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Just Between Us

Written by Cathy Kelly

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CATHY KELLY

Just Between Us

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To John, with love

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During the writing of this book, there were times when I seriously thought I wouldn't be able to finish it and toyed with the idea of an abrupt ending that involved everything suddenly working out in the space of two pages, with a classic *Scooby Doo* explanation of how it had all happened, and a final, speedy line such as 'and they all lived happily ever afterwards'.

Anyhow, thanks to lots of love and support from the people in my life, I clambered over the 'I-can't-finish-it/*Scooby Doo*' hump and finished *Just Between Us*. I think that's what acknowledgements are for: to say a profound thanks to the people who give encouragement, support and who listen patiently to the writer moaning about how awful the whole book is turning out. To other people, acknowledgements probably sound as corny as the acceptance speech at my TV soap awards ceremony, but they're from the heart.

So, from the heart:

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Finally, Ireland has lots of glorious places with gloriously Irish names, names that probably sound mad to other people but absolutely normal to us. Due to my constant fear of creating characters who coincidentally happen to have the same names as real people who live in the same place as in my book, I like to make up place names. I wrongly thought I'd made up the name Kinvara (don't ask me how) until I was in the supermarket and saw smoked salmon from a real place called Kinvara. Eeek.

And just in case, I asked people did they know of any other Kinvaras.

'Ah, sure there's loads of them,' I was told.

Double eek. Anyway, my Kinvara is my own invention and to make it different, I called it Kinvarra. And ditto Castletown, which is made up and is not one of the scores of Castletowns dotted around the place. Place names aside, I hope you enjoy *Just Between Us*.

JUST BETWEEN US

PROLOGUE: MARCH

Adele looked at the invitation and wondered exactly how much it would cost to print up at least a hundred such creamy, expensive cards. A fortune, she'd bet. It was the embossing that cost so much. And for all that it looked so nice, it was a waste of money.

There were perfectly acceptable invitations available in the newsagent's – ones that you filled in yourself – but clearly, run-of-the-mill invitations weren't good enough for her sister-in-law. But then, Rose had always had notions above her station.

Adele ran a deeply disapproving finger over the extravagant letters.

Rose & Hugh Miller have great pleasure in inviting Adele Miller to a lunch party to celebrate their Ruby Wedding Anniversary on Saturday, April 25th at Meadow Lodge, Kinvarra.

She scanned down to the dress code, which was 'smart casual', whatever *that* meant.

She'd wear one of her knitted suits, as she always did. She might be sixty-five, but she was proud of the fact that she was still trimmer than many women of her age. Maybe a shawl just in case it was cold, because it would only be April, and the party was going to be in a marquee and not in the actual house. Adele hadn't been keen on the idea of a marquee. Talk about a waste of money, not to mention delusions

of grandeur. Then Hugh had told her it had been his idea, which had suddenly made the whole plan sound like a great idea after all.

'A big party in the house could destroy the place, what with high heels digging into the wooden floors and red wine on the chairs, you know that, Della my love,' Hugh had said the previous week when he'd popped in on his way back from a meeting with a client in a nearby town. Adele had smiled fondly at her little brother as he tucked into the steak sandwich she'd made for him as a little treat. He was the only person in the world who still called her Della. Not that Adele would have permitted anyone else to call her by a pet name. Even the doctor she'd known for forty years was on pain of death to call her anything but Miss Miller. The cheeky pup of a postman had tried to call her by her first name once, but Adele had soon put a halt to his gallop. She wasn't one for modern ideas of familiarity.

But Hugh could call her any name he liked. Her darling brother could do no wrong.

'You've got to have a party for your fortieth wedding anniversary,' Hugh went on, munching his sandwich appreciatively. Hugh liked his food. He was a big man after all, and handsome, Adele thought, with that six-foot frame and the shock of silver hair. His hair had been an Arctic white-blond once, so he was truly a golden boy. All Adele's friends had been half in love with him all those years ago. If only she'd found a man like her brother, she might have married too, she thought wistfully.

She glanced down at the invitation. 'RSVP' it said. No time like the present.

Her sister-in-law answered on the third ring, sounding out of breath.

'Hi, Adele,' Rose said, 'I was just running the vacuum over the rugs. The place is such a mess.'

Adele thought this was highly unlikely. Her sister-in-law's home, eight miles away on the other side of the sprawling country town of Kinvarra, was always sparkling. And elegant

too. Although it irked Adele to admit it, Rose did have fabulous taste. Who else would have thought of knocking down all those internal walls to transform the rather dark reception rooms into a well-proportioned open-plan space? Adele preferred carpets herself, but the pale wooden floors with their muted rugs looked elegantly modern and fresh compared with the conservative dark maroon carpet that graced Adele's more traditional Victorian-style house.

'I got the invitation,' Adele said stiffly.

'Did you like it?' asked Rose. 'Hugh picked it. I feel a bit guilty spending so much, Adele. They've just laid off twenty more people in the tyre factory down the road, you know, and here we are having a big party with a marquee and caterers and flowers . . . The poverty action group is in serious need of funds and all this excess doesn't seem right . . .' Her voice trailed off but, in her indignation, Adele didn't notice.

'My brother's an important person in Kinvarra; people would think it odd if he didn't celebrate according to his status,' Adele said stiffly. 'They'd certainly think it was odd if you didn't have a grand party for your ruby anniversary.' Rose seemed to forget that the Miller family were pillars of the community. How would it look if they weren't seen to be doing things properly? People might talk. Adele was deeply against having people talk about the family.

'You're right, Adele,' Rose said lightly. 'I'm getting paranoid in my old age; I worry about the silliest things. I do hope you can make it? Hugh would be devastated if you couldn't. We all would be. It wouldn't be the same without you,' she added kindly.

Adele pursed her lips. This was not going as planned. She hadn't meant to endorse the whole event, certainly not without some reservations. But for Rose to even imply that she, Adele, might miss it! Her darling brother's party. By rights, no arrangements should have been made until she had been consulted. She was the oldest member of the Miller clan, three years older than Hugh. She *should* have been

consulted. What if she'd had something planned and couldn't manage the third Saturday in April?

'I must fly, Adele,' Rose was saying in that low, soft, accentless voice of hers. Adele often wondered how Rose had drilled the accent out of her speech. 'I've got another call coming in. Probably the florist. Thank you for calling so early, you are a love. Take care. Bye.'

And she was gone, leaving Adele as highly vexed as she usually was after conversations with her sister-in-law. Florist indeed. Far from florists Rose had been reared. The Miller family had always had lovely flowers in the house, of course. They'd had a maid, for God's sake, when nobody else in the country had one. But Rose came from a tumbledown house on some backroad in Wexford; a house with slates coming off the roof and plumbing out of the Ark. There hadn't been enough money for food in the Riordain house, never mind flowers. Marrying Hugh had been Rose's ticket out of there. Adele glowered at the phone. She had a good mind to phone back and point out that Rose could do the flowers herself and not waste money on a florist. Rose had a knack with flowers. As if in honour of her name, in summer there were always roses all over the place: blowsy yellow ones that matched the buttercup yellow walls and a big china bowl of riotous pink blooms which usually sat on a low, Scandinavian coffee table. All Rose ever did was to carelessly place a handpicked bouquet in a vase and the flowers all fell into place beautifully. She was the same when it came to clothes, thought Adele resentfully. The oldest white shirt looked elegantly informal on Rose Miller because she always had some trick of pinning her dark hair into a soft knot, or of hanging a strand of pearls around her neck, and then she looked instantly right.

Adele had spent years doing her best not to resent Rose. It hadn't been easy, for all that Rose was so kind to her. Kindness, like other people's happiness, could be very hard to deal with. And speaking of happiness, here was more proof of how lucky Rose was. She had a lovely home, three

grown-up daughters, Stella, Tara and Holly, who'd never given her an iota of bother, and no financial worries, thanks to dear Hugh.

Hugh, Adele had always felt, was the real reason that Rose had had such a wonderful life. Adele adored her baby brother passionately. He was so clever and kind. He'd plucked Rose from an impoverished background and her dull secretarial job and turned her into a Miller lady. And now Hugh and Rose were celebrating their ruby wedding anniversary, complete with uniformed caterers and florists, the whole nine yards. It was like their wedding all over again, Adele thought bitterly, remembering herself, a drab bridesmaid next to the radiant Rose. All eyes had been on the bride with tiny coral-pink rosebuds pinned into the cloud of her dark hair. Even Colin, Adele's young man, had remarked upon how lovely Rose looked.

'Good old Hugh.' Colin had been frankly envious. 'He's a lucky fellow to be marrying a girl like her.'

Adele had never forgiven Colin for not understanding how much she felt she'd lost Hugh to Rose. She'd spent hours pinning her fair hair up with little hair clips to show off her long neck and had even dabbed on a bit of rouge and Coral Surprise lipstick, angry with herself for giving in to vanity. It had been no good. Rose had glittered like the sun, overshadowing Adele without even meaning to, and Adele had never, ever been able to forgive her.

Lost in her memories, for a moment Adele let her customary guard down. Her normally stiff back drooped and she sank down onto the arm of a faded old wing chair. If she'd said yes to Colin all those years ago, would she have had a golden life, a family like Hugh and Rose? Colin had been a nice man, sweet and gentle. He simply hadn't measured up when compared to Hugh, though. Nobody could. At the time, measuring up to Hugh had seemed very important, but now it was different. Adele was lonely. The sidelines were cold and she was always on them, watching other people's lives and, somehow, not feeling a part of it

all. While Rose had everything. Everything. Why had Lady Luck shone so brightly on Rose, who was only a Miller by marriage, and utterly bypassed Adele?

Even the autumn blight that had savaged Adele's beech hedge had left her sister-in-law's untouched. And Rose had her beloved girls, the golden Miller girls. Those three girls had led charmed lives, Adele felt, and though they'd undoubtedly been indulged by Hugh, it had all turned out so well.

Adele went to the desk where she kept her stamps and notepad, and wrote formally to accept the invitation to the anniversary party. The phone call had been more in the line of information gathering, rather than an actual response. Adele Miller had been brought up properly, and written invitations got a written reply. It was the kind of behaviour that implied breeding, the sort of thing that people who were dragged up in little cottages in the back of beyond didn't understand.

'I would be delighted to attend . . .' wrote Adele, her language as formal as the Queen's. She sighed. Despite everything, she was looking forward to the party, actually. Parties in Hugh's were always fun and a fortieth wedding anniversary was sure to be a splendid affair. She'd get her hair set, of course. Happier at this thought, Adele began to plan.

CHAPTER ONE

The previous December: two weeks before Christmas

Rose Miller hated committees. Which was a bit unfortunate, because she was on three of them. The Kinvarra Charity Committee was the most irritating for the simple reason that its internal wranglings took so much time, there wasn't a moment left to actually raise any money for charity. Discussions about the size of the type on the menus for the annual ladies' lunch, and whether to serve salmon or beef, had taken endless phone calls and two lengthy meetings. If Rose hadn't practically lost her temper, the committee would still be arguing over it.

'Does it really matter what the menus look like or what we eat?' she'd demanded fierily at the final, drawn-out meeting, rising to her feet and making all the other committee ladies clutch their copies of the minutes in shock. Mrs Rose Miller with her dark eyes flashing in anger was not a common sight. A tireless worker for the local charities, she was known for her calm self-possession and for her organisational skills. Tall and strikingly elegant with her trademark upswept hairdo, she was almost regal in her anger. 'We're here to raise money, not waste it. Is this our best effort for the underprivileged of this town? To sit in a cosy hotel bar and slurp our way through urns of coffee and entire boxes of custard creams while we discuss minutiae?'

'Good point,' squeaked Mrs Freidland, the current chairwoman, who'd been stubbornly holding out for flowing script type and seafood chowder followed by beef despite the fact that the majority wanted salmon for the main course

and tiger prawns to start. 'We've been wasting far too much time; let's stop arguing and vote.'

Feeling rather shocked at her own outburst, Rose sat down and wondered, as she did every year, why she didn't just resign and take up something less stressful, like hang-gliding or swimming with sharks. But every year she let her name be put forward because, if she wasn't on the committee, no money would be raised at all. And she passionately wanted to help people. A life lived selfishly was a life half lived: that was her credo. The only difficulty was that for some of the other committee members, charity work was more a sign of social status than anything else.

The Church Hospitality Committee only met a couple of times a year and was the least trouble, as it only involved putting together a couple of suppers for inter-church gatherings and, occasionally, a party for a visiting missionary priest.

Rose's third committee, the Kinvarra Motorway Action Group, was halfway up the scale of annoyance. Set up to oppose the proposed new route through Kinvarra's nature park, an area of outstanding beauty around the midlands town, the KMAG committee included a highly efficient local solicitor, several prominent business people and three local politicians. Therefore things got done. But the public meetings were a total nightmare which usually ended up with the committee being instructed to work on at least four wildly differing approaches.

Rose needed a stiff gin and tonic after the KMAG public meetings, although Hugh grinned and told her that in his experience of public meetings, she'd be better off with a stiff drink *before*hand.

As one of Kinvarra's leading legal brains, Hugh was a committee veteran. He'd even served his time as the town's mayor many years before, which he laughingly said had been a lesson to him Not To Get Involved. Rose had a photo of him in his mayoral robes on the mantelpiece: tall, stately and handsome with his immaculately brushed silver hair

setting off the high forehead and the benevolent gaze. The camera hadn't picked up the wicked glint in Hugh's eyes that day, a look that said he didn't mind the job but could have done without the mayoral necklace hanging like a cow chain around his neck.

'It's impossible to please even half the people a quarter of the time,' was Hugh's sage advice on committees. 'Everyone goes round in circles for weeks. As for your public meetings, unless someone takes the planners to court, you're wasting your time.'

'We will if we have to,' said Rose heatedly. 'But we must show our solidarity as a community. We don't want to be walked on. Don't you care about the motorway?'

'It won't be anywhere near our house,' Hugh pointed out.

Rose gave up. She found it hard to understand how Hugh could be so pragmatic about important matters. She herself became passionately involved in all her causes, whether they affected her directly or not, but Hugh didn't seem to feel these things as deeply as Rose.

The girls had all taken after their mother. Thirty-eight-year-old Stella, for all she appeared to be a sensible lawyer, working hard to bring up her daughter on her own, hid a romantic soul beneath her sober office suits. Tara, seven years younger, was the same: a debating queen at school and college, she threw herself wholeheartedly into anything she did. She'd fallen in love the same way, marrying computer sales executive Finn Jefferson six months to the day after they met, half-astonishing people who thought that Tara was destined for unconventionality and liable to run off with a rock star if the mood took her.

And as for Holly, the baby of the family at twenty-seven, Rose knew that beneath her youngest daughter's gentle exterior there was a vulnerable, fiercely passionate heart. But while Tara and Stella had the courage to fight for what they believed in, Holly didn't. The secret fear that Rose carried round with her, was that Holly lacked self-confidence because of Rose and because of what she had or hadn't done.

Somehow, Rose felt, she had failed her beloved youngest daughter. But the thought was too painful, and Rose Miller, known for facing all kinds of problems with calm resilience, blocked it out. She wouldn't, couldn't think about it.

Today was the dreaded Kinvarra Charity Committee and as Rose parked her car outside Minnie Wilson's sedate semi-detached house, she had a sudden desire to take off on a mad shopping spree and forget all about the meeting. Instead, she did what was expected of a sensible Kinvarra matron; she checked her lipstick in the mirror, re-pinned a wayward strand of her greying dark hair back into its elegant knot and carried a home-made lemon cake up the path.

'Rose, is that the time? I'm all at sixes and sevens, I'm not a bit organised!' wailed Minnie when she answered the door.

Rose gritted her teeth into a smile and walked in. Minnie had to be at least Rose's age, round the sixty mark, but had the manner of a dizzy young girl and got flustered at the slightest provocation. Minnie was one of the people who'd worried so much about the type size on the charity lunch menus. She'd moved to Kinvarra three years ago when her husband retired and she'd thrown herself so frenetically into local affairs, it felt as if she'd been part of the community for years.

'Don't worry, Minnie, I'll help,' Rose said automatically. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Well . . .' said Minnie anxiously. 'The kettle's boiled but I haven't got the cups out. And look at my hair . . .'

Hang-gliding, definitely. It had to be more fun than this, Rose reflected. 'Why don't you go and fix your hair, Minnie,' she said calmly, 'while I sort out the tea.'

Minnie fluttered off upstairs and Rose grimly thought that the group's chosen charities would be better served if its members all just sent a cheque every year to the charity of their choice. They'd save money spent on endless tea mornings where at least half the time was spent on the process of sorting everyone out with seats, cups and plates of cake.

Rose briskly organised the tea, her mind elsewhere. She often wondered how had she ended up in this life. She'd never wanted to be a pillar of the community and a leading light of every local concern going. When she was eighteen, she'd wanted to work in a modern office in the city, where people addressed her respectfully as Miss Riordain and where a wage packet with the anticipated amount of money was put into her hand every week without fail. The respect and the unchanging wage packet were important. On her father's tiny farm, income fluctuated wildly, resulting in lean times and very lean times. Nobody felt the need to show particular respect to the beautiful and clever daughter of a small farmer and Rose had grown up deeply aware of the nuances of how people treated the daughters of the local doctor and the big landowners. One of her ambitions was to receive such respect. A good, settled job and a pay packet that came every week would give her freedom. She'd got her foot on the ladder all right, with the junior secretarial job in a construction company. Efficient and eager to learn, she'd dedicated herself to self-improvement. She'd battled with an elderly typewriter until her nails broke and she watched the senior secretary for hints on how she should dress. And then she'd met Hugh, the dashing young lawyer friend of the owner's son. Hugh came from a world where people never needed to be told how to dress or which fork to use. But to two people in love, that didn't matter. They were soul mates. Love turned Rose's life plan upside down and within two years she was married with a small daughter.

Occasionally, she wondered what would have happened if she'd said no to Hugh? Maybe she'd be a high-powered businesswoman, having an exciting but selfish life instead of living for others in Kinvarra where her only day-to-day concerns were her charity work, getting the freezer fixed and helping Hugh organise Christmas hampers for the firm's most important clients.

Tonight, his firm was involved in a Christmas fundraiser for the local poverty action group which, with the recent

wave of redundancies among the area's big factories, was even more stretched for funds than usual. A black tie gala dinner, it would mean top table stuff and all the Kinvarra glitterati out in force. Rose enjoyed getting dressed up but there were times when she got bored with the inevitable polite conversation at such events. Hugh, on the other hand, never got bored with gala dinners.

She dragged her mind back to the task in hand.

There were seven committee members, so she whipped out seven cups and saucers, because Minnie always made such a big deal about china cups and not mugs. She laid out milk and sugar, cut her lemon cake into slices, and had everything ready by the time Minnie came downstairs.

'Oh, Rose, you're so good,' trilled Minnie when she saw everything. 'I don't know what we'd do without you.'

Rose had been about to say something mundane about how it had been no problem, when she really looked at Minnie. For once, Minnie's girlish complexion ('soap and water every morning!' she claimed) was grey and tired. Her eyes were a telltale watery red. It wasn't mere tiredness, Rose realised. It was something else.

'Are you all right, Minnie?' she asked gently. Minnie looked into the face of the woman she'd been half in awe of ever since she'd moved to Kinvarra. Rose was like some elegant television celebrity; gracious and ladylike, without a hair out of place. She had a look of that poor Jackie Kennedy, God rest her. Minnie had never met any aristocratic types but she knew one when she saw one. Rose Miller came from classy people, Minnie was sure. And she was kind; as friendly to the girl in the pub who served them tea as she was to Celia Freidland, the committee chairwoman.

Minnie had tidied the house extra specially for the meeting mainly because Rose would be there. Rose's husband was a very important man, she had a beautiful house in the most expensive part of town, and she had three lovely girls. Minnie never met Rose without being overwhelmed with a desire to impress her.

'Minnie,' said Rose again. 'Are you sure you're all right? Is there anything wrong?'

Minnie shook her head. 'Nothing,' she said. 'I'm just tired, that's all. Now, the committee will be here any minute.' Her smile was camera-bright. 'I suppose we're all ready?' she added.

'Yes,' Rose said kindly. There was more to it than tiredness, clearly, but if Minnie didn't want to talk, that was her business.

The doorbell pealed and Minnie rushed to answer it, welcoming in her guests as if she hadn't a care in the world.

For once, Rose didn't hurry the committee's ramblings. She was quieter than usual and the meeting meandered on until half five when everyone began making astonished noises at how time had flown and how they had families to feed. Rose left after giving Minnie a meaningful handclasp on the doorstep.

'Please phone me if you need to talk,' she whispered.

As she drove home, Rose couldn't get Minnie Wilson out of her mind. There was something wrong there and Rose longed to be able to do something to help. Poor Minnie. As she speculated on her hostess's misfortune, Rose couldn't help thinking again of her own life and how happily it had turned out.

Adele often said, grudgingly, that Rose was lucky. But Adele was right. She *had been* lucky.

Nobody could be prouder of their daughters than she was of Stella, Tara and Holly. Even if she hadn't been their mother, she'd have thought they were special women. She had a granddaughter she adored, too. Amelia had a great way of staring up at her grandmother with those big, grave eyes and asking things like: 'Granny, will you and Grandad have a baby so I can play with it?'

Stella had roared with laughter when Rose told her about it.

'What did you say?'

'I said we were thinking of getting a puppy and would that do?'

'Oh no,' Stella howled. 'She wants a dog more than she wants a baby sister; she won't let you forget that.'

If only, Rose thought, Stella had someone in her life. Tara was blissful with Finn, happier than Rose would have imagined she could be. Seeing her middle daughter so settled, made Rose long for the same happiness for Stella. She'd have given anything to see Stella content. Not that she would ever say that to Stella. But a mother could hope.

And as for Holly: well Holly never told anyone what she wanted. Rose did her best to be there for Holly in the background but her youngest daughter had retreated from life in Kinvarra, and Rose, desperate to help, had to accept it. Perhaps Holly was happy after all. Because you never knew, did you, reflected Rose.

Hugh insisted that Rose should stop worrying about her brood.

'They're modern women, haven't they the lives of Reilly?' he'd say, proud as Punch of his three bright daughters. When the girls came home to Kinvarra, Hugh was always keen to take them into town to lunch or dinner, to 'show them off' as Rose teased him.

'I'm surprised you haven't set up the Daughters Sweepstake Race,' she joked, 'where all the great and good of Kinvarra get their offspring in the race to see who's the best.'

'There's a thought,' he said gravely. 'You're always telling me you're fed up with organising charity dinner dances and cake sales. A sweepstake would be a sure-fire winner.'

Dear Hugh. He'd been blessed with a great sense of humour, for all that he drove Rose mad with his ability to spread chaos all over the house without ever bothering to tidy up. No matter how many times she scolded him, he still left the bathroom looking like someone had been washing the Crufts Best In Breed in it, with at least three soaked towels thrown around and the top off the shower gel so that a trail of sticky gel oozed into the shower tray. But, despite everything, she loved him and he was a wonderful father.

There had been bad times, for sure. But Rose had weathered the storms, that was all in the past. She *was* lucky.

The Millers' rambling farmhouse was in darkness when Hugh Miller returned home. Once, Meadow Lodge had been the badly-maintained home of a small farmer with several rackety haybarns, a silage pit positioned right beside the kitchen window and sheep contentedly grazing in the garden, doing their best to fertilise the landscape. When Hugh and Rose had bought it forty years ago, they'd knocked down the crumbling farm buildings, turned the three-acre plot into a decent, sheep-free garden, and had modernised the whole house. Nobody looking at Meadow Lodge now would ever think it had been anything but a gracefully proportioned building with fine big rooms, a huge comfortable family kitchen and gas heating to cope with the winds that sometimes swept down through the midlands and Kinvarra. Rose had filled the house with comfortable couches, luxurious-looking soft furnishings, lots of pictures, lamps that cast a golden glow and plenty of unusual ornaments.

With his arms laden down with his usual consignment of papers and briefcase, Hugh unlocked the front door, shoved it open with his shoulder and turned on the lights in the hall. He wondered where Rose was. It wasn't like her not to be there when he got home. Even if she had one of her meetings on in the evening, she rarely left until he was home and, if they weren't going out, she always had something delicious cooking for him. It was strange, therefore, to find a dark, cold house, especially since it wasn't long before they had to go to the Poverty Action Night dinner.

Dumping his cargo, Hugh threw his big sheepskin coat on the hall chair, dropped his car keys on the hall table not thinking that they might scratch the wood, and went into the big yellow sitting room.

Switching on the overhead light, not bothering to shut the curtains or even switch on one of the Oriental table lamps that Rose liked, Hugh sank down into his armchair, stretched his

long legs onto the coffee table because there was nobody there to object, and flicked on the television news.

He was still watching half an hour later when Rose arrived. She switched on the hall lamp and switched off the main light before putting Hugh's keys into the cream glazed pottery bowl where they lived.

Hugh was still glued to the news.

Rose swallowed her irritation when she went into the sitting room and found all the main lights blazing. If opened curtains were the extent of her problems, then she had little to worry about. Silently, she shut the heavy, primrose-yellow curtains and flicked on the lamps, all of which took mere moments. Why did men never do that sort of thing? Did being a hunter-gatherer absolve the whole species from domestic tasks?

'How are you?' asked Hugh absently, without taking his eyes from the box.

'Fine,' said Rose. 'We've got to be out of here in an hour: I'm going to make a cup of tea and then have a shower.'

'Oh I'd love some tea,' said Hugh.

Why didn't you make some, then? Rose thought crossly. She stopped herself snapping just in time. She was grumpy tonight, for some reason. She'd better get a grip on herself. She, above all people, had no excuse for moaning. But as she went into the dark kitchen to boil the kettle, she thought that it was all very well deciding that you were lucky, but Hugh drove her insane sometimes.

She'd just made the tea when the phone rang.

'Hiya, Mum,' said Tara breezily. 'How are you?'

Rose beamed to hear her middle daughter's voice. Tara was one of life's the-glass-is-half-full people and it was impossible to be miserable in her presence. 'Great, Tara love, how are you?'

'Wonderful. Finn and I are just racing out the door to a special film screening but he just got a work phone call, so I thought I'd give you a quick buzz.'

'Sounds like an interesting evening,' Rose said, holding the portable phone in one hand and pouring tea into two pottery mugs with the other.

'I wish,' sighed Tara. 'It's a small-budget, black and white and boring thing written by one of *National Hospital's* ex-writers.' *National Hospital* was the television soap which Tara wrote for. 'We've all been press-ganged into going. I'm terrified Finn will doze off in the middle of it.' Tara laughed merrily. 'You know what he's like when he's made to watch anything without either football, car chases or Cameron Diaz in it.'

'Like your father, in other words,' Rose said smiling. She poured the correct amount of milk into Hugh's tea. 'Why do women marry their father?'

'It saves time,' Tara said. 'What have you been up to?'

'The usual. Trip to the supermarket this morning, a charity meeting in the afternoon and the poverty action gala tonight.'

'I hope you're going to be wearing the Miller family emeralds,' joked Tara.

'But of course,' rallied her mother. The Miller family emeralds consisted of old-fashioned earrings and a tiny and very ugly pendant, all of which were in Aunt Adele's keeping. Adele was always dropping heavy hints about leaving them to one of her nieces when she died, but the girls were doing their best not to be remembered.

'Actually,' said Rose, 'I haven't worked out what I'm going to wear and we've got to leave soon.'

'Shame on you,' teased Tara. 'The whole town will be talking if you don't turn up in your glad rags. Do you not have some swanky cut-down-to-the-boobs dress that'll make everyone so astonished they cough up even more money for charity?'

'I'm trying to wean myself off the wanton trollop look,' Rose said gravely. 'Besides which, I don't have the bosom for that type of thing any more.'

'Shame,' laughed Tara. 'I better go then, but can I say hello to Dad?'

With the radar that meant he always knew when his beloved daughters were on the phone, Hugh had already picked up the phone in the hall.

'Hiya, Tara love,' said Hugh happily. 'What mad sexy scenes have you been writing this week to shock us simple television viewers?'

Even Rose, on her way upstairs, could hear Tara's groan of 'Da-ad!'

'She's in great form,' Hugh remarked when he walked into their bedroom a few moments later, pulling off his tie.

'Yes, very happy,' said Rose who was standing in front of the wardrobe mirror attempting to zip up a cream beaded evening dress. 'Will you do me up?' she asked Hugh.

He ambled across the room and threw his tie on the bed.

'Were you talking to Stella today?' he asked as he expertly pulled the zip to the top.

'Not today,' replied his wife. 'She said she was going to have a busy day. And her neck's been at her all week. I might phone her now.'

'Great.' Hugh grinned. He stripped off his clothes quickly, while Rose sat on the edge of the bed and dialled Stella's number. She wedged the receiver in the crook of her neck and began to paint a coat of pearly pale pink on her nails.

'Hello, Amelia,' she said delightedly when the phone was finally answered. 'It's Granny. I thought you and Mummy were out when you didn't answer.'

'Mummy is in the bath. She has a cricket in her neck,' said Amelia gravely, 'and Aunty Hazel gave her blue stuff to put in the bath to get rid of the cricket.'

'Poor Mummy,' said Rose. 'Tell her not to get out of the bath, whatever happens.'

'She's here,' Amelia announced. 'And she's dripping wet bits onto the floor.'

'Sorry darling,' apologised Rose when Stella came on the line. 'I told Amelia not to get you out of the bath.'

'It was time I got out,' Stella said. 'I was in danger of falling asleep in there.'

'How's your neck?'

'A bit better,' Stella admitted. 'It started off as a little twinge, or a cricket, as Amelia says, and today it just aches. I can't lift a thing and Amelia has been very good, haven't you, darling?'

In the background, Rose could hear her granddaughter say 'yes' proudly.

'Have you got any of those anti-inflammatories left from the last time?' Rose said worriedly. 'If you're out, remember, you left some here just in case. I'll drop them up tomorrow if you want.' Kinvarra was an hour's drive from Stella's home in Dublin, but Rose never minded the trip.

'That would be lovely, Mum,' Stella said. 'I don't have any tablets left,' she admitted. 'But are you sure you want to drive up? The traffic's sure to be mad this close to Christmas.'

Rose smiled. 'What else are mothers for?' she said simply.

'Can I say hello?' said Hugh.

Rose held up a finger to indicate that she'd be another moment. 'Tell me, what time do you want me there for?' asked Rose. 'If I come up for ten, you can go back to bed and I'll bring Amelia swimming.'

'Oh, Mum, that would be wonderful.' Stella sounded so grateful. 'But I feel so guilty . . .'

'Rubbish. You need a break,' her mother said firmly. 'Here's your father.'

Rose and Hugh changed places.

'I'll come too,' Hugh told Stella. 'Amelia loves swimming with her grandad.'

As he talked to their oldest daughter, Rose hung Hugh's tie on the rack in the wardrobe, then picked up his shirt from the beige carpet and popped it into the laundry basket. The master bedroom was no trouble to tidy. Knowing Hugh's propensity for mess, Rose had furnished it so there was nowhere to put clutter. There was just a king-sized bed

with a quilted cinnamon-coloured bedcover, a small boudoir chair in the same fabric, and pale wood bedside cabinets which were adorned with lamps and photos of the girls in wooden frames. Rose kept her scent and make-up in the big cupboard under the washbasin in the adjoining bathroom. The unfussy lines of the room were comforting, in her opinion. Relaxing. Apart from the family photos and the big watercolours of four different varieties of orchid on the walls, there was nothing to distract a person from going to sleep. Hugh had wanted a TV in the room but Rose had put her foot down. Bedrooms were for sleeping in.

Sleep sounded very alluring right now. Rose wished they weren't going out tonight. She'd prefer to get an early night and head off for Stella's early in the morning. Supper on a tray would be lovely.

Hugh said goodbye and hung up.

'Try phoning Holly,' Rose said from the bathroom. She hadn't spoken to Holly for a week, not that this was unusual, but even so, Rose still worried when there'd been no word from her youngest.

'Nobody there,' said Hugh after a moment. 'Her machine isn't on, either. I might buy her one for Christmas. That old thing she has is useless.' He dialled another number. 'Her mobile's off too. Hi, Holly, it's Dad. Remember me? Father-type, silver hair, known you for, oh, twenty-seven years. Just phoning to say hello. Your mother says hello too. I suppose you're out enjoying yourself as usual. Another wild party? Talk to you sometime over the weekend, darling, bye.'

He hung up. 'Holly's terrible at returning phone calls,' he grumbled.

'She's enjoying her life,' Rose said automatically. 'She's entitled to be out having fun and forgetting about us. That's what girls her age do.' Well, she hoped that's what Holly was doing.

'I suppose you're right,' said Hugh.

In the bathroom, he and Rose stepped round each other in the expert dance of people used to forty years of sharing

a bathroom. While Rose applied her lipstick in the mirror, Hugh ran water to shave.

In the harsh light of the bathroom, Rose noticed that there seemed to be more wrinkles than ever fanning around her eyes. If she'd religiously slathered eye cream on for years, would it have made a difference? Rose didn't care. She'd do. She left Hugh to his shaving and went back into the bedroom to sort out an evening handbag, and to mentally plan her trip the next day. Then she scooped the dirty clothes from the laundry basket and went downstairs to the kitchen to put on a wash. She felt happier from just talking to her beloved daughters.

Stella had sounded so grateful that Rose was going to drive up and visit, but the reality was that Rose adored seeing Stella and little Amelia and loved being able to help her darling Stella out in some small way. Not that she pushed herself into their lives, no. Letting your children go was the one part of motherhood there was no manual for. Rose did her best not to be a clingy mother. She let her daughters live their own lives, which was why it was doubly wonderful that they wanted her around.

The kitchen in Meadow Lodge was Rose's favourite room in the whole house. Probably, because it hadn't changed much since Stella, Tara and Holly used to sit at the scrubbed pine table moaning as they laboured over maths homework. The walls were still the same duck-egg blue, the floor was still terracotta tiled, with a frayed scarlet kelim beside the shabby two-seater couch, and the cupboards had only changed in that they'd had several more layers of cream paint applied over the years. The child's paintings stuck on the fridge were now Amelia's, while the wall of family photos was crammed with the ever-increasing Miller family gallery. This now included Tara looking sleekly radiant in Amanda Wakeley on her wedding day, the normally camera-shy Holly looking uncomfortable in her graduation dress, and a beautiful black and white portrait of Stella and Amelia, taken by her friend Hazel.

Rose set the washing machine to a warm wash and then looked around for something else to do. This evening wouldn't be too bad, she decided. Talking to the girls had invigorated her. Anyway, there were loads of people who'd love a glamorous night out at a dressy dinner. She was lucky to have such a good social life. She was lucky full stop. People were always telling her so. But then, it was one thing to look as if your life was perfect, it was another thing for it to be so. Looks could be deceptive. Minnie Wilson's was a prime example: bright on the outside, with some sort of hidden misery clearly lurking on the inside. Rose wondered if everybody's life was different behind the facade?