

‘This is nice.’ Her mother picked out a sheer lemon bra with a double row of bright pink satin ruffles and held it up against Saffy. ‘This is *lovely*.’

*Lovely?* If you were a teenage, colour-blind hooker, possibly.

‘Um.’ Saffy shook her head. ‘I don’t think it’s really me.’

‘Oh, Sadbh!’ Saffy’s scalp prickled with annoyance. She hated her full name. ‘We’ve got to get you out of those neutrals. You need a bit more – what do they call it in that ad? – *va-va-voom*. And fashion tip: if God wanted us to wear glasses, he wouldn’t have given us contacts.’

It had seemed like a good idea to take her mother shopping instead of to a restaurant. Saffy had thought she could sidestep Jill’s attempt at a girly heart-to-heart *and* buy something to wear under her cream dress. Something sweet and sexy to surprise Greg with. Her mother had been delighted. ‘I can’t remember the last time we went shopping for you! This will be *fun!*’

Unfortunately, Saffy could remember. It had been for her debs dress. There had been tears (Jill’s) tantrums (also Jill’s) and humiliation (hers). She had wanted an elegant navy cocktail dress with spaghetti straps. She ended up in pink satin with a puffball skirt, pink lace tights and a matching shrug. She was still dreading the pictures popping up on Facebook.

The lingerie department of Brown Thomas was jammed with loved-up couples canoodling among the rails of suspenders and French knickers.

‘You’d look gorgeous in this!’ Jill tucked a leopard-print bra under her arm. ‘I wonder if they have it in a thirty-four A.’

There was nothing like your mother announcing your bra-size to a small crowd to make you wish you hadn’t been born. An assistant was hovering. ‘If you and your friend need any help, just let me know,’ she said with a smile.

Saffy hated it when people mistook them for friends or, even worse, sisters. Her mother, of course, loved it. But luckily she

hadn't heard. She had ascended directly to retail heaven. She was rifling through a rail of clattery hangers. Her blonde hair was escaping from her messy topknot. Her face glowed and her blue eyes sparkled. She had been a model, briefly, back in the seventies and she had the cheekbones and that coltish, prancing walk to show for it. She also had an amazing figure for fifty-three and she could still turn heads but did she *have* to do it in a clingy coral wraparound dress and purple suede boots?

Saffy sneaked a look at herself in a gilt-framed mirror. On the downside, she didn't have her mother's bone structure or her traffic-stopping curves. On the upside, what was so great about stopping traffic? Women disliked you, men expected way too much of you, and, somewhere along the line, you became addicted to all the attention. She suspected that was why her mother always dressed so that she was the most visible person in the room.

Her own grey DKNY pinstriped suit was simple but classic. Her hair, the caramel side of brown, was shoulder-length and feather-cut to flatter her narrow face. Her skin was too pale but, with just the right shade of foundation, it could be persuaded to do a good impersonation of creamy. It was hard to see them when she was wearing her glasses but her eyes were wide greeny brown. She would have liked narrower hips and bigger breasts but wouldn't everybody? Everybody with breasts to begin with, obviously.

At a film premiere once, a journalist had mistaken her for Bono's wife. Ali Hewson was everything Saffy wanted to be: natural, elegant, understated, happily married to a famous man but content to stay out of the limelight, wouldn't be caught dead in purple boots.

'So, tell me,' her mother took her arm and steered her towards the Myla section, 'how are things with Greg?'

'Things are great,' Saffy said smoothly. This was the conversation she had been trying to avoid. 'How are things with Len?'

When she was small her mother used to tell her that you had to kiss a lot of frogs before you found a prince and apparently

she was right. Len was the latest in a long line of frogs that stretched back for as long as Saffy could remember.

Apart from the hand-knitted jumper, the passion for veganism and the unhygienic-looking beard, there was nothing really wrong with him. Saffy had met him only twice and she probably wouldn't meet him again. The frogs never lasted very long.

'Oh, Len.' Jill fingered the marabou trim on a white baby-doll and sighed. 'He means well but I'm getting a bit tired of the whole "meat is murder" thing. I can't remember the last time I had a bacon sandwich and I've had to put away all my leather shoes except these.' She gave one boot a loving pat. 'I told him they were mock suede. He's coming round later to cook me a five-bean stew, which is lovely, I suppose, but it's not exactly an aphrodisiac.'

She put the baby-doll back on the rack wistfully. 'What about you? Any Valentine's plans?'

'I think we're going out to dinner,' Saffy said vaguely.

'Ooh! Where?'

'365. It's—'

'I know what it *is*! It's fabulous. I read the review in the *Irish Times*. You're a lucky girl.' She sighed. 'I don't think you have any idea how lucky you are but . . .'

Saffy knew what was coming. 'Wow!' She snatched a hanger at random and held it up. 'You should try this on.' It was a red, fishnet basque.

Her mother looked straight through it. 'Sadhbh, don't you think maybe it's time you and Greg got married because it's been—'

'Because it's been what?' Saffy snapped. 'Six weeks since you last asked?'

'There's no need to bite my head off.'

Saffy tried to backtrack. Her mother loved a scene, especially a public one. 'Look, I'm sorry, let's just change the subject . . .'

But it was too late. Jill was off.

'No, *I'm* sorry! *I'm* sorry if it's a crime to show the slightest interest in my only daughter.'

It wasn't Saffy's fault that she was an only child. As a matter of fact, she would have loved brothers and sisters. The more the

better. Anything that took the blinding spotlight of Jill's attention off her. Anything that stopped her mother expecting an access-all-areas pass to her personal life.

'*I'm sorry*,' Jill pointed a small metal hanger at her accusingly, 'if I want you to be happy and secure. I'm sorry if I don't want you to wake up when you're fifty, alone and—'

'I am happy! I am secure! And I won't be fifty for seventeen years!' Saffy's voice came out louder than she'd intended. Quite a lot louder. Now *she* was the one turning heads.

'And I'm *sorry*,' Jill said dramatically, 'for whatever I've done to make you shout at me in public! Something I hope *your* daughter never does to you!' She stalked around a circular red-velvet banquette towards a wall of glass cabinets.

She needn't have bothered hoping. Saffy wasn't going to have children. She had decided that long ago. Her parents weren't exactly an ad for happy families.

She had never even seen a picture of her father. If there had been any, Jill had destroyed them long ago. The only thing she had to remember him by was her full name, *Sadbh*. He had disappeared long before she had a chance to call him something equally horrible back. Even Irish people, who were *supposed* to know that 'Sadbh' rhymed with 'drive', moved the lumpy combination of consonants around in their mouths carefully, as though they were afraid it might chip a tooth.

Rob Reilly had been more than twice her mother's age when they met, and he'd been married. When Jill got pregnant, he had left his wife and they had moved from Bristol to Dublin. Then, when Saffy was two, he had, apparently, woken up one morning and changed his mind.

He had walked out and gone back to his wife. Jill rarely talked about it but, from the little she said, Saffy knew that her mother couldn't go home. Her parents had told her that, if she had a baby with a married man, she needn't bother coming back.

People said you couldn't miss what you never had but people were wrong. Even when she was too small to understand why, Saffy got a pinch in her chest when she saw a man swinging a little girl up onto his shoulders or taking her hand to cross the street.

For some reason, she had missed her father most when she was a teenager. It was the ordinary things that always got to her. A razor jammed into the toothbrush cup in someone else's bathroom. A man at the school gate scanning the crowd of kids for a face that wasn't hers. Sitting, invisible, in the back of the car while a friend bickered with her dad on the way home from a disco. The words 'Father Christmas'. The utter pointlessness of Father's Day.

She didn't know where her father was or why he had left. And she couldn't change the fact that he didn't want to be part of her life but she could change the horrible name he'd given her and, by the time she was twelve, nobody except her mother called her *Sadbh*.

The crowd parted now and she saw Jill on the other side of the shop glaring into a glass cabinet, pretending to be interested in a display of seamed stockings and showgirl tassels. For a second, Saffy almost felt sorry for her.

Her mother had done so much. She had learned to drive and to type and to soften her English accent so it didn't stand out so much. She had turned the grotty flats they lived in into homes. She had cleaned offices and typed dissertations till Saffy was at school, leaving her with a neighbour or bringing her with her in her pushchair. Then she had taken a part-time job in an antique shop and learned everything she could about the business. She had saved enough to buy a house. But no matter how much she did, her life would always be defined by all the 'if onlys'.

If only she hadn't fallen for Rob Reilly. If only she hadn't believed him when he said he'd look after them. If only she had been careful. If only she hadn't been caught. All the 'if onlys', Saffy realised when she was fourteen, added up to one big one: if only *she* hadn't been born.

Jill was determined that Saffy would get all the things she'd missed out on by being a single mother: college, a career, travel. Saffy had ticked all those boxes but now her mother was holding her breath, waiting for her to tick the biggest box of all. The one that contained the big white dress and the happy-ever-after *she* had never had.

But she was going to have to keep holding her breath. Because

having a child didn't mean you got to live your life over through somebody else. That wasn't how it worked.

Marsh was sitting at the huge glass table in her office, staring at a document and ignoring Simon who was sitting opposite, staring at the triangle of creamy skin and the lacy edge of a white bra that showed beneath her soft, perfectly cut, red Nicole Farhi jacket.

Her office looked like a set from *Interiors* magazine. It was huge and elegant with a wall of windows that overlooked the Rotunda at the Mansion House. There was a pale silk carpet and a red leather Eames chair and a grey velvet sofa under a floating glass shelf with a display of glass and metal advertising awards. The roses, now arranged in a massive pewter vase, were, Saffy saw, the same Pantone reference as her suit.

Marsh looked up at Saffy. 'You're late,' she said, 'again.'

Simon didn't bother hiding a smile. Technically, as they were both Senior Account Executives, Saffy and Simon were equals. But, frankly, she couldn't see the point of him and he seemed to think that his job description included undermining her.

It didn't help that Marsh kept hinting that, one of these days, she would take an executive role and make one of them Managing Director. Or that she played them off against one another, making them compete for every scrap of business.

Saffy could wipe the floor with Simon when it came to writing a brief but he was smooth and handsome and sporty and he could wipe the floor right back when it came to flirting with female clients and letting male clients beat him at golf. She was slightly ahead of him in billings but, with Simon, you had to keep looking over your shoulder.

Saffy sat down as far away from him as possible. 'Sorry, Marsh.'

'Do you know what "punctual" means?'

Saffy did. But she was guessing Marsh didn't want the Oxford English definition.

Marsh flicked her glossy hair and gave a tight smile. 'Punctual means never having to say you're sorry.'

Marsh didn't do late or mistakes or shoddy or second-rate.

She did perfect. Personally, professionally and (as far as Saffy could tell after three years) perpetually. She was one of a handful of women who'd made it to the very top of the advertising ladder and the only one to have done it in five-inch heels with Teri Hatcher's hair, Victoria Beckham's body and Carrie Bradshaw's wardrobe.

She could have passed for thirty but Ciara swore that she had seen her passport and that she was forty-five. But then Ciara also swore that Marsh drank the blood of teenage boys, never wore underwear and kept a piece of chamois leather in her drawer and used it to polish her shins.

Saffy slid into a chair beside the Media Manager. Mike was in his forties but could have passed for sixty. There was the ghost of a soup stain on his yellow tie. His slacks had ridden up and he was wearing Santa socks. In February.

Marsh stood up and opened a fresh flipchart and wrote the words 'White Feather' neatly at the top of the page. Her marker squeaked like a frightened mouse.

'This is one of our most important accounts, right? And this,' she ripped the page off, screwed it into a ball and threw it on the floor, 'is what we're doing with it.'

Saffy exhaled. This wasn't her problem. White Feather was a sanpro brand and most of its sizable budget was giveaways and money-off promotions. It was Simon's baby and his Adam's apple, she saw, was bobbing like a yo-yo.

'I ran into Dermot Clancy at a Marketing Society dinner last night.' Marsh paced around the table. Her nude leather Louboutins left a trail of tiny punch marks in the carpet. 'He is not a happy bunny.'

This was hardly news. Dermot Clancy *always* looked like an unhappy bunny. He had candyfloss white hair and pale rabbit eyes and he nibbled things. Biro, his fingernails, the corners of presentation boards. His indecision was legendary. A previous agency had nicknamed him 'Nervous Dermot'.

'Market share is down by twenty-three per cent in the last six months.' Marsh eyeballed them, one by one. 'On. Our. Watch. And he's thinking about putting White Feather out to pitch.'

The air went dead. This wasn't just Simon's problem any

more. Losing a two-million-euro account in a recession could send Komodo to the wall. And, even if it didn't, it would start a domino effect. A big loss always shook every client's faith in an agency. Other accounts would leave 'like rats', as Greg once said, 'deserting a stinking ship'.

'Don't ask me how.' Marsh narrowed her eyes suggestively. 'I managed to persuade Dermot to give us one last chance. But I did. We have three weeks to come up with a new positioning strategy, produce concepts and get his buy-in.' She glanced at the tiny Rolex on her slender wrist. 'Three weeks! Starting. From. Now!'

She jabbed the air with her marker waiting for ideas but nobody wanted to be the first to get shot down. Saffy's stomach rumbled. Mike uncrossed his legs and his socks played a faraway snatch of 'Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer'. He tried to cover it with a cough.

Simon leaned back in his chair. His body language was nonchalant but his hands were shaking and his handsome face had gone a strange shade of puce.

'I saw this coming, Marsh. I've been trying to persuade Dermot to increase his budget since January. The competition has really upped its game. The product is tired. The packaging needs an update and we need a better class of giveaway – an item with a really high perceived value, like a DVD, one that really ties in with the brand.'

Marsh wrote the letters 'DVD' on the flipchart. 'Like?'

'Like, I don't know, say, *28 Days*, which would be perfect because the average woman's cycle is, you know, twenty-eight days.'

'Is that the one with Sandra Bullock as the alcoholic?' Mike asked. 'That's a brilliant film.'

'Yeah.' Simon nodded. 'And we could follow it up with *28 Days Later*.'

'Possibly the best zombie movie ever made!' Mike shook his head in awe.

Marsh held up a hand on which she was wearing the output of a small diamond mine. 'You think a woman who is having *her*



*period* has the remotest interest in alcoholics and zombies?’ She turned to Saffy. ‘Save me from these idiots.’

‘This isn’t about budget or packaging,’ Saffy said. ‘The reason market share is nose-diving is that White Feather is stuck in the Dark Ages. Look at the endline: “Your secret is safe with us.” It’s just so patronising.’

‘It’s a perfectly good endline,’ Simon snorted. ‘It’s been around for fifty years.’

‘Exactly. And if we were trying to attract the Stepford Wives it would be fine. But we’re not. We’re trying to attract young, sexy, confident twenty-first-century women. And they’re not remotely interested in cheap on-pack giveaways. They’re looking for an emotional connection. I think we should go back with a total re-brand on TV, online, cinema and outdoor.’

‘Right,’ Simon chipped in. ‘What the world really needs is another clichéd sanpro ad with a girl in white jeans doing handstands and being pulled along on roller-skates by a Great Dane.’

‘No,’ Saffy shot back, ‘what the world needs, what Nervous Dermot needs, is a challenging campaign idea that redefines the whole sector.’

‘And I suppose you have that idea?’ Simon said.

Saffy did. And though she felt a bit guilty for kicking him when he was down, this was her chance to air it. It had come to her when she was looking through a photography book in Ant and Vicky’s office a few weeks back. She had stopped at a Duane Michals shot of a handsome, half-dressed male angel sitting on a bed watching a woman sleeping. It was just so right. But if she got carried away, she’d blow it. Marsh had to think it was her idea, too.

‘Well, I don’t have it all worked out, and I’m just thinking out loud here, but the brand essence is “protection” and the product has wings. What about, I don’t know,’ she gave it a few moments to make it look as if this was occurring to her for the first time, ‘what about a White Feather angel who protects women at the time of the month when they’re feeling most vulnerable?’

‘An angel,’ Marsh said thoughtfully. ‘A *winged protector*.’

Saffy nodded. That was exactly where she was leading her.

‘That’s it! There’s the brand personality. Women will love it! And we can bring it alive with guerrilla marketing. Have a guy dressed as an angel giving out samples at Dart stations.’

Marsh snapped the lid back on the marker. ‘Now this,’ she said, ‘is why I pay you that ridiculously large salary. Simon, get all the White Feather research over to Saffy. You’re off the account unless she asks for your help, which I’m guessing she won’t. Mike start digging out figures on women, sixteen to forty-five. Saffy, I’d like the brief on my desk before you leave today.’

*Today?* That was impossible.

‘Nice one, Saffy.’ Simon looked gutted but he managed a nasty little smile as they stood up to leave. ‘Hope you didn’t have anything special planned for Valentine’s night.’

Simon had dumped three huge boxes of White Feather documents in Saffy’s office. She dragged them up to the boardroom, spread them all out on the huge glass table and started to work through the research. By five, she was snowblind and the brief wasn’t even halfway there. She wanted to call Greg to tell him that maybe dinner wasn’t a good idea but he was shooting so she guessed he’d have his phone switched off.

She got up and poured herself a cup of coffee and then closed the blinds and flicked on the boardroom monitor to watch the Valentine’s episode of *The Station*. She should have been used to seeing Greg on TV but she wasn’t, not completely. Maybe it would be different when he moved over into film but the series was set in real time. It was like a parallel life that he was living, one where she didn’t exist. Saffy tried not to let it get to her but she didn’t like watching him in love scenes with other women, especially when they were with Mia, the female fire-fighter who had been involved with him, on and off, for nearly as long as she had.

She’d half-admitted it to Greg once but he’d gone off on a tangent about the storyline. ‘I keep telling the writers they need to add more meat to the whole Mac and Mia thing, Babe. It’s not going anywhere. It’s just a sexual thing. They don’t really have anything in common. They hardly ever talk, have you noticed that?’

She had. They were usually too busy sticking their tongues down one another's throats and peeling off one another's uniforms to say much. And for some reason, she didn't find that reassuring.

The credits ended and there he was, striding through the billowing smoke carrying a small, limp body wrapped in a blanket. It could be a dead dog or even a child but it was hard to care too much either way when the camera moved in for a close up of Mac Malone.

Journalists, especially female ones, ran out of words when they tried to describe that face. His jaw was 'strong and clean' or 'square and strong' or 'clean and strong'. His eyes were 'raisin' or 'toffee', though a woman from the *Clare Champion* had once dug deeper and came up with 'Valhrona 70 per cent'. There wasn't really anywhere to go with his hair, which was black, but sometimes 'coal' or 'tar' or 'soot' was tagged on. From time to time the debate about his height reared its head but the general consensus was that size wasn't important. Not when you looked like Greg Gleeson.

Right now his hair was damp and stuck attractively to his sweaty, sooty forehead. One sleeve of his uniform was torn off to reveal a broad shoulder and a tanned, muscled arm.

The other fire-fighters hung their heads as Mac carried the body past them. Mia put down her hose and called after him but he shook his head and kept walking.

Frank, *The Station's* craggy fire-chief, put his arm around her. 'Let him go,' he said, stroking her mane of highly flammable-looking hair. 'He needs to be alone.' Mia bit her trembling glossy lip. 'You don't understand, Frank. Even when Mac is surrounded by people, he's always alone.' The ads came on.

*The Station* made *Gossip Girl* look like *The Wire*, but most people weren't looking for gritty reality. They were looking for escape and *The Station* served it up to them three times a week. It came with an out-of-control blaze, usually involving children, half-naked women or pets, but that was just a backdrop for the real drama: the latest instalment of the smouldering love triangle between Mac, Mia and the married station fire-chief, Frank. And

plenty of soft-focus shots of Mac soaping the soot off his six-pack in the shower.

The weird thing was, *The Station* wouldn't exist if it weren't for Saffy. She was the one who had cast Greg in the Ice Bar ad that had inspired the entire series. *Hunky fireman rescues pretty girl and her Ice Bar from a burning building, then dumps her, steals the ice cream and eats it himself.*

Greg had nearly missed the audition. He had turned up late with a straggly goatee and the casting director had told him to go home. Saffy was outside taking a phone call when he was leaving. All the actors they'd seen were taller. A couple were better looking. But there was something about Greg, something a smitten journalist later christened 'Elvis dust', that made her stop him and send him next door to the Spar for a disposable razor. Then she had convinced the director and the creatives to hang around to get him on tape.

And, when he looked into the camera as if he would like to have sex with it soon and often and then fall asleep with his arms around it and delivered the line, 'of all the bars in all the world she had to be eating this one', nobody needed any more convincing. He was their guy.

Ice Bar sales went through the roof. Grown women vandalised bus shelters to get their hands on a poster of Greg. One of the tabloids put him on the front page with the headline, 'Sex on a Stick'. Then someone in a TV production company sat down and rushed off the pilot of a fire station drama and offered him the part of Mac Malone.

None of this surprised Saffy. What surprised her, back then, was that he remembered her name and tracked down her number and called her and kept calling her and asked her out to dinner. And that he hung on her every word. And kissed her in the restaurant, in the taxi on the way home, outside her apartment, inside her apartment and pretty much everywhere else. And that he kept asking her out until it finally sank in. He wasn't just their guy. He was *her* guy, too.

She always thought that those songs about people watching one another sleep were kind of creepy but during those first few months she woke up every other night and lay there looking at

Greg. And every time he walked into a room, she had a feeling of completion; as if he was filling a space she hadn't realised was there.

Not one but two of her exes had bought her *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*: Ciaran – the accountant with the webbed toes – and Gordon – the graphic designer who could only go to the toilet in his own apartment. Saffy was a 'problem solver' but the book explained that you weren't supposed to help men solve their problems. If you innocently recommended a reputable plastic surgeon or a couple of sessions with a hypnotherapist, they would (and did) disappear off to their caves.

Greg didn't seem to have a cave. He wanted her advice. He asked for it and then he listened to it. She helped him to find the right agent. She knew when it was time to push for a raise. She steered him away from the dodgy plot twists that *The Station* writers floated when the ratings wobbled. Having Mac cross-dress or drink-drive or turn into a coke fiend might have pulled in the ratings for a while but Saffy knew enough about marketing to know that Mac's Unique Selling Point was that he was a hero. And she made sure that Greg hung onto it.

'Couldn't have done it without you, Babe!' he said from the podium after he won his first Irish Film and Television Award, and her heart had doubled in size because she knew it was true.

*The Station* came back on again. Mia, a pint-sized pneumatic twenty-five-year-old that the papers like to call a 'flame-haired fox', was wriggling out of her uniform in the communal changing room. As she shrugged her jacket off to reveal a lacy balconette bra, the door swung open and Mac burst in. He had an uncanny knack of appearing whenever Mia undressed.

He turned to leave but Mia took his arm. 'Don't blame yourself, Mac. You did everything you could to save that little girl.' He pulled away and paced around the room for a while then punched a hole in a surprisingly flimsy metal locker with his fist. 'It's no use. I can't do this any more!'

'You don't get to choose to be a fire-fighter. You're born to do it. Stop listening to your fears.' Mia thumped her tiny fist against her improbably huge chest. 'Listen to your heart!'

‘No, I can’t do *this*. I can’t keep hiding the way I feel about *you*.’

The camera moved in for a two-shot. There was a lone, wiry hair sticking out from Greg’s left eyebrow like a question mark. Saffy would have to get him to have a word with Make-up. She picked up her coffee.

‘Mia,’ Mac said, ‘will you marry me?’

Saffy took a sip full of air. The coffee that she missed splashed down the front of her shirt. *What?* This episode had been recorded sometime last week. Why hadn’t Greg told her about this? She stared at the screen in disbelief as Mia’s hands flew to her face.

‘Oh, Mac! Do you mean it? Do you really mean it?’

Mac dropped on one knee and opened his hand. There, on his soot-stained palm was a huge diamond solitaire. The credits rolled. Apparently he did.