



Sinead Moriarty

In My Sister's Shoes

One size doesn't fit all



The bittersweet new novel from the
Number One bestselling author

In My Sister's Shoes
by
Sinéad Moriarty

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One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine,
TESTOSTERONE . . .

I waited . . . nothing. Bollox. I still wanted to kill them. I thought the counting was supposed to calm me down, make me Zen, stop me wanting to murder them.

The letter T flew by me, hit the wall and slid down, leaving a trail of tomato sauce behind it. An F hit me right in the face, splashing tomato sauce into my eye. They screeched with laughter.

I wiped my eye with my sleeve and sighed. How, in God's name, had I ended up here? Where was my old life, the glamorous one, the independent one, the nice, clean, non-food-smudged, non-snot-covered one?

Maybe if they were my own kids it wouldn't be so difficult. Maybe if they were my own kids I wouldn't want to kill them right now. Maybe if they were my own kids I'd know what the hell I was doing.

But they weren't and I was drowning in a sea of alphabet spaghetti.

I

As I strutted up the pathway to my sister's house, I realized I felt really happy for the first time in ages. I was on top of the world. I, Kate O'Brien, was a television presenter. After eight years of living in a studio apartment in London, making tea for other presenters, I finally had my own show and it felt fantastic.

I rang the doorbell and heard squealing from the other side. The twins were obviously very excited about being five.

The door opened and a very harassed-looking Dad pulled me into the hall.

'Guess what?' I asked, dying to tell him my good news, but he cut across me.

'Thank God you've arrived. Mark's been boring me rigid about some new mathematical theory or other. I'd rather nail my balls to the mast of a sinking ship than listen to another word of it,' he hissed.

'Charmingly put. Nice to see you too, Dad.' I laughed, and looked at my brother-in-law, Mark, who had his back to me and was now busy showing the twins how to multiply three apples by three pears. They gazed adoringly at their father as he prattled on.

'That dude needs to get out more,' drawled Derek, my younger brother, from the couch. 'It's bad enough that he's a maths professor but he doesn't need to inflict it on his kids. They're going to be total nerds. No one wants to hang out with kids who are good at maths!'

‘You could have done with a bit more focus on your studies, instead of pie-in-the-sky dreams about being a musician,’ grumbled Dad. He had been funding Derek’s dream of becoming a famous rapper for years and was clearly fed up.

‘When I’m playing sell-out gigs in Wembley, you’ll eat those words,’ said the confident artist.

‘Seeing as you haven’t made it outside the garage yet, I won’t hold my breath.’

‘Where’s Fiona?’ I asked.

‘She’s in the kitchen putting the candles on the cake,’ said Dad. ‘If you can call it a cake, it’s a rotten looking organic carrot yoke. Sure you wouldn’t feed it to a rabbit.’

As if on cue, my elder sister came through the door carrying the birthday cake. ‘Kate, I’m so glad you made it,’ she said, coming over to kiss me.

‘I wouldn’t miss the boys’ birthday,’ I said, winking at the twins, who ran across to say hello.

‘Except last year when you forgot,’ said Mark, as I glared at him. I could never figure out what Fiona saw in him. I suppose because she was a maths genius too, they had numbers in common.

‘Never mind, you’re here now,’ said Fiona, smoothing things over as she always did.

‘Where’s our present, Auntie Kate?’ Bobby demanded.

‘It’s in here,’ I said, handing him the bag.

‘I hope it’s more suitable than their Christmas present was,’ said Mark.

I blushed. Riddled with guilt at having forgotten their fourth birthday I had spent a month’s wages on a PlayStation that came with two games – Big Mutha Truckers 2 and Airforce Delta Strike – which I’d thought was a really cool present. How was I to know that they were violent games

and that the boys were too young for PlayStation? I didn't have a clue about kids. Fiona was speechless and Mark kept shaking his head, saying how totally unsuitable it was and didn't I know that these games corrupted children's minds? I had felt about two feet tall.

Jack held up his present, looking confused. 'What is it?' he asked.

'Burberry ear-muffs – to keep your ears warm in the winter when you go to the park,' I announced.

The twins looked blankly at me.

'Look, you put them on like this,' I said, placing them on Jack's head.

'Yucky,' he said, and pulled them off.

'What's this?' asked Bobby, trying to put a little jacket over his head.

'That's a little Burberry coat for Teddy, so he can keep warm when you take him for walks,' I said, grinning at Teddy, the cocker spaniel, who was curled in a ball in the corner.

Everyone was staring at the ear-muffs in silence.

'Lovely,' said Fiona, bemused.

'What's Bunberry?' asked Dad.

'It's, like, totally bling designer gear,' said Derek.

'I thought tartan went out of fashion in the sixties,' said Dad, laughing.

'Well, it's better than last year's fiasco,' said Mark.

Bobby peered into the bag to see if anything else was in there. Finding nothing, he fixed his eyes on me with raw disappointment.

'Sorry, guys, I thought you'd like them,' I said, feeling like a total moron.

We heard a yowl and turned to see Jack wrestling Teddy into the dog coat – clumps of his fur were stuck in the zip.

Mark ran over to save him.

‘Guess what?’ I said, still bursting to tell them my news.

‘You’re up the duff,’ said Derek.

‘You’ve met a nice lad,’ said Dad, hopefully.

‘I’ve got my own show!’ I said, ignoring them both.

‘Kate, that’s fantastic!’ said Fiona.

‘Ah, sure what good is that to you?’ said Dad. ‘You need to focus less on that auld job and more on meeting a nice boy.’

‘So, are you going to be earning mucho *dinero*?’ asked Derek, perking up.

‘Well, it’ll be a lot better than what I’m on now, although that wouldn’t be hard. But don’t be expecting hand-outs – get your own job.’

‘Is it an entertainment show?’ asked Fiona.

‘Yes, pretty light stuff – interviewing rising stars, reviewing music, movies and TV shows. It’s on the Lifechange channel, not exactly the BBC – but it’s up and coming and at least I finally get to present. I’ve taped the first three shows already. It’s going well.’

‘Mark,’ Fiona called, ‘did you hear the good news? Kate has her own show. She’s going to be famous.’

‘Finally. Well, at least now you won’t have to worry about her so much,’ he said, sitting down beside his wife and putting his arm round her.

‘Fiona! What are you doing worrying about me? I’m thirty, for God’s sake, I’m fine.’

She shrugged. ‘I can’t help it. It’s habit.’

I smiled at her. She’d been worrying about Derek and me since Mum had died twenty-two years ago. Dad, heart-broken, had thrown himself into work and left Fiona, aged twelve, to look after her younger siblings. I was eight and Derek was only four, so Fiona had become our surrogate

mother. I always felt guilty that she had given up her youth to make our sandwiches and do our homework with us. She had been twelve going on forty.

‘Well, you can stop right now,’ I said. ‘I’m an overnight success after eight years’ grafting.’

‘So, like, can Gonzo and me come on your show and try out some of our new material?’ asked Derek.

‘No.’

‘What happened to families helping each other out?’

‘She doesn’t want the show to be cancelled,’ said Dad.

‘Your stuff isn’t good enough yet. It needs more work,’ I said, trying to be tactful.

‘We’ve been working on some new songs. You’ll be blown away when you hear them. We’re recording a CD on Friday so I’ll send you a copy and you can slot us into your show,’ said the wannabe rapper, as he headed out the door. ‘Thanks for the grub, Fiona, I’ll catch you later.’

‘Oh, God.’ I groaned. ‘How am I going to get him off my back? He’s going to hound me about this every day.’

‘Couldn’t you put him on the show for a few minutes?’ asked Fiona.

‘No way – he’s brutal.’

‘Is it that bad? I thought some of the lines rhymed well,’ said the ever-supportive oldest sibling.

‘It’s absolute tripe. The lad needs to cop on to himself and get a proper job,’ huffed Dad.

‘Well, Bill, you’re the one who’s funding his delusional music career,’ Mark pointed out, and Dad bristled.

‘I’ve told him, next year when he turns twenty-seven the finances will dry up. Besides, he’s working part-time at the moment so I’m helping him less. I can tell you now, when your two boys grow up and beg you to support their pipe-dreams, you’ll find it a lot harder to say no than you think.’

‘Our boys will be mathematicians, like their parents,’ said Mark, as we watched Jack rubbing birthday cake into Bobby’s hair.

‘Now who’s delusional?’ muttered Dad.

‘So, how’ve you been?’ I asked Fiona, changing the subject as quickly as possible.

‘Good, thanks. You know, busy with teaching and the boys. Actually, we have some exciting news too. Mark’s been asked to submit a paper for the Goldwin Prize.’

‘Sounds great,’ I said.

‘Tremendous,’ said Dad.

Mark nodded. ‘It’s a big honour. It’s for the conference on statistics, mathematics and related fields.’

‘What do you get if you win?’ Dad asked, in his usual blunt manner.

‘A huge grant for the department, and worldwide recognition of his work. It’s a really big deal – there’s a lot of pressure on him,’ said Fiona, smiling proudly at her husband.

‘Wow! Well, good luck with it all,’ I said.

‘Thank you, Kate,’ said Mark. Then, to Fiona, he said, ‘Actually, darling, speaking of the prize, I need to slip away and do a couple of hours’ work, if that’s all right?’

Fiona looked a bit crestfallen.

‘Now? On the boys’ birthday?’ I asked.

‘It’s fine, Kate,’ said Fiona.

‘This paper’s going to make a difference to the way people think. Not as important as interviewing teenage singers, perhaps, but important none the less. I’ll be back to read the boys a bedtime story,’ he said, kissed Fiona and walked out.

‘Who’d like tea?’ asked Fiona.

‘I’d love some,’ I said, as she went into the kitchen to boil the kettle.

‘Imagine how insufferable he’ll be if he wins this prize.’
I sighed.

‘Perish the thought,’ said Dad, with a shudder.

The phone rang. Fiona mustn’t have heard it in the kitchen so I picked it up. ‘Hello.’

‘Hello, Mrs Kennedy, your biopsy results have come through and Dr Summer needs to see you right away. I’ve scheduled you in for nine tomorrow morning.’

‘OK,’ I said, as the phone went dead.

What the hell was going on?

I sprang up from the chair and went to find Fiona, who was in the kitchen with the twins.

‘Hey, boys, will you go to Granddad? He wants to talk to you,’ I said, and ushered them out.

I took the teapot out of Fiona’s hand and led her to the table to sit down. ‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

‘My question exactly. You’ve just had a phone call from Dr Summer’s secretary. Your biopsy results are back and he wants to see you at nine tomorrow morning.’ Fiona’s face crumpled. ‘Are you OK? Why are you having biopsies?’

‘You should have called me. That was a private phone call,’ she said, trying to compose herself.

‘The woman didn’t give me a chance to say I wasn’t you. Anyway, that’s irrelevant. Are you sick?’

‘If they’re calling me back first thing tomorrow it must be bad news,’ she said, fighting tears.

‘Jesus, Fiona, what is it?’

‘A lump.’

‘Oh, God, where?’

‘Breast.’

I stared at her, speechless.

‘Freaky, isn’t it?’ said Fiona, laughing bitterly. ‘She was exactly the same age as me when she died.’

‘Don’t think about that. It was a long time ago and the treatment now is much better. Besides, Mum’s was very advanced. Yours is probably just a little lump that they need to take out,’ I said, grabbing at straws.

She sighed.

‘Does anyone know?’ I asked.

She shook her head. ‘I didn’t want to worry Mark unnecessarily.’

‘I’ll go with you tomorrow.’

‘You’re flying back to London in the morning.’

‘I’ll change my flight.’

‘Don’t you have to work?’

‘Yes, but I can sort something out. Come on, I’d like to go with you.’

‘No, it’s fine. I’ll tell Mark tonight and he’ll come with me.’

‘Well, if you change your mind I’m happy to stay.’

Fiona smiled at me. ‘You’ll break out in a rash if you stay in Dublin for more than twenty-four hours. It’s OK, I’ll be fine.’

‘Rash?’

‘Come on, Kate, you’re allergic to Dublin.’

‘No, I’m not.’

‘Yes, you are. You always look uncomfortable and edgy after a couple of hours.’

‘Do I?’ I asked, knowing fine well I did. ‘I don’t mean to. I love catching up with all of you.’

I did like the idea of coming home and seeing my family, but after an hour or two I always began to feel claustrophobic. In the last three years I’d only come home for Christmas, and once during the summer for a weekend. I could never wait to get back to the airport. A weight lifted off me when I boarded the plane to London. I was always glad to see my family, but after the initial catching up, I never knew what to do with myself. I didn’t seem to fit in. Dad, Fiona and Derek had moved on with their lives and were closer to each other than they were to me. I felt like an outsider as they told stories about things that had

happened while I was away. I spent most of my time lurking about the house, clock-watching.

‘Maybe if you came home more regularly it’d be more comfortable for you. I know Dad would like to see more of you. I would too.’

‘Sure, absolutely, I’ll try and do that,’ I lied. ‘Anyway, what are we talking about this for when there are much more important things going on? How are you feeling? Have you been sick?’

‘No, not at all. I only noticed the lump a few weeks ago, so I decided to get it checked out and they sent me for a biopsy.’

‘It’ll be OK, Fiona. You’ve caught it early.’

‘What if I haven’t? What if the boys end up like us, with no mother? I couldn’t bear that, Kate. Life can be so unfair. I hated not having Mum around. It meant having to grow up so quickly. I want the boys to be children for as long as possible.’

I tried desperately to think of something reassuring to say. I owed her so much. She had given up her youth to raise me and Derek. While we were playing with our friends on the road, Fiona was cooking dinner or doing our laundry. Because of her selflessness, Derek and I had had a very stable upbringing. She was the one who made all the sacrifices.

‘Fiona, the boys will be fine and so will you. Women are always having lumps removed and go on to live long, healthy lives. I bet when you see the doctor tomorrow he’ll tell you it’s nothing to worry about.’

Before we could continue the conversation, Dad barged in, with the twins hanging off his back, screeching with laughter. ‘Jesus, did you go to India to pick the tealeaves?’ he puffed, as Fiona and I peeled the boys off him. ‘My God, Fiona, they’re very lively. I don’t know how you do it. I’m

worn out after ten minutes,' he said, plonking himself down on a chair while the twins chased each other round the table.

'You get used to it,' she said.

'Well, you look tired to me,' said Dad. 'I hope Mark's doing his fair share, Goldwin Prize or no Goldwin Prize.'

'Yes, Dad, he is. Mark's a very hands-on father.'

'Here you go,' I said, pouring his tea to shut him up.

'Well, *have* you met a nice lad yet?' he asked, ricocheting from one interfering question to the next.

'No, I'm too busy with work to meet men,' I said.

'You've always been far too focused on your career. You should spend more time trying to meet a nice fellow like your sister and settle down. You're no spring chicken any more.'

I almost choked on my tea. Mark had never been Dad's idea of a great son-in-law. He had hoped Fiona would meet someone who'd spoil her and pamper her and take away all her worries and responsibilities. Give her back some of the childhood that had been robbed from her. But you can't turn back the clock and change the past. Fiona was responsible, efficient, reliable and dependable, and she wasn't going to change regardless of whom she married. Besides, she really did seem to love Mark and he adored her.

They had met at a chess competition – Mum had taught Fiona how to play. When she was too sick to get out of bed, Fiona would go up to her room and they'd play for hours. After Mum had died, Dad signed Fiona up to a chess club and made her go every week. At first she didn't want to, but then she began to enjoy it, especially after she met Mark.

For Fiona it was love at first checkmate. She had finally met someone who was passionate about chess and maths. Living with Derek and me must have been torture for her – we could barely add. They spent hours discussing linear

programming, genetic algorithms and differential equations. Fiona thought she had died and gone to heaven. After years of trying to teach me and Derek to play chess – I got bored after five minutes and Derek tried to shove the pieces up his nose – she had found a true kindred spirit.

‘Thanks for reminding me of my age, Dad,’ I said. ‘And, by the way, in case you ever meet anyone I work with, I’m twenty-six,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘In my line of work once you reach thirty you’re over the hill, unless you’re hugely successful. So, I’ll be twenty-six for a couple of years.’

‘What kind of a job is that? You should come home and–’

‘Get a real job,’ I said, finishing his sentence for him. ‘No, thanks, Dad. I love my job and I’m where I want to be. If I have to starve myself and go to the gym five days a week to look younger, so be it. It’s worth the effort.’

‘You’re looking very thin,’ Fiona said.

‘I have to be. TV adds on ten pounds – and you should see the girls I’m in competition with. They’re stunning and rail thin. It’s dog eat dog out there.’

‘Who’s eating dogs?’ asked Jack.

‘That’s mean,’ said Bobby, putting a protective arm round Teddy.

‘No one’s eating dogs, sweetie, it’s just an expression,’ said Fiona, giving Jack a hug.

‘Mummy, will you light the candles again?’ he asked.

‘Of course. Will we sing “Happy Birthday” again too?’ Fiona asked.

‘Yes, please,’ they said, jumping up and down.

‘OK, here we go.’ She lit the candles and we sang ‘Happy Birthday’ for the fifth time.

I watched Fiona's face looking lovingly down on the twins as they blew out their candles, and remembered my mother lighting my birthday cake and felt a pang of emptiness. I prayed that everything would be all right with Fiona's lump. Children need their mothers, and Fiona was incredible with the twins. They were lucky to have her, and she deserved to be their mum for a very long time.

I sat smiling tersely at the teenager sitting opposite me and watched the clock tick. I had ten minutes with her and was supposed to air the interview on the show later that week. Some interview, I thought glumly. So far the kid had answered every question with either a shrug or a barely audible monosyllable. The bolshie Hollywood starlet scowled and pulled on her cigarette, exhaling smoke into my face. I took a deep breath and tried again: ‘So, did you find the role of Amy challenging?’

‘No.’

‘Is Louisa May Alcott your favourite author?’

‘Who?’ said the star, frowning.

‘The author who wrote *Little Women*, the book of the film you’ve just made,’ I said, beginning to lose the screed of patience I had left.

‘Dunno, never read books.’

‘So you made a film, based on a classic tale, and didn’t read the book?’

She shrugged.

‘Are you as good at reading as you are at conversing?’ I snapped.

‘What?’

‘Talking. You know, having a conversation,’ I said, letting my temper get the better of me. ‘Is that concept alien to you? Because I’d like to know why you’ve wasted my time today. I’ve spent five hours waiting in a draughty hotel corridor to interview you for ten minutes and all you can

say is, “dunno”, “yes” and “no”. Do you not understand English?’

As my cameraman, Gary, sniggered, the PR woman, who had been nodding off in the chair behind him, leaped to her feet and said that the interview was over. How dare I speak to her star like that? She called Security and I was promptly escorted out of the hotel by two large bodyguards.

‘Bloody hell, Kate, what’s got into you today?’ asked Gary.

‘I’m sorry. I’m in a really bad mood and I’m sick to death of interviewing mind-numbingly stupid child actors with attitude.’

‘Yeah, but Donna’s going to do her nut when she hears about this.’

‘Fuck Donna,’ I snapped. Gary stared at me in shock. I never lost my cool in interviews – I had plenty of experience with uncooperative stars. He knew something was up.

‘Sorry, Gary, I didn’t mean to be so grumpy. Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you back in the office. We’ll sort something out,’ I said, smiling weakly at him.

Gary shrugged and walked off to his van.

I sighed as I watched him go, then set off for the tube, putting my sunglasses on to hide my tears. What was I going to do? For the first time in my life, my sister needed me. I knew going home to Dublin was the right thing to do but I also knew that the sick feeling in my stomach wasn’t just concern and fear for Fiona. If I was being totally honest, a big part of it was selfish anger. I knew that by leaving London I’d lose everything I’d worked so hard to achieve.

I went over that morning’s disastrous phone conversation with Mark.

‘Hello, Kate. Are you alone?’ he asked, sounding strained.

‘Yes, what’s up?’

‘I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news. Fiona’s biopsy has

shown the lump to be malignant. She has breast cancer. She's having the lump removed and then she's probably going to need chemotherapy.'

My hands began to shake violently.

'Kate?'

'Is she going to be OK? Is it bad?'

'We won't know until after the lumpectomy, which she's having on Thursday.'

'How is she?'

'Not good. She seems to have fallen apart.'

'Can I talk to her?'

'No. She's gone to drop the boys to music lessons. Besides, she doesn't know I'm calling you. You know what she's like, never wants to worry anyone.'

My head was throbbing. 'Does Dad know?'

'She's too afraid to tell him. Especially with your mother's history.'

'Oh, God – poor Dad! This'll kill him. Do the boys know?'

'Not yet,' said Mark, choking up. 'We're going to need help with them, so I don't want to say anything until we've arranged something. Actually, that's why I'm calling. Could you come home and look after them?'

'Sure, I'll come home tomorrow for the day and try to get back every chance I have between recording the show.'

'The problem is, Fiona's going to need full-time help for the foreseeable future. It could be three months, it could be six.'

'But if I come home every opportunity I can, and if you work part-time, we should be able to manage.'

'Unfortunately the timing couldn't be worse. I'm completely swamped with this Goldwin Prize paper and Fiona

won't hear of me giving it up. She became hysterical when I mentioned it. She said my work on the paper would keep her going, that it would be a really positive focus for us in the middle of this nightmare. She thinks she can manage on her own, but she can't, Kate. She's struggling already. She needs someone to be there all the time for the boys, someone she trusts and who knows them,' he said getting emotional again.

'But, Mark, I can't give up my job and move back. I've only just got my own show after eight years' hard slog. I'll help in any way I can – I'll come back at every opportunity – but I can't be there full-time. You can work on your project when the boys are asleep and I'll be back every week and Dad can pitch in. We'll muddle through.'

'Muddling through isn't good enough,' said Mark, suddenly sounding angry. 'We have a crisis on our hands. Fiona has cancer. She's always been there for you – she gave up her youth to bring you up when your mother died. You owe her, Kate.'

'Look, I've said I'll do what I can and I—'

'I have to go! She's back, and she'd kill me if she knew I was asking you for a favour,' whispered Mark. 'Kate, I need an answer within the hour, or I'll have to start calling nanny agencies. She's going into hospital on Thursday. Call me back as soon as you've made your decision.'

I stared at the phone in shock. I wasn't Mark's biggest fan, but he'd never been rude before. I understood that he was upset, but he didn't have to try to blackmail me into moving back. Who did he think he was, telling me I owed Fiona? Telling me she'd given up her youth for me. I knew exactly what Fiona had done – she'd been amazing and I *did* owe her. But I loved my job. It had taken me so long to get to

this point in my career. Why did *I* have to give everything up and not Mark? He was her husband. They were his children. Stuff his stupid prize. He'd have to put his foot down and tell Fiona she came first, not work. I'd help as much as I could. He needed to understand that my presenting job was a one-in-a-million opportunity and as important to me as his Goldwin Prize was to him.

I called him back and told him as much. There was a deathly silence at the other end of the line.

'What you don't seem to be grasping here,' he said coldly, 'is that your sister has begged me to continue with the prize paper. Of course I'd give it up if I thought it would help, but she made me promise not to. I realize your job means a lot to you, but you're young, you'll pick up another job as soon as all this is over. Right now, you need to focus on Fiona.'

'I *can't* give it up. It's my life! I don't have a husband or kids – this job is it for me. I'm sorry, but giving it up just isn't possible. I'll talk to my producer and see if I can come back for two days a week or something.'

'Do you have any idea what's been going on here while you've been chasing your career in London? For the last eight years Fiona's nursed your father every time he's had the flu or a cold and she's the one who always boosts Derek's confidence when he gets yet another knock-back for his music. She's spent her life looking after your family but she can't do it any more. She's sick and it's your turn now. It's time for you to step up and be responsible. She needs to concentrate on getting better. You owe her, Kate.'

I really wish he'd stop saying that. It had got to me because he was right – I owed Fiona a lot and she had never asked me for anything.

'Well?' he asked.

‘I can’t decide now. I need time to think about it. I *can’t* give up my job and move home. I’ll see if I can work round it.’

‘Your sister has cancer, the same cancer your mother died from at the same age. How *can* you put your job first? She never put herself first when it came to *you*. She gave up everything to make sure you and Derek had a happy childhood. Do you have any idea how difficult that was for her? You have to come home and help her with the boys.’

‘Why can’t *you* look after her? To hell with your stupid maths prize! Your wife and children are more important,’ I snapped, panicking as reality hit me. I knew now I’d have to move back. I couldn’t leave her.

‘How eloquently put. I can see why you appeal so much to the dumbed-down television generation. Much as I’d love to sit here and argue with you, I have to sort out care for my wife and children. If you’re not going to help, I need to start calling agencies.’

‘Wait!’ I said, and my heart sank. ‘Don’t call anyone else. I’ll come back.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mark, sounding relieved.

When I hung up I realized I was shaking, with shock about Fiona and fury with Mark for having forced my hand. Why was it up to me to look after his wife and kids? Hadn’t he married Fiona in sickness and in health? Why did responsibility for his family fall on my shoulders? How long would it be for? Would I ever work again?

How would we get on living in each other’s pockets? Fiona and I were very different. She was responsible, *über*-organized and happy for her career to take second place to Mark and the twins. I was restless, ambitious and impulsive. Fiona craved a secure family unit, while the thought of settling down made me feel claustrophobic. She had been a

child genius and member of Mensa, while I had struggled to pass exams of any kind.

Fiona had spent her life being my surrogate mother, worrying about me, fussing over me, but as I got older and she continued to mother me it had become a bit suffocating. Moving to London had been incredibly liberating. How would Fiona react to me taking care of her and her children? It wouldn't be easy.

I took a few deep breaths and tried to process the information: Fiona had cancer, the same cancer Mum had died from.

Mum had only lived eight months after she was diagnosed. If Fiona only had eight months to live, how could I not be there for her? On the other hand, she might get better and live to be ninety. But could I take that chance? In my heart I knew I only had one choice. My sister needed me and Mark was right: I did owe her.

I had twenty-four hours to tape the new show and beg my producer, Donna, for leave of absence. I was doing the right thing, the only thing, but I was terrified. I had left Dublin eight years ago in search of fame and fortune and had just reached D-list fame, with the fortune yet to come – but at least I was free, anonymous, away from the goldfish bowl of Dublin and Fiona's lifelong habit of trying to fix me. I dreaded going back. I knew it would be as if the last eight years had never happened. I'd have to try and persuade Donna to keep my position open. I had to be able to come back. It was the only thing that'd get me through.