

DCA Office, Manor House, Dame Street, Dublin 2

You can do this. But what if I can't? You have to. There's no other way. People do it every day, every hour. They manage and so will you. Don't think, just act. Another fifteen minutes and all your problems will be over. Life will go back to normal and you'll never have to think of it again.

ONE

Earlier That Day

Sweat trickled down Delia's back. Her face burned and she could feel something bubbling up from the pit of her stomach. Her hands shot out and were within inches of the girl's scalp before she realised it. She snatched them away and gouged her nails into the palm of her hand. What was happening to her? She looked around. Had anyone noticed? Her neighbours were on this train. Some of their kids were in Ellen's preschool. She couldn't have them thinking the poor child had a lunatic for a mother.

Delia knew she had a reputation for being highly strung, but until recently she had exercised extreme control over her emotions. Her temper tantrums, glorious outbursts that terrified family and colleagues by their violence and unpredictability, were actually carefully orchestrated performances. One or two a year and she controlled everyone in her life. She had always believed more frequent outbursts would be counterproductive. But something had changed in the last month. Almost every day she felt the urge to hurt someone. The previous week a man had bumped against her in the supermarket and she had almost punched him. The incident terrified her. She was a respected member of her community, a single mother with a daughter to support. She couldn't afford a criminal record. Routine, she decided, was the only answer. Doing the same things, in the same order, at the same time would reduce her stress levels and enable her to keep control. It had worked reasonably well until today.

Today Delia's routine was shot to hell. Firstly Ellen had thrown up all over her, then a frantic search for clean clothes had made her late for work and now the train was filling up while she was stuck behind a young girl struggling to reach the luggage rack. Delia fought the urge to fling the girl to the floor and crack her skull open. 'Think,' she muttered to herself.

How would she have handled this a month ago? She put her hands in her pockets and sighed loudly. It had no effect. The girl was absorbed in her struggle and oblivious to her surroundings. The train lurched and Delia saw her opportunity. Pretending to lose her balance, she flung herself forward, aiming an elbow at the girl's ribs.

'Ow!'

The girl turned, saw the queue behind her, mumbled sorry and moved to one side.

That was better. She was in control again. Delia gave a wide, fake smile and was about to apologise profusely for losing her balance. 'I'm so —' she began. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted a woman in a green coat approaching the only remaining seat from the opposite end of the carriage. All protestations of concern forgotten, Delia bolted down the aisle. The other woman was slightly ahead and would get there first, so she threw her bag at the empty seat.

'Well, really!' the woman muttered, but she walked away as Delia had guessed she would.

Delia sat down beside a middle-aged, obese man who already occupied three-quarters of the seat. She wanted to scream, 'Where the hell am I supposed to sit?' but reminded herself that might be viewed as inappropriate. She had to be content with jamming her rucksack between them and squashing him into a corner.

'Excuse me,' the man said.

Delia ignored him. She'd barely had time to establish Ellen didn't have a fever before rushing out the door.

Taking Ellen to the doctor? she texted.

Will wait to see if sick again. Reading her a story now. Seems fine.

Delia leaned back in the seat. For one blissful moment she almost relaxed; then she remembered the day ahead. Bloody bankers, she thought. If they hadn't bankrupted the country she wouldn't be stuck in a job she hated with people she despised. What she wouldn't give to be free

of the lot of them, especially Dan. If she never had to see that pig again ... or Laura, with her golden hair and her husband and her perfect—

Her thoughts were interrupted by an announcement. 'We apologise for this delay. This is due to the late departure of a previous train.'

Pain shot through her ankle at the same moment her neighbour yelled, 'Jesus Christ!'

Delia looked at her foot and at the man who was now rubbing his shin and it dawned on her that she had kicked him.

People were turning in their seats to stare. Delia gathered her belongings.

'Foot slipped,' she muttered and hurried away before he could respond. She pushed her way down the narrow aisle, banging off a lady sitting on the edge of one of the tables and almost tripping over a young man stretched out on the floor, his long legs blocking the exit. The front of the train was less crowded, and to her relief she found an empty space between two of the carriages. She flung her belongings on the floor and leaned against the wall, legs trembling.

What had she done?

He deserved a kick, taking up all that space, she told herself. But that wasn't the point. She had never intended to touch that man. She hadn't even realised she had touched him until her foot hurt. It was like someone else was controlling her body.

Another ten minutes and the train would arrive at the station. A short walk and she'd be in the office. It would be easier then, she told herself. At least she'd be in familiar surroundings. She groaned as she remembered her 9:30 meeting with Dan. She could do without that today. Closing her eyes, she rested her head against the door.

'Get a grip,' she muttered. 'You need that job. Ellen deserves a good life.'

That's why she put herself through this hell, for Ellen.

Delia straightened up and examined her reflection in the glass. She ran her fingers through her dark, curly mop, trying to tame it into submission. For several minutes she practised facial expressions until she was confident she could pass for a woman in control. She could cope. She would cope. Nobody would be allowed to come between her and the life she wanted for Ellen. Anyone who got in her way would regret it.

#

A hand touched her shoulder and Laura woke with a jolt. Her eyes darted around the empty carriage as she tried to figure out where she was.

'You have to get off the train now,' a man in an Irish Rail uniform said.

'What's wrong? Where is everyone?'

'They all got off.'

'What happened to the people sitting beside me? How could they get out without me noticing?'

'I don't know, love. You have to leave. This train is going out of service.'

Laura rooted in her bag for her ticket. As she held it against the barrier, she glanced at the station clock. 'Oh dear God,' she muttered, pushing against the barrier and tearing down the long platform.

'We're full,' the bus driver shouted, closing the door on her face.

Laura jammed her foot into the tiny gap. Barely able to breathe she panted, 'Please, please let me on. I can't be late.'

'There's another bus in a few minutes.'

'I'll have died of a heart attack by then. You don't mind if I squeeze in, do you?' she pleaded with the people lining the aisle.

'Let her on,' a man in the back shouted. 'Can't you see she's desperate?'

'All right.' The bus driver opened the door. 'But just this once. In future get here on time.'

'Thank you so much,' Laura said. 'It's the kids. Flu. I was up all night with them. You're a lifesaver. I can't tell you how grateful I am.'

#

Aoife heard the click of the letter box. She was straining to pick up the post when her mobile rang. 'Hi, sweetheart.'

'Just checking you're okay.'

'Don't worry so much. I'm not due for another four weeks.'

'You will take it easy today, won't you? No rushing off to the shops? If you need anything, phone me and I'll pick it up on my way home.'

'I'm not an invalid, Jason. I can't stay in the house all day, I'd go nuts.'

'Well, if you have to go out, phone Mum. She'd be happy to drive you wherever you want to go.'

'I don't want to go anywhere specific. I'll probably walk down to the park, get a bit of exercise.'

'Mum would love that. A walk would do her good.'

Aoife laughed. 'You make her sound like a geriatric. She's fitter than either of us. We can't ... oh, that's probably her on the phone. I'll call you back.'

Aoife didn't recognise the number but she was glad of an excuse to drop the subject.

'Aoife Walsh.'

'Hi, Aoife, it's Lisa from Advance Recruitment. Have you gone on maternity leave yet?'

'Not yet. I'm starting next Thursday.'

'Great. One of my temps never showed up this morning. Could you fill in until Wednesday? I should be able to organise someone else by then.'

'Who's the client?'

'DCA, Dublin Charity Administration. They provide an administration service to small and medium-sized charities.'

'Where are they based?'

'In Dublin 2. Let me check the address. Ah, here it is. Manor House, Dame Street. Near the Olympia Theatre. Can I tell them you'll be there by ten?'

'I'd never make it. Tell them I can start at eleven, but I have a hospital appointment so I'll have to leave early.'

When everything was confirmed, Aoife lumbered upstairs to change. What would she tell Jason? He was convinced she would go into labour the second she left the house. If he knew she was going into the city, he'd be worried sick all day. She would ring straight through to his voicemail, she decided. That way he couldn't ask any questions.

'Hi, it's me. Sorry I had to hang up. I'm going to have a shower now, then I'm going out. See you tonight. Don't worry and have a good day, okay? Bye.'

When he returned her call a few minutes later, she didn't answer. She knew he'd assume she was in the shower. But what would she do when he phoned again? If she kept ignoring his calls he'd think something was wrong. Forty minutes later, she checked her phone as she was leaving the house. No call from Jason. That was a first.

There were no taxis available, so Aoife had to walk to the station. She buttoned her coat up to her neck and buried her face in her scarf, but the wind cut through her. If only Jason hadn't taken the car. She had suggested driving him to the station, but he had been appalled at the idea of his pregnant wife getting out of bed to act as his chauffeur.

As Aoife tried to avoid the waterlogged potholes, she wondered for the hundredth time if buying on the edge of the Curragh had been a mistake. At first it had seemed the ideal location, a five-minute drive to all the amenities of a small town and a forty-minute train journey to Dublin. She had fallen in love with the old house the moment she'd seen it, mostly because the exterior bore an extraordinary resemblance to the Brontë Parsonage. The surroundings were different, of course. Rather than a graveyard, Aoife's house overlooked flat green plains. From her bedroom window she could see the long lines of racehorses as they made their way to their daily training sessions, and it was almost impossible to leave the house without tripping over a sheep. Spring was her favourite season, especially when the lambs were tiny and took mad leaps into the air for no apparent reason, or walked so close to their mothers there was no discernible space between them. Even in the depth of winter Aoife loved pulling on waterproofs and squelching through the mud, and she nagged a reluctant Jason until he accompanied her.

The downside to living here was everyone tramped across the plains, leaving the paths deserted. She never felt safe here on her own.

Aoife reached the end of the path and turned on to the narrow road. A car whizzed by and she had to step into the wet grass to avoid it. Before stepping onto the road again, she looked behind to check the road was clear. In the distance she saw what appeared to be a young man. It was rare to see pedestrians on this road. When, ten minutes later, the man hadn't passed her, Aoife glanced over her shoulder. From the little she could see, the man seemed young and healthy. Why would any young man walk so slowly? She tried to hurry but who was she kidding? A three-year-old could outrace her these days. There was nothing to worry about, she told herself, but she was still relieved when she reached the footpath and could see the cluster of houses in the distance. She spotted a woman with two young children and followed them until they turned into a shop. She was now on the station road. It was well past rush hour and the road

was deserted, but she was only five minutes from the train station. Was he still there? As she turned, the man ducked down and fiddled with his shoelace. All she could see was a black hoodie. Was she imagining that the gap between them had lessened?

The train was late and Aoife had to wait ages on the platform. She kept one eye on the entrance, but the man in the black hoodie never appeared.

#

Delia felt her shoulders relax as the tiny lift shuddered and squeaked its way to the fourth floor. While she was within these four walls she could cope. After thirteen years, life in DCA held no surprises. How weird that she felt safe here. Normally, depression hit the second Manor House came into sight. So much so that if she was in the city at the weekend, she would avoid Dame Street entirely. Usually everything about the building irritated her, even the high ceilings, large windows and ornate plasterwork of the original Georgian features. Not that she saw much of them. The DCA offices were in what had once been the servants' quarters, and here the floors sagged, the tiny windows didn't shut properly and the heating system had two settings – sauna and slightly above freezing.

Delia took a plastic bag from her rucksack, removed a pair of six-inch heels and placed them on the floor. She undid her hiking boots and put them in the plastic bag. By the time the lift doors opened, the rucksack was thrown over her shoulder and she carried her shoes in one hand. Delia could hear voices coming from the canteen, but the long corridor was empty. She walked barefoot to the HR office. Pausing outside, she slipped on her shoes and yanked open the door.

A startled Laura dropped the keys she was inserting in the filing cabinet. 'Oh! Morning, Delia.'

'Where are Joe and Rachel?'

'They'll be here any minute.'

This was familiar territory and Delia felt comfortable dealing with it.

'It's eight fifty-eight.' She allowed her voice to rise an octave. 'Any minute will make them late. I permit you to leave a half hour early every Friday and how do you repay me? You haven't even taken your coat off yet.' She slammed the door and, as the bang echoed down the corridor, people could be heard scuttling out of the line of fire. 'You're the senior person in this office. I expect you to make sure the others are ready to start work at nine a.m. at the very latest. This is why you'll never make manager. If you had an ounce of enthusiasm you'd be running this place.'

'I—'

'I don't want to hear it's not your job. Your job is to do whatever I ask of you. How do you expect to be promoted if you don't go the extra mile?' She stood on tiptoes but Laura still towered over her. 'Sit down, for heaven's sake. At least look like you're planning to work.'

Laura sat at her desk and Delia moved closer, her finger only inches from Laura's face. 'It's high time you got your act together. I've been a manager for eleven years now and I'm only a year older than you. You could be earning a decent salary and I'm sure your husband would appreciate the extra income.'

The colour drained from Laura's face. 'My husband—' she said through gritted teeth.

Delia felt a surge of triumph. Watching others struggle for control was a pleasant change.

Fists clenched, Laura took a deep breath. 'Everyone has been working long hours all week preparing the year-end report. We—'

'How many times do we have to go through this? Is preparing the year-end report your job?'

'Yes, but—'

'Does doing your job entitle you to come in late?'

'No, but if we weren't understaff—'

'Haven't you heard there's a recession? Where are we going to find the money for extra staff?'

'But—'

Delia raised her hand. 'I'm not interested in excuses. I have to prepare for my meeting with Dan. Tell the other two as soon as this meeting is over, I will, for the very last time, outline exactly what I expect from my staff. You have no idea how lucky you are. The dole queues are full of people who would kill for a cushy job like yours.' She opened the interconnecting door to her office and without turning around barked, 'Coffee, now.'

#

'Rachel, where the hell were you? It's ten past nine.'

'You wouldn't believe the journey I had, Laura. There was some kind of accident. Traffic isn't moving. Did she go mad?'

'What do you think? It didn't help that Joe hasn't shown up either. If he's not here before Dan arrives, he might as well not bother.'

'Did you try his mobile?'

'I rang both of you. Nobody answered.'

'It's impossible to hear anything over the sirens. What did she say?'

'The usual. We're having another team meeting so she can tell us "exactly what she expects from us".'

'As if we don't already know. Work twelve hours a day, never express an opinion on anything and keep her supplied with endless cups of coffee.'

#

Rachel had barely switched on her computer when Dan strode into the office.

'Morning. I love this bright, cold weather. I got off the DART in Sidney Parade and walked the rest of the way. It's a pity I can't make morning walks compulsory. Nothing like exercise to get the juices flowing.'

'Morning, Dan.'

'You're all very subdued for a Friday. I thought you'd be full of the joys of spring.'

'We're so busy we forgot what day it is,' Laura said.

'I can expect to see you all tomorrow, then?'

'Ha-ha!'

'Where's Joe?'

'He...he went to the shop,' Laura said. 'We're out of milk.'

'Why are you wearing coats? Is the heating on the blink again?'

Rachel sighed. 'When is it ever any other way?'

'I don't know what I'm going to do with you all. We need more positive attitudes around here. Maybe I'll bring chocolate next time I come.' He opened the interconnecting door to Delia's office. 'Nothing like chocolate to cheer people up. Especially the ladies.'

'Ha-ha!' they said dutifully.

#

'What's the matter with that shower out there?' Dan growled.

'Search me. They spend their time moaning they're underpaid and overworked.' Delia placed a notepad and pen on the small round table, sat down and waited for Dan to join her. 'I carry the bulk of the workload myself. I'm here until midnight every Friday and I let them leave a half hour early, but they've no gratitude. They're convinced they're hard done by.'

'Well, things are about to get a whole lot worse.' Dan lowered the dial on the fan heater. 'The board refused to introduce another round of salary cuts. They're insisting on redundancies.'

'For staff below manager level, I presume.'

'No, the redundancies will affect everyone.'

'Not me, though.'

'I tried to keep you out of it, Delia, but the board weren't having it.'

'You mean—?' Delia's face turned red, then purple. 'You bastard,' she hissed.

'Now, Delia, it's out of my hands.'

Delia's fingers twitched. She gripped the edge of the table. Her knuckles were white and her back ramrod straight. 'Don't give me that

crap. You've been dying to get rid of me for years. Well, you're not getting away with it. I will keep my job and I want an increase—fifteen percent, no twenty-five percent. Otherwise, I promise you everyone will find out all about the great Dan McGonigle.'

Dan's lips stretched into a smile, but his eyes were as hard as glass. 'You're hysterical. You don't know what you're saying.'

'Don't I?' Delia sprang to her feet and her chair clattered against the vinyl floor. She took two steps in Dan's direction, then froze. Very slowly she walked backwards until she was flattened against the wall. 'Do you think I go around with my eyes shut?' she hissed. 'I know exactly what you and Robert are up to. One word from me and you'll be lucky if you don't end up in prison. And let's not forget the saintly Annette. How would she react if she knew about us?'

'What "us"? It was one night, four years ago. Annette would never believe you.'

Delia saw the fear in his eyes and knew she had the upper hand.

'Remember Ellen? DNA tests will prove you're her father, and I'm sure the papers would love to hear how you took advantage of me.'

'Would it be any wonder if I forgot the child when you won't let me... hang on, are you accusing me of rape?'

'I'm accusing you of taking advantage of your position as CEO to pressurise an employee into having sex. I was afraid my career would suffer if I refused.'

'Give over! You were dying for it.'

'Don't kid yourself. You may have been good-looking in your youth, Dan, but that was a long time ago. Nobody lusts after balding, overweight sixty-something-year-olds. Do you really think those young girls you flirt with every day find you attractive? They laugh at you behind your back.' Delia gave a thin smile. 'Still, things could look up. You might be the centre of attraction in prison.'

Dan's eyes narrowed, then he leaned back in his chair. 'I'm hurt, Delia. You can't really think I want you to leave.' He picked up her chair. 'Please sit down.'

Delia glared at him.

His expression calm and compassionate, Dan held her gaze until she returned to her seat. 'That's better. Now, you know you will always be very special to me. You're the mother of my child.'

'Oh, so it's "my child" now? Don't pretend you give a damn about Ellen. You don't see her as your daughter. To you she's an unexploded bomb that could wreck your precious marriage.'

'And to you she's a toy you won't sha—' He sighed. 'I didn't mean that. I respect your right to decide what's best for Ellen.'

'Because it suits you.'

'Suits me?' Dan shook his head. 'This is getting out of control. You're angry because you think I betrayed you, but since the new chairman was appointed, I can't control the board the way I used to. Let me talk to the other directors. If I can get them on side, we might be able to convince the chairman we can't do without you.'

'You'd better. I've been very good to you, Dan. I've kept your secrets. I didn't even tell my family about our relationship, and have I ever asked for child support? Well, I've had enough. I keep my job and I get a twenty-five percent increase, or life as you know it is over.'

Dan moved his chair closer and put an arm around her. 'Be reasonable. How can I get you an increase when people are losing their jobs?'

'I don't care how you do it!' Delia screamed, shrugging off his arm. 'Just make sure I get what I want.'

'Bloody hell, Delia, are you looking for an excuse to cause trouble? It'll be a miracle if I can talk the board into keeping you. They have big plans for your salary.'

Delia's entire body went rigid. *Take it easy*, she told herself. *You can win this*. 'Let them make someone else redundant.' She hoped he couldn't hear the tremble in her voice.

'We'd have to let four people go to save that amount. Staff levels are already cut to the bone, and the board won't even consider further salary cuts. Even if I could talk them into a smaller saving, at the very least we'd have to make two people redundant. We can't fill redundant positions, so how would we operate without those roles? It's not possible.'

'You think you can function without a manager?'

'The board will give Laura an extra three thousand to act as supervisor. She can keep some of her current duties and divide the rest between Joe and Rachel.'

The silence that followed was broken by Delia's heel tapping the leg of the table. 'What if two people resign? We could replace them with interns. That wouldn't cost anything, and we'd save on the redundancy payments.'

'Nobody is going to give up a good job in this economy.'

'You never know. Leave it with me. If two staff resign, do you guarantee my job is safe and I get my increase? You can call it a productivity bonus. I'll negotiate again next year.'

'Will they leave by next week? They're announcing the redundancies at Friday's board meeting.'

'I don't see why not. Do we have a deal?'

'Hmm, maybe.'

'What do you mean "maybe"? I—'

'Okay, okay,' Dan said. 'If two people leave by next Friday, I should be able to save your job and get you that increase.'

#

Delia's screech had penetrated the partition separating her from the outer office. Laura, Joe and Rachel exchanged glances, then sprang into action. Joe rushed to the corridor, ready to delay anyone planning to enter the

office. He leaned against the office door, one hand on the handle, ready to jiggle it if anyone approached. Several people walked past. Some looked at him curiously, but the combination of his height, bulk and reputation was enough to prevent any questions. Laura waited on the opposite side of the door, ready to react to Joe's signal. Rachel put her ear against the partition and tried to decipher the now muffled voices. She glanced at Laura occasionally and shrugged. They both jumped when a chair scraped against the floor. Laura signalled Joe, and all three were sitting at their desks when Dan entered. Dan rarely passed up an opportunity to perform, and they were subjected to several minutes of inane conversation. The moment he left, they gathered around Rachel's desk.

'I didn't hear much,' she whispered, one eye on the closed interconnecting door. 'Just "redundancies" and "salary cuts," but Dan mentioned all of us.'

Laura sank down on Rachel's desk. 'Did you hear anything earlier?'

'I think Delia mentioned Robert, but I'm not sure.'

'Probably making more people redundant so that plonker can be promoted again,' Joe said. 'How many times is it now?'

'Three this year and twice last year. He's only two stages from CEO. I wouldn't mind if we hadn't started on the same day and he was the one with no experience. His salary increased by fifty thousand in the last three years and mine went down by six thousand. How is that fair?'

Laura reached across her and switched the phones to voicemail. 'He's progressing at a great rate, all right. Nothing to do with his father being the CEO, of course.'

'It's just not right. What are we going to do? There aren't any jobs out there. I've been looking for ages.'

'You'll find something, Rachel. It mightn't be the job you want, but you're still in your twenties and you have good experience. What about me? Nobody's going to hire a thirty-eight-year-old mother of four who can only work three days a week.'

'You don't have to tell them you have kids, and at least you have a husband to pay the mortgage. I don't even have a mortgage. The minute I can't pay the rent, I'm out on the streets.'

'I've only made one payment on me mortgage,' Joe said. 'I'll be in hock to the bank for the rest of my life, and Anne and I will have to move in with me ma.'

'Look, you two, they can't get rid of us all. Can you see Delia doing our jobs as well as whatever it is she does all day? We don't know why Dan mentioned our names. He might have been talking about people who won't be made redundant.'

'At least one of us is bound to get the chop.'

'You don't know that, Joe. Let's have lunch out today. We'll need something to cheer us up after this meeting.' Laura removed her coat and hung it on the back of her chair. 'Come on, we'd better not keep the Fuhrer waiting.'

#

Aoife took the Luas from Heuston to Abbey Street. She was standing at the lights, waiting to cross O'Connell Street, when she felt eyes on her back. When she turned, she spotted a man in a black hoodie hurrying in the opposite direction. At the lights near Trinity, she looked behind her again. A man in a black hoodie was looking at the ground. As she walked up Dame Street she saw three young men in black hoodies on the opposite side of the road. 'For God's sake,' she muttered. Half the young men in Dublin wore black hoodies. Did pregnancy make you paranoid? She imagined her mother roaring with laughter at the question and had to bite her lip to stop the tears welling in her eyes. There was no time for this. Eyes fixed straight ahead, she hurried up the street.

#

Rachel stuffed her coat and bag into the small cupboard containing the Hoover and cleaning products, then tiptoed down the corridor. She took care not to let the office door creak as she sneaked inside. Satisfied that

Delia's door was fully closed, she lifted her chair so it wouldn't scrape against the floor and switched on her computer. She changed her print settings from the office printer to the photocopier in the print room and selected the documents she required. Ten minutes later, she was tiptoeing towards the door when Delia's phone rang.

'Hi, honey,' she heard Delia say. 'Oh God, I completely forgot. It's been a hectic day.... Are you sure?... Thanks. How long will you be?... Fine, see you then.'

#

Okay, this time nothing will stop you. Deep breath. Move.

#

Delia yawned, unplugged the fan heater and reached for her mug. How could she have forgotten? It must be the stress. She'd barely been able to think all morning, and the afternoon had been devoted to her staff reduction plan. She gave a sigh of relief that she'd kept her part of her bargain with Dan. By the end of the week there would be two less staff. She was proud of the way she'd handled the situation, and, whatever they said, she couldn't see either of them causing any real trouble. Everything would soon be back to normal. All in all, things had worked out rather well. Today had proved she could hold it together when she had to. It had been touch and go there for a while, but she had gotten through it without hurting anyone.

Delia yawned again, sipped her coffee and grimaced. The downside of forcing her underlings to make coffee was they sometimes used it to get revenge. She'd become accustomed to coffee that didn't taste quite right, but this was dire. It would have to do. She needed something to wake her up. She took the magazine from her desk and flicked through the pages, smiling when she saw a quiz entitled "Is your relationship on the right track?" This was going to be her year. Her eyes closed. She was drifting off to sleep when she thought she heard a noise. As she struggled to sit up, the cathedral bells chimed six o'clock. That must have been

what woke her. She put her head down on the desk. Fifteen minutes' sleep and she'd be raring to go.

#

Three Days Later

'Morning,' Aoife shouted over the noise of the Hoover. 'Josie, isn't it?'

Josie switched off the Hoover and put both hands on her hips. 'You're the new one, right? Did you take my key?'

'What key?'

'The key to the HR office. That Delia one says the office has to be locked every night, so Laura gave me a key. I keep it in the press with the J-cloths and the dishwasher tablets. It's never gone missing before.'

'I'm sorry, I don't know anything about it, but I can let you in now.'

'Are you having me on? Do you know what time it is? I already wasted half the morning looking for the blooming key. I have grandkids to get to school. You think I'm going to start cleaning the office at this hour? It's not my fault someone nicked the key.'

'No, of course not. I'll explain to Laura why you couldn't clean the office, and I'm sure she'll get you a new key. Is there anything else I can do to help?'

Josie smiled. 'Sorry, love, it's not your fault. It's just that snooty cow gets up my nose. You know she wrote me a note once? Two inches high each letter was. Does she think I can't read? "THERE IS DUST ON MY TABLE. DO NOT LET ME SEE DUST HERE AGAIN." I'm telling you, it's a good thing I've never run into her. I'd give her a piece of my mind, you can be sure of that.' She unplugged the Hoover. 'What are you doing here at this hour, anyway? You should be taking it easy in your condition.'

'You sound like my husband. He won't let me take the train "in my condition", so we have to be in Dublin before rush hour. Why he thinks that's better for me than an extra hour in bed, I've no idea.'

'You're lucky to have him. My young one's fella took off the minute he heard she was pregnant. Never saw him again, any of us.' She picked up the Hoover. 'I'm off. You take care of yourself now, love.'

Aoife made herself a cup of tea, read her newspaper and phoned Jason. She had been hired to do a compliance check on the HR files, but, as she didn't have keys to the filing cabinet, she couldn't start work until Laura arrived. She finished her tea and headed for the office.

The interconnecting door to Delia's office was slightly ajar. As Aoife removed her coat, several loose coins fell out and rolled around the room. Holding on to the desk for balance, Aoife got down on her knees and shuffled around, collecting them. The last one had rolled into Delia's office. Aoife shoved open the door and picked it up. She was manoeuvring herself into a standing position when she noticed the shoe. Black suede with a gold buckle and a six-inch heel. It was lying on its side in the middle of the floor. As she straightened up, Aoife saw two stockinged feet dangling in the air. She let her eyes travel up to the woman's knees, then, covering her mouth with both hands, she clamped her eyes shut and backed out of the room.