' she whispered, 'I know your mom is really proud of you.' The flinch was almost invisible, but she caught it. 'Are you okay?'

'I just need a couple of minutes of us-time before lunch.'

'Sure.' She took his arm. Nick was edgy about seeing his family and Kelly got that. Her parents reminded her of parts of herself she'd rather forget. She had moved to New York to get away from her past. And then crossed an ocean, just to be sure.

Claire watched them hurry along the path to the gate, the perfect stranger who used to be her brother and his perfect wife. She had thought, when Nick first moved back to Dublin, that he was coming home, but this was only the second time she'd seen him in nearly a year. She didn't blame him. He couldn't help it. She looked back down at the grave. It wasn't just her mother who was buried beneath the rectangle of granite chippings, it was all of them, the family they would have been if she were still here.

Her dad unwrapped the stems of wilting lilac and put them down on the gravel. 'Well . . .' He turned, talking to the air just

behind her shoulder, saying what he said every year. 'I'm just going to see if I can find Phil Lynott's marker.'

There was a blank in Claire's mind where the funeral should have been. The first time she could remember coming to the graveyard was on her seventh birthday. She remembered sitting on the bottom step of the stairs and holding her feet up, one by one, so Nick could tie the buckles of her red sandals, the ones with the daisy pattern punched into the toe.

He had told her that they were going to visit their mum so she had thought that they were going to heaven because that was where everyone said that her mother had gone.

She had stood just here, holding Nick's hand, looking around at the strange stones that stuck up out of the ground and the heaps of wet clay and the faded plastic flowers under dusty plastic domes. She had been expecting angels with harps and white clouds. Why was everything so dirty? When was her mum going to appear so they could all go home?

She bent down now and touched the silver inscription on the slim, white marble headstone.

Maura Dillon (née McHugh)
Died 1st June 1983
Aged 33.
Beloved wife of Tom and mother of Claire and Nicholas.
'Tread carefully, for you tread on my dreams.'

She rearranged the flowers, fanning the stems out so that they covered the gravel. What had her mum's dreams been? What did you dream about when you had everything to live for?

Nick took a moment before he opened the door. He had lost it there for a minute in the graveyard but he felt calmer after the drive back with Kelly. He grounded himself with an affirmation. 'Nothing can harm me when I am guided by my higher self.'

'Nicholas.' The old man shuffled past without looking at him and disappeared into the living room. The distant roar of a crowd at a football stadium drifted out into the hall from the TV.

'Little boys' room?' Devine bounded past him and up the stairs.

Probably to snort a line of coke, Nick thought. What was his sister doing still hanging around with that lowlife? He watched Claire locking her decrepit old car and wobbling up the short driveway in her ridiculous shoes.

'Look,' he said, trying to sound pleasant, 'I don't want to cause conflict but it's really not OK to invite a stranger into my house without asking.'

Claire flushed. They would be at her dad's house if Nick hadn't insisted on having lunch here, and Ray was practically family. 'I'll check with you next time.' Nick closed the door and she followed him down the hall to the kitchen.

The walls and the open shelves were painted French greys and greens. A pretty chandelier hung over a table and some carefully mismatched antique chairs. There was a bottle of white wine chilling in a silver bucket on the table. She was dying for a drink but she needed to pace herself.

Kelly was in the garden putting up a parasol and Claire was relieved when Nick went out help her. There were a dozen photographs mounted in white frames on the wall. Nick and Kelly in a rowing boat, in a forest, in a hammock, on bicycles, in ski gear. She scanned them until she found the one she was looking for – a black and white shot taken on the steps of the City Clerk's Office in New York. Claire had never seen a picture of their wedding. There was Kelly in a short, elegant white dress. Nick in a dark suit grinning. It made her tearful to see him look that happy but it made her happy too.

Shit! Ray thought, looking at the hunch of Claire's shoulders. She was on a downward spiral. He pulled the wine bottle out of the ice bucket and held it like a microphone. 'And they call it . . .' he sang, '. . . yuppy luh-uh-uh-uve.'

'Shh!' She pointed at the garden. 'They'll hear you.' He handed her the wine and she took a quick gulp. 'What's that on your face?'

'Nothing.' He rubbed it in. It was a blob of Dr Sebagh's Serum. He'd had a little rummage in the antique cabinet in the bathroom. Kelly had great skin. He peered at a photograph of her in a pair of hiking shorts. She had great everything. Old Nick hadn't done too

badly for himself. 'I caught Miss America checking me out in the graveyard.'

'Don't,' Claire jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow, 'even think about flirting with her.'

Ray put his hands up. 'I'll behave, I promise.'

Kelly was trying to be nice, Claire could see that, but she thought that lunch would never end. Drinking in the sunshine always gave her a headache and just looking at her sister-in-law made her feel exhausted. Kelly was three years younger than she was but she made Claire feel like a scruffy teenager. She was so perfect, so polished, so completely unruffled by her dad's monosyllabic answers and Ray's little in-jokes and the fact that Nick seemed irritated by everything.

She sat there in her linen dress sipping soda water, chatting about books and films and exhibitions as if they were normal people, as if this was just an ordinary Sunday lunch. What had Nick told her, Claire wondered, about the accident? When they were growing up, he couldn't talk about their mother at all.

'You've hardly touched your salmon, Tom,' Kelly said now. 'Can I fix you something else?'

'No, I'm fine, thank you.' Her dad stood up. 'I might just go inside for a while.' He went back into the house and, after a moment, the sound of the TV drifted out into the garden again.

'Tom Dillon. A man of few words.' Ray put down his napkin. 'And most of them are "I'm fine".'

'Poor Dad,' Claire said quietly, and Nick felt a hard knot of frustration gather in his stomach. The old man wasn't some tragic figure nursing a broken heart, he was a fraud.

'Honey,' Kelly leaned over and laced her fingers through his, 'you haven't told Claire your news! Nick's going to be doing a regular spot as a Couples Coach on the *OO in the Afternoon* show. He's designed a relationship fitness programme. Isn't that fantastic?'

'Way to go!' Ray smirked. 'Love the radio show.' He sometimes listened to Nick's agony uncle slot on Fish FM just so he could wind Claire up about it. He'd text her messages saying

things like 'love is a verb, not a noun' and 'you've got to be friends to be lovers'.

Claire kicked him under the table. 'That's fantastic news. I probably won't see it because I'll be at work.'

Ray kicked her back. 'I can record it for you.'

'Sounds like you're busy, Claire?' A tiny diamond on a fine chain sparkled on Kelly's collarbone. 'What have you been up to?'

'Um,' Claire's hand went to her locket; she pressed the small gold disc between her finger and her thumb, 'nothing really.'

Ray refilled her glass. 'That's not true. You did that short film and that corporate video thing and you had a couple of days on *Forensic* last month.'

'But it wasn't really acting.' Claire flushed. Extra work didn't require an audition or up-to-date head shots or an explanation for a three-year gap in an acting résumé. You were a face in the crowd of football fans in a freezing stadium, cheering an empty pitch, or a customer in a restaurant picking at the same cold plate of food over and over while the real actors got their lines right. 'I was just a blur in the background.'

'I'm sure you're just being modest.'

'Modesty is Claire's middle name.' Ray leaned over and patted Claire's hand. She laughed and swatted him away.

Nick stood up and began to collect the plates. Maura was Claire's middle name, and if he had to look at Ray Devine's smug face for one more minute he thought he might punch it. Ray was the one who'd encouraged Claire to go to drama school instead of doing medicine or teaching, and now she was in her thirties, broke, with no career prospects, living like a student, and she seemed to think it was a big joke. He dropped a pile of forks into the salad bowl with a clatter.

'Do you want a hand?' Kelly asked him softly.

He shook his head. 'I'm fine.' Christ, he thought, he sounded just like the old man. The kitchen was cool after the heat of the garden. He stood at the sink Seven-Eleven breathing, trying to slow his heart rate. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this overwhelmed.

After a minute, Claire came inside with the serving dishes. She

put them down on the draining board. She had taken off her shoes under the table; her toenails were painted purple and chipped. 'Did I say something to upset you?'

'I just don't think there's anything funny about the fact that your career is going down the pan.'

'Neither do I.' She turned away and began to scrape salad leaves into the bin. 'But it's tough out there. There's a recession. Budgets are being slashed.'

Claire had always been a terrible liar. He looked at her now. Barefoot, she only just came up to his shoulder. She seemed almost childlike, but she wasn't a kid any more. She was thirty-three. 'I just think that maybe it's time to name the elephant.'

'What?' She was washing her hands. She smiled at him over her shoulder.

'The huge issue that you're pretending doesn't exist.'

'Which is?'

What was he doing? He had spent the first half of his life trying to fix Claire. He was supposed to be done with all that. But apparently he wasn't. 'That you don't have what it takes for a cut-throat world like acting.' Claire's smile faded. 'I'm sure you have talent, but you don't have the . . .' He searched for the word. '. . . resilience.' *The ability to recover from setback and cope with rejection.* Claire had always been too soft. Too quick to give up and give in. She was doing it now.

'I didn't come in here for a coaching session. I came in to say I was sorry . . .'

'Are we all supposed to just stand here and watch you throwing your life away? What's wrong with you, Claire?'

She flinched as if he'd slapped her.

He tried to sound professional, as if she was a client instead of his sister. 'Look, it's not rocket science. If what you do isn't working, change it. If you can't change it, do something else. Don't let your fear keep you stuck. Do one thing that scares you every day.'

'Can she do the one thing that scares you,' Ray Devine was standing in the doorway, glaring at him, 'instead?'

*

'Damn!' Kelly said, after everyone was gone. 'I totally forgot!' She went over to the fridge and brought out a glass stand with a cake on it. 'I made this for Claire.'

It was perfect, like everything she put her hand to. White-iced and tied with a red satin ribbon. There was a black icing stiletto with a red sole standing on the top.

Nick had a flashback to walking down to Lennon's shop to buy Claire a cake after they got back from the graveyard that first year. He didn't remember what kind of cake he'd bought. He just knew that none of them had eaten it.

Kelly put the cake back in the fridge. 'Honey, you look stressed. Why don't we go upstairs and Two-Listen?'

Nick shook his head. He was too burned out to talk. Whenever he was around Claire and the old man, all the years of therapy disappeared. He regressed to being a teenager, trying to fix everything again and failing. 'Can we just Hug Until Close?'

'Sure.'

He took her in his arms and they stood in the middle of the kitchen holding on to one another for a long time and Nick forced himself to focus on the moment. The way their breathing slowly synchronised. The weight of her hair on his bare arm, the warmth of her body through his shirt. She was his family now, this beautiful woman, not the messed-up girl and the monosyllabic old man. That was all that mattered.

'Jesus,' Ray said. 'Is it not enough that your brother is the King of Psychobabble? Does he have to win the prize for World's Biggest Shit too?'

'It's not his fault.' Claire was jiggling the key in the lock of the door in the laneway.

Claire's capacity to live with broken things astonished Ray. Her taps dripped. Her water pipes howled. She had no letter 'P' on the keyboard of her laptop. Once, Mossy had lost reverse for two months and she'd just driven around Dublin, parking on corners.

'Let me do that.' Ray took the key and gave the door a sharp kick. A flake of faded green paint chipped off but the door swung open. He followed Claire through the tiny, nettle-choked garden

and down the steps to the door of her basement flat. 'Your place or mine?'

Claire shook her head. 'I've had it with today.' They went inside and she kicked off her shoes and switched on the fairy lights that were looped above the old-fashioned kitchen presses.

'Come on. One mojito? Or a manhattan or margarita.' They were supposed to be working their way through the A to Z of cocktails but they'd been stuck on 'M' for months.

Claire sank down on to a folding IKEA chair, put her elbows on the table and rubbed her eyes with her fingers. 'I'm supposed to go to an open casting first thing tomorrow.'

'For what?'

She took a baggy sweatshirt off the back of the chair and pulled it on over her head. 'That new costume drama, *The Spaniard*,' she said from underneath it. Her head reappeared, her hair springing out like corkscrews. 'I think Lorcan sent me the email by mistake.'

Ray leaned against the draining board and folded his arms. If Claire was really going to start going back to auditions, this was not a good time to do it. 'Are you sure you're able for a cattle-call?' he said carefully.

She tugged the sweatshirt down over her knees and hugged them. 'I'm not sure of anything,' she said.

'Tell you what, skip the casting, let's do Muckanaghederdauhaulia. I'll make a mix-tape.' Claire loved road trips and Ray had a thing about visiting randomly named Irish villages. Thermonfeckin, Emo, Bastardstown, Camp.

Claire tugged the sweatshirt sleeves down over her knuckles. 'I don't know.'

'It means "a piggery between two briny places". And I'm not leaving you here on your own unless you say "yes".' He began to sing, loudly. 'I've been to paradise, but I've never been to Meath.' Muckanaghederdauhaulia was in Galway but that didn't scan.

'OK!' Claire put her hands over her ears.

'Hey.' He went over and put his hands on her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. 'It's over for another year.'

Claire waited till the door that connected her flat to Ray's apartment had closed. She listened to him bounding up the stairs, then,

when she was sure he wasn't going to come back down again, she got up, opened a bottle of wine and found a glass, then went up the three shallow steps and along the narrow hall to her bedroom.

It was still bright outside. She could see a tiny triangle of blue sky tinged with pink at the top of her window but the raised front garden blocked out most of the light. She turned on her bedside lamp and knelt on the floor. She opened the bottom drawer of the mahogany dressing table, took the lid off the box that was inside and spread them all out on the rug by her bed – all the things she had taken from her dad's room over the years. Things she knew he'd wouldn't miss.

The empty Consulate packet. The round wooden hairbrush with a few coppery hairs still caught in the bristles. The glass Opium bottle with the gold and orange lid that still had an oily trickle of perfume in the bottom. The single Aran mitten with the scorch mark on the palm. The cream lace dress with the slippery lining. The stethoscope with the worn green rubber tubing. The tube of Coty 'Schiaparelli Pink' lipstick. The photographs in their fat little stack, held together with a thick plastic band.

Claire didn't look at photographs much any more, they couldn't be trusted, not even the one in the silver frame she kept on her bedside table. She didn't really remember the day they'd played cricket in the garden but for years, she thought she had. Photographs superimposed themselves over the fragile impressions of her own memories.

The tiny flecks of yellow in her mum's dark green eyes. The way she smelled of Opium and Juicy Fruit chewing gum and menthol cigarettes. The static crackle when she brushed her hair. The contradiction between the serious, preoccupied doctor and the light-hearted, mischievous mother who sometimes came out to play. Who teased and tickled and double-dared. Who sculpted Claire's soapy hair into Mohicans and devil-horns at bath time and scooped her into her lap and sang 'Clair de Lune' and 'Oh Claire', making up entire verses when she didn't remember the words. Who would suddenly decide, on a sunny afternoon, to close up her surgery and pick Claire up from Montessori and take her on magical mystery drives.

Nothing compared to that feeling of having her mum, who was

usually so busy and important, all to herself. Claire was the navigator and she was allowed to say which way they went. 'Left or right?' her mum would say at the end of the street, laughing. 'Quick, make up your mind!' And Claire would be so excited that she almost felt sick.

Where did they go on those drives? All she had were hazy fragments. A shop where her mum tried on clothes behind a curtain while she sat on a blue velvet stool pressing her fingertips against the brass buttons. The grey ribbon of a country road. A restaurant with a huge gilt-framed mirror where she had a whole banana split to herself. She could still feel the weight of the heavy silver spoon in her hand, see the beads of condensation on the frosted glass dish.

Claire poured another glass of wine and slipped her hand into the Aran mitten. She didn't remember where the other one had gone or how this one had gotten the scorch mark but she had never forgotten the night her mum had come into her bedroom with her red coat over her nightdress and carried her downstairs wrapped in her duvet. The back door was already open and the air outside was a feathery blur of white. There were footprints leading out to a blanket spread out on the glistening lawn. She could still remember the surprise and the heart-stopping beauty of the garden. It must have been the first time she'd seen snow.

They had snuggled together on the blanket, one mitten each, their knees drawn up to their chins, their faces turned up to the whirl of slowly falling snow, catching flakes on their tongues.

It must have been cold but all Claire remembered was the sound of their laughter in the quiet garden. The thrill of being awake in the middle of the night. The feeling that whenever she was with her mum, something wonderful was going to happen.

Another, darker memory came to the surface of her mind and she pushed it down again. A sunny afternoon, six months later on her seventh birthday. Her mum sitting in a garden chair, wearing a yellow summer dress, looking at her over her sunglasses. 'What is wrong with you, Claire?'

She was still asking herself the same question, twenty-seven years later. She picked up the hairbrush and looked at the coppery hairs caught in the bristles. Each one of them held a DNA

blueprint of her mum, a complete map of who she had been. All Claire had was a dozen memories, but they told her all she needed to know. There was nothing wrong with her mum. She had been perfect.

At seventeen, when Claire was hanging out on the riverbank with Ray, smoking and playing sweary Scrabble, her mum had been in medical school. In her twenties, when Claire was waiting for the big break that never happened and having her heart broken, she had been getting married and getting pregnant and setting up her own GP practice. At thirty-three, she had everything to live for, but hadn't had a proper acting job or a relationship for three years. She was barely scraping by.

The stethoscope was still looped around her neck. She kicked off her shoes and climbed onto the bed, slipped the little metal buds into her ears, slid the cold disc down under the neck of the sweatshirt, beneath her dress, and listened to the stubborn hammer of her heart. She was still here and her mother was gone. It wasn't fair.

When Claire woke up it was getting light again. Her leg was fizzing with pins and needles and her mouth tasted sour and vinegary. She took off the stethoscope, put everything carefully back into the box and closed the drawer and went to the bathroom. Ray must have been down in the night. There was a metal hanger with an FCUK gift voucher pinned to it hanging on the door handle and, beneath it, a tube of salt and vinegar Pringles with a jaunty pink birthday candle pushed into the lid.

She brushed her teeth and took off her make-up. She undressed and put on an old Smoke Covered Horses T-shirt that was hanging on the back of the door. She looked at her reflection in the mirror in the half-light from the hall, but it was her mother's face she saw. The tears she'd been holding back all yesterday came, but they weren't soft tears of sadness or of self-pity, they were tears of shame. Nick was right. How was she supposed to stand at the grave a year from now, knowing that she'd just wasted another year?

It was too late to try to be like her mother. That door had closed a long time ago. But she had to do something. She would give herself twelve months to try to salvage something from the

mess she had managed to make of her life. She had made promises like this before but this time she meant it. She blew her nose and went back into her bedroom and set the clock.

'Do one thing that scares you every day,' Nick had said. She could start by going to the open casting. It was three years since she'd been to an audition and, right now, she couldn't think of anything more terrifying.