

PROLOGUE

MATT SHUT HIS eyes and took several deep breaths. After a few minutes he felt his pulse begin to slow. *Good. Breathe in, hold. Breathe out. Okay, now do it again. And again. That's better. Now think. How are you going to get out of this?* Images popped into his mind and he jerked his head to one side to dislodge them. *The people who caused this aren't important right now,* he reminded himself. *What matters is figuring out a way to...* His eyes flew open. *What the—? Is that...? Oh dear God, no!* He squeezed his eyes shut like a kid who believed things he couldn't see would disappear. His heart beat so fast he felt the room spin. For a second he wondered if he was having a heart attack. The idea was so ridiculous he almost laughed. *What difference would it make now? What difference would anything make?*

ONE

THE MAN SETTLED down on the sunbed and looked around. It was as he'd feared; not one unattached female. Such a pity he hadn't been able to get here earlier in the season. A family who had been occupying several sunbeds moved away and there she was, on the last sunbed in the row, staring out at the ocean. She was a little older than his eldest daughter, twenty-four or twenty-five, maybe, with alabaster skin and carrot-red hair. Not beautiful, definitely well below his usual standard, but she was pretty enough and he'd never been with a redhead before. She'd do. He was about to make his move when he noticed the towel, iPad and shades on the sunbed beside her. Was her friend male or female? It would be a mistake to rush in. What if her friend turned out to be a goddess? He could wait. He finished his drink, eyes roaming the beach in case a prettier girl walked by.

About fifteen minutes later, movement caught his attention and he looked her way again. The girl was now shoving the items from the second sunbed into her bag. So she was alone after all? He sat up, ready to catch her eye and give her the smile that had never yet failed him. But she hurried past without even a glance in his direction. He was amazed to find he was quite annoyed.

Why did he care if that chit of a girl didn't notice him? It took him two whole minutes to decide to follow her, a decision he regretted almost immediately when she strode up the road like a commuter who could see her train in the distance. Should he go back to the beach? A girl who walked that fast was way too uptight for his taste. No, he was up now, he might as well get a nice cold drink from the hotel bar.

The girl was talking to the receptionist when he entered the lobby. He'd definitely been right about her. Look at that frown! Her face would be destroyed in another few years if she kept that up. He took a seat as far away from the door as possible and had just ordered a drink when the girl rushed out of the hotel again. All that running around. What kind of a holiday was that? Somebody really needed to teach that girl how to relax.

Twenty minutes later, she sprinted past him to the receptionist desk. There was a hysterical note to her voice, and her hands were flying in all directions. Curiosity got the better of the man and he moved to a seat nearer the reception desk.

'Matt was lying on the sunbed beside me,' he heard her say. 'I fell asleep and when I woke up, he was gone.'

The receptionist muttered something the man didn't catch. The girl's voice rose.

'You told me already that he didn't return to the hotel today. I want you to call the police right away.'

The receptionist picked up the phone and muttered into it. The man's Italian was limited, but he was pretty sure he caught 'hysterical' mentioned more than once. Three minutes later he saw the short, stout hotel manager straighten his tie and pat his greying moustache as he hurried to the receptionist desk. The manager muttered something in a conciliatory tone, put

his hand on the girl's arm and tried to lead her away from the desk. The girl shook him off.

'I am not going anywhere. I have walked the entire beach twice. I've checked our room. Nobody has seen Matt in hours. I want you to get the police over here this minute.'

'Madam, you must not be upset. Your husband is enjoying the Italian sun. He will return momentarily.'

'Something has happened to him. I know it. He'd never disappear without telling me.'

'But you were asleep, yes? He didn't want to disturb you, so he went sightseeing, perhaps? If he has not returned by tonight, then we will contact the police.'

'My husband would never disappear without a word. Something terrible has happened. You have to call the police right away. This is an emergency.'

'Madam, the sea here is calm. You say your husband is a strong swimmer. He could not drown. If he had been in an accident, the police would have contacted the hotels. Please, go upstairs and rest. I'll have a waiter bring you a nice cold drink. When you wake your husband will be—'

'So you're not going to phone the police? Fine. I'll call the Irish embassy and they can handle it.' The girl ran out of the lobby, the hotel manager in hot pursuit.

The man shook his head. The receptionist had been right. The girl was hysterical. If his own wife called the police every time he went chasing a young girl, they'd never get anything else done. *Didn't the girl say the Irish embassy? It's always raining over there. Everyone knows they can't cope with the sun. The girl probably has sunstroke. Tomorrow she'll be embarrassed by the fuss she caused.* A pair of long shapely legs caught the man's attention, wiping all thought of unstable Irish girls from his mind.



The following morning, the man stood at the receptionist desk. His foot tapped against the floor as he waited for the receptionist to finish her phone call. As the minutes passed, his grip on his suitcase grew so tight his knuckles ached. He needed to get out of here now. Wasn't it the receptionist's job to check him out? Why couldn't she do her job while she chatted away on what was probably a personal call? Two seconds later, he'd had enough.

'Excuse me.'

The receptionist smiled and held up one finger to indicate she'd be with him in a moment. The man's face reddened. This was intolerable. He was about to speak again when the receptionist's eyes widened and she hurriedly finished her phone call. The man glanced behind to see two men in police uniform. His heart pounded against his chest as he moved to one side, picked up a hotel brochure and pretended to read it. He couldn't follow all of the conversation between the police and the receptionist, but he understood it had something to do with an Irish man who was missing. That damned Irish redhead. Couldn't she have waited a few hours until he'd managed to get out of the country? He couldn't risk the police questioning him. The man took a seat in the reception area and waited until the hotel manager led the police to a private office. Then he rushed to the reception desk. Elbowing an elderly couple to one side, the man insisted he had to leave immediately or he would miss his plane. He settled his bill with the cash he had taken from the ATM earlier that morning and almost ran out of the building. He jumped into a waiting taxi. As it pulled into the traffic, he sank into the seat and let out a long sigh. Earlier that morning, he'd worried he'd never make it out of the hotel in one piece,

but the future was looking brighter already. Nobody would ever be able to link him to the fake name and address in the hotel records. He would be safe now.



Almost a month later, the man was scrolling through his newsfeed as he waited for his youngest to finish her ballet class. It was the red hair that caught his attention. The Irish girl was in an airport, head down, dragging two large suitcases behind her. The headline read, *Newlywed returns home alone.*

TWO

AOIFE DIDN'T HEAR the click-click of the high heels hurrying towards her. Even the chair scraping across the floor didn't immediately catch her attention.

'Sorry I'm late. Work is hectic as usual. I must have been out of my mind when I decided to become a lawyer.'

'Huh?' Aoife looked up from her phone. 'Oh, hi, Orla. Hang on a sec.'

Orla stopped a passing waiter and ordered a coffee. She checked her text messages, then turned to her friend, but Aoife's eyes were still glued to her phone.

'What's going on?'

Aoife slipped her phone into her bag. 'Sorry, I just had great news. Remember I mentioned that an editor I've done some work for has contacts at the *Irish Times*?'

'Oh my God! You're writing for the *Times*? Aoife!'

Aoife laughed. 'It's only one feature.'

'But, Aoife, it's the *Times*.'

Aoife's eyes shone. 'I know.'

'Is it the missing people feature you told me about?'

'Yeah. I pitched them an entire series, but I knew that was

a long shot. They liked the idea, but they want a different journalist reporting on each case.’ She grinned at Orla. ‘The brilliant thing is they said I could do the first story and I get to choose the subject. Isn’t that amazing?’

‘I can’t believe it! Have you decided who you’re going to write about?’

‘Nicole Gallagher. Do you remember her? She was all over the papers last year.’

‘Her husband disappeared, didn’t he?’

Aoife nodded. ‘On their honeymoon. Can you imagine?’

‘Has she agreed to speak to you?’

‘She just messaged me now. We’re meeting tomorrow.’

‘That’s really brilliant, Aoife. I’m so happy for you. If you keep going on like this, you’ll be able to give up all those horrible temping jobs soon.’

‘I hope so. I’d really love to be working from home full-time before I get pregnant again.’

‘Are you planning on having kids immediately?’

‘We thought it would be best to wait a year or two. I want Amy totally used to her new family before we disrupt her life any further.’

‘Is she okay about the wedding?’

‘To her it’s just a party and a chance to wear a fancy dress. She doesn’t remember a time when Conor wasn’t in her life. Her latest thing is parading up and down the hall, flinging potpourri everywhere.’ Aoife laughed. ‘She says she’s practising to be a flower girl.’

‘Talking of which’—Orla thanked the waitress, who put a cup of black coffee on the table—‘did you check out the links I sent you?’

‘Links?’

‘Aoife! For God’s sake! The wedding’s in four months. You have to choose a dress. What are you waiting for?’

‘Oh, there’s no rush. It’s not like we’re doing the big white wedding thing. It will only be family and a few friends, and we’re having the reception in the garden.’

‘Have you at least ordered the marquee?’

‘I think Conor did that.’

‘You think! Aoife! Do you want to get married or not?’

Aoife laughed. ‘Of course I want to get married. I just don’t have any interest in what I wear or where we eat or any of that stuff. I did the whole big white wedding thing before, remember? And look how that worked out.’

‘That was because you chose the wrong man. This time it will be completely different.’

‘Yeah, well, I didn’t know I’d chosen the wrong man at the time and I still hated every minute of the entire day.’

‘You were a teenager, Aoife, and your parents were barely cold in their graves. A big family wedding was the last thing you needed. Besides, I wasn’t there, was I? This time you are going to have a ball. I take my bridesmaid’s duties very seriously and you are going to have the best day of your entire life, whether you want it or not. I won’t hear any arguments.’

‘Orla, I have people to inter—’

‘No “Orlas”. I am making an appointment for you and we are going to pick out your dress.’

‘But—’

Orla held up a hand. ‘No buts. I’ll give you a choice of three different days, but you are going to one of them if I have to drag you there by the hair.’

THREE

AOIFE WAS WELL used to interviewing people and it rarely cost her a second thought, but this time it felt different. Her mouth was dry and her hands clammy as she parked opposite Block 2 in the apartment complex. This time there was so much at stake. If she did a good job, she'd be able to pitch to every editor in the country. It could really kick-start her career.

Nicole's apartment was in Sandymount. It was an expensive area, within walking distance of both the ocean and the city centre. Judging from the size of the apartments and the age of the majority of cars parked near her, Aoife assumed most of the apartments were rented. In a largely futile attempt to make the four concrete boxes look inviting, tiny green triangles separated the four apartment blocks and the exteriors were freshly painted.

Aoife took deep breaths as she climbed the stairs to the second floor. She wiped her hands on her leggings before knocking on the door. It was opened by a woman a few years younger than herself wearing skinny jeans and a grey hoodie. She wore no make-up and her red hair was tied into a loose plait which was pulled over one shoulder, Katniss Everdeen style. Aoife could count on the fingers of one hand the number of natural redheads she had seen

in her life, but the freckles that covered every inch of Nicole's face left no doubt that her hair colour was natural. There were dark circles under her eyes, and although her lips formed a smile as she greeted Aoife, her eyes were dull and lifeless.

Nicole led Aoife into a large room which comprised the entire living area. The kitchen ran along one wall, opposite which was a tiny breakfast bar with two stools. Directly opposite the kitchen was a peach-coloured three-seater sofa which faced a wall-mounted flat-screen TV. Almost touching the back of the sofa was an oval glass table with four chairs. French doors led to a decent-sized balcony with a round table and two chairs.

'I know,' Nicole said when she saw Aoife looking outside. 'Whose bright idea was it to waste so much space on a balcony? It might make sense if we had a sea view, but you'd need a skyscraper to catch a glimpse of the sea from here.' She took two mugs from the cupboard. 'Coffee?'



'You're the first journalist I've spoken to in a long time,' Nicole said, putting two mugs of coffee on the table. She took a seat opposite Aoife.

'Thanks for agreeing to talk to me.'

'To be honest, I'm not sure this is a good idea. I'm sick to death of people saying Matt ran out on me and I just can't accept it. He didn't, you know.'

'What do you think happened?'

'I don't think, I have absolutely no doubt what happened.' Her eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them away. 'Matt is dead.'



There was a knock on the door and Nicole went to answer it. ‘My neighbour,’ she said when she returned a few moments later. ‘Checking up on me. I barely knew anyone in this building before Matt died—now I’ve no idea what I’d do without them. They’ve all been so good.’

‘You’re very lucky.’

‘You have no idea. In the beginning, when I didn’t want to get out of bed, they brought food. After a few weeks, they insisted on dragging me outside for some fresh air. I would never have believed strangers could be so kind.’

‘They sound amazing.’

‘They really are. And they won’t even let me thank them. They insist I did them a favour. The other apartment blocks in this complex are mostly full of strangers, but they say it’s thanks to me that in this block we’ve all become close friends.’ She gave a sad smile. ‘At least one positive thing came from Matt’s death.’

‘Why are you so sure Matt’s dead? He’s still listed as missing, isn’t he?’

‘There’s no other possible explanation.’ Nicole picked up her mug. ‘Oh, I know what people say. Believe me, I’ve heard it all—he had another wife, another family, he was in debt, in trouble with the law. It’s all nonsense. I knew Matt. He wouldn’t have left me without a word. Not under any circumstances.’

‘Tell me about him. How did you and Matt meet?’

Nicole’s eyes took on a faraway look, but her memories didn’t appear to give her much pleasure. ‘In Nepal. Both of us booked the same hiking tour to the Everest base camp. Matt and I were the only two Irish people, so we spent a lot of time together. I mentioned returning to Ireland and looking for a full-time job. We were both in IT, so when Matt returned a few months later, he texted me and asked if I had any good contacts.

I said he could stay with me for a while until he found a place of his own. He never left.'

'Who did he work for?'

'Mostly he worked freelance. He talked me into doing the same. It gave us the best of both worlds—a home base and regular extended holidays.'

'You both worked from this apartment?'

'I like working at this table, or in good weather I move out to the balcony. Matt worked in the bedroom.'

'How long were you together before you got married?'

'Three months.' She caught the surprise on Aoife's face. 'You think I hadn't known him very long and that I have no idea what Matt is capable of. You're wrong.'

'People can surprise you.'

Nicole shook her head. 'Not Matt. I knew him as well as it's possible to know another human being. And Matt knew me. My mother...' She twisted the wedding ring on her left finger. 'Aoife, I don't want you writing about Matt's family or mine. That's confidential.'

'I keep my promises, Nicole. You'll get to read every word of my story before it's printed, and I'll remove anything confidential that's not essential to the story.'

'Right. Well, this is completely irrelevant, so it stays between us. Okay?'

Aoife nodded.

'My mother has substance abuse issues. I rarely saw her growing up, but every year or so she'd turn up at my grandmother's house, make a big fuss of me, and just when I was beginning to think that this time everything would be alright, she'd disappear. She never once said goodbye. It took me years to accept she'd never change. If Matt wanted to leave me, he'd

have told me. At the very least, he'd have sent me an email, or even a text. He'd never disappear without a word. He knew what that would do to me.'

'The last time you saw Matt was on the beach, right?'

'Yes. He was on the sunbed beside me before I fell asleep. When I woke up, there was no sign of him.'

'And he left all his things behind?'

Nicole nodded. 'His passport was in the hotel safe. His bank account has never been touched. He's never used his credit cards. His phone has been switched off since the day he disappeared. He's never contacted his parents.'

'What does his family think happened?'

'You'd have to ask them. I only met his mother once. I've never met his father.'

'Why is that?'

'When Matt told them we were getting married, they tried to talk him out of it. There was a big fight and Matt said if that's the way they felt, he wasn't inviting them to the wedding. I tried to talk him round, but he said they weren't a close family and he only told them we were getting married out of a sense of obligation.'

'Did Matt say why they weren't close?'

'The only thing that matters to them is what others think of them. Everything was framed in terms of the neighbours. It wasn't "you'll be late for school", it was "the neighbours will see you're running late again". They cared how their son reflected on them, but they didn't give a damn about Matt.'

'He told you that?'

'Not exactly. Matt was very reluctant to discuss his childhood. All he would say was it was no big deal, that his parents had never been abusive and he'd wanted for nothing. But I knew his relationship with them bothered him more than he let on.'

Once I met his mother, I understood why. A block of ice would have more warmth.'

'You met his mother after Matt died?'

Nicole nodded. 'When I came back from Italy, I called to their house. The police had already told them Matt was missing, but they'd made no attempt to contact me. It didn't seem right ignoring them. I was dumb enough to assume that at the very least they'd have questions about Matt's disappearance.'

'They didn't want to discuss it?'

'His mother wouldn't even let me inside the door. She said it was my fault her son ran away. She accused me of lying about being pregnant and—'

'You were pregnant?'

'No, I was never pregnant and Matt knew that. His mother thinks I lied to him. She believes there was no other possible reason Matt would want to marry somebody he'd only known for such a short time. She said I put him under too much pressure, that he was too young to be a husband and father and that if I hadn't forced him into a commitment, none of this would have happened.'

'Can I speak to Matt's parents?'

'You could try, I suppose, but they won't want to be interviewed. I'll text you their contact details. They live in Glenageary.'

'Great. Now this is a human-interest story, so my readers will want to feel they really know Matt. Did he have an Instagram account?'

'He had one when he travelled, but he hasn't posted since then.'

'Could you forward the photos on his phone?'

'I can't. There was a break-in here a few weeks after I returned from Italy. There wasn't much to take, but they got both our laptops.'

‘Weren’t his photos saved to the cloud?’

‘No, he’d used up his free storage when he was travelling and he didn’t think it was worthwhile buying more. We generally used my phone for photos. It’s got a much better camera. I can send you those pics if you like?’

‘That would be great, thanks. But those pics are a record of your life together. I’m looking for something that gives me a feeling of Matt as an individual. Could you send me his bank and credit card statements for the six months before he disappeared?’

‘How would they help?’

‘You can tell a lot about a person from their financial records.’

‘Okay. It can’t do any harm, I suppose.’

‘I’d also like to speak to Matt’s friends. Could you give me a list?’

‘I’ll send you the wedding guest list. Everyone we knew was there, and it was the last time any of them saw him.’

‘And I’d like to speak to your neighbours.’

‘Matt had a few clients in the complex, but he didn’t know them well. Mostly he gave them remote assistance. He knew the people on our floor to say hello to but that was about it. As I said, I only became close to the neighbours after Matt died.’

‘I’d still like to speak to them, if that’s okay with you.’

‘Sure. I’ll let them know I’m fine with it.’



Nicole printed out the bank statements and handed them to Aoife.

‘Thanks. You mentioned on the phone that you hired an Italian firm of private investigators. Did they come up with anything?’

‘They only have one lead that seems promising. When they

spoke to all the hotel staff, one of the receptionists mentioned a man she thought had been acting strangely. According to her, the man's eyes followed me every time I entered the reception area that day.'

'Men often watch young, pretty women.'

'The odd thing about this guy was he checked in the day Matt disappeared and checked out the following morning. He'd reserved the room for a week.'

'That's unusual. He could have had an emergency of some kind.'

'That's what I thought, but the detectives felt it was worth following up on. They bribed the receptionist to give them a copy of the man's passport, but when she checked the file it was missing.'

'Could she have misfiled it?'

'Maybe. But when the investigators checked out his address, it was fake. They think he gave a fake name too.'

'How is that possible? Didn't the receptionist look at the passport when she registered him?'

'She doesn't remember the man checking in. It had been a very busy day with lots of people coming and going, but she's adamant she took a copy of everybody's passport and confirmed their photo and name matched the passport details.'

'How do the detectives explain that?'

'They're not sure, but one thing is certain, that man went to a lot of trouble to hide his identity. Why would he do that, Aoife?'

'I don't know.'

'I think it's because he's either Matt's murderer or he knows something about his death.'

FOUR

THE MINUTE SHE reached her car, Aoife phoned the Gallaghers' landline and left a message. She doubted she would even get a response, but that evening she received a text with directions to the Gallagher home and a request that she arrive at 10.15 the following morning. The text was unsigned. Who arranged meetings for 10.15? Why not ten o'clock or ten thirty?

Matt's parents lived on a quiet street lined with mature trees. The houses were all large red-bricked buildings separated by generous gardens. The residents obviously didn't believe in house numbers. The houses were distinguished by their names—'The Pines', 'Prospect House', etc. One was even called 'Sea View' although there was no sea in sight. The Gallaghers' home was 'Aurora'. The gates opened onto a large, paved area. Two octagonal steps led to a glass door with a black frame. The bell was answered by a small, elderly lady who introduced herself as 'Mrs Gallagher'. Aoife guessed she was in her late seventies. That would make her in her fifties when Matt was born. Matt's grandmother, maybe? Mrs Gallagher was a little too thin to be considered elegant, but her style was classic and expensive. She wore a well-cut navy skirt, white blouse, navy cardigan and

navy patent kitten-heeled shoes. Her light brown hair was cut into short layers. She looked Aoife up and down and from the frown and her pursed lips, Aoife guessed she didn't approve of jeans or leather jackets.

'Follow me, please.' Her tone was frosty and her posture stiff. Disapproval practically seeped from her pores.

They walked through a short corridor into a large, high-ceilinged octagonal hallway. It was bright, airy and cheerful, a stark contrast to Mrs Gallagher. The large room Aoife was led into seemed a better fit. The dark, heavy furniture was appropriately oppressive. It was as if every attempt had been made to diminish the room's natural beauty. Even the stunning bay windows were half hidden by multicoloured floral curtains. Mrs Gallagher motioned for Aoife to take a seat on the dark brown sofa. She perched on the edge of a chair opposite, her head erect and her back ramrod straight.

Aoife was unsure how to begin. What was this woman's relationship to Matt?

'Will we be joined by Matt's father?'

Mrs Gallagher pursed her lips. 'My husband spends most mornings on the golf course.' She caught the surprise on Aoife's face and her frown deepened. 'We believed we were unable to have children. Matthew was something of a surprise.'

'Thank you for agreeing to speak to me, Mrs Gallagher.' Aoife waited, but Mrs Gallagher didn't respond. Nor did she ask to be called by her first name. 'I've spoken to Nicole,' Aoife continued. 'She—'

'The only reason I agreed to speak to you is to explain that Matthew is not a suitable subject for your article. My son is not missing. He realised his marriage was a mistake and he couldn't face telling the girl, so he ran away. He'll return when he is ready.'

‘Have you heard from Matt, Mrs Gallagher?’

‘I have not. Nor do I expect to. Matthew was very angry when his father and I advised him against marrying that girl. We were right, obviously, but that will add to Matthew’s anger.’

‘Why are you so sure your son is alive?’

‘I do not subscribe to the theory that bodies can disappear into thin air. If Matthew was dead, his body would have been found by now.’

‘His wife disagrees.’

‘Of course she does. She wants Matthew declared legally dead.’

‘Why would she want that?’

‘Because she thinks she can get her thieving hands on my son’s money.’

‘Matt had money?’

‘He’s the only grandchild on either side of the family. Both sets of grandparents left money in trust for him. He’ll have access to it on his thirtieth birthday. I said to the police, keep an eye on that money. On Matthew’s thirtieth birthday, he’ll get in touch with our solicitors. I’d stake my life on it.’

‘Is there much money involved?’

‘About five million.’

In an attempt to stifle a whistle, Aoife had a fit of coughing. Matt’s mother watched impassively. When Aoife made two unsuccessful attempts to speak, both interrupted by a fit of coughing, Mrs Gallagher gave an exasperated sigh and left the room. A few minutes later she returned with a glass of tap water.

‘Thank you,’ Aoife said when she had recovered her breath. ‘That’s a lot of money.’

‘It certainly is, and it’s the reason that girl wants everyone to believe Matthew is dead. She thinks she’ll inherit everything.’

‘And will she?’

The older woman shrugged. ‘It depends on the terms of the trust. I don’t imagine his grandparents envisaged Matthew disappearing without a trace.’

‘I get the impression you don’t like Nicole.’

‘You are correct.’

‘May I ask why?’

Mrs Gallagher’s mouth twisted into a sneer. ‘She is not the kind of person I would wish to associate with.’

‘Why is that?’

‘Do you know her mother is a drug addict?’

‘Nicole mentioned there were issues.’

Mrs Gallagher snorted. ‘Issues! The woman’s been in prison for shoplifting. That’s the kind of family my son married into—criminals!’ Her face flushed a dark red. ‘My husband and I devoted our whole lives to building a reputation as honest, decent, upstanding citizens and that’s what our own son does to us—marries a criminal and then’—her voice rose—‘in case there was a single person in the country who didn’t know about it, he runs away and has the whole sordid tale spread all over the media. It’s all I can do to hold my head up in public.’

‘How do you think Matt is supporting himself at the moment? He hasn’t tried to access his bank account or use his credit card.’

Mrs Gallagher shrugged. ‘He works in IT. There are always people willing to pay cash for that type of work. Matthew can look after himself.’

‘It must be a difficult life, though. Wouldn’t it be a lot easier to tell Nicole he wanted a divorce?’

‘Obviously, but Matthew wouldn’t see it that way.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Are you familiar with the saying “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree”?’

Aoife nodded.

‘My husband is a talented businessman and has many stellar qualities. Unfortunately, our son inherited his main failing.’

‘And that is?’

‘The men in my family are weak. Neither of them could stand up to anyone if their lives depended on it. At the first sight of confrontation, they turn and run. Matthew would rather walk away from his life than tell that girl unpleasant truths.’

‘Such as?’

‘That their marriage was a mistake, of course.’

‘But they’d been married less than a week.’

‘Huh! Believe me, you can know a marriage is a mistake within hours.’

‘I see. Would your husband be willing to speak to me?’

Mrs Gallagher stood. ‘I believe I have adequately explained why speaking to any member of my family would be a waste of time.’ She opened the door to the hall and waited for Aoife to join her. ‘I’ll show you out.’