

SHE CAN FIX ANYONE'S LIFE.
EXCEPT HER OWN.

Not MY
PROBLEM

CIARA SMYTH

Also by Ciara Smyth:
The Falling in Love Montage

Shortlisted for the An Post Irish Book Awards

‘An outrageously comic, moving debut’
Guardian

‘It’s so special, so arrestingly heartfelt, and so
painfully, gorgeously real’
Becky Albertalli

‘Funny, sexy and smart, *The Falling in Love Montage* is the
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‘Audaciously fills a gap in queer romance.
Smyth paints each character as a complex,
messy, lifelike individual’
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Deirdre Sullivan

‘A book that manages to be both tenderly gutting and absolutely hilarious’

Dahlia Adler

‘*The Falling In Love Montage* is a joyous, hilarious, big-hearted book with the kind of electric, rollicking voice that makes you want to live in its pages forever’

Jeff Zentner

‘The romantic story all queer girls deserve: funny, flirty, and absolutely perfect’

Camryn Garrett

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*To Darren, for everything.
Maybe you'll read this one.*

1

It started with Meabh Kowalska having a temper tantrum in the girls' changing room. You know a Meabh Kowalska. Trust me. The intense overachiever type, with no hobbies other than winning. The girl who will either run the world or become a supervillain dedicated to destroying it.

Or maybe they're the same thing.

She was weeping. No. Not weeping. She was wailing and writhing on the floor. Her pale skin had turned blotchy, and she was banging her fists. It was a full-on tantrum. She clearly thought she was alone.

No, I'm getting ahead of myself. It started in the PE hall about an hour earlier. Our form tutor, also our English teacher and the head of PE (that was her true love, much more than Emily Dickinson and Shakespeare), always took morning registration in the gym instead of a classroom, and we had to balance on those huge inflatable balls instead of chairs. I can't imagine what they're actually supposed to be for. Giant dodgeball?

“—so Mrs McKeever's class will be in room one-oh-three instead of two-oh-seven. If you want to audition for next term's musical, there's a sign-up sheet. It's somewhere.

You know what, just ask Mr Smith, he's usually involved with that—"

I rolled the ball under my bum from side to side, bumping into Holly each time I leaned left. I wasn't really paying attention. I was thinking about how Mam seemed off this morning and whether I should text her and make sure everything was OK.

"I'm going to ask Jill to read my article and give me notes," Holly said. "If she can tear herself away from that slimy knuckle dragger she calls a boyfriend."

We both glanced over at Jill and Ronan, who was about two seconds away from sticking his tongue in her ear. They'd been going out three weeks and I had no idea what she saw in him. Neither did Holly, though I didn't mind that Jill had less time to spend with the only person who actively liked me. Jill could hang out with anyone. I only had Holly.

I bounced up and down on my ball until Ms Devlin gave me one of her fed-up-with-your-antics glares and I stopped and pressed really hard into the rubber instead, watching the tips of my fingers turn white.

I wondered if I could text inside my bag. I slipped my hand in through the open zip and rummaged around.

"Finally, as you all know—Aideen? Do you need something in your bag that you cannot find?"

Ms Devlin was a sarky bastard.

"I was looking for my phone, but I think it'd be inappropriate to take it out now."

I heard Holly snort beside me.

“It would, Aideen. I think it can wait another minute. As can foreplay, Ronan.” She shook her head, disgusted, and he rolled a few inches from Jill and shoved his hands into his pockets with a huff. “As I was saying, the student council elections will be held in three weeks, which is an opportunity for you all to exercise your democratic responsibility. Women died for your right to vote, girls; the least you can do is use it. Boys, you’ve had a head start – if you want to sit this one out, be my guest.”

A few of the boys exchanged miffed expressions.

“Miss! You can’t say stuff like that!” Ronan said.

Ms Devlin looked at him, waiting for him to explain why she couldn’t say stuff like that.

“It’s . . . it’s not fair.”

Ms Devlin looked extremely unmoved by his reasoning.

“I hope that any applicants to the student council will have more impressive debate skills. Just a thought.”

I watched Ronan choke back a retort, his face contorting in frustration. It was like he’d never met Ms Devlin before.

“Anyway, as I was saying. The elections will be held at the end of the month and the president chosen this year will be your class president for the remainder of your senior cycle, so choose wisely, for God’s sake. I don’t want to be sitting in a consultation meeting with some eejit demanding no school on Fridays, all right? Just because someone tells you they can do something you like the sound of, doesn’t

mean it's remotely possible, and if they can't actually achieve it, then they're worse than useless to you."

Meabh Kowalska's hand shot up into the air.

Holly leaned over and whispered to me, "You know, I really don't think anyone died so the students at St Louise's could vote for Meabh Kowalska to kiss teachers' arses for two years."

I snickered. She had a point. The whole election was a formality anyway. For one thing, she was the principal's daughter, and for another, I couldn't tell you the name of anyone who'd been council president since I'd started at this school. No one cared. Usually only one person volunteered for it. It was extra work with no reward except maybe missing a few classes – and there was no point in that if you were missing them so you could sit and talk to teachers anyway.

"Yes, Meabh?" Ms Devlin pointed at her. She didn't have the weary expression many of the teachers had when they called on her.

Meabh stood up.

"She's going to make a speech," Holly said. I could hear the eye roll without having to see it.

"I'd just like to say a few words."

Groans.

"Shut your mouths, every last one of you," Ms Devlin barked. "Or you're doing suicide sprints before your first class. That's right, you can sit next to your adorable crush smelling like unwashed armpits."

The class collectively remembered we were terrified of Ms Devlin's wrath and we fell silent like she'd pressed the mute button on us. She was one of those teachers where you could have the craic with her, but when she reached her limit . . . well, no one tested what happened when she reached her limit, but the threats often involved an inhumane amount of exercise.

Meabh faltered slightly but drew herself up.

"I will be running for class president this year and I would like to ask for your support and give you some information about the initiatives I will be hoping to implement. Firstly, I have a green initiative, which includes reducing the shocking amount of unnecessary waste produced by this school. I will also be campaigning to have a Polish language class for the Leaving Certificate – as you all know, my family is Polish-Irish and there is a significant Polish community in this town as well as making up two-point-seven per cent of the national population. Thirdly, I will be seeking to address the issues in the school's application procedures that have created a worryingly homogenous student body. I hope that you will consider voting for me. I want to address the problems in this school that students really care about and my door is always open. I will take any questions you may have now."

She looked around the room expectantly, with the impatient air of a mother waiting for a toddler to tie their own shoes. Ms Devlin had commanded silence, but she couldn't make people listen. I followed Meabh's gaze as she

took in people biting their nails and playing with their hair. Her brow furrowed. She had tried very hard to sound calm and collected. It was almost impressive, when I knew for a fact that she would rather beat us all into submission if that had only been an option.

“Very admirable and ambitious but not fucking absurd ideas, Meabh. Thank you.” Ms Devlin’s swearing brought the class back to attention with a few giggles. Meabh plopped back on her ball chair, her jaw visibly grinding. She took out a notebook and began scribbling furiously as Ms Devlin dismissed us.

“See you all second period. Helmets and shin guards. No excuses.”

She looked at me when she said the last bit, and I pointed to myself and looked around, pretending there could be someone else that she meant. Ms Devlin rolled her eyes.

I grabbed Holly by the elbow and guided her out the door into the cold.

“Did you hear Queen Meabh?” she said as we crossed over the pitch to get to the main building. Then she mimicked her in a high-pitched voice: “*I’m going to address the problems the students really care about.* I mean, if she wanted to address the problems students really have, she’d be printing fake IDs or getting us all tickets for Electric Picnic.”

“There’s an idea,” I agreed. “Instead of flyers and badges, she could hand out test paper answers and bags of weed.”

I checked my phone to see if Mam had texted. She hadn't. I pressed my fingertips into the sides of my jaw, where all the tension was, and found a painful knot. Who even knew you could get face knots?

Holly took my hand and squeezed. She looked down at me with her big blue eyes sparkling.

"Save me a seat for Geography?" she said. "I see Jill's escaped Ronan's clutches."

"Last time I saved you a seat, you ended up sitting with Jennifer Murphy and I was on my own."

We were in a lot more classes together this year because we weren't streamed by ability for transition year, but so far we hadn't spent much more time together than when we were separated for nearly everything.

"She's not in our Geography class," she pouted.

That was not the point. But it didn't matter either way. I didn't have to save her a seat next to me. No one would take it anyway.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said, kissing my hands. I felt a flutter for a second and then a dull, familiar drop as I watched her run off, with her perfect wavy red hair bouncing in its ponytail.

I took out my phone and texted Mam.

Aideen
U ok?

Of course Holly was only just in time for Geography; she and Jill were still nattering about her article when they walked in and took two seats at the front. She texted me under her desk that she hadn't wanted to make a fuss and it would have been rude to abandon Jill. That was understandable.

I didn't get any response from Mam.

We were supposed to read a passage about plate tectonics and answer questions. It made my head swim. I tried to think about all the things Mam could be doing, and how that list was so much longer than the list of things I hoped she wasn't doing. Which meant statistically it was more likely that she was doing one of the OK things. She'd message me back on her coffee break.

Even with your limited knowledge of statistics, you know that's not how it works.

I ignored that voice. The mean one. I kept my phone tucked into the waist of my school skirt all through the class so I'd feel it vibrate when she replied.

Mam didn't reply.

I got all the answers wrong.

2

An hour later I was in front of Ms Devlin again. This time I had a slip of paper and she had a huge wooden stick. OK, the technical term was a camán and it was used to play camogie. For those of you who, like me, think all sports are just sticks and/or balls, this is another stick-and-ball game. For Ms Devlin and the girls on her team, it was life and death.

“I’m not reading that,” Ms Devlin said. She was short, white, and sturdy, and she had a no-nonsense energy that I ignored.

“OK.” I shrugged and put the note in my pocket.

“You’re playing today,” she said. Her voice had a very “this is an order, not a request” feel about it.

“No, I have a note,” I said brightly, and produced the note again, smoothing it out.

She closed her eyes and breathed really hard. With her free hand she snatched the note from me.

“Please excuse Aideen Cleary from PE today. She has bubonic plague.”

I coughed.

“You do not have bubonic plague.”

“I do though.”

“I could phone your mother.”

“You could.”

She'd threatened this a dozen times since September. But she hadn't done it yet. I had a suspicion my last form tutor had warned her there was no point, that my mam didn't care. Mam would absolutely eat the face off me if she knew I was skipping PE, but I had long since solved that problem. Unfortunately, I had a bad feeling about Ms Devlin. Like sooner or later she wouldn't be able to help herself from getting involved.

The rest of the class had changed into shorts and T-shirts and were messing around on the pitch even though it was the bloody dead of winter. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Holly stretching, the hem of her jersey riding up and revealing a few inches of bare skin. Holly was one of those girls who took camogie very seriously.

Ms Devlin narrowed her eyes at me, then threw her hands up.

“Whatever. Just do something productive. You haven't done your last two English assignments and you have one due Friday. I told you next time it's detention.”

“Wow, gossiping about me with the English teacher. I would have thought you were above that kind of thing.”

Ms Devlin turned red, ready to explode. “I *am* your English teacher, you ninny.”

“Oh right, I thought you looked familiar.”

She sighed and rubbed her temples for a second.

“Is everything OK at home, Aideen? Is there a reason your work isn’t being done?”

A prickling sensation crept over my skin.

“Everything is fine.”

“I don’t know if there’s anything I can do to help unless you talk to me. I’m not trying to give you a hard time. I want to see you get stuck into something. Anything. So you have some support.”

“You’re trying to make me play camogie to solve an imaginary problem. There’s nothing wrong. Except for my bubons.”

“Your what?”

“My bubons. I have bubonic plague. My body is covered in bubons. Under my clothes, though, obviously.”

“You could at least read a bit more about these illnesses, you know, instead of simply choosing one off a list.”

“Sounds like homework.”

Ms Devlin shook her head at my back as I escaped towards the sports centre. I couldn’t see it but I knew she was doing it. I could feel the head shake of resignation.

I made a beeline for my usual spot. There was a sort of balcony that overlooked the main hall; it had great reception, and last year I managed to talk a substitute teacher into giving me her log-in details to the teachers’ Wi-Fi network when she couldn’t work out the system. During PE I liked to sit up in the balcony and get all Netflix and cosy.

I tried ringing Mam before I settled in, but she didn't answer. She was supposed to be at work. She worked in a hairdresser's and they opened around ten. So it was fine. Her phone was on silent, that was all. Just as I found the show I wanted to watch I realised I needed to pee and sighed, thinking of how I had to walk all the way downstairs again. I left most of my stuff behind me because I didn't have anything worth stealing, but I put my phone in my pocket. Not that it was worth stealing either, but I'd still be annoyed to lose it if some waste of space nabbed it.

As I approached the changing room, where the toilets were, my ears picked up on some kind of unholy wailing. It echoed and bounced off the walls and the closer I got to the changing room, the louder it became. I blessed myself. This was it. There was some kind of ghost or demon in there. The school was an old convent and although the sports hall was a renovated building, it was definitely built on ancient ground. Although wasn't all ground ancient technically? The most likely scenario here was the disturbed spirit of some girl who had died while undergoing an aggressive exorcism. Probably because she had unnatural feelings (a gay) or disturbing thoughts (an opinion) or had been possessed by Satan (was horny?).

I was almost disappointed for a second that it turned out to be a regular, real-life teenage girl having a shit fit.

OK, that's potentially misleading on account of how it's a toilet, but I mean like a tantrum. All the crying and

wailing was less interesting before I realised who it was. Meabh Kowalska. I watched for a moment, curious like I was getting to see rare footage of a creature undisturbed in its natural habitat.

Here we see the Perfectionist maximus engaged in the ritual dance of her species. See how she flails her limbs? Soon she will progress to pulling chunks of hair from the head.

She must have noticed me mid-thrashing, because she suddenly froze and then slowly turned her head and looked me dead in the eyes. Her blue eyes were red rimmed and puffy. I thought about how I must look to her now, in her moment of weakness, and I was very generous, picturing my out-of-control brown curls as lustrous waves and my blue eyes as sparkling and amused.

She let out a strangled groan. “You.”

“Yep.” I grinned broadly, and rocked back and forth on my heels. This was the best day of my life.

I have these two daydreams. One is catching my enemies in a moment when I have the upper hand and they’re embarrassed and I get to act cool and aloof. The other is doing something amazing with my life and coming back to a school reunion and rubbing it in everyone’s faces. I’d invent an app that everyone uses and I’d rock up to the reunion and people would be using it and they’d be like, *Oh, Aideen, nice to see you after ten years. Are you on Flubberygiblets?* and I’d shrug like I didn’t even care. *I invented Flubberygiblets*, I’d say. Everyone would think I was class and then I’d be like,

Have you met my wife, Kristen Stewart? We're flying on a private jet to Maui tonight to have lots of sex and lip biting. Fuckity bye, arseholes.

This was obviously the first scenario, and for a second I worried that I'd peaked. Maybe it would all be downhill from here unless I could figure out what Flubberygiblets did and learn how to code. That wasn't likely seeing as I was pretty stumped by the time we had to create budgets in Excel for Business Studies and my figures wouldn't add the numbers together. I just kept getting this symbol a lot: Σ .

Calling Meabh Kowalska my enemy was kind of harsh really. Saying that I have enemies sounds like I have had epic showdowns with people and we're involved in elaborate plots to take each other down, when really it's a lot more basic than that. We've been in the same class our whole lives and "didn't play well together" in teacher speak. This is definitely a nice way of saying it. The same way those "Good Effort" elephant stickers on my homework was the nice way of saying I was stupid when everyone else got "Excellent" eagles or "Very Good" gorillas. After a few years it doesn't really matter why you don't like each other, you just don't. It's not like I remember every detail of how she made me feel smaller than all those inept elephant stickers combined or anything.

But it was 9th November 2013 at 11:00 a.m. and it was raining, not pissing rain, just spitting down, you know? We had this school project that was a shoebox model of a scene from a book and I had actually read the book and all. I

really liked it and so for a change I was kind of into the homework. We split up the tasks. Meabh was going to construct the chairs for the auditorium scene and all the little people, and I had to make the background look like a stage. Well, I went round her house on Sunday night with my shoebox. I'd done my best trying to paint a stage and I'd cut a picture of a pair of red curtains out of a home furnishings catalogue and stuck them to the sides. I thought this was really clever. Well, sure didn't she take one glance at my creation and get a face on her like a smacked arse.

“What. Is. This?” she screeched, and picked up my box, holding it out from her body with her fingertips like she might be infected by my mediocrity.

I wish I'd told her to cop on to herself because it was only a school project, but I was shy and got embarrassed real easy so I looked at my shoes and swallowed hard.

“Do you think these” – she indicated a hundred tiny, perfectly constructed wooden chairs with real red velvet seats – “go with this?” She looked half possessed when she said it and waved my box desperately in my face. “These are one-twenty-fourth scale Victorian replicas and this has a picture of a pair of curtains taped on it. You didn't even use glue.”

We didn't have glue. I'd had to search the junk drawers for the end of a roll of tape and had been so relieved when I found it because I knew there was no way Mam was going to go out and get a new roll just for this.

I've thought about that moment a lot over the years. It's the kind of thing that pops into my head when I'm trying to fall asleep, and even though I know that Meabh was the one being the dick, I always feel the shame all over again. It's like a dormant creature living in my stomach and every now and then it wakes up and crawls up my throat to choke me.

In the changing room, looking at Meabh's red eyes and blotchy cheeks, after all these years, I remembered something else about that day back in primary school: the way Meabh pressed all ten fingertips into her skull so hard it looked like the bones of her knuckles would break through the skin. I remember how her dad came into the room and Meabh winced when he took the box out of her hand.

"We don't scream, Meabh," her dad said, and she apologised. Mr Kowalski told me to ring my mam to pick me up because Meabh had homework to do. He wasn't the type to be cross or shout, but that made him scarier to me then. I didn't know how to handle his quiet disappointment. I didn't want to say I didn't have a phone. Or that we didn't have a car and that Mam had told me to get the bus. I didn't want to say that Mam hadn't given me enough money for the bus either, so I just walked home. Mam wasn't there and I didn't have a key for the flat so I sat on the stairs in the hall until she got home and hugged me with limp arms and kissed me sloppily on the forehead, her breath making my eyes water.

When we went back to school on Monday, Meabh had completely redone the shoebox. It had real tiny curtains and a cord you could pull to draw them open. The teacher went loolally over it, obviously, and Meabh never said that I didn't do any of it, but the teacher knew. We both got an A and I finally got a stupid eagle sticker. I peeled it off the page and stuck it to the inside of my pencil case. I didn't want to look at it, but I didn't want to throw it away either.

But I don't hold a grudge. Meabh is what she is. A hectic pain in the hole. I didn't like her, with her speeches and her being a relentless know-it-all, but Holly *hated* her. They were always in competition. When they were six, Meabh tripped her before their gymnastics yoke and Holly twisted her ankle. Holly was convinced it was some Tonya Harding shit. I don't know about that because I thought Meabh wouldn't want to beat her by default. She'd want to beat her by being better than her. And then she'd want to rub it in her face that she tried her absolute hardest and still lost. Last year Meabh had a party after the exams and her dad made her invite everyone in the class even though she wasn't really friends with anyone; I think the party was his idea really. So Holly invited a bunch of girls out the same night to the underage disco up at the hotel and her mam paid for us all to get in. It didn't help that Meabh had made camogie captain over Holly three years running.

"This must be pretty embarrassing for you," I said now.

“I thought you stopped having these tantrums years ago but obviously you just stopped having them in public.”

“This is a school changing room. Technically that is a public place,” she said, heaving herself into a cross-legged position on the floor.

“I love how you’d rather correct me on a technicality than deny you still have massive hissy fits at sixteen.”

“I can hardly deny that now.”

“True. But you’re taking the fun out of this for me. I want to bask in your humiliation.”

Instead of sniping back, she just sat there as a tear snuck out of her eye and rolled down her face. I couldn’t help but feel kind of sorry for her. I was watching her sad little tear make its way down her face when—

“Did you . . . ?” I pointed, aghast.

“What?” She looked confused.

“You . . . you licked your own tear. It reached your mouth and your tongue popped out and licked it.”

She shrugged. “It’s salty.”

I shook my head. “Uh, that doesn’t make the kind of sense you think it does. *It’s salty* does not explain ingesting liquid that came out your eyeballs. There’s loads of things that are salty but you don’t go round licking them all.”

“Like what?”

I scrambled to think of something.

“Um . . . ROAD SALT,” I finally said triumphantly. “Sand.”

“A sweaty armpit,” she said.

“A dick.”

“Oh my God, Aideen. Gross.” She groaned and wrinkled her nose. She was laughing though, and I forgot that I was supposed to be revelling in her pain.

That brings me to one of the other reasons Meabh annoyed me. Even if it wasn't technically her fault. In first year at secondary school everyone called me a lesbian because I was always hanging around Holly, and while she had lots of other friends from all her clubs and societies, I didn't. I was never really comfortable with her other friends either. There was stuff about my life only Holly knew and that was how I wanted it to stay. But it did mean that it was really hard to ever feel connected to anyone else. I always felt like I was lying. Anyway, I told another girl who I *thought* was my friend at the time that maybe I *was* a lesbian, and she told everyone, and for ages there were a few people who gave me a really hard time about it.

Until at some point a couple of years later everyone turned super woke and a few other girls said they were bi and Meabh said she was a lesbian too and the same people who made jokes about me acted like none of that had ever happened. Even though Meabh wasn't exactly Miss Popularity, no one was going to make fun of her for that now because being homophobic was no longer acceptable. Which is great, *obviously*. It just wasn't great in time for me. It didn't seem fair that it was easy for Meabh and Orla

and Katia; I got all the hassle and they got to be brave and everyone else got to act like our school had always been this rainbow utopia.

“Are you going to tell me what you’re yapping about anyway? Did you get a B in something?” I joked.

Meabh pursed her lips. “I’m going to lose.”

“What, the election thing? You were junior president. You’re a shoo-in. Besides, no one else is actually running.”

“*Yet.* Some asshole is definitely going to. And I have so much to do. I have so many policies to write and I said I’d do all this stuff and I don’t even know where to start and I can’t do anything.”

Tears were streaming down her face. She was a hopeless case.

“It’s a stupid election. You don’t need any policies or initiatives. No one cares. Like genuinely nobody cares. And so what if you lose? You already have a lot going on, do you really need this too?” Aside from being camogie captain, Meabh always had her hand in something. She was for ever fundraising or making a petition or entering some kind of competition. Not a week went by without her lobbying the teachers for some kind of change. Last week she harangued the old caretaker until he agreed to only order energy-saving bulbs in future.

“You don’t understand,” she said. Not in a mean way, like I wouldn’t understand because I’m a dope, although that’s true, but in a way like she really wished that I could.

“I don’t understand most things,” I said, “but sure, why don’t you tell me what it’s like to be a smarty-pants anyway?”

Meabh must have been disorientated by her tantrum because she actually started telling me. Me. The girl who cut curtains out of a catalogue instead of sewing them from scratch. How the mighty had fallen.

“I already said I’d do all these things and I can’t fail. I can’t.” She looked genuinely distressed, and I *didn’t* understand. I dug deep into my empathy store and found a dried-up old raisin. Meabh had literally everything. She was a brainiac and her family’s house had two sitting rooms, for fuck’s sake. Still, I tried my best.

“Look,” I said matter-of-factly. “I fail at things all the time. I promise you nothing actually happens. It won’t kill you.”

“That’s what I’m worried about.”

“You’re worried it *won’t* kill you?” There was no pleasing this girl. “Tell you what, if you do lose, I’ll finish you off myself. How about that?”

She stood up, a scarily serious look on her face. The kind I assumed serial killers got right before they chopped your head off and wore it as a hat. I took another few steps back, but she stalked towards me. This is what you get for being a Good Samaritan. You die in a girls’ changing room at the hands of a deranged overachiever.

“Do you know what will happen if I fail? What I’ll learn from that?”

She kept walking towards me until I'd backed into the wall, which was damp with condensation from the showers. Her menacing expression was enhanced by the mascara dripping down her face. I would have laughed, but I was pretty sure if I did she'd unhinge her jaw and I'd be swallowed into the dark chasm of her stomach.

"I'll learn that failure is not the end of the world."

I opened my mouth to squeak out that this might not be a terrible lesson for her to learn sooner or later. It might cut down on the meltdowns. But she put her hand across my mouth.

"Then maybe I'll start to relax. I won't be so intense about my homework. I'll think, *Meabh, you can chill out. Wind your tits down to medium.*"

I laughed into her hand, thinking that her tits were indeed currently wound up to high and I enjoyed the phrasing. She continued, ignoring my snicker.

"I'll think, the worst has already happened and you survived it. You've wasted years of your life being a perfectionist."

I nodded *yes*, her hand still over my mouth. She shook her head slowly, deliberately *no*.

"It'll start off small. I'll only spend two hours instead of three preparing my topic for the comhrá and Múinteoir Nic Gabhann won't really notice because I already have excellent conversational Irish."

Her hand shifted slightly so it covered my nostrils, and

I tried to speak to tell her she was obstructing my breathing and I needed that to live, but her grip was clamped so tight that all I could do was lick her palm. She grimaced and snatched her hand away, wiping it on her skirt.

“Ew, don’t lick my hand,” she said, breaking the tension.

“What if there were tears on it?”

She didn’t even smile. She continued her weird rant instead.

“Complacency will lead me to more failure. I’ll start to think it’s OK to doss off. It’s only transition year, I’ll tell myself. It doesn’t count for anything. Then it becomes, It’s only fifth year. The exams aren’t till next year. It’s only coursework. It’s only a B. Hell, why not give myself a break and take ordinary-level Maths? I don’t *need* to get the full six hundred and twenty-five points.”

I didn’t think anyone needed to get 625 points. But Meabh was the kind of person who’d probably engrave her Leaving Cert results on her tombstone, so I could see why she’d want them to be good. She took a few steps back from me then.

“Maybe after I’ve given up on higher-level Maths I’ll think I have time to go to that party.”

There was no party.

“Someone there offers me crack. And I think *hey, sure, I have a Biology lab to write up but I can do it in the morning.*”

“I feel like you’ve missed a step. Who do we know who brings crack to parties?”

“I’ve read *Go Ask Alice!*” she declared. Like that settled it. “Once you snort that meth, there’s no going back.”

I shook my head, realising that Meabh thought meth and crack were the same thing and she also had no idea how you took either of them.

“Years from now you’ll wonder, what happened to that girl from school? She was going places once. Then one day you’ll pass a person lying in the gutter, a needle sticking out of her arm and a glazed expression on her face. You’ll think, that’s so sad. I wonder what happened to her. She’s so young. She’s probably the same age as you are.”

She trailed off, a faraway look in her eye.

“Is it you?” I asked.

She sighed, exasperated. “Yeah, *obviously* it’s me. It’d be a pointless ending if it’s just some random and I’m off finding a new renewable energy source or ending global capitalism.”

I thought for a minute.

“There are a few holes in this,” I said. “One: I guarantee I’m not going to be wondering what you’re doing years from now.”

I’d be too busy making love to my wife, Kristen Stewart, on a bed of Flubberygiblets™ money.

“Two: You clearly don’t even know *how* to take meth and if you did, believe me, you’re middle-class enough to end up in some country club rehab, not the gutter. And three: you’ll die of a stress-induced coronary before any of this happens so I really wouldn’t worry about it.”

For a second she did nothing, and I thought she was considering my very reasonable points.

Then she burst into tears. Far too many tears for her to lick off her own face.

“FINE,” I shouted over the wailing and rending of garments. “I’LL FIX IT!”

She paused in her dramatics and eyed me up and down. “How?”

“Well,” I said thoughtfully, “what do you need?”

And that was how it started.

3

“Time,” Meabh said hopelessly, “I need more time. I’ve worked out my schedule to an inch of its life.” She pointed at some papers that were scattered across the room like she’d thrown them. “I simply can’t do everything unless I give up sleep. And I’ve tried that before. It did *not* end well.” She got a dark look on her face.

I had a mental image of her pacing a room with her hair on end. There was writing all over the walls and lots of red string connecting things. It felt very real.

“All right, weirdo. Give me your timetable. There’s definitely somewhere you can cut back.”

With great effort Meabh picked herself up off the floor and retrieved the timetable, handing it to me. It was blurry where it had got damp from being thrown near the showers and I had to gingerly remove a long blonde hair.

Meabh had a sensible dark brown bob and I had an explosion of brown curls that could not be tamed by either product or professional and simply had to be restrained for visibility purposes. So it was shower hair. I shuddered.

“OK, what about . . . cello lessons?”

“No, I can’t quit those.”

“Do you have to practise for two and a half hours a day though?”

“Yes.”

“Two and a half hours? Come on, isn’t, say, ninety minutes plenty?” I joked.

“Some studies show that two hours is the point of diminishing returns but I have it carefully planned, splitting time between scales, études, and repertoire, and I wouldn’t call that research empirical, you know?”

I didn’t understand any of that. But I guessed the cello was not something we were going to budge on.

“What about these classes here, what are they?” There was a yellow-coded ninety-minute block on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

Her face darkened. “Yoga.”

“Ah yes, of course, you do seem the type, after all.”

“Mum makes me. She says I need to relax.”

“If she wants you to relax, maybe she should schedule some relaxation.”

“If I schedule relaxation, all I’ll do is think about all the things I need to do. Which is not relaxing.”

“Well, you must be super flexible at least.”

“I can barely touch my toes,” she grumbled. “The instructor says I won’t be able to be ‘flexible in body until I am flexible in mind.’ I tried explaining that that is not how hamstrings work.”

“How long have you been doing it?”

“Since last year after the exams when all my eyelashes fell out.”

“Huh . . . and you can’t touch your toes yet?”

She demonstrated. She was *almost* there, but she did look exceptionally awkward.

“Your instructor might have a point, don’t you think?”

“Mum won’t let me quit yoga,” Meabh said, and pursed her lips.

If my daughter’s eyelashes had fallen out because of an exam I’d probably be crushing blues into her cereal every morning, but my family did tend to take the chemical route to our destination whenever possible.

“What’s this?” Everything was acronyms and initials.

“The gym.”

“You already go to yoga!” I protested.

“The gym is for working on strength and speed. For camogie.”

I rolled my eyes. At least now it was obvious why Meabh was continually beating Holly for captain.

“That’s Polish reading,” Meabh continued, pointing to the schedule. “That’s current affairs. What? I have to read about what’s going on if I’m going to be in politics. That’s showering.”

“Your *showers* are scheduled?”

She shrugged. “I’m busy. That’s kind of the problem.”

“I know, but it’s transition year. It’s meant to be a doss.”

Transition year is the best thing about our whole education

system. You do three years of studying to do your Junior Cert exams then you get transition year, which is meant to be for “personal development,” before you do two years of study for the Leaving Cert exams. When adults remember their Leaving Cert year, they get this haunted look in their eyes, like they’ve been through shit you can’t imagine, so the least they can do is give us a year of farting around.

“Transition year is an excellent opportunity to round out my skill set and get a head start on the senior curriculum.”

Her lip wobbled and then tears filled her eyes. She pressed her fists into her eye sockets and pushed hard.

“All right, all right, that’s probably how you lost your eyelashes,” I said, pulling her fists away from her eyes by grabbing her wrists.

Meabh had always been a hectic mess, but I guess I’d assumed that was her personality and that she liked being like that. Now I was a bit worried about her. At the same time I was also mentally trying to tot up how much all of these lessons and instructors cost. Did principals make that much money? Or was Meabh’s mam the one raking it in? I had no idea what a cello instructor charged or how much yoga class was. I knew for a fact there was free yoga on YouTube though.

“There are two options.” I stroked my chin. “We can break your wrist *or* your ankle.”

I waited for her to laugh. She didn’t so I continued, “If you ask me, your wrist will free up way more time. No more cello, homework, or yoga!”

She stopped crying and sniffed up an escaping trail of snot. “You’re right.”

I wrinkled my nose. Upset Meabh was gross. “Huh?”

“I mean, not about the wrist thing, that’s ridiculous. I can’t break my wrist.”

“Oh good. I was really worried you’d completely lost it there for a sec—”

“But my ankle definitely. I’d be able to stop taking PE, that’s two doubles a week, and all my yoga classes and gym sessions . . .” She wasn’t really talking to me any more. She was daydreaming about the free time she could fill with more work.

“Eh . . . I was joking, you know?” I said quickly. I could see she was deadly serious and I was a little alarmed. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was concerned for her or because I didn’t want to end up in trouble and having to explain how yes, it was all my idea but I didn’t mean it.

She rounded on me. “No, you’re brilliant! It’s the only solution.”

“You could talk to your parents,” I said half-heartedly. I wouldn’t talk to my parents either if it were me, and I was stupidly flattered by being called brilliant. Had anyone ever called me brilliant before? I felt like I would remember it if they had.

She laughed out loud for the first time. Maybe in her whole life. I tried to remember if I’d ever seen her laugh before.

“How, though?” she mumbled. “That’s the question.”

She began pacing the room and then walked out the door into the main hall. I followed her.

“We could get a hammer from the woodwork room.” I shut my mouth. She’d probably do it. “I mean, no. Meabh. Seriously.”

She looked around, ignoring me. Then she ran up the stairs and stood at the top. I stayed at the bottom.

“One, two, three . . . seventeen, eighteen, nineteen.”

“Meabh, no.”

“That’s going to really bother me,” she said. “Nineteen. Why nineteen? What kind of self-respecting architect puts an odd number of steps in a staircase?”

“Meabh, you can’t jump down the stairs.”

She clasped her hands together like she was going to dive into a pool, then took a few steps back and did a sort of mock run towards the stairs. She even turned around with her back to me and teetered precariously on the top step.

“Meabh, you’ll crack your head open like that. You cannot do this.”

“I can’t do this,” she agreed. “My brain is rejecting it. You know how you can’t drown yourself either? Your body’s instincts won’t let you deliberately inhale water or stay submerged once the hypercapnia becomes overwhelming.”

“How do you know that?” I was amazed that even as she contemplated injuring herself, she still found time to show off.

"I know everything," she said absently.

"Come downstairs and we'll think of something else."

"You come upstairs."

"You come downstairs."

"You come upstairs."

"No."

"Yes."

"You are so bossy," I said, giving up. It didn't seem wise to bicker with someone who was literally on the edge.

"So I'm thinking you could ask your dad if you could swap out doing cello for this term with doing your election stuff. The green whatsit and the application thingy."

"Oh no. That won't work. He can't know I'm struggling. No one can know. No. I'm going to need you to push me." She said it casually, as though it was the obvious solution. I guessed I counted as "no one."

She wriggled in front of me and braced herself as though she thought I was really going to just shove her down the stairs. Briefly I considered that we really needed Holly for this. Meabh annoyed me, sure, but I didn't have the edge it would take to maim her. Although Holly wouldn't push her archnemesis down a flight of stairs if she had any inkling that it would benefit Meabh.

"I am *not* going to do this. Get out of my way."

"Nope." She blocked the stairwell with both arms.

"This isn't going to work. I'll just go watch TV on my phone," I said, gesturing to the benches that lined the balcony.

“You can’t stay there for ever. And Ms Devlin is going to come looking for you any minute now.”

For a second it seemed as though she was going to fight back. And then her whole body just collapsed. Her shoulders drooped, her head flopped forwards, and her knees buckled. Silent tears sprang out of her eyes. How could one person cry so much?

“Please,” she said. She grabbed the front of my jumper and pulled me so close I could smell her breath. It was still pepperminty from brushing her teeth that morning. No pre-class coffee for Meabh. She probably thought coffee was a gateway drug to cocaine.

“I know you think I’m losing my mind, but this is the only way I can get what I need. I’ll owe you one. Anything you want. I will tutor you for the rest of the year!”

I frowned. That didn’t sound like a reward.

This wasn’t normal-person behaviour. Her parents were obviously way too hard on her. If I inspected her timetable closer I’d probably find three minutes for peeing twice a day. Meabh irritated the life out of everyone, but the girl had once rubbed all her own eyelashes out, for Christ’s sake. If I didn’t do this, she would keep trying to do everything on that timetable *and* the election on top of that. Then she really would lose it and I would know there was something I could have done.

Something absolutely bizarre and possibly illegal? Were you allowed to injure someone if they asked you to?

“Fine.”

Her whole body perked up.

“Really?”

“Yes,” I said, not quite believing I was saying it. “I guess I can push you down the stairs. But don’t hold it against me if I enjoy it. Or if you injure something you don’t want to injure. I cannot be held responsible if your brains leak out your head or something.”

We both heard the bang of a door and exchanged a look. Meabh quickly ran downstairs and when she reappeared she shook her head. “No one there.”

She returned to her position standing on the edge of the steps, elbows bent so her forearms protected her face but her hands would be spared from the impact. I stood behind her, raised my hands to around shoulder-blade level, and took a deep breath. I was a lot of things but I was not naturally a violent person. I closed my eyes. They stayed closed for a long time and I didn’t move.

“JUST PUSH ME,” she shouted finally.

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“Agggggghhhhh!”

I pushed.

There was a clatter and a thump and a *thwack thwack*

thwack and a screech of pain. When my eyes sprang open, I saw Meabh in a ball at the bottom of the stairs.

“Are you OK?” I called.

“No! I definitely did something to my ankle,” she groaned, but she sounded pleased. “Help me up.”

Nothing like a please or thank you, eh? Wonder how much it costs for manners instructors.

I ran down the stairs but before I could reach her, I heard something that made my blood chill.

“Here, let me help.” Kavi Thakrar crouched down beside Meabh and in one move scooped her into his arms.