

Between Sisters

Cathy Kelly



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Prologue

LONDON

Dr Elsa de Marco sat in the television studio make-up room and closed her eyes to allow the make-up artist to begin the slow task of airbrushing her with foundation. It was a fabulous gizmo, Elsa often said to people who marvelled at her youthful screen self – despite the HD screens – and her not-so-youthful self in the flesh.

One moment she was pale with the wrinkles and uneven pigment of a sixty-year-old woman, and the next, she was sandblasted with television-quality beige, fluffed up with peachy, illuminating blusher to create cheekbones, and the majority of her wrinkles were expertly hidden with special magic pens.

Even her eyes, hooded now from age, shone out of her face the way they used to all those years ago: bright, a little too knowing, eyes that had seen it all, now lined with expert gel liner to give her gravitas along with a hint of sex appeal.

The thinking man's TV psychoanalyst crumpet, a newspaper supplement had once called her.

Tanya, the presenter of *The Casebook*, had not been pleased. Tanya liked all attention on herself.

'I hate the press interviews,' Elsa had pointed out with the calm, even tones she found worked with highly strung, highly jealous people like Tanya.

'That's right, you don't,' said Tanya, looking curious. *Why would anyone not want to be in the newspapers?*

'You're better at that sort of thing,' Elsa added before Tanya

got thinking as to *why* any reasonable person would pass up lifelong exposure to media scrutiny, which was Tanya's dream.

If Tanya had ever asked her this, Elsa would say that psychoanalysts liked to stay in the background and let the stars shine, which would be handily manipulative – and not entirely honest.

In truth, Elsa didn't want anyone delving too deeply into her life. Being in the background was her speciality.

Elsa's close friends still teased her about the 'thinking man's TV psychoanalyst crumpet' comment. But her psychoanalyst friends, who thought their profession should stick to small rooms, couches and comfy chairs instead of television shows, didn't mention it, apart from the odd comment about how nice it must be not having to worry about money.

Either way, Elsa didn't mind. She'd learned that she could not change how other people thought of her. And having money, after many years of playing catch-up, *was* nice.

Still, she didn't look too bad for a woman her age, Elsa had to admit, staring at herself in the mirror.

'Where could I get one of those foundation spray-on machines?' her tactless, young, new upstairs neighbour had asked only the previous weekend, catching Elsa about to leave the house and exclaiming again that television make-up was: 'science-fiction brilliant because, honestly, look at your skin now compared to when you're on the telly!'

The Elsa of thirty years ago might have snapped that, yes, she was an aged harridan compared to the twenty-something in front of her, and she had a polymer mask that they glued on in the TV studio. But the Elsa who'd spent most of the past twenty-four years praying for peace and acceptance at great personal cost smiled benignly at her neighbour and said, 'They're available on the internet, I think.'

'Oh, gosh, thank you. My skin... ' The young woman touched her face, and Elsa, who hadn't been wearing her glasses, finally noticed the acne marks. 'It's so hard to find the right foundation for coverage,' she said awkwardly.

'This is great, but you're too young and beautiful to need it,' Elsa said kindly.

The young woman grinned.

'I've seen you on TV – you're always the nicest one to people.'

My mum's dead impressed I'm living above you. If she comes up to London, could she get your autograph?'

'Of course,' said Elsa, but the knot was in her chest again. Incredible how few words could do it.

She'd learned how to deal with the knot. Repeating her words to live by helped: *the wisdom you've learned was worth the journey*. That's what she told herself every single morning.

But it didn't always help.

All of these thoughts were rippling around in Elsa's mind as she was being beautified that morning in the busy make-up room in OTV, where a rising boy band with degrees in hotness were being cooed over in one corner and a Miss World-lookalike newsreader with a degree in English Lit was being stared at by the boy band. Just your average morning in make-up.

Amid the buzz, Gigi chatted to Elsa. 'What's the topic this morning?' she asked.

Elsa liked it when Gigi was the artist working on her face. She was young, calming and concentrated on her work. Their conversations about the show centred Elsa, took her into the space of thinking about the guests and what she was going to say.

'Grandparents' rights in the first show, and then plastic surgery and the danger of unrealistic expectations about it,' said Elsa.

'Interesting,' said Gigi, standing back to check if Elsa's eyes were evenly shadowed. 'So not to expect a nose job will change your life – it'll only change your nose.'

'Exactly,' said Elsa, thinking of precisely how painful a nose job actually was, because she'd had one. It had hurt like hell and she'd looked like she'd been in a fist fight for two weeks. 'You could be doing my job.'

Gigi laughed. 'You've got the qualifications, Doc,' she said. 'I'd just be talking common sense but you really know what you're talking about.'

Elsa smiled good-naturedly. A degree was a wonderful thing to hide behind. A doctorate was even better.

Dr Elsa de Marco was an expert and nobody asked experts how they knew what they did. It had all been learned in dry, dusty lecture halls and over endless hours of listening to people spill out their pain as they lay on the analyst's couch. People never expected academics to have learned most of their wisdom the hard way.

Still, Elsa had found college a joy: learning why people were made the way they were was like finding the key to the puzzle of everyone she had ever known.

Gigi went back to her work, instructing Elsa to close her eyelids again. Under the black nylon make-up cape, Elsa's hand strayed to her left armpit, as it had so often these past few days.

Stop it, she told herself.

She'd palpated the lump so many times it would be impossible now to know if she'd created this swelling with its dull ache or if it really was something sinister. Probably nothing. That's what she said at night when her fingers touched it lightly, an innocent little nodule that could be so many things.

Sign of an infection, for a start. Plus she was run-down. Filming twenty shows in a ten-day schedule was insane.

'Budgets,' was the answer of the production company and the show's constantly beleaguered producer, Stanley. Cheaper to get the team in for a full day and work them to the bone filming two shows in a row. Get the guests up for one night in a London hotel – not as good as the old hotels used to be, now cheaper chains with no mini-bar so vast drinks bills could not be rung up with after-show relief. Have make-up do everyone in one high-speed swoop. So what if the afternoon guests' minimal make-up was sliding off their faces after lunch in the canteen? Nobody wanted to see the guests looking too glamorous: real life in all its normal, reddened or aged skin was what was called for. The talent – the show's host, Tanya, plus Elsa and Malik, the child psychologist – all had the services of a make-up artist on set so that by the second show, they were still unshiny and with no thread veins peeking through.

Suddenly Tanya breezed in, a cloud of heavy perfume behind her along with a nervous PA wielding a cup of coffee and an iPad. Everyone with eyes closed for eyeliner opened them to see the vision.

Today, Tanya was encased in some sort of bandage dress that Elsa knew her fashion-conscious friend, Mari, would be able to identify. In it, Tanya's forty-five-year-old body looked like a rather sexy mummy straight out of the sarcophagus, having torn her bandages to mid-thigh and rather low on the bosom.

'Tanya knows about the pain of cosmetic surgery,' Gigi murmured quietly to Elsa.

Elsa smothered a laugh. Tanya's bosoms had miraculously increased in size one summer and she'd had the gall to say she planned to be the face/bosom of an entirely natural breast-increasing cream.

'They're going to pay me a fortune!' she'd said gleefully.

Stanley, a man with great sad eyes like a Bassett hound and an entirely bald head from tearing his hair out over budgets, had taken her aside and muttered that she might be accused of false advertising.

'Any, er... cosmetic help would count against you if you implied the, er... increase was due to creams alone,' he'd said, desperately trying not to look at Tanya's breasts, which perched high on her chest as if they were a TV drama heroine's and had been stuffed into a corset by Wardrobe.

When Tanya had subsequently taken two days off 'sick' as proof of her rage, Stanley had been heard to say he should have kept shtum and let her be sued.

'You're ready to go, Elsa,' said Gigi cheerfully five minutes later, admiring her handiwork and sliding the cape off Elsa's shoulders.

'Thank you,' said Elsa with the genuine warmth that had made her a star.

'If you can fake warmth, you can do anything,' Tanya liked to say, a bastardisation of the old W. C. Fields joke about being able to fake sincerity. Tanya's warmth was skin-deep and most of the time she shimmered with malice. Tanya hated that Elsa was beloved of the viewers.

For a moment, Elsa thought about what would happen if the lump under her armpit turned out to be more than her being a bit run-down. Tanya would tonelessly say, 'Oh dear,' and then turn to Stanley and the director to discuss Elsa's replacement in a heartbeat. Tanya's reputation for being as hard as nails was entirely deserved.

The lump was bound to be nothing, Elsa assured herself. Nine out of ten breast lumps were not cancerous. *Use your training. Calm yourself. Do not catastrophise. Give it a few weeks and see if it calms down.*

She remembered a doctor once telling her that if you heard hoofbeats, you shouldn't always assume zebras were coming. Breast cancer was a herd of zebras, or whatever the collective noun was. This was probably nothing.

She climbed down from the make-up chair and went back into her dressing room where she made, purely for want of something to do, another cup of lemon and ginger tea.

She sat in the stiff armchair she'd made comfortable over the years with some cushions, trying to run over the details of the first show. But her mind was betraying her, slipping and sliding all over the place, refusing to deal with the case of grandparents trying to persuade an angry former daughter-in-law that her children would benefit from seeing them.

The Casebook was supposed to be a cut above the ordinary 'let's open the DNA-test envelope and see who the father is' morning show. Elsa was proud of the work she'd done on it over its ten-year run. It was the achievement she was second most proud of in her life. The list of things she regretted was far longer, but time and help had taught her to forgive herself for her failings.

Yet she couldn't forgive herself for them all. Sometimes it was impossible to close the door on the past.

Again her hand slipped under her silk blouse to the painful lump. If it was cancer, what would she do? Did she have the courage to confront things the way she made people on the show or in her practice confront things? She'd confronted so much herself, but now she was out of energy.

Physician heal thyself.

No, she was fed up with dealing with things. She'd let this wait. She'd know if it was serious, wouldn't she?

One

DUBLIN

Dark hair plastered to her head with rain, Cassie Reynolds stood in the weary queue in Starbucks at five past eight in the morning and half-listened to the conversations going on around her.

‘The kids won’t get up for school. Do you think it’s easy for me, I asked them?’ demanded a forty-something woman laden down with laptop bag, handbag and light raincoat for the unseasonable downpour outside.

‘They won’t go to bed on time,’ agreed her friend, equally laden down.

Cassie, mother-of-two, and carrying just as much equipment in the way of laptop, overstuffed handbag and rain gear as the two women, understood their pain. Her daughters Lily and Beth, thirteen and fifteen respectively, seemed to think it was *her* fault that they had to get up for school in the morning.

‘It’s inhuman. Teenagers have rights too,’ Beth had taken to saying when 6.45 rolled around each morning and Cassie woke the household up.

Cassie wondered if she could go into the school Amnesty International group – which Beth had just joined – and point out that they were supposed to be explaining to the kids in class about basic human rights, and that this didn’t include moaning about their own first-world problems.

‘I’m sooo tired,’ Lily complained every day. ‘Can I have five more minutes, please?’

‘I don’t want to get up either,’ Cassie wanted to say when she

was poleaxed with exhaustion. ‘But we have to. You need to go to school or I’ll go to jail for keeping you out, and I need to earn money. Simple?’

She hadn’t said it so far – she knew she’d sound unhinged if she did. Unhinged was bad parenting, apparently. Or so it said in the women’s magazines she occasionally had the energy to skim through at night in bed.

Trying to get everyone to bed earlier didn’t work, nor did dire threats to remove electronic equipment for weeks. The only possible power she had left was turning off the Wi-Fi but she quite liked going on Pinterest herself in the evenings. She liked meandering in and out of photos of lovely holiday destinations and photos of adorable animals, pinning them on her wall of ‘Places I’d Like to Visit’ or ‘Cute!’ boards.

All of this activity was avoidance of setting up a ‘Why Are Teenagers So Tricky?’ or ‘Am I a Bad Mother?’ board, which would be far more to the point.

She pondered this as she stood in the queue. Was it the girls’ ages that made her feel so stressed lately?

Yes, that was it: being a parent of modern teenage daughters was the equivalent of running the Government or the health service. No matter what you did, you were always in trouble. Nobody apologised for yelling at you, nobody hugged you, and no matter what sort of fabulous meal you conjured out of thin air after a full day of work, nobody ever said thanks.

The years of being ‘fabulous Mummy’ had morphed into slamming doors to a chorus of ‘You’re horrible and I hate you!’

It broke Cassie’s heart.

She’d tried so hard to make her family into all the things she’d missed as a child: the perfect nuclear family with a cat, home-cooked food, camping holidays and Cassie doing her best to help with homework even though she worked full-time. And it had worked, until about two years ago when her daughters had hit hormone city one after the other and, suddenly, they weren’t a nuclear family – they’d just become nuclear.

Making scones or healthy oat and raisin cookies on Sundays for the girls’ lunches at school the following week didn’t cut any ice when someone was sulking up a storm over not being allowed to go to a party where Cassie knew the parents would think it perfectly fine to let teenagers bring their own beer.

Saturday night was no longer a cosy movie-and-take-away family night because the girls spent the whole evening ignoring the movie and texting, despite dire warnings about phone confiscation. Now Beth could officially watch 15 movies, she wanted to watch 18 ones.

‘I’m not a kid anymore so why do I have to watch kids’ movies?’ she’d say in outrage at the sign of any sort of family movie.

Beth now mooched around the house wearing low-slung pyjama-type joggers with her slim teenage belly visible. She had made hints about getting a belly ring, comments which made her father go green and made Cassie say ‘over my dead body’ in the manner of a Victorian parent.

She wore coal-black eyeliner, sky-blue nail varnish and had posters of shirtless young male singers with six-packs on display Blu-Tacked to her walls.

Lily, once a sweet little poppet prone to hugs and drawing kittens, had thrown out all her fluffy, fairy-style tutu skirts and insisted on jeans so skinny her mother worried about Lily’s circulation. Her once-beloved Lalaloopsy dolls were in a box under the bed and Lily kept rushing into her big sister’s room to watch things on YouTube. More reason to ban Wi-Fi for the next ten years.

Any comment on either sister’s clothes was followed by the refrain, ‘But everyone’s wearing these now, Mum!’

And, being infatuated with her cool, older sister, Lily now wanted to paint *her* nails blue and had begun shrugging off any type of hug.

The only thing Beth and Lily tried to hug with any regularity was the family cat, Fluffikins, who was not a touchy-feely animal and protested loudly at being picked up and dragged out of rooms after rows. Cassie thought the cat might possibly go deaf, what with all the slamming doors he was exposed to.

‘It’s a phase; the girls will grow out of it,’ Grammy Pearl said whenever they discussed it. ‘You did.’

‘Please tell me I wasn’t that bad or that hormonally difficult,’ Cassie begged her grandmother.

‘The times were different and you were different,’ Grammy said diplomatically. ‘You had a lot of hard things to deal with, Cassie. Teenage girls need to fight with their mothers and you didn’t

have one. You only had me. I'm not easy to argue with – having your Great-Aunt Edie as a sister had taught me how to avoid arguments, because Edie could start one in an empty room.'

Grammy Pearl mentioning Cassie's lack of a mother was the closest they ever came to discussing the great pain of the Keneally family – how Cassie and her younger sister Coco's mother had left them when Cassie was seven years old and Coco had just turned one. How the pain had eventually killed their father ten years ago, destroyed by grief.

Jim Keneally had floated on the edges of the all-women household in Delaney Gardens, letting his mother sort out arguments and sign school letters. When Cassie thought of her father, she could see him bent with his head in a book, retreating from life because it hurt too much.

There had been happiness and love too – Pearl had made sure of that. But their family had never been the sort of normal family Cassie used to dream about – the ones in books or the ones her school friends had. Like a child peering in at a happy family at Christmastime, Cassie often felt that she'd spent much of her childhood peering through the glass windows at the homes of happy families she knew, watching as people made jokes and giggled, as mothers dropped kisses on father's heads, as fathers were teased for hopeless anniversary bouquets for their wives.

Despite the happiness in hers and Coco's childhood, they were different from their peers. Motherless.

That had made Cassie utterly determined to create the perfect family with Shay and her daughters, to make up for the one she'd never quite had. Her daughters would never be the ones with their faces pressed up against the glass windows, peeping in.

Except lately, it had all fallen apart.

'One day they'll come around and they'll be hugging you, saying you're the best mum ever,' Grammy said. 'Mark my words, it'll happen.'

'Any date in mind for this miraculous event?' Cassie asked, laughing without mirth. 'I want to mark it off in my diary and then see if I can get tranquillisers to keep me going until it happens.'

Worse was her marriage, because the most united thing she and Shay did now was to discuss their daughters and have rows about belly rings, clothes and unsuitable videos on YouTube, where male

singers sang about sex and barely dressed girls who got called ‘hos’ danced around them.

She and Shay never scheduled the apparently vitally important ‘date nights’. Without date nights, your marriage was as dead as a dodo, and their version of a date night were nights when both she and Shay were too tired to cook – he really did his best to help, although he wasn’t a natural chef – and they got a takeaway with which the whole family slumped in front of the TV and hostilities were temporarily suspended.

Did that qualify as date night? Nobody fighting? Surely there was kudos for that?

Besides, if Cassie felt the spark had gone out of their marriage, then wasn’t that what happened to people with kids and busy lives, stuck on the mortgage hamster wheel, endlessly trying to make it all fit together? Shay worked in an engineering firm and these days – thankfully – he was as busy as she was.

Time was what they needed, and one day they’d get it. Well, they might if only Shay’s mother, Antoinette, let them.

Cassie, who had no real mother, had married a man who was joined at the hip to his. There were three people in their marriage, as the Princess of Wales had once said.

Three years ago, Shay’s father had died, and since then his mother had permanently attached herself to Shay like a barnacle to a whale. She rang constantly, asking Shay to come fix plugs, change light bulbs and open the jammed washing machine door.

‘I wouldn’t ask him to fix those things,’ Cassie said in outrage to Coco.

‘She’s grieving,’ said her sister, always the peacemaker. ‘She’ll get it out of her system. Remember that sweet lady who used to come into the shop all the time when her husband died, in every second day, always with some little trinket? She could have brought it all in in one fell swoop to sell but she wanted the company. It’s like that. Then she got involved with the bingo crowd and now I never see her. She just needed to find her place in the world again.’

‘It’s not like that with Antoinette,’ said Cassie, sighing. ‘It’s like she wants a replacement husband.’

‘Don’t be freaky,’ said Coco, laughing.

Then Cassie had laughed and said she wasn’t being freaky, but honestly, Antoinette lived forty-five minutes away: it wasn’t

as if she was around the corner. She had two daughters into the bargain, and ‘Could she not learn to change a plug herself?’

‘She will,’ soothed Coco. ‘She’ll adjust and find a new life.’

Except Antoinette hadn’t. Three years on and Shay still drove to his mother’s house like a good little boy whenever she phoned.

Cassie had explained to Shay that he was spending a lot of time in his mother’s house and might it not be a better plan to talk to his sisters, Miriam and Ruth, and say that they could all club together to afford handymen to help her do the odd jobs, and perhaps to share visiting her all the time?

‘Oh, Cass, she needs me now my father’s gone. Don’t you understand that?’ Shay had said crossly when she’d made this suggestion, so that Cassie had felt as if she was being selfish and horrible by wanting her husband to spend some time around their house at the weekend.

Worse, what Cassie couldn’t say to her sister – because it sounded stupid and melodramatic – was that she didn’t feel loved when Shay put his mother first every time. He kept choosing his mother over his wife.

Cassie had been too scarred by this happening when she was seven to want it to ever happen again. But how could she say this? It would sound ludicrous and childish.

Antoinette was older and alone; she needed Shay more.

Cassie tried so very hard to adjust to this and yet everything in her life was shifting. She’d relied on Shay to be the one constant in this teenage maelstrom but even he had shifted off course and was dedicating himself to his mother. Cassie was supposed to not be even vaguely upset by any of this. She was ‘good old Cassie’ who kept the home fires burning and required no love or affection at all.

Cassie could tell nobody, but this withdrawal of Shay’s presence – and, to Cassie’s mind, his love – was the most frightening thing of all.

The Starbucks queue shuffled forwards and Cassie let her attention wander to scan the customers, eyes paying particular attention to women in their late fifties and sixties. She’d been doing it for so many years that she didn’t notice she was doing it: always looking.

The woman she was looking for could be dead now for all Cassie knew. She might live somewhere else entirely; she might

be living on a street dressed in blankets and begging for a few coins so she could buy something more to drink. Or would she have moved on to harder stuff? Heroin? Meth? Wasn't that what happened to women like her mother?

Who knew?

Thirty years since she'd last seen her, yet Cassie couldn't stop herself looking out for her mother. Despite the fact that she'd told everyone – Coco, their father, their grandmother, her husband, her friends – that she'd long since got used to the fact that her mother was a loser and had abandoned her without a second thought, Cassie still looked. And hoped.

She had no idea what she'd say to Marguerite – she would never call her mother or mum – but she was sure she'd know what to say if the chance ever came.

Why did you leave? Why did you never come back? Was it my fault? Was I not lovable enough?

The voice in her head when she spoke those words was never that of the always calm, mature Cassie Reynolds, née Keneally; it was the voice of a heartbroken seven-year-old who'd never forgotten the day she'd come home from school to hear that her mother had just left.

Her father had picked her up from school, not Grammy or Rita from next door, who did it when Mum couldn't. Dad never picked her up. It was always Mum, except the day before they'd had the crash. Maybe Mum was upset about it, even though she'd laughed at the time and said it was all fine. Just a teeny little mistake.

Mum liked to do fun things when she came. She'd have Coco all bundled up in her car seat and she'd have a plan.

'Let's go to the cafe for tea and buns!' she'd say, looking all shiny and pretty with her hair curled and her woolly coat – Mum said it was fake fur and she looked like a snuggly and glamorous bear, Cassie thought, with it wrapped around her.

Mum never talked much to the other mums.

'They're boring,' she'd whisper to Cassie, except Mum didn't whisper quietly enough and people heard her.

Cassie knew she should feel bad at the stares people gave them, but Mum didn't care. She shook her streaky dark hair and beamed back at everyone.

In the car, Cassie got to pick what music to play and they'd sing

along loudly as they sped down the road, laughing and talking. Mum's perfume was everywhere in the car: flowers, spices and something else Cassie didn't recognise, something uniquely Mum.

She loved her mum more than anyone else in the world but sometimes, only sometimes, late at night, Mum got angry and shouted. Her voice sounded funny too, not like Mum at all. Cassie had heard her, heard Dad shouting back, heard Coco's cry as she woke up.

Those nights gave her a pain in her tummy and she had it now when she saw Dad waiting for her at the school gates with all the mothers. He looked sick, sort of pale, like he might fall over if he wasn't leaning on the gate pillar.

He took her hand in his and led her over to the car, with the big dent in it where Mum had banged it.

'Only a teeny bang,' Mum had said happily.

'Teeny,' Cassie had agreed, giggling.

'We could cover over where the paint came off with nail varnish! Pink or red?'

Cassie had giggled some more. The car was pale blue. Pink bits would be so funny – a special car, for a special mum.

As she got into the car, Cassie didn't ask Dad why he was there. Coco wasn't in the back seat. She was at Grammy's, Dad said. It was the only thing he said on the whole journey. His hands were really shaky the way Mum's sometimes were – 'Silly Mummy with her shaky hands!' – and Cassie didn't ask why they were driving to Grammy Pearl's house with the pretty green and the old tree in front instead of to their home around the corner.

Grammy was at the door, reassuringly normal and calm, and she hugged Cassie and said she had made butterfly cakes. 'Your favourite. I had to stop Basil and Sybil from nibbling them all,' she added, as the pugs, both black and shiny with fat pink tongues, panted up to Cassie for kisses and licks.

On the ground, encircled by soft fur, squashy bellies and adoring dogs, Cassie felt a moment of safety. Grammy would tell her what was going on. Grammy had been the one who'd said Mum and Coco had to stay in hospital for a bit when Coco was a teeny baby and had been sick. Grammy was good at minding her when things went wrong.

But Grammy said nothing all day. Not when Cassie was doing her homework, not when they were watching *Scooby Doo* and

Coco was asleep in her carrycot. Not that evening when Grammy brought Cassie up to the spare bedroom that was decorated in sunflower yellows and had all Cassie's things magically in it – her teddies, her nightlight, her jammies with the rabbit on the front, and her books.

Cassie had to ask.

'Where's Mum?' she said in her quietest voice, so Coco wouldn't hear. She didn't want Coco to get upset, even though she was a baby and everything. She might get upset and cry again. Coco was special because she'd been so sick and Mum called her 'my little angel'. Cassie felt a powerful need inside her to take care of Coco. She was the big sister, after all.

Grammy muttered that the pillowcase looked unironed and went to find a new one. She didn't look at Cassie as she changed it. 'There, all nice and ironed now.' She paused. 'Your mum isn't well, Cassie, and she had to go away to get better.'

'Go away? Without me and Coco?'

The pain in her tummy had never felt this bad: it was like something ripping her tummy into two bits, carving a hole the way the people on the television had carved a pumpkin once for Hallowe'en to show how it was done.

Grammy Pearl sat heavily on the bed.

'It's the best thing, Cassie.'

'No,' wailed Cassie, not caring about the noise. 'It's not the best thing! I need her. Coco needs her. Somebody made her go! She was kidnapped! She wouldn't go, she loves us!'

Grammy Pearl hauled Cassie on to her lap and held her like she was a baby.

'Of course she loves you; that's why she went. Because she's not well and she wants to be a better mum to you both.'

'She's the best mum!'

'I know, I know,' crooned Pearl as Cassie sobbed. 'It's the best thing, really. I promise.'

A day had gone by and Mum hadn't come home, hadn't even phoned. Then another day. Then a week.

Grammy said Mum would come home but Dad hadn't. Once, only once, he'd stared at Cassie with those sad eyes and had told her the worst thing in the whole world: 'Your mother doesn't want us anymore, Cass – that's the truth of it. She's not coming home. We can be happy without her, can't we?'

He'd hugged her then and Cassie had been afraid to cry, afraid to say 'Noooo', afraid to do anything but hug her father back and pretend that everything was fine, like there wasn't this hole in her life.

Eventually nobody even talked about Mum anymore. The photo of Mum and Dad on their wedding day disappeared but Cassie found it in Dad's room, hidden on his dressing table behind a school one of her in her grey pinafore.

She began to worry about baby Coco. What if she went too? So Cassie decided that she would never allow that to happen. Coco was her sister and if they took her, they'd have to take Cassie too. Coco was hers to mind, whatever happened. Nobody would ever hurt her or take her away.

A skinny double-shot cappuccino in one hand, Cassie entered Larousse Events via the revolving door and made her way to the lifts, drinking some of her coffee, hoping it would work its magic. She'd been awake in the middle of the night due to thirteen-year-old Lily having a nightmare, and Cassie had ended up spending an hour in her younger daughter's bed, hugging her until the night terror was over.

'There are no monsters, honey,' she'd said, holding Lily tightly until the shaking stopped. 'Mummy's here with you; you're safe, Lily.'

The holding always worked. Like swaddling an infant, Cassie thought. It had taken a while to work out what seemed to calm Lily.

'I used to put a cool cloth on your arms and legs and the cold gently took you out of it without really waking you up,' Grammy Pearl had explained when Lily first started the nightmares.

Nightmares in children could be genetic but Cassie couldn't remember having them until her mother had left. Maybe she was wrong. Her memory of those days was hazy now. She didn't remember what from that time was the truth anymore.

But she knew one thing for certain: she couldn't imagine what would ever make her leave her children.

There had to have been something wrong with her mother, hadn't there? Not just the addiction. That's what Pearl had finally, grudgingly, told her about when Cassie had begged to know – the drinking and the drunk driving. There had to be something more.

Because any mother who really loved her kids would sober up and come home. No mother could leave her kids forever.

Except for Cassie and Coco's mother, Marguerite Keneally, who'd had a family and a home and who'd packed her bags one day and had never returned.

There were no photos of her in the house in Delaney Gardens where Pearl lived alone with her darling pug; no memories whatsoever. It was as if Pearl, who talked and laughed about everything, had done her best to remove Marguerite from her granddaughters' memories because she thought the memory of a long-lost mother would break them. It was enough that their father had died permanently mourning his wife. Pearl had decided that Marguerite could do less damage if she were forgotten.

In the office lift, Cassie tried to summon up her game face. Broken sleep seemed to be worse than no sleep at all. Shay and Beth had slept through it all. The double shot in her cappuccino might help and she hoped she'd get a few moments in the office to let her hair dry and let the caffeine sink in before the phone started.

Larousse Events – 'We Make Your Imagination a Reality' – had a quarter of a floor to themselves in an office block in the financial district. One half was executive offices and an imposing reception that had been designed to look like the lobby of an expensive boutique hotel and which was beloved of the company boss and owner, Loren Larousse.

'First impressions are vital,' she intoned as the staff worked out how much the original art on the walls cost and wondered how the cost of it had affected Loren's decision to cut bonuses that year.

The rest of their part of the fifth floor was a warren of tiny offices and cubicles where the work actually went on.

Cassie, as a senior organiser, had her own office close to the huge meeting room which Cassie's friend Belinda called 'the place where ideas went to die'.

Loren Larousse – which had to be a made-up name for a girl from Dublin, but nobody had ever managed to get their eyes on her passport as ultimate proof – had set up Larousse Events twenty years ago and viewed the company not so much as her baby but as her own private fiefdom.

In the media, she was much vaunted as a female entrepreneur

who loved to hire women. In private and within the tight-knit industry, she was an equal opportunities employer: capable of being a complete bitch to both men and women.

Whenever she sat at a meeting in the huge boardroom with its vast ceiling-to-floor windows, Cassie dreamed of pushing Loren out.

‘We all think you’re a witch, so let’s see if you can fly!’ she’d say gleefully.

But that was bolshie Cassie speaking, the nineteen-year-old girl who’d been full of who’s-going-to-make-me attitude. Modern Cassie, who was tying herself in knots to be the perfect mother, perfect wife and perfect career woman, would never say such a thing.

It was now 8.15 and the Larousse Events staff were just getting in, hanging up coats, checking how many zillion emails had uploaded in the night, hoping for a few penile enlargement ones or lonely girls with unlikely names who wanted to be their best friends because they could happily be deleted.

Cassie’s head ached as she thought of the day ahead. Her workload today included the final stages of setting up a conference in a large hotel west of the city, where it transpired the spa was going to be out of order during the three-day conference the following week.

‘They’ll be too busy to be in the spa,’ blustered the hotel’s manager the day before, a new hire who made Cassie long for his predecessor, who’d made everything run smoothly.

‘Theoretically they might be too tired to use the mini-bar, but it will be stocked in every room, won’t it?’ Cassie had replied. ‘We need this sorted out or we’ll have to discuss pulling the conference,’ she added.

That was utterly last resort stuff. Everywhere would be booked. The company needed a big hotel and really big conference hotels in Dublin were short on the ground.

She was thinking how she’d call him first thing to see if he’d come up with a solution, and knew she’d have to drive out there to talk in person, when she spotted Belinda, her closest work colleague and possibly second-best friend on the planet, walking back from the ladies’ room, handbag in hand.

Belinda was ying to Cassie’s yang – a tall, cool blonde, keen on silk T-shirts, sharp skirts and *Vogue*-editor heels, as well as

done-every-month highlights and blood-red manicures. Cassie was petite, had dark curly hair like her sister Coco, and taming it into work mode was easier when she could corral it back into a loose knot without actually doing much in the way of brushing it. Brushing caused lethal 220-volts frizz.

While Coco was the sister who wore vintage and lived in fifties cinched-in dresses, Cassie's wardrobe veered towards the androgynous, with loose modern jackets and trousers. Never skirts. Never heels. Heels were girlie and Cassie was not. Being her sister's protector from the age of seven meant Cassie had been the ultimate tomboy and she still was, she sometimes thought.

Instead, Coco was the girlie one with the bow-shaped lips and dimple on one side. Cassie had a strong chin, deep-set grave eyes and a serious problem with freckles: cute on kids, but not so cute on late-thirty-something career women.

Sometimes she wondered if she'd got those freckles from her mother because nobody else in the family had them except Beth, but because there were almost no photos of Marguerite, she'd never know. Her memories of her mother had faded to that memory of perfume in the car, something spicy she'd never been able to identify because it wasn't there fully in her consciousness, just hidden beneath the surface.

When she closed her eyes, though, Cassie was sure she could smell it: something exotic, reminding her of a Moroccan souk with spices, heady oud and vanilla.

'What do you think?' Belinda asked in a murmur as they fell into step beside each other. 'It's a new foundation,' she continued, gesturing to her perfect skin. 'Said to last forever and make me young and dewy. Or something along those lines. I don't know why I believe that crap, actually, but they sucker me in every time. Advertising works.'

Cassie smiled.

At forty-one, Belinda was three years older than Cassie, but had one older son who was unlikely to have woken her in the night since he was away at college. She actually did look pretty dewy but that was down to facials, IPL lasers and a new thing called jet flushing that cost as much as a week's food shop, and apparently you needed six in a row to get any result at all. Cassie knew she would never be getting flushed unless her numbers on the lottery came up.

‘You look fabulous,’ she told her friend truthfully. ‘Are you still using that magic concealer pen to get rid of under-eye circles?’

‘Yup. Fakes eight hours’ sleep.’ Belinda was single and liked her own space, but not all the time. Gentlemen callers were welcome as long as they knew when to go home. Men messed up the towels.

Cassie used to wonder if Belinda was lonely. But then she realised that these days, *she* was sometimes lonely, and she was married with kids. Maybe those date-night people were onto something.

‘Can I borrow the magic concealer pen?’ Cassie asked.

‘Lily had a nightmare?’

‘Yes. Can’t you tell? I’m trying to eradicate it with caffeination before Loren sees me and rips me in two for appearing in the office looking less than perfect.’

‘Yeah, well, we can’t all have a professional blow-dry every morning and get dressed from a wardrobe set up by a personal shopper,’ Belinda replied.

She briefly gazed at her friend’s pale face, the bruised smudges beneath her brown eyes and the wet hair. With amazing sleight of hand, Belinda took Cassie’s coat and laptop bag, handed over her own handbag, and muttered: ‘Go. Let the under-eye thing do its magic. Use the highlighter/sculptor thing too. Charlotte Tilbury. Ludicrous price but worth it. Does actually make you look like you’ve been on holiday and have cheekbones like a supermodel. We should have gone into the beauty products business years ago, honey. That’s where the money is today. Then we wouldn’t have to be prostituting ourselves working for the Wicked Witch of the West.’

‘Isn’t it the Witch of East?’ said Cassie.

‘She was the good one, wasn’t she? Nah, West. Loren had all the good sucked out of her on her last liposuction procedure.’

Cassie had her first laugh of the day and, juggling her coffee and Belinda’s handbag, headed for the loo.

The ladies was large and full of chatter as women from the various companies on the floor talked while they brushed their hair and slicked on lipstick. Usually a hotbed of rumours, the current one was about the US event company, Prestige, taking over Larousse Events.

Cassie still hadn’t found out if it was true or not but that

didn't stop the gossip. From what she could ascertain, Prestige was a much leaner affair than their own company. Friendly takeovers were just like hostile ones but with more smiles: many people would still lose their jobs. The thought sent a little shiver through Cassie. More change, and she hated change. She hoped that rumour was just a rumour.

She went to work with Belinda's magic products, dried her hair with some paper towels and listened.

The other gossip was that Denise, from the small accountancy firm on their floor, had left her husband after an affair with one of the personal trainer guys in the gym on floor ten. As Cassie applied Belinda's brilliant concealing pen to the dark shadows under her eyes, she heard how Denise had been sick of her workaholic husband and how he had no time for her.

'Nothing in the bedroom department,' the girl with all the news informed her avid listeners.

'Do you think yer woman with the Rolling Stones fella was right about how to keep a man?' someone said. 'Cook in the kitchen and hooker in the bedroom?'

Everyone was silent as they thought about this. At least half of the women on the fifth floor had kids and really needed a wife to keep the show on the road. Bedroom antics were way down the list.

'I wouldn't be into yer man from the Stones,' said Gladys, senior supervisor from the insurance company, as if Mick Jagger was waiting outside for her command to have him washed and sent to her tent. 'The mouth on him.' She shuddered. 'Now, that nice Michael Bubl , if he was around . . . Well, you wouldn't kick him out of bed for getting crumbs on the sheets, would you?'

Everyone laughed, breaking the tension.

But Cassie didn't laugh. Instead, she thought of how long it was since she and Shay had made love. True, she was perpetually too tired for sex. Arguing with the girls gave her tension headaches too, but it was months now and Shay hadn't made a single move to make love to her. She tried to remember the dates but couldn't, yet she realised that it was a long time since Shay had reached out in the bed towards the wall of her back, stroking, telling her he wanted her.

She put down the magic concealer pen, no longer really caring about how she looked. Was her husband going off her? *Had* he

gone off her? The ripple of anxiety over abandonment she'd never truly been able to shake began to hit earthquake status.

'Cassie.' A voice interrupted this terrible thought. 'Do you have a moment?'

It was Karen, a junior in Cassie's department: a sweet girl in her twenties who was going out with the boyfriend from hell.

Desperate to talk, Karen just blurted it out: 'I told him what I was thinking and he walked out. Just walked out, Cassie. I don't know what I'm going to do. I thought we'd talk about our relationship but he didn't. He got his stuff, said I was too high-maintenance with my talk about our plans for the future, and then he went. My brother's wedding is next weekend and we were going together, but now I'll be there on my own.' Karen's crying sounding like howling. 'Cassie, what do I do?'

Cassie managed to put an arm around Karen and let her howl.

As ever, it was a supreme irony that Karen had come to her for help. People had been coming to Cassie for help and support all her life. People told her things. She didn't know why.

'You have an open face; we have open faces,' Coco had said years before. 'We look like we can keep secrets and that we don't judge.'

Coco had been born looking as if she was interested in everyone, with sparkling brown eyes that could turn almost black with emotion and feeling, and made the person talking to her feel as if nobody else on the planet existed but them and their problems. She exuded warmth, caring and kindness. And she didn't mind.

Cassie had been born looking as if she was the woman who could sort out every problem, starting with the Middle East. And she did mind.

Tell me and I will fix it was the unspoken message on her face, and although Cassie had spent hours looking at herself in the mirror trying to figure out why people felt this about her, she was at a loss. She only saw a woman with dark eyes, winged brows, those darn freckles and a too-wide mouth that possibly smiled too much because smiling was safer, she'd learned over the years. Smiling stopped people asking 'are you all right?'

Since she'd been seven, though, she'd understood pain. Was that the secret? Did people see pain in her eyes and think *she'll understand*?

Either way, Cassie fervently wished she hadn't been born with

this look on her face. She knew the secrets of half the people in her office, many of the mothers in the girls' school and, when Coco was busy, her friends turned to Cassie for advice. It was exhausting.

Grammy Pearl had the same gift. People loved to talk to Grammy and total strangers flung themselves at her at parties, telling her their life stories while searching for tissues in their pockets or handbags.

Weird how genetics worked. They'd got this unasked-for gift from Pearl.

It could hardly have come from Marguerite.

Still, Cassie summoned up the strength she'd been summoning up since she was seven, closed off her own problems deep inside her, and began to calm Karen down.

She might text Coco later and see if she could come round for supper that evening. Coco always cheered her up. And Coco never, ever let her down.