



HELEN FALCONER

THE  
CHANGELING

*Some of us are born to be magic . . .*

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## About the Book

*'I am here for your little girl,' said the woman. A banshee. A woman of the fairy hills.*

Aoife knows something is wrong when she spots a small child alone, out on the heather. A child no one else can see.

**After that, everything changes.**

Her parents make a strange confession.

They believe their human child was stolen by the fairies, and that Aoife is the changeling left behind in her place.

Shocked by their story, Aoife turns to quiet mysterious Shay. Together, they embark on a dangerous journey which overturns everything they thought they knew about fairies.

THE  
CHANGELING



HELEN FALCONER

**RHCP DIGITAL**

*A story dedicated to Alana Quinn*  
9th March 2001 -  
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# BOOK ONE

# PROLOGUE

THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO,  
IN THE WEST OF IRELAND . . .

He was a handsome boy of seventeen when he chanced on her, washing her red-gold hair in the soft water of a pool surrounded by hawthorns. She looked up at him and smiled as she wrung the water from her hair - and that was the end of everything for him. He forgot his mother, his father, his brothers and sisters, his duties as a young warrior of the Fianna. And when the girl slipped feet first into the pool, he threw aside his cloak and sword and followed her.

At first the water only came to his knees, but very soon it was up to his waist and then to his shoulders. It was as cold as ice. The hawthorn blossoms floating on the surface gave off a sweet, dizzying scent. The girl smiled back at him, her red-gold hair floating out around her on the surface of the water. He held out his hand but she took another step further into the pool and the freezing water closed over her head. And, a moment later, over his.

*Wahu*: Greeting used in the west of Ireland,  
possibly derived from the Irish *Ádh-thu*  
(luck be with you).

## CHAPTER ONE

Aoife was texting while picking her bike out of the flowerbed, when the phone slipped from her grip, skittered across the dry-stone garden wall and disappeared. She climbed after it into the field behind the house and poked around in the nettles with a stick, finding first the main part of the phone, and then the casing off the back. It was while she was trying to get at the battery without being stung that she found the tiny heart locket half buried in the earth.

She fixed her phone, then rubbed the heart clean. The dirt was hard to shift, as if the locket had been lost for a long time. Scraping with her thumbnail, she found that the gold underneath was engraved: *Eva*. Interesting. Aoife was 'Eva' on her birth certificate, although everyone, including her parents, called her by the softer version of the name. She flicked the heart open and found two portraits – one of her parents looking ridiculously young and the other of a pink-faced baby. Even more interesting. Her parents had lost all their photos in the move from Dublin, so this was the first time she had ever seen a picture of herself under the age of four – there had been no Facebook then, keeping its eternal record.

She tried the locket on. She had a slender neck, but the fine gold chain was meant for a little girl and she could only just fasten the clasp. As it clicked into place, an image sprang into her mind – two little girls with glittering wings, wandering hand in hand through the long grass of this field. Herself and Carla, years ago, playing at 'follow the fairy road'. She turned to see if the 'road' was still there,

and it was – a narrow stripe of paler green that ran straight from where she was standing, up the steep slope, then over the high bank at the top of the field. A badger run, perhaps, or the sign of a stream hidden underground? As little girls, they had never made it over that thorny bank. Now Aoife was filled with a desire she had long forgotten: to see if the road continued on through the next field, and if so, where did it—

Her phone beeped. Then beeped again and again – incoming texts, stacked up while she was hunting for the battery. All from Carla:

orange too tight  
Im so fat 😞  
where are u  
u there?  
help 😞  
WHERE ARE U

Aoife texted:

not fat 😊 wear the orange, dropped fone, ON WAY 20 mins

Carla texted:

HURRYUP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Aoife scrambled back over the wall into her garden, ran the bike down the side of the small house and out of the front gate, threw her leg over the crossbar and set the stopwatch on her Nokia. Her record to Carla's: nine minutes, thirteen seconds. She hit START and shot down the narrow flowery lane. The potholes had got deeper in the last two weeks of solid rain, and she was forced to swerve or risk her wheels. Two kilometres on, she came up behind Declan Sweeney's tractor and had to wait for him to turn left onto the Clonbarra road before herself heading right for Kilduff. She picked up speed, past the garage, the empty estate, left at the shop. A steep sweaty climb in the

sun, standing on the pedals, up past the GAA pitch where a game of Gaelic football was in noisy progress, past the builder's huge three-storey house, the secondary school, then downhill all the way to the Heffernans', skittering to a halt outside the yellow dormer. She dropped her bike on the step, checked her time - nine minutes, fourteen seconds - '*Aargh!*' - took the stairs three at a time into Carla's room and collapsed, panting, full-length on the bed. '*What* are you on about? That dress is pure gorgeous on you.'

Carla was contorting herself in front of her wardrobe mirror, judging herself from every angle in the close-fitting orange dress. 'It's not. I'm a pig. Nothing fits me any more. I wish I was beautiful like you.'

'Don't talk crap. You're gorgeous, everyone says it.'

'Ha ha. Sinead admired my curves?'

'Carl, she's just jealous of your boobs. And that dress is perfect for showing them off.'

For a moment Carla brightened - 'You really think?' - then she checked the mirror again and her freckled face fell. 'No. My arse is way too—' A faint beep, and she stopped to scabble through a pile of clothes like a dog after a rat, emerging triumphant with her phone. Then panicked. 'Jessica says what are we wearing to the cinema? What will I tell her?'

'Snapchat her what you've got on, 'cos that's what you're going in.'

Aoife's phone also vibrated. It was Killian, asking was she going on Sinead's birthday trip - like he'd 'forgotten' the whole class was invited.

'Aren't you going to answer that?'

'Vodafone top-up reminder.'

She never lied to Carla, but Killian Doherty, with his ridiculously pretty looks, was Carla's crush. Not only Carla's, unfortunately. Half the girls in their year - and the years above and below - had already gone out with him, yet

every time he dumped the latest one (by text) Carla prayed (literally, in church, to God) that it would be her turn next. Which was why Aoife had also lied – or at least, not told – about the builder’s son trying to chat her up at last month’s Easter disco. (She had ignored him then, the same way she’d pretty much ignored his texts ever since, but still he failed to get the hint. Did he imagine she was *shy* around him like the other girls still waiting their turn? Good joke. Maybe he was one of those boys who was only interested in what he couldn’t get.) ‘Come on, Carla, let me do your face, I’ll make you irresistible.’

‘Some chance of that.’

‘Will you stop. Sit over in front of the mirror and do your foundation while I stick on some decent music.’ Aoife knocked off One Direction, scrolled through Carla’s iPod for Lana Del Rey, and stuck it back in the dock. *Born to Die*. One day she hoped to write a song like that. She’d written hundreds already, but none she felt were any good; maybe a few that were passable. She chose a white eye-liner. ‘Tilt your head back. Keep your eyes open.’

Carla said, straining not to blink: ‘I’m loving the necklace. Is it new?’

‘No . . .’ Aoife drew the point of the pencil along the inner edge of Carla’s eye. ‘I found it in Declan Sweeney’s field, the one behind our house. I must have lost it years ago. I don’t even remember owning it.’

‘Then how do you know it’s yours?’

‘It has my name on it – I’ll show you in a sec. *Don’t blink!* Mam and Dad’s picture is in it and me as a baby.’ She glanced towards the window, towards the distant mountains, hazy in the summer heat. ‘Do you remember the fairy road?’

‘Do I or what! All that sheep shite and thistles!’

‘Ah, it was fun!’

‘I’ll never forget that time you got nearly to the top of the bank and I had to run back for your mam, I was so sure

you'd get into the next field and be trampled by a bull, and she went pure mental—'

'*Anyway.* Do you remember me wearing this locket ever?'

Carla sighed, and tilted her head back again. 'No. Is it in any of the early photos?'

A hundred Blu-tacked memories of their childhood selves gazed down on them from all four walls. As Aoife worked on Carla's face, she kept pausing to look around but she couldn't see the necklace anywhere, though she did spot the fairy wings. As a little girl, she had been a lot smaller than Carla and appeared to have been in a constant state of surprise - her blue-green eyes wide open, her short red hair a tangled mess. Later, the wings had become school uniforms, and by the time they had donned huge amounts of make-up and started pouting at their own camera phones, Aoife was the taller of the two by several centimetres. She fired the blusher and mascara back into the drawer.

'Now - you're lovely. Just let me get changed, I won't be a sec.' She stripped off her trackies and T-shirt, and took her favourite dress out of Carla's wardrobe - a pale green A-line. She pulled it over her head, slipped on her navy Converse, fixed her hair - now very long and a deep red-gold - into a ponytail, grabbed one of Carla's many shoulder bags for her phone and purse, then checked herself in the mirror. 'Aaargh! Way too short! What else have you got?'

'No point - all my dresses will be like that on you now. Like on me they're too tight. At least you've got taller. I've just grown *out*.'

'You have not. I'll change back into my trackies.'

'You will not! Your legs are amazing: let everyone see them. Sinead will be sick - serve her right.'

'Nice of her to bring us all to the cinema, though.'

'Whatever. *Don't take off that dress.*'

Downstairs in the kitchen, Carla's mother, Dianne, was putting ten euros into a birthday card for Sinead. 'I hope ten's enough - I don't have a twenty.'

Zoe, Carla's four-year-old sister, plump with light brown hair and freckles (the image of Carla in the early photos), looked round from the television. 'Can I come?'

Carla ignored her. 'Ten's plenty, Mam: no one puts twenty in the cards any more, no one has the money.'

Dianne Heffernan sighed. 'I suppose. It seems so little.'

Aoife said, 'No, Carla's right, everyone gives a tenner now . . . Oh, for—'

Carla said, "S up?'

'Left my card at home.' All she had in her purse was one euro twenty.

Dianne offered, 'You want to add your name to Carla's?'

'No, you're grand. I'll give it her in school on Monday.'

Zoe said again, louder: 'Can I come?'

Aoife smiled at her. 'I'll bring you back something.'

'Chocolate chip ice cream?'

'No, it'll only melt. I'll get you a bar.'

Even though Carla's house was only half a kilometre from the town, the journey back to Kilduff took over ten minutes. Carla's bike was rusted, and stuck in a low gear. The green dress kept riding up, and Aoife kept having to pause to tug it down, worried her pants were on show to passing drivers - it was true what Carla said: nothing fitted them any more. The day was getting hotter, and flies bombed them every time they stopped. Finally they crested the hill and cruised down past the school, a long white one-storey building with high glittering windows, then the field of cows. As they passed the builder's wrought-iron double gates, Killian Doherty swung out on a clean, mean, electric-blue racing bike and overtook them in a spurt of gravel; a great pumping of legs and narrow arms. He shouted over his shoulder as he raced ahead of them: 'Love your dress!'

Carla wobbled. 'Did he mean me or you?'

'You - he was looking at you.'

'Oh God . . . Are my boobs falling out?'

'Course not - don't mind him, he's an eejit.'

'Don't *mind* him? You think he was being sarcastic?'

'No!'

'Maybe you were right, maybe it is OK to have big boobs.'

'Trust me, I'm right.' Aoife pedalled on at Carla's side, except where the potholes were too deep to allow it.

There was a bevy of lads piling out of the GAA clubhouse, still pink from running non-stop for seventy minutes, though their short haircuts were spiky from cold showers. A couple of them were in Aoife's school. She slowed as she overtook them. 'Hey, Ciaran, how'd it go?'

'Crushed them in the last minute - they were one point ahead, eleven-twelve to them, but then we scored a goal.'

'Who got the goal?'

'That lad from your year. Shay Foley. He's pure fast. Burned them off. Zinger of a goal. He'll be scouted for Mayo when he's sixteen, I'd say.' He nodded ahead, to where a tall, black-haired, sun-browned boy walked on alone, long-legged in faded jeans, his Gaelic football kit slung over one shoulder.

'Really? I didn't know he was that good.' The sight of Shay Foley walking by himself vaguely annoyed her. Anyone else would have been in the thick of it, celebrating, but he was such a typical lad from back the bog: silent as the mountains he lived among; utterly unconcerned with social goings on. He'd turned up at Kilduff Secondary only last September, after his school in the Gaeltacht got shut down. In three terms, Aoife had never heard him say one word except in answer to a direct question from a teacher.

As they cycled past him, Carla called out: 'Well done! Coming to the cinema?'

Shay glanced at her, and kept on walking.

'I'll get him to talk to me one day,' said Carla.

'Good luck with that. Why bother? He's pure anti-social.'

‘Gorgeous looking, though. You know both his parents are dead?’

‘Seriously?’ Now Aoife felt bad for having bitched about him. She glanced over her shoulder; he had turned into the path behind the shop, taking the short cut to the square. ‘You never told me that.’

‘Sorry - only found out last week. It was my granddad’s birthday and we were putting flowers on his grave, and my nan pointed out the Foley grave behind. Both in the same year, when Shay was five.’

‘Oh God . . . Car crash?’

‘Don’t think so. Nan said the mam died in an accident all right, but his dad died later of something fatal.’

‘Bad. Does he live with his grandparents or something?’

‘No - still on the parents’ farm. He has a much older brother. Come into the shop - I’m busting for a Coke, you can share it.’

‘Sure, I need to get that bar for Zoe.’

There was a queue for the till and the twenty-seater from the community centre had its engine running when they came out. Sinead was sitting near the front with Lois; she rolled her pale green eyes when Aoife apologized for forgetting the card. ‘Sure, if you’re that skint, don’t worry about it . . .’

‘I’m not. I have it at home, I’ll give it you Monday.’

‘Like I said, don’t worry about it. Find a seat. There aren’t any left together. Pity you didn’t get here sooner.’

Lois grinned fakely at Aoife, all apple-red cheeks and frizzy black hair. Aoife grinned hugely back again. After the school talent show, Lois had accused Aoife of being an attention-seeking anorexic who wrote crap songs. Lois was a lot more direct in her insults than Sinead.

Annoyingly, Sinead was telling the truth - there were only two seats left: one across the aisle beside Killian, and the other near the back beside . . . For a moment Aoife was so surprised she just stood staring blankly up the coach. Then

someone tugged at her dress and the blond, silver-eyed builder's son was smiling up at her, patting the seat beside him.

She kicked him lightly in the leg. 'Come on, gorgeous, move your arse up there next to Shay Foley. Me and Carla want to sit together.'

He scowled, making a big show of rubbing his shin. 'I wasn't asking *you*, Ginger. I was saving this seat for the girl in the sexy orange dress.' He tossed his floppy hair, and turned his boy-band smile on Carla.

'Oh . . .' And Carla spectacularly disintegrated before Aoife's eyes, grinning like a psycho, soft brown hair standing out like an electric charge had been shot through it.

Aoife couldn't resist kicking Killian again - not so lightly.

*'Oi, bog off!'*

'Sorry, Carla, bad luck - looks like he's superglued to the seat. You'll have to put up with him.'

'Sit down, everyone!' Sinead's father was backing in alarming fits and starts across the potholed square. 'Oh, for . . . Where's first gear on this crate?' He stalled and restarted, with a hideous scraping of the gears and a stink of burning clutch. 'Everyone, sit down!'

Shay Foley was plugged into his phone, earphones in, eyes closed. He was occupying the aisle seat, and showed no sign of moving over. His knees almost touched the seat in front, and Aoife had to clamber over them, tugging down the short pale green dress. The bus kangarooed forwards, and she nearly fell on top of him. In a quick reaction, without even opening his eyes, he grasped her arm and steadied her.

She murmured, vaguely mortified, 'Thanks.'

He didn't answer but remained with his head tilted back, listening to his music. A thread of song drifted from his earphones. *Little Lion Man* . . . Mumford and Sons - cool London folk. She glanced back down towards the front.

Carla had turned to see was she all right – anxious but still looking like the cat that’s got the cream. Aoife smiled back; a reassuring wave of her hand. Then sat down and pressed her forehead to the glass.

The bus lurched off down the Clonbarra road, past the garage, then the turning to Aoife’s own boreen. Fields of yellow irises juddered by. She tried to retreat to that place in her head where she created her songs, but couldn’t stop thinking about her first day in junior infants. A little boy with white-blond curls had been chasing a plump girl with a worm, and Aoife had taken it off him and stuffed it down his shorts, sending Killian in pant-wetting hysterics to the teacher. That’s when her and Carla’s friendship had started, and it had just gone on and on, no reason to change it. She swallowed and the tight gold chain pressed against her throat – she pushed a finger under it, running it back and forth, looking towards the hazy mountains. A faint pale line wriggled across their slopes – a distant dusty track. She thought of the fairy road, and herself and Carla in their wings, when the games they had played were so simple.

A light touch on her arm.

She moved her elbow away.

Another touch – this time, definitely deliberate. Slowly Aoife turned her head. Shay was looking straight at her. ‘Don’t worry about your friend,’ he said, in the soft rain-washed accent of the mountains. ‘Killian’s only a gobshite but she’s well able for him, more than you think.’

Aoife stared. He smiled suddenly. The deep curve in his upper lip flattened out when he smiled.

‘You see, I do talk,’ he said. ‘If there’s something needs saying.’

It was Aoife who couldn’t speak. She just kept on staring at Shay. How had she never looked at him before? Properly looked at him, that is? Apparently unperturbed by her scrutiny, he continued to gaze back at her, still with that

same smile. His jaw was slanted, and his cheekbones strong and slightly flushed under his sun-browned skin. His eyes were dark green mottled with chestnut – the colour of woodland growth; his eyelashes were as black as his thick close-cropped hair. He had a single silver earring, worn near the top of his ear. He was wearing the Mayo jersey, and a well-worn leather belt slotted through his faded jeans.

The bus lurched wildly, and Aoife managed to drag her eyes away from him. Sinead's father had taken a sudden right turn, swinging the bus up a steep, narrow road towards the mountains.

*'Dad, where are you going?'*

'Settle down, Sinead. There's a short cut up here to the back road – we'll get there faster this way.' The bus climbed steeply between dry-stone walls, brambles squealing painfully along the paintwork.

Shay said under his breath, 'We won't be getting anywhere this way.'

Aoife turned to him again, frowning. 'Are you sure?'

'This here is an old bog road – it'll take us straight west into the mountains.'

'Crap. Go up front and tell him, before he goes any further.'

He shrugged. 'Sure, there's no talking to the likes of Tom Ferguson when he gets a notion in his head. Whatever wild thing led him astray, he'll have to come to his senses by himself.' He stuck his earphones back in and closed his eyes.

Aoife stared out of the window, annoyed and not knowing what to do. How could Shay Foley so casually predict disaster and then just wash his hands of the whole problem? She was right about him, he was anti-social. He had no reason to think Thomas Ferguson wouldn't listen – it was just a lame excuse not to get involved.

Sinead was on her feet, strawberry-blond ponytail trembling with indignation. ‘Dad, are you sure about this?’

Thomas Ferguson’s bald head flushed pink. ‘Sinead, sit down. I know *exactly* what I’m doing and where I’m going.’

Aoife glanced quickly at Shay. But his eyes remained shut, long thick lashes resting on his cheeks. His silver earring glittered slightly in the sun. His mouth was deeply curved, at rest. His lashes flickered. She pulled her gaze away.

The bus kept on relentlessly climbing. Before them, the dusty road unwound through endless heather. The mountains rolled away into the west. No other cars, no farms, just this sweeping lilac-orange land.

A united groan went up as all the phones went out of range.

‘Dad. Are you—?’

‘*Sinead, relax!*’

This must be the pale track she had seen from the road, crossing the mountains. Even if Thomas Ferguson wasn’t so set on going in the wrong direction, there was no place to turn – it was far too narrow, and the soft margins of the bog on either side wouldn’t take the weight of the bus. In the distance, a small green hill rose from the bog, capped with a white circle of hawthorn.

A little girl was running down the hill, in the direction of the bus.

Aoife blinked, looked again, saw nothing for a while. Then did – the same small figure, now struggling across the soft terrain of the bog between the hill and the road, standing, falling, crawling. Impossible at this distance to be sure it was a girl . . . or a child at all. It could be a lamb. It must be a lamb. Or some other animal. How could a little girl – or boy – be out here in the middle of nowhere, all on their own? There was no house anywhere, not even a car parked by the road.

It was a lamb.

It was a child, she was sure of it.

The bus passed a low outcrop of grey rock, and the tiny stumbling figure was blanked from view. When Aoife could see back past the rock again, there was only empty bog.

She sat very still for a moment, thinking about it. Then stood up and climbed out over Shay's long legs. He pulled out his earphones, eyebrows raised. She said, 'Sorry - saw something . . .' and strode quickly down the aisle. 'Could you stop the bus for just a moment?'

'Why? Are you going to be sick?'

'No, I saw a little girl out there on the bog, all by herself.'

'Out here?' Sinead's dad started to slow down. 'Where?'

'Back there by the hill.'

Killian's voice said, 'Hey, Aoife saw a leprechaun.'

*'Dad! We're going to be late!'*

Thomas Ferguson stopped looking over his shoulder and speeded up again. 'No, you must have seen a lamb.'

'Please, just for a minute, while I check—'

'Aoife, if you're not going to be sick, sit down.'

Shay was on his feet. He called across the seats in his soft westerly accent, without even seeming to raise his voice, 'You might want to stop the bus, Thomas. If there's a little girl lost out here on the bog, we wouldn't want to be the ones to have driven off on her.'

The bus slowed again, tentatively.

Lois shouted, 'Aoife's only trying to ruin the day for everyone because Killian's going out with Carla and Aoife fancies him!'

Speeding up—

Aoife screamed, *'I'm going to be sick!'*

Thomas Ferguson slammed on the brakes.

## CHAPTER TWO

As soon as she'd jumped off the bus, she sprinted back up the road.

*'Aoife, get back here!'*

She increased her speed. All around, acres of bog stretched to the horizon, broken only by the small green hill, crisscrossed with sheep paths and crowned with white hawthorn. Nothing moving.

She had seen a child.

She had.

The bus did a clumsy three-point turn on a stretch of grass and came rumbling up the road behind her.

Aoife cut left across the bog, round the back of the rocky outcrop. It was painfully slow going across the soft ground, her feet sinking in at every step, but after a few minutes of struggle she hit on a trail of mossy stones laid side by side in a regular pattern, as if they had once formed an ancient pathway. A thought came to her: *Down*. Yet the stone track brought her straight to the foot of the hill, and the only way forward was up. Maybe from the top she could get a better view. She mounted the steep slope, turning at the top to scan the landscape. Slopes of rusty and purple heather, dotted with fluttering white scraps of bog cotton, stretched away to the mountains and a distant glint of sea. A few sheep with their lambs. Nowhere to hide in this wild empty land.

The bus drew up at the side of the road and two figures got off: one in a bright orange dress and the other in the green and red of a Mayo jersey.

Aoife hurried on across the summit towards the circle of hawthorns. Maybe the little girl had taken fright and run back the way she had come, and had hidden herself among these trees.

The densely woven hawthorns were wound together as tight as a roll of barbed wire. There seemed no easy way into the thicket. She tried to pull the branches aside, but the thorns hurt her hands; she peered in between them, and saw only whiteness. This close to her face, the scent of the hawthorn blossom was overpowering, so strong it made her feel strange and floaty. A hand touched her arm, and she spun.

'Jesus, Carla, you nearly gave me a heart attack!'

'Sorry.' Carla was breathless and pink with the effort of struggling across the soft ground and up the steep slope. 'I'm so sorry about that stupid crap Lois said about Killian.'

'Not your fault. Here, help me find a way in—'

'Stop pulling at those thorns, you'll hurt yourself! Sinead's dad sent me to tell you to come back.'

'Help me—'

'I *have* been helping. I was looking all around me all the way across the bog and up the hill. Shay Foley's looking as well, on the other side of the road.'

'Really?' She would never think badly of him again, ever, even if he never said another word to her or anyone in all his life.

'Aoife, stop doing that . . . *Stop it, you're bleeding!*'

'It's all right, I've found a gap - come on.' She pushed her way through into the circle. Inside, the canopy of flowers above and the carpet of blossom made a pale, sunlit dome filled with sweetness. At the centre of the clearing lay a round pool, so flat and black it was like an oil spill on snow.

Carla came complaining bitterly in her wake. 'Ouch, yuck. Aoife, let's go, there's nobody here and I'm scratched to pieces, and this dress is ruined and my dress that *you're* wearing is ruined . . .'

Aoife walked across the soft carpet and looked into the pool. Blackness. Nothingness. She crouched down on the bank, and felt around in the water. It was freezing and deep, deeper than her arm could reach. She lay down on her front. Carla said in a panicky voice, standing over her, 'Oh my God, have you seen something?'

'No, but what if she's in here? I can't reach the bottom.'

'What? You can't see anything in there but you think she's *drowned*? Aoife, this is crazy. Even if you did see her, she can't have had time to—'

Aoife sat up, kicked off her shoes and slid into the pool. The coldness of it nearly stopped her heart.

*'Aoife, what the hell? Get out of there!'*

The water was up to her chest. She took a deep breath and crouched, letting the iciness close over her head, feeling blindly around the soft bottom of the pool, her knees sinking into the mud, fearing yet longing to put her hands on a small cold body buried in the mud. Sinking down, down . . . Her lungs were straining, and her head was ringing. *Down. Down.* She was numbingly cold; her veins had filled with the waters of the pool. *Down, down . . . Under the ground . . .* Hands seized her, dragging her to her feet; her head surfaced, lungs expanded; she choked down air.

Carla was sobbing, shoving her along in front of her onto the bank. 'Get out of the water, you stupid fool . . . *Get out!*'

Aoife's head was spinning, light and dizzy; vision black; her tongue felt thick. 'Let go of me—'

*'Get out!'*

'But the child—'

Carla screamed at the top of her voice: *'There is no child!'*

The release was immediate, as if Carla's despairing scream were a full-strength hammer blow that had shifted a heavy blockage in her head, allowing the darkness to drain, letting in the light.

Carla was right.  
There was no child.

Thomas Ferguson took one look at the two of them – soaking, muddy and shivering – and announced that he was driving them back to Kilduff before taking everyone else to the seven o'clock showing instead.

Killian refused to let Carla sit beside him because he didn't want to get wet; he went to sit beside Shay. Shay moved over into the window seat to make room for the builder's son, plugged his earphones in and closed his eyes. He would probably never speak to Aoife again, not after he had broken his long silence to stand up for her only to be made a fool of.

Carla sat beside Aoife, staring gloomily out of the window, eyes full of tears.

In the seat across the aisle, Sinead was being loudly comforted by Lois. 'Don't let her spoil your day.'

'There won't be time to get a pizza after!'

'There will, and if not we'll go next week, just you and me.'

Behind, Killian was on great form, leaning across the aisle to crack pointed jokes about leprechauns with his cousin, Darragh Clarke. 'Two leprechauns walked into a bar. Ouch! It was an iron bar.'

As they neared Kilduff, Aoife touched Carla's hand. 'I'm so sorry.'

Carla said stiffly, without turning her head, 'It's all right.'  
The bus drew up outside the church.

Aoife paused beside Sinead. 'I'm really, really sorry . . .'

Sinead ignored her. 'OK, well, I hope the film is OK.'

Silence, and a prolonged sigh from Lois. She followed Carla off the bus.

As she was picking up her bike, she heard a man's harsh voice shouting: 'Shay! Get over here!' across the square. She turned, and Shay Foley had dismounted from the bus –

he caught her eye, hesitated, then walked rapidly away towards a beaten-up, three-door red Ford that had just pulled out of the pub car park. The driver who had summoned him was a big, black-haired man in his mid-twenties – his brother, presumably. Shay got in, and the Ford drove away. So he really had decided not to talk to her any more.

Carla was standing beside her gazing forlornly after the departing bus. She said, without looking directly at Aoife, ‘That was pretty mean of Sinead’s dad to make us come home.’

‘You can’t really blame him, though – look at the state of us. We’re not just wet, we’re filthy wet. I’m really sorry.’

Carla shrugged. ‘It’s OK.’

‘Will I come home with you and explain to your mam?’

‘You’re all right, I’ll just say what we said to Sinead’s dad – that you fell in a bog hole by accident and I helped you out.’

‘I don’t mind telling her the whole thing—’

‘No.’ Carla paused, and sighed. ‘I’m not being funny, but you know, it was a bit weird and she might not understand.’

‘OK.’

‘Are you feeling all right now?’

‘I guess. Here’s that bar for Zoe.’ She pulled it from her bag and held it out.

Carla took it but then just stood there holding her bike, clearly working herself up to something else. ‘Look—’

‘Carla, don’t worry, I know I didn’t see a child. Or a leprechaun. I swear on my life I haven’t gone mental on you—’

‘No, no, I don’t mean about that, I mean about Killian. Do you really fancy him? I don’t mind – just tell me.’

Aoife said, taken aback, ‘No, really, I don’t.’

‘Because actually he said to me on the bus that he thinks you do.’

'*What . . . ?*' But she stopped herself in time. Telling the truth would just be the poisonous icing on Carla's already very bad day. 'No, he's grand and everything, but seriously, no.'

Carla shrugged, not looking any the happier. 'Anyway, I don't know why I'm even asking, 'cos it doesn't matter now. He couldn't stop laughing at me when I got back to the bus all covered in mud and my hair in a big frizz.'

'Oh, Carla.' Aoife wanted to say something like *If he really likes you, something like that won't matter to him*, but that was the sort of thing only mothers said, and it was never true. 'I wish . . . Look, I'm sure he'll text you.'

Carla said stiffly, 'He won't. Don't worry about it.'

Aoife hugged her - awkwardly, because they were both holding their bikes.

As she rode out of the square, her phone beeped. Carla.

i love u more than any boy

Warmth flooded Aoife's heart.

me too

She set the stopwatch and rode home as fast as she could, as if through sheer physical effort she could leave her own bad day behind. Past the unfinished estate on the edge of the village, where her dad, a carpenter, had been working before the recession. Past Kilduff garage and then slightly downhill, the breeze drying the last of the dampness from her short green dress. There was a tractor ahead of her, and she overtook it. After the tractor was a car, and she had a sudden urge to overtake that too - and did. The elderly man at the wheel gave her a startled glance as she powered by. This was strange - and a bit frightening. How fast was she going? The old man must have been driving very slowly . . . The turning to her house was coming up, and she only just made it, skittering left in

a wide spray of gravel into the breen. This was terrifying – the pedals were spinning so fast her feet could barely keep up. If she didn't slow down, she'd destroy her wheels on the potholes . . .

And yet she did not brake, because suddenly all fear had drained away, and she was filled instead with a mad, unnatural pleasure. There was no need to slow down for the potholes – she was flying over them. The hedges were a green and flowery blur, the cows in the field mere streaks of black and white . . . The small stone house appeared in its nest of trees, and seconds later she was dumping her bike on the lawn, panting, exhilarated, her hair a mess. She checked her phone to see how long it had taken her. Two and a half kilometres in two minutes, two seconds. That morning it had taken her over nine minutes to cycle the three kilometres from her place to Carla's.

For a brief moment Aoife was giddy with triumph. Two minutes! Then reality intervened. It wasn't possible; she must have set the timer wrong. Still breathing hard, she dragged her fingers through her tangled hair. Hawthorn blossoms showered out. Her dress was still covered with mud from climbing into that icy pool. *Down . . . Down . . .* She had set the timer wrong. She took a deep breath, and walked into the house.

Her mother was in her usual place at the kitchen table, working on local farmers' accounts, her dark blonde hair dragged back into a scruffy plait. The sink behind her was stacked with plates. She glanced up as Aoife passed. 'I thought you were going to the cinema, sweetie?' And stayed staring, pushing back her chair and standing up. 'What on earth . . .? Hey, wait, don't go – what happened to you?'

Aoife came back to the doorway. 'We went for a walk and I fell in a bog hole.' At some point she would tell her mother the whole story, but right now she needed to get

her head in order. And she wanted a shower. 'Is there any hot water?'

Maeve, shocked but half laughing, was coming towards her with her arms held out. 'You poor thing. Are you all right?'

'Grand.'

'Oh. Oh my God.' Now Maeve had both hands pressed to her mouth, eyes staring – she seemed to be becoming more shocked as the seconds passed, not less.

'Mam, calm down, it's just a bit of mud. Is there any hot —?'

'Where did you find that?'

Aoife said, confused now, 'Find what?'

'That. *That.*'

'Oh, you mean this.' She touched the heart locket. 'I dropped my phone in Declan Sweeney's field and I found this when I was looking for it. Weird, isn't it, how it turned up after all this time? I must have lost it when me and Carla used to play in there – do you remember we had this game called—'

'Let me see it?'

Aoife unclipped the chain. 'Are you all right, Mam? You look kind of . . . It's nice, isn't it, having something from when I was a baby? After all the photos were lost.'

Maeve didn't answer; just took and studied the locket very closely, reading the name. Opened it. Kissed the picture of the baby. Closed it. Tears were leaking down her face.

After a while Aoife said, not knowing how else to break this strange emotional impasse, 'It's too tight on me now.'

Maeve looked up at her vaguely; the tears were still trickling, and she kept wiping them away with the back of her hand.

Aoife said, 'It needs a longer chain. Do you have an old one lying around somewhere, if you don't want to buy one?'