

'A dark,
delicious thriller'
LOUISE O'NEILL

'Immersive and
unsettling'
SARAH VAUGHAN

'Love this book'
ELISABETH MOSS

'Rare and complex'
MARIAN KEYES

'A cracking read'
STEPH MCGOVERN

'Beautifully written'
SAMANTHA DOWNING



PERFECT STRANGERS

Friends tell each other everything.
Or do they?

ARAMINTA HALL

EXCLUSIVE
SAMPLER



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Previously published as *Imperfect Women*



Praise for *Perfect Strangers*

‘Rare and very refreshing... a novel where middle-aged women are represented in all their wise, sensual, flawed complexity. I enjoyed it SO much’
Marian Keyes

‘A psychological thriller in the truest sense of the word: a thoughtful examination of the psyche of three credible women with baggage and flaws. So much will resonate, not least Hall’s exploration of gender politics and motherhood. At points I was folding pages repeatedly. Deeply unsettling. Recommended’
Sarah Vaughan

‘Not only a deeply satisfying psychological thriller but an insightful and sometimes disquieting exploration of relationships, families and the challenges and pressures confronting women today’
Cara Hunter

‘A brilliant exploration of the secrets and hidden lives women create for themselves as they try to navigate their way through life. The friendships are real and touching, the relationships are consuming and passionate. I read this in no time and really enjoyed the pace, flow and insights Araminta writes about. A fabulous novel of modern love, life and people, with an excellent twist’
Dorothy Koomson

‘A dark, delicious thriller which holds the complexity of female friendship at its heart. I loved it’
Louise O’Neill

A stunning, dark novel about who women want to be and the reality of who they are. Beautifully written, thought-provoking and should not be missed’
Samantha Downing

'*Perfect Strangers* is a painfully honest, haunting portrait of friendship, betrayal, marriage and disappointment. While Hall is able to keep you on the edge of your seat (and awake much later than you should be) she can also make you weep, such is her insight and lack of judgement of the human condition. A beautiful book that will stay with me for a very long time'

Dolly Wells

'Beautifully written and expertly structured – a masterclass in psychological thriller writing'

Simon Lelic

'A slow-burning, tense build to a furious conclusion. Female friendships and the compromises women make are explored in stark detail, and through three different perspectives the story develops to a pleasing and very just ending. It's great'

Harriet Tyce

'It's been clear from the start that Araminta Hall has a talent for telling unpalatable truths and *Perfect Strangers* is no exception. Expertly peels the layers from the everyday lies we tell each other, and ourselves'

Sarah Hilary

'Dark, visceral, proper psychological thriller with a powerful feminist agenda'

Laura Wilkinson

'An immersive, intelligent and gripping exploration of the deep wells of female friendship and what it means to be a woman in a world made by and for men. Hall gives us three flawed female characters and shows how their expectations of life are thwarted in different ways, exploring their relationships and enticingly messy behaviour with compassion, even in the darkest of deeds'

S.E. Lynes

‘A stunning example of the new breed of “psychological thriller” with a deep dive into the conflicted worlds of three brilliantly-drawn female characters, irradiated by a terrible crime. A pitch-perfect, meticulously-observed and utterly absorbing novel’

Philippa East

‘A cracking read’

Steph McGovern

‘A dark take on friendship and festering secrets that had me turning pages well into the night’

Caroline Hulse

‘A tense psychological story about female friendship and bad choices’

Julie Cohen

‘A perfect slow burning thriller that beautifully dissects the complexities of female friendship and the choices women make’

Nikki Smith

‘A brilliantly unsettling exploration of secrets and lies’

Jo Spain

‘A psychological page-turner of a story that deftly explores the dark and confronting dualities of womanhood. I read hungrily it in a day’

Laura Jane Williams

‘Toxic relationships, crushed hopes & rebuilding yourself from rock bottom... a fabulous novel’

Liv Matthews

‘The story of three female friends and the equally imperfect men in their lives. It’s about deception, disappointment & murder. It’s also about female friendship and platonic love, which cuts through the darkness. Gripping stuff!’

Paul Burston

Araminta Hall has worked as a writer, journalist and teacher. Her first novel, *Everything and Nothing*, was published in 2011 and became a Richard & Judy read that year. Her second, *Dot*, was published in 2013, and her third, *Our Kind of Cruelty*, in 2018.

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Follow Araminta on Twitter @aramintahall to find out more.

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Everything and Nothing

Dot

Our Kind of Cruelty

PERFECT STRANGERS

Araminta Hall



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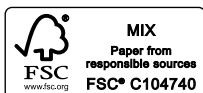
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To my own wonderfully imperfect women,
Polly, Emily M, Dolly, Shami & Emily S

'The perfect human being is all human beings put together, it is a collective, it is all of us that makes perfection.'

Socrates

ELEANOR

‘Eleanor.’

She sat up because she hadn’t even been aware of answering the phone and the night was still black and nothing made sense. Her head spun and she dropped it forward to make it stop, which allowed other things to fall into place.

‘Robert?’

‘I’m sorry to wake you.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Just after four.’

‘My God, has something happened?’

‘No. Well, I don’t know. Nancy’s not here. I must have fallen asleep when I was reading because I’ve just woken up and she’s not back. And her phone’s going straight to voicemail.’

The streetlights were seeping in through the cracks in Eleanor’s curtains and she tried to focus on the strip of artificial light, as if it meant something.

‘You don’t know where she is, do you? I mean, she didn’t by any chance come back to yours after dinner, did she?’ His voice sounded like overstretched elastic.

‘No, no, she didn’t.’ She swung her legs out of the bed and all the irritation she’d felt for Nancy the night before, for ages

really, sloshed around her body. ‘Look, I can be there in fifteen minutes.’

‘Oh, God, you don’t have to ...’

‘It’s fine, Robert. I’ll throw on some clothes and get in the car.’

The elastic in his voice snapped. ‘Oh God, do you think then ... I mean, should I call the police?’

‘No, wait for me.’ Eleanor pulled on her jeans as she spoke and her irritation mutated to anger. She wanted to pick up something and hurl it against the wall. She wanted to scream into Nancy’s perfect face. She wouldn’t let her get away with this. She would recount everything, every last painful second, she would spare her nothing.

As she drove the few miles between her small flat and Nancy’s large house, Eleanor calibrated all the words she would say to her friend when she saw her next. How she would demand that Nancy stopped playing these stupid games with them all and just bloody own up to what she’d done so they could get on with their lives. Over the years Eleanor had watched Nancy constantly create little dramas in her life, culminating now in this big one, and she couldn’t help wondering if it was to add interest to a life that wasn’t nearly as full as it could have been. She wondered sometimes what it must be like to occupy Nancy’s brilliant brain, but never put it to any tangible use. Nancy could really have been or done anything, and yet she had so often failed to commit to anything whole-heartedly. It sometimes felt like Nancy had written herself out of the story of her own life, and surely that was an act of sabotage.

She stopped at a red traffic light and three teenagers tripped across the road, their arms interlinked, their faces creased by laughter. And then she just felt sad because they seemed to have appeared like a message from her past, or a rip in the seam of

time, because they could have been her, Nancy and Mary from thirty years before.

One of the girls turned as they passed the car and her gaze locked with Eleanor's so her smile faltered for a moment before she was pulled back into the conversation by her friend. They looked like the students Nancy, Mary and her had been when they'd met, on almost the first day of Freshers' week, amazed at their luck in finding each other so soon. Eleanor wondered if they were going back to a messy house in which they'd laugh about the night they'd just had, before talking about the people they were going to become, the loves they would experience, the lives waiting for them to step into.

As she started driving again she tried to remember what it was they'd felt so certain they'd accomplish. She supposed she'd not swerved too far from her path, although she'd imagined herself running Oxfam and sitting on committees by now, instead of the small aid charity she'd set up. Mary had wanted to stay in the world of Greek gods forever and had her eye on a life of academia. In actuality, Eleanor thought her life more closely resembled the punishment of a Greek god, with her terrible marriage that seemed to have sucked the life out of her, although she did undeniably adore her children, who were now not even children, and where the hell did time go. It was hard even to remember what Nancy had wanted to be. Eleanor thought it had to do with journalism, editing a newspaper she thought had been the ultimate goal, although it all seemed so unlikely now, as the idea of Nancy ever being satisfied enough by anything seemed implausible.

Nancy and Robert's house was lit up like a Christmas tree. Eleanor could tell from the road that Robert must have been into every room and now it shone out of the dark street as if ready for a party. Robert's face showed up in the rounded

living-room window and he opened the front door as she came up the steps, where they hugged a greeting, him drawing her in as he always did.

‘Shall I make some tea?’ he asked as they went downstairs to the basement kitchen.

‘I’ll do it. Sit down,’ Eleanor said.

He did as he was told, folding his already crumpled body into a chair and rubbing his hands into his eyes, creasing further his already rumpled skin. His blond hair was a mess, sleep ravaged, she thought, and it spiked her familiar tenderness for him.

They sat together and sipped their tea and neither of them said anything because neither of them wanted to be the one to say it, neither wanted to know or tell. For a second, Eleanor thought, they could have just been a couple, an early start at work beckoning, their comfortable house settled around them.

‘Do you know where she is?’ Robert asked finally.

‘Not exactly.’ Eleanor cupped her hands around her mug and tried to imagine how she was going to say what she knew.

‘But there is someone else, isn’t there?’ He looked straight at her with his question.

‘Oh God, Robert, I could kill Nancy.’ She couldn’t be the one to tell Robert, but then again she couldn’t lie to his face.

‘How long has it been going on?’

‘You need to have this conversation with her.’

‘But I can’t, she’s not here.’

Eleanor thought that Nancy had been putting her in impossible situations for most of their lives, but this was perhaps the worst. She might not forgive her this time. ‘Oh, Robert, I’m so sorry.’

‘Did she go to him last night?’

‘After we met, she said she was going to meet him. I didn’t know beforehand, I promise.’

'It's not your fault, Eleanor.' But his voice was harsher than she'd heard before. 'Do you think that's it then? Have they run away together?'

'I really don't think so. She's been trying to end things with him, but he hasn't been taking no for an answer.' For the first time, Eleanor felt a seam of fear in her belly because Nancy had been wanting to end the affair for a while now and she couldn't imagine what this other man could have said to make her change her mind like this. Nancy wasn't mean, she certainly wasn't the sort of person not to come home to her husband of over twenty years. She spoke again to allay her fears. 'She's hardly told me anything about him, beyond the fact of him. She was upset last night. She really has been trying to finish things.'

'Who is he?'

Eleanor felt nausea rise through her body with the warmth of the tea. 'Really, I don't know. All she's told me is that he's called David and she met him through a work thing.'

He flinched at the information as if she'd burnt him. 'But is it serious enough for her to do this, for her to leave?'

Eleanor thought of Nancy's pale face from the night before, from this same night really, which was an absurd thought. It was true that she'd wanted to end the affair, but she had also been visibly devastated and it was always so hard to tell with Nancy what was real or exaggerated. Eleanor comforted herself with the thought that Nancy was impetuous and daring. She wouldn't have run away, but it was possible that she could have done something this stupid. Eleanor looked back at Robert and his sharp blue eyes, his solid being, and she couldn't understand why he hadn't been enough. She'd gone to bed feeling guilty that she hadn't been nicer to her friend, but now she thought she hadn't been harsh enough.

'I don't know. It's been going on for about a year.' He rocked

backwards with her words. 'But, really, she was in the process of ending it, or at least trying to. She wants to try to make it work with you.' God, Nancy deserved less than this.

'So this could just be one last...' His words trailed into the air, their sordidness sullyng the perfection of the new kitchen Nancy had just put in.

'Oh, Robert, this is fucking ghastly. You don't deserve this. I am so sorry.' Eleanor thought of the times she'd sat round this table eating Robert's food and drinking his wine, of the weekends spent at their Sussex house, of the comfy beds and hot baths, of the fireside chats and the long walks. And it seemed shameful that she had betrayed his friendship.

'Anyone would have done the same in your position. I mean, Nancy's your friend.'

'But you're my friend too.' She reached over and put her hand over his as she spoke and his skin was surprisingly soft.

The smile he gave her was stretched and tight.

'If it makes it any better I've told her how much I disapprove of it all, since the beginning. I've never encouraged her.'

He checked the clock above the door and so Eleanor followed his gaze. 'I suppose I should be getting ready for work.'

'But it's only five-thirty.'

'We've got a big case on.'

'But, I mean, surely today. Are you really going in?'

'I can't sit around here moping. And I'd rather not make any decisions before I've spoken to Nancy. It would be better to keep busy.'

'So you're going to forgive her?' Eleanor's voice sounded shrill to her ears. 'Without knowing any of the facts?' The charm of Nancy's life reverberated around her and for a moment she couldn't bear it, couldn't bear that she would get away with this as well. But she pushed that thought away because she needed

to stop letting the last year sour her feelings about Nancy. Nancy was also a woman she loved and cherished, who made her laugh, who was always at the other end of the phone, who often took care of her.

‘I didn’t say that.’ Eleanor heard the pureness of the anger in his voice. His hand was gripping the side of the table, the veins standing out of his skin. ‘But we’ve been together for a very long time. And there’s Zara. I mean, you don’t just throw away over twenty years.’

The moment felt unreal, maybe because it was so early and still dark as night outside. Eleanor swallowed down her tears along with her shame – of course she didn’t know what it was like to consider those sorts of things, other people, long-time loving. But then Robert stood and so Eleanor did the same because he clearly wanted her to leave.

‘Thanks for coming,’ Robert said as they made their way back up the stairs.

They stopped at the front door. ‘How did you know she was having an affair?’

Robert shrugged and his eyes refused to rest on hers. ‘Something’s obviously been up for a while. I suppose it’s just one of the things you consider.’

Eleanor rubbed Robert’s arm through his jersey. ‘I think you’ll sort it out. I hope you do.’

He opened the front door and the chill of the early morning was penetrating. ‘If you hear from her today let me know, she might not call me.’

‘Of course I will. And you me.’ She was shivering with the cold, but Robert hadn’t seemed to notice. ‘Anyway.’ She turned to go but as she did a white car pulled up outside the house. She looked back at Robert and his face told her that she wasn’t wrong. They both watched in the silent, thick stillness of the

beginning of a day as two policemen got out of the car and turned towards the house.

'Oh God,' Robert said behind her.

As they came up the steps, their uniforms blended into the dark.

'Mr Hennessy?' one asked.

'Yes,' Robert said.

'Can we come in, please, sir?'

Robert stepped backwards and Eleanor remembered how you had to invite vampires into your house, they couldn't just walk in.

They went back into the hall and Eleanor wanted to shake them all, to ask the policemen why it wasn't strange to find them standing on the doorstep before dawn. She didn't want to be part of their world in which everything and anything was probable.

'Is there somewhere we can sit down?' the policeman asked, so Robert opened the door to the drawing room, painted in the bright yellow Nancy had always loved. *One room in every house should be sunny*, Eleanor heard her say as she sat on the sofa, like they were a group of friends who happened to be meeting before most people were awake.

'Sorry, and you are?' the policeman said to her.

'Oh, sorry, this is Eleanor Meakins. She's a good friend of my wife's.' The statement hung terrifyingly in the air when it should have needed explanation.

'Please, Mr Hennessy, sit down,' the policeman said.

'No,' replied Robert, 'I'd rather stand.'

The policeman removed his hat and his colleague copied. 'I'm very sorry. The body of a woman in her late forties was found just over an hour ago and we have reason to believe it is your wife, Nancy Hennessy.'

Robert sat at that, right next to Eleanor; she felt the sofa compress and his body sink against hers. She concentrated on

that for as long as she could as the rest of the world spun around her.

‘What makes you think it’s Nancy?’ Robert asked finally.

‘Her bag was found with her and her driving licence was in her purse.’ The second policeman still hadn’t spoken and Eleanor wondered if he was on some sort of training exercise.

‘Oh my God. What happened to her?’ Eleanor’s mind was filled with the thought of Nancy spending the night out in this freezing cold.

‘At the moment we’re not entirely sure. But it looks like she suffered a head trauma.’

Eleanor tried to make sense of the words that were being said. They had called Nancy a body and now they were talking about a head trauma. Surely someone hadn’t hurt her in some way, surely there was some mistake? She felt a sickening anger at that thought, and a desperate desire to rush to her friend and soothe away her pain.

‘Where is she?’ Eleanor asked. ‘I mean, is she dead?’

Both policemen and Robert turned to look at her as if she was stupid. ‘Yes,’ the speaking policeman said finally. ‘I’m sorry, I thought you understood ...’ He blushed a deep crimson. ‘She’s in a mortuary now.’

‘Where was she found?’ Robert asked.

‘By the river, near Hammersmith. I’m sorry to ask but have you got a recent photo of your wife?’

Robert didn’t seem like he was going to move so Eleanor stood and fetched a photo from the mantelpiece. She picked a recent one of Nancy with her arm round Zara. Bad photos of Nancy didn’t exist, but this one was particularly luminous because the sun was behind her and accentuating her perfection, almost giving her an outline. She handed it to the policeman and he nodded when he looked at it.

'We're going to have to ask you to come and identify the body, Mr Hennessy. Or if there's someone who can do it for you?'

Robert groaned, a low bear-like sound.

'I can do it,' Eleanor said.

'No,' Robert said. 'It should be me.'

Their eyes met as he spoke and Eleanor felt a jolt of terror pass through her as she realised that everything about Nancy's death was worse than any other death anywhere. They would all suffer and nothing would ever be the same again.

As she waited for Robert on the cold plastic chairs outside the viewing room she couldn't remember how they'd arrived at the mortuary. She tried to reassemble the journey in her mind, to give it some cohesion, but nothing came. Robert reappeared relatively quickly, but his eyes were unfocused and his body appeared to be trembling.

'Do you mind if I go in?' Eleanor surprised herself by saying, but he waved her in, so then she felt like she should.

The room was artificially dark, or at least subdued, with fake flowers dusty in vases and a navy velvet chair in one corner. The outline of a body, which Eleanor supposed to be Nancy, lay on the bed, covered by a sheet. A woman was standing next to the shape and she nodded, so Eleanor nodded back. The woman leant forward and folded the white sheet back, so Eleanor only realised what she was doing when it was too late and she didn't have any time to prepare herself for what she was going to see. And then there was nothing more to do than step closer and look at her friend. She momentarily felt a pang of relief because they'd clearly got it wrong, it wasn't really her. It was just a facsimile of Nancy, a waxwork, a cardboard cut-out. Eleanor wanted to reach out and feel her skin, which already looked devoid of anything meaningful. Her beauty, which had been so

present in life, had vanished, as if it knew what was to come, as if it couldn't bear to let itself mush and decay and be eaten by worms. Eleanor gasped at her own thoughts, but the woman holding the sheet averted her gaze and besides, she must have seen everything in this terrible room. What a job. It seemed impossible that anyone would want a job like this.

Eleanor stepped closer because there was something wrong, or missing perhaps, that she couldn't work out. Nancy's left cheekbone was swollen and a yellow bruise had crept up under the strange turban-like thing she was wearing. Her jaw looked strange as well, almost as if she'd been to the dentist and left in the wodge of cotton wool they used. She wanted to turn away because it all spoke of something very ugly that had happened to her friend and she couldn't bear to think of the violence that must have produced those marks. Her last moments had been painful, that much was blindingly clear.

But in fact the strangest thing was that Nancy didn't have any hair, or at least that her hair had been completely covered by this odd turban. Nancy was always surrounded by her golden hair, long and straight in university, rising upwards, curling, now a flouncy bob that stopped just above her shoulders. That was as far as her hair would go, Eleanor realised with a jolt, Nancy would never have another haircut.

But mixed in with all of that, was the knowledge that Eleanor had known Nancy had been going to meet her lover, and what if he was the person who had done this? What if Eleanor could have said the right words to stop her going and didn't? She hadn't even tried, she realised. Sickness rose through her and her anger at this woman she had shared so much of her life with pooled in a mess by her feet, so she was just left with shame at herself. Eleanor had loved this woman and had let this happen to her.

‘Why has she got that round her head?’ Eleanor pointed at the turban, as if it mattered.

‘The wound on the back of the head was quite substantial, this is so we contain it,’ the woman answered.

‘Will there be a post-mortem?’

‘I would imagine so.’

‘So they’ll cut her up? She won’t ever look like this again?’ Eleanor couldn’t understand why any of this mattered, but it was fuelling a building desperation inside her. She wanted very much to lean down and kiss Nancy’s alabaster cheek, but she didn’t dare, not just because she was being watched, but because of what it might make her feel.

‘They’re very good at their job. And it really is essential in cases like this, it helps us recover all the evidence.’

Eleanor nodded, because what else was there. She heard the woman replacing the sheet as she left.

A policeman drove them home, or at least to Nancy’s home, which already felt vacuous without her in it, or the knowledge of her return. It was filled with other police, both inside and out, the rooms busy and crowded. There were also a few people loitering outside, a couple with cameras slung about their necks, one of whom rushed up to them and asked Robert if he wanted to make any comment, before being pushed aside. Once inside, a policewoman asked Robert if he wanted them to inform Zara, she said a family liaison officer could be sent to her university halls and she would be taken care of. But Robert said no, he had to do it, which was not something he looked capable of. He considered driving up to tell her in person, but Eleanor persuaded him against that and they compromised by dispatching the family liaison to be there after Zara had taken the phone call. Eleanor left him alone and went to the kitchen with a different policeman where she started to make tea, aware

that there was nothing really useful she could do and that from now on all tasks might seem pointless.

It was absurd that nothing was different: that you still had to get a teabag from its box in the cupboard, drop it into a mug, fill the kettle and flick the switch, listen to the sing of the boil, pour the water over, fish out the bag, add milk. She watched herself perform these actions but they were as unconnected to her as the used brown bag that she dropped into the bin.

They sat and had their tea in the kitchen and Eleanor thought it was just another moment, that was all. And she had had plenty of terrible moments in her life. Probably none quite as terrible or unreal as this, but nonetheless, another moment to be lived through, like all the others. What was important was for her to remember this wasn't about her, it was about Nancy, Robert and Zara. She mustn't think about her dinner with Nancy the night before, or what had been said, or not said. She couldn't fall apart, not yet.

'Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?' the policeman said, breaking into her thoughts. The sky had lightened to a dead grey outside and, when she looked up through the window, she could see the trees on the street stripped and bare, tiny specks of rain pattering the glass. 'My name is DS Daniels and we find if we get these cases started quickly we have much better outcomes.'

'What do you mean? What cases?' Momentarily, Eleanor was lost in what he meant.

'Suspicious deaths.' The policeman looked exasperated and it made Eleanor realise that this had now officially become something else.

'Do you, I mean, do you think she was murdered, then? I mean, isn't it possible that she fell or something?' Except she had seen Nancy and her face sort of put paid to that thought,

but she clung on stubbornly because it had to be the best option in a series of terrible ones.

'Everything is possible at this stage,' DS Daniels said, calmly. 'But there are certain indications that are pointing us towards the thought that this wasn't an accidental death.'

'Oh God.' It felt like things were slipping away and they were entering a new realm.

'We know you had dinner with Mrs Hennessy last night.'

'Yes.'

'It makes what you tell us extremely important.'

'I suppose it does.' She could hear herself speaking, but it all seemed unlikely.

'How did Mrs Hennessy seem? Do you know where she went after dinner? What time did you leave the restaurant?'

Eleanor drew in her breath because now, she knew, was the moment that she would make everything change. 'We left around ten and Nancy went to meet her lover.'

DS Daniels sat forward, unable to check his excitement. 'Her lover? Who is that?'

'I don't know.' Eleanor suddenly felt so weary she worried she might simply fall asleep. There was too much to tell and too little time.

'Does Mr Hennessy know about the lover?'

'Yes. At least he does now. He rang me at four this morning, because Nancy hadn't come home, and I came round and told him. But he'd guessed already.'

'How had he guessed?'

She looked at the eager man writing in his book and it struck her again that this was no more than a job to him, possibly a promotion if all went well. 'I'm not sure. He said they'd been getting on badly and it's one of the things you consider.'

'And you say you don't know the lover's identity?'

‘That’s right. Nancy was very ashamed about it all. She’d only spoken to me about it because she felt so guilty, but she never told me any details.’ Eleanor remembered what it had been like in the early days of the affair, when she’d practically had to peel Nancy off the ceiling to have a conversation, but she also wanted to protect Nancy from what she knew everyone would think because that wasn’t the truth about her friend. ‘The only thing she ever told me was that he was called David and she met him through work.’

‘Nothing else? No surname?’

‘Of course I’d tell you if I knew his surname.’

‘But you’re sure he was called David?’

‘Yes, it was the only specific piece of information she ever told me about him. And only because I asked so many times. She said I didn’t know him so there was no point in telling me any details.’ But then Eleanor remembered something from the night before, which seemed like a thousand years ago. ‘Oh, actually, I asked Nancy last night if he was married and had children and she said yes.’

‘That’s all she said? She didn’t tell you the name of his wife, or how many children?’

‘No.’ Eleanor focused on a line of red spots at the side of the policeman’s chin, which could be a shaving rash.

‘Do you know how long had it been going on?’

‘A bit over a year, that I know of.’

‘So possibly longer?’

‘Possibly, yes.’ Although Nancy was bad at keeping things to herself, so Eleanor thought it unlikely.

‘And did Nancy talk to anyone else about this?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. Maybe our friend Mary, but I think I’d know if she had.’ She thought of Mary going about her life and it seemed impossible that it hadn’t yet been shattered.

'She was really scared about Robert finding out, so I can't imagine she spoke to anyone else about it.'

DS Daniels wrote in his pad. 'And she said she met him through work?'

'Yes. I think she said at a party.'

'Where did Mrs Hennessy work?'

'Well, actually, mainly at home. She translates books. She speaks fluent French, so if a publisher buys a French book she would translate it into English.'

Eleanor thought the policeman looked depressed at the number of paths that answer could lead him down.

'And when you left the restaurant last night did Nancy tell you where she was meeting this David? Or did you see which direction she went in?'

Eleanor felt her face flush with the memory of their parting. 'Actually, Nancy left before me. I stayed on to pay, so no, I didn't see where she went.' Eleanor wondered if the policeman understood what a terrible friend she was.

'Did you pay because Nancy had no money on her?'

'No, I mean, I didn't ask, I just offered to pay.' At least that made Eleanor feel a bit better. 'But Nancy always had money on her.'

'Would she have been carrying cash, do you think?'

'I don't know. Why are you asking this?'

He looked like he didn't want to tell her why, but then said, 'When she was found her purse was lying open next to her body and there was no cash or cards in it.'

'She definitely would have had a card at least on her.'

'And did she have a phone?'

'Yes, of course. Was that gone as well?'

'We didn't find one. Did you see her use her phone last night?'

Eleanor searched through her memory but all she could see

was Nancy's pleading face. 'No, sorry. But I'm completely sure she would have had it on her.'

'Yes, most people do.'

'But surely the man she was meeting wouldn't have robbed her?' It was definitely better if she hadn't been killed by the lover, as if it made Eleanor less responsible.

The policeman nodded, but then ruined it by saying, 'Robbery isn't the only reason someone might take those things.'

'Oh God, because there could be messages from him on her phone? Can't you trace it somehow, or read the messages anyway?'

'We've got a team working on that now, but it's not quite as easy as TV shows would have you believe.' He leant back and stopped himself from stretching. 'Anyway, you've been very helpful, Miss Meakins.'

Eleanor stayed until Zara got home and then she left them to it – a weeping bundle of misery, which made her feel like an intruder. Also Nancy's mother, Pearl, was on her way and the thought of seeing her was too much right then. She promised to come back in the morning, not sure if she was needed or wanted, except Robert looked so grateful that she thought she should. It was dark again by the time Eleanor left and this time nothing stopped her; it could have been a replay of the morning and Nancy might not be dead and time could have unravelled and any way you looked at it nothing was ever going to be the same again.

She sat with her hands on the steering wheel and her body felt shredded, as if a car had run her over and then reversed back again and again. Her mouth was dry and her heart jarred against her ribs, the sweat lining her armpits so her own odour rose to greet her. Mary still didn't know. It wasn't something she

had felt capable of telling her over the phone, but the policeman had warned her it would be all over the news that night and it was coming up for six o'clock and she doubted Mary watched it that early, but who knew. She started the car and turned in the direction of Kilburn, inching along with the rush-hour traffic, men and women locked in their own private lives, nothing out of the ordinary.

Mary's gate was still hanging off its hinges as it had done for years. Her front garden was still a mess of weeds and the broken pane of glass in the door was still held together with Sellotape. She rang the bell and Maisie answered, which meant she had to smile.

'Hi, Ellie.' Maisie smiled, her newly acquired teenage spots heartbreaking. 'I didn't know you were coming round.'

'I'm not. At least, I am, but nobody knew.'

'Mum,' Maisie shouted, 'Ellie's here.'

Mary came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands down her skirt, her hair hanging by her face in long strands and Eleanor found herself thinking she should cut it, as if that would resolve something.

'Ellie, what a lovely surprise.' She stepped forward. 'Is everything OK? You don't look well.'

Eleanor found something had lodged in her throat so even though she opened her mouth all that happened was she cried. 'Mimi,' Mary shouted up the stairs, 'come here.'

There was a thud and then Mimi was there, staring at Ellie along with her little sister and Eleanor knew it was all wrong, she was doing it all wrong.

'Take Maisie and go and watch some telly or something,' Mary said. 'Don't come into the kitchen.' Then she took Eleanor by the elbow and led her through to the hot, steamy room, which smelt of mince. 'Sit down,' she instructed and Eleanor

did because otherwise she was going to faint anyway. 'Do you want anything?'

'Some wine. Or whisky. Or anything.'

Mary opened the fridge. 'Howard's got a beer in here?'

'That'll do.'

Mary handed her the cold black can and sat next to her. 'What the hell's happened, Els?'

She tried to think of a good way of saying what she knew, but there was none. 'Nancy's dead. The police seem to think she was murdered.' The beer tasted yeasty and reminded her why she didn't like it, but at least it stopped her crying.

'What on earth do you mean?' Mary's eyes were wide behind her glasses so she looked like a cartoon character.

'Oh my God, Mary, she's dead.'

Mary sank into a chair and started crying in a way Eleanor wished she could, in a pure and complete way, with noise and tears and snot. She moved her chair closer and put her arms around her old friend and they sat together while Mary heaved and moaned.

Eventually Mary's sobs subsided and when she pulled away her eyes were swollen and her cheeks blotchy. 'But how? I mean, why? When?'

'They found her really early this morning, on a path by the river in Hammersmith, right next to the bridge. She died from a large wound on the back of her head.'

Mary cupped her hand to her mouth as if she might be sick. 'Oh my God. But I mean, who did it? Do they know why?'

'No.' Eleanor felt the weight of all the conversations she'd had that day.

'Was she raped?'

The question felt like a jolt. 'God, I don't know. I don't think so. I mean, surely they'd have told us that.' Although maybe

they'd said something to Robert and the thought churned her stomach.

'Was it a mugging that went wrong or something then?'

'It could be. Her bag was next to her, but her cash and phone are missing.'

'Oh God, she can't be dead over an iPhone.'

Eleanor took her friend's hand. 'Did you know she was having an affair?'

'No. My God, did she tell you?'

And Eleanor thought it was always there in friendships, even this far down the line, that possibility of jealousy. 'Yes, but I think only because she was desperate.'

'So they think he did it?'

'Yes, maybe. I saw Nancy last night and she was going to meet him afterwards. She's been trying to end it for a couple of months, but he's been making it very hard for her.'

'Who is he?'

'I don't know. She never told me.'

'How long have you known?'

'About a year.'

'Is that how long it's been going on?'

'I don't know. I think so, pretty much.'

Mary looked at her like everyone else had that day. A year of knowing that about one of your best friends and you don't make them tell you who it is? What sort of friend does that make you? What sort of person? She felt like she might float away soon.

'She must have told you something.'

'She didn't talk about it much. I know he was called David and she met him through work, but that hardly narrows it down.'

'God, poor Robert,' Mary said finally. 'How is he? And Zara?'

'Terrible, as you'd expect.'

Mary's face folded in on itself and the tears came again. 'Oh, I can't bear to think about them.'

Eleanor gulped from the metal can again, forcing the thick liquid down her throat.

'I can't get my head around any of it,' Mary said.

'Mary Mary Mary.' There was no pause between the words. They simply rolled down the stairs and through the door of the kitchen.

'What's Howard doing home?' Eleanor didn't bother to keep the harshness out of her voice.

'He's been here all day. Some sort of sick bug.'

Mary's name continued to bang on the door and Eleanor watched her friend stand automatically. 'For God's sake, tell him to shut up,' she said, so unlike herself that Mary paused on her way to the door. But at least she sat back down. 'You should have done that years ago.'

'What?'

'Not answered him.'

'But he's ill.'

'Well, yes, today he's ill. I'm talking generally.'

Mary leant forwards onto the table, her greasy hair pooled across her arms. 'Oh God, Ellie, not now please. We've got to get through this first.'

In the end Eleanor arrived home relatively early, just after half past eight, although she felt so ungrounded that time didn't seem entirely real. She had found herself unable to stay at Mary's, finding something grotesque about how even in the depth of misery, Mary still had to pull herself forward and consider other things. The full house made it impossible not to acknowledge that life was going to continue and much would stay the same. And Howard went on needing things, which Mary provided too

easily in Eleanor's opinion, although her friend was right, it was not the time to go back down that well-trodden path. Besides, her dislike of Howard was insignificant compared to her misery at what had happened to Nancy.

So, Eleanor had made her excuses and left, promising to call in the morning. But, as she let herself into her house from the street and stepped into the bland hallway she shared with her downstairs neighbour, Irena, she felt a crushing dread at the thought of opening her own front door and being confronted with all the empty space in her flat. She'd seen the light on in Irena's front room as she'd walked up the path and she stood outside the door now, her hand raised, unsure whether or not to knock.

Eleanor's flat was the top floor of a house which had once belonged entirely to Irena, a house in which the woman had lived for over fifty years, since she'd arrived from Poland with her new husband all that time ago, bringing up her children and creating a life. A life which had involved its own share of terrible losses and hardships – her parents were murdered in the war and she nursed her husband through a fatal illness when their two children were very young. It made Eleanor hesitate to impose her own sadness on her, but she was also desperate for the woman's understanding.

As she stood outside Irena's door she thought back to when she'd made an offer on her flat, fifteen years before, and the estate agent had embarrassedly told her that she had to meet Irena before her offer could be accepted. It had put other people off, he'd said, but Eleanor had been charmed by the idea and agreed immediately, going round the next day to sit in Irena's warm, cinnamon-scented kitchen where they'd talked and laughed, so that afterwards she'd waited by her phone like an

excited schoolgirl, desperate to know if the object of her affections returned her feelings.

They'd always been more than just neighbours, her and Irena, more than just people who exchanged polite chit-chat when they bumped into each other. They'd sat in each other's kitchens and learnt things about each other, they'd helped each other out of bad situations, they'd carried milk and medicine to front doors, they'd included each other at times of festivities. Then, a few years ago Irena's daughter, Sarah, had rung Eleanor and said she had begun to worry about her mother living alone, with both Sarah and her brother living over an hour away in different directions, but that Irena was refusing move. Eleanor had totally understood her reluctance to move, and had also been appalled at the idea of her not being there, so she'd said Sarah could call her anytime if she was worried about her mother, and that she would make sure she went to see Irena at least once a week. So now she had supper with Irena every Thursday, unless she was away or tied up with work, and it had become a little oasis in her week, which she sometimes thought she needed more than Irena did.

It wasn't Thursday, in fact it was Tuesday, but Eleanor longed for Irena as she stood outside her door and the hall light clicked itself off. She longed for her in a way she'd used to long for her mother, who had finally lost her grip on a sanity that had been tenuous for a while, five years before, and now wouldn't recognise her, even if she'd been able to speak. Eleanor knocked and tried not to cry. But as soon as Irena opened the door, leaning on her walking stick, and the sweet fog of her flat hit her she couldn't stop herself, her mouth simply pulling towards the ground and her tears spouting from her sore eyes.

'Eleanor, Eleanor,' Irena said in her accent that still retained its Polish roots, 'child, what is the matter?'

But Eleanor couldn't stop crying or form words into sentences, so Irena pulled at her elbow and she allowed herself to be led by this tiny woman, who hobbled in front of her to the little kitchen at the back of the house.

'Sit,' Irena said, pointing at a chair with her stick and so Eleanor sunk gratefully. 'Do you need tea? Or vodka?'

Eleanor laughed briefly. 'Vodka.'

Irena reached down to a low cupboard and produced a dusty bottle and two grimy shot glasses, which she placed on the table, before sitting herself. 'Now, you tell me what has happened.'

Eleanor accepted the little glass, greasy with fingerprints and age, downing the warm liquid that rushed through her blood. 'You know my friend Nancy?'

'The one with the big house and lots of complaints?'

Eleanor felt ashamed that her descriptions of Nancy had resulted in Irena seeing her this way. 'Yes. She died last night.'

'Oh my God.' Irena crossed her bony fingers over her pigeon chest and it made Eleanor think of her heart and how much sadness it had had to endure and she wondered how it had been possible. 'I am so sorry. How did it happen?'

'I think, maybe, I mean, they seem to think she was murdered.' The concept still didn't feel real to Eleanor; surely murder was something that happened to other people.

'The lady by the river? I heard about it on the news this evening.'

'Yes.' Eleanor's tears had now dried but her body had developed an internal shake. She poured them both more vodka and they both downed the shot. 'I don't know what to do, Irena.'

'Nothing tonight but weep. And then you get up tomorrow and you start doing.' She placed her hand over Eleanor's and it felt like wax paper.

'No, but you don't understand. I saw her last night and I wasn't nice to her.' The words felt sharp in Eleanor's chest.

'You argued?'

'Not really, no. It was an argument we'd been having for a while. I suppose I sort of disapproved of how she was living and I was angry with her that she couldn't seem to sort it out.'

'Ah.' Eleanor forced herself to look into Irena's eyes and tried to find the judgement she felt should be there, but if anything they looked worried, kindly even. 'We only bother to argue with the people we love, you know.' Eleanor tried to smile, but her face hurt too much. 'When my children were little and told me I was mean because I had shouted at them about their manners or told them they couldn't eat sweets for breakfast or all the other things that make mothers cross, I used to tell them that it takes so much more effort to be stern than it does just to say yes, that if I wanted an easy life I would let them do all they asked. But I also told them I loved them too much to always say yes, that I took the time to scold them and argue with them so they would learn what was right or wrong. Anger is often not cruelty, Eleanor, it is more often love.'

'But the last things I said to her were so unkind. I feel terrible.'

Irena shook her head. 'I don't think I have ever told you, Eleanor. But when my husband died I felt guilty for months afterwards. I was forever going over and over in my head how I could have made him more comfortable, or told him I loved him more, or hidden my sadness better. Anything I could find to torture myself with I did. Until one day I realised all I was doing was hiding from my grief. That the guilt allowed me to make it about me, not about losing him.'

Eleanor tried to let Irena's words penetrate her but she felt hollowed out by grief, as if it was eating away at her and she had to grab hold of something, anything to pull her back upwards.

'I'm not sure how I can go on.' She hated herself for saying those words to Irena, a woman who had experienced such hardships, but also couldn't stop herself.

Irena reached her hand up and cupped Eleanor's face so she was forced to meet her eyes. 'You will go on because you have to.'

'How did you do it, Irena?' Eleanor's voice was no more than a whisper and it felt like the whole world had contracted around them. She stared at Irena's creased face as if precious secrets were held within its pendulous folds.

'I remember that I am nothing special. I have this picture in my head of the world and all these bright lights shining out of it. All that goodness everywhere. And it reminds me that what feels like a great tragedy to me is nothing more than a small sorrow in the big scheme of things.'

'What do you mean?' Eleanor couldn't make sense of the idea of a smallness at this moment.

Irena's red, mouse-like eyes were watering, as they so often did. 'Sorrow is a bit like sacrifice. We, as women, absorb it so others don't have to. But then one day we stand back and we say, enough, I have done my bit, let another person take this. So we pass it on and the next woman steps forward and it all begins again. All our sorrows and sacrifices are small, ultimately, and that is a good thing. That is the way of the world.'

Eleanor's alarm sounded as it always did to the news at 7 a.m. the next day. But the stories didn't wash over her, or irritate her, or niggle at her conscience like they usually did. They instead lifted her out of her bed in pure terror, her heart hammering against her chest as the newsreader relayed the details that she already knew about her friend, details made so much more certain by the fact that they were coming out of a radio. She dressed quickly and went to the Co-op near her house, where she was greeted

by Nancy's face on the cover of most editions, her smile looming out as if she didn't have a care in the world. They seemed to already know all the details and Eleanor wondered how it was possible that nothing stayed quiet or personal any more. Her phone vibrated in her pocket as she left empty handed, because she didn't want or need a souvenir of this terrible day.

'It's all over the news,' Mary said.

'Yes, I know.'

'How on earth do they know about the lover already? And how did they get a photograph of her?'

'The photo's her Facebook profile picture and the house was swarming with police yesterday, and there were already press outside, so I guess someone said something.' Whole sections of life that she had never before considered now seemed like a new order.

'Are you going there again today?'

'Yes, I'm on my way now.'

'Oh, God,' Mary said, which was precisely how Eleanor felt.

The numbers of young men and women in ill-fitting suits standing outside Nancy's house had at least doubled since the day before. A few shouted questions at her as she climbed the steps to the front door and a flashlight even went off behind her back. But inside it was like the house had been held in aspic. Nothing was different, it was all still awful, all still bitingly terrible. Nancy's mother, Pearl, had arrived and was apparently in Nancy's study, so Eleanor went to find her, even though she was scared by what she would find. The last time she'd seen Pearl had been at Nancy's father's funeral, and that had been about ten years before.

As Eleanor climbed the stairs to the study, she remembered being annoyed at the ease with which Nancy had found work after taking nearly a decade off after Zara was born. She'd

bristled when Nancy had shown her the cosy room with duck-egg blue walls and a pale wooden desk, thinking of her own drab grey office in a municipal building where she actually employed people, or how if she worked from home it was at the kitchen table because her flat was so small. But she remembered also how Nancy had always been so aware of her ability to irritate. How, as they'd walked back downstairs, she'd said, 'I feel like a fraud with an office all set up when I've only got a couple of jobs.'

Eleanor also remembered how she'd replied and how much she'd meant the warm words, 'Well you shouldn't, it's lovely.'

'I'm so glad I'm doing it though,' Nancy said from behind her. 'It's taken me way too long. I've wanted to go back to work for ages, but I felt guilty when Zara was young. And then I lost my confidence and I didn't think anyone would want to employ me. I mean, they still might not, but at least I'm giving it a go now. And, you know, sometimes I find myself wandering around the house and think I might go mad with the fact that I don't really have anything to do. Or nothing that seems like it means anything much.' They'd reached the bottom of the stairs and Eleanor turned to see that Nancy had flushed red. 'God, I feel embarrassed admitting that to you, with your wonderful career.'

'What do you mean?' Eleanor thought it was strange how she could think damning things about Nancy, but when those same thoughts came out of Nancy's mouth she wanted to protect her from them. 'Are you talking about being a mum and making a home?'

'Yes.'

'But of course that's important.'

Nancy looked like she was close to tears. 'I know, but do you know how hard it is to hang on to that when you're actually doing it? When you're bombarded with women "having it all",

as they like to say, rushing to a meeting in a smart suit with a baby on their hip. Domesticity has never been valued.'

It was hard not to think about Mary as Nancy spoke, so trapped under the weight of domesticity that Eleanor could sometimes go for weeks without seeing her and, when she finally did, she was either being climbed over by a child or distracted by someone else's problem. 'It's funny, but lots of the countries I've worked in, which we consider third world, value domesticity very highly. It's true that unmarried, young women are usually at the bottom of the social scale, but mothers are almost worshipped.'

'Yes, but here we worship money, so of course those who earn it are prized above those who don't.'

Eleanor had felt a rush of shame then as she realised she too could think like that about both Mary and Nancy, although she was less inclined with Mary because she had three young children and no money, which made everything seem more worthy. It was very confusing because they had all seemed like complete equals at university, but now, it was true, they had assumed positions that had nothing to do with who they were. Nothing was ever simple when you were a woman and she tried to think of a way to tell Nancy this. 'You know, I'm getting to that age where everybody asks me if I have kids and, when I say I don't, actually ask me why not, or if I want them, which they would never, ever do to a man. And there's this kind of judgement behind the question that I'm not fulfilling my womanly duties by becoming a mother. And then I work with lots of women who have children and they're constantly feeling guilty about not being with them, and definitely being judged by the same people who judge me for not having them, or you for not working.'

'How did we let this happen?' Nancy said and Eleanor thought she saw real fear in her eyes, which made her want to pull her into a hug and tell her it was all going to be all right.

She stepped forward and put her hand on to Nancy's arm. 'You know, Nance, you're amazing and the rest is bullshit. Really, you could do anything you want. And you mustn't feel bad about any of the choices you've made.'

But Nancy shook her head so abruptly that Eleanor remembered feeling such a deep pang of love for her it almost knocked her over. Nancy's vulnerability was so close to the surface it was like it shimmered off her, like it existed intrinsically within her friend, like it was never going to let her go.

Pearl was sitting very still with her hands on Nancy's desk and her gaze firmly centred out of the window, into the garden. The room smelt profoundly of Nancy, like a bed of roses warmed by the sun. She turned as Eleanor came in and her skin was slack and pale, her eyes red and rheumy. She held out her hands and Eleanor took them, sitting as she did on the little armchair next to the desk.

'I'm so sorry,' Eleanor said. 'This is just so dreadful.'

Pearl nodded, her namesakes at her ears and neck bobbing in agreement. 'I can't quite take it in.' Her voice was quiet, but even in her desolation it was as clear as it always had been to see where Nancy had inherited her beauty. 'Did you know about this other man?'

'Yes. A bit. She never really told me anything about him.'

'Just that he was called David?'

'Yes.'

'And you have no idea who he is?'

'I'm so sorry, really, I don't.'

Pearl sat back and took her hands with her. 'What was she doing anyway, the silly girl?' Eleanor tried to hear the admonition in Pearl's words, but they weren't there. She was beginning to

feel infected by Nancy's secret, as if she'd been the one betraying them all. 'Did Mary know?'

'No.' Eleanor wound her silver ring against her finger. She had bought it for herself in Jaipur, fifteen years before, and the movement was comforting. 'She was trying to end it, you know.'

'They think that's why he did it, don't they?' Pearl said. 'A fit of jealousy or something.'

'Are they saying that now, that it was definitely him?' There were lots of questions Eleanor wanted to ask, but she knew she had to save them for the police.

'Well, they're not saying anything definite, but it seems obvious to me.'

'She did say he wasn't taking the idea of it ending very well.' The police had called that morning saying they needed to interview her properly. She had to get the story straight in her head.

'I just can't believe she'd do any of this. Poor Robert.'

'How is he this morning?'

'Awful. He's in with the police now. And of course Zara's inconsolable.'

Eleanor thought of all the people she'd seen over the years desolated by loss. Places where the earth had moved from under them or seas had risen up and devoured them. Women and men who had lost everything and everyone. She realised she'd always been rather sniffy about Western grief, as she thought of it. How she'd read stories about a murder or a teenager dying of an overdose and wonder at the extent of the reaction, wanting to take the writers of these articles to the places she knew, where you could legitimately use the word 'devastation'. But she hadn't known what it was like to inhabit moments like this, how no word seemed enough, how it really did feel like the end of the world.

'I'm so glad Hank died before all this,' Pearl said. 'If she could have waited a few more years I could have been gone as well.'

Eleanor looked at Pearl and the odd tenuousness of her words, which she barely understood. She thought of her own mother, unencumbered by sanity, in her care home in Devon and wondered if she'd even understand if one of her children died.

It was strange, the times she thought of her mother, and the shock of realising that she wasn't still the mother she'd known, always struck her as a fresh blow. Eleanor imagined being able to ring her now to talk about Nancy and the comfort she would give. It had been such a talent her mother possessed, the giving of comfort, and the absoluteness of Eleanor's grief spun her back through time to her childhood home and her mother's exuberant, fizzing presence. She heard her mother's deep laugh as it echoed up the winding stairs of their draughty house, past her father's study, through their messy rooms, over unwashed dishes and dusty surfaces. *There are always better things to do than clean*, her mother would say as she rushed from one charity appointment to the other, pulling Eleanor and her sister along with her when they were too young to be left alone. Her mother had always liked Nancy, but she would have disapproved of the opulence of her life, something that Eleanor thought could have influenced how she saw her friend.

'We tried to have a baby for ten years before Nancy came,' Pearl said, and Eleanor wished she'd stop. 'And then she came and she really was the most perfect little thing we could have wished for. Except there's always been this side of her that I've never understood, this urge to always push things further than they should go, don't you find?'

'I suppose.'

'Even going to university. I can't remember why she went. Why did you go, Eleanor?'

‘Because I...’ Eleanor looked again at her hands but they seemed smaller than she remembered. ‘Because I wanted to go on with my studies. I don’t know.’

‘Sometimes I think it was easier when women just didn’t.’ But Pearl stopped herself and Eleanor thought she’d learnt to put away the age she’d been born in to and wear the present like an itchy jumper. She swiped at her eye, batting the tears in to submission. ‘And actually, I do know where she got it from. Hank was just like that, always locking himself in his study and falling into what we used to call his moods. Except he was allowed to behave like that, we all thought it was part of his genius. I would make sure he had everything he needed and life was ready for him when he wanted to open the door. But, of course, Nancy was a woman so she didn’t have that option.’

Eleanor felt slightly stunned by Pearl’s outburst, so she said something totally benign that sounded irritating even to her own ears. ‘Why don’t we go downstairs, get some tea or something.’

Pearl rose with a sigh. ‘I don’t want any bloody tea ever again.’

Zara was in the kitchen, sitting cross-legged on the floor, with the dog on her lap, weeping into his fur. Her hair was matted on her head and her body was encased in what Eleanor supposed must be Robert’s dressing gown. She howled when they walked in, propelling herself off the floor and throwing herself against Eleanor, making her stagger backwards. She smoothed Zara’s hair and muttered something ineffectual and bland.

‘I can’t bear it, I can’t bear it,’ Zara was repeating over and over, like a bloody incantation. Eleanor manoeuvred her to a chair and sat her at the table, which she collapsed onto, her head banging against the wood. Pearl sat next to her but didn’t seem able to make anything better. Eleanor boiled the kettle. It was like being in hell.

Pearl and Eleanor had drunk their tea by the time Robert

came back, but Zara's was cold in front of her. Her weeping had become a backdrop to Eleanor's thoughts, which whizzed and spun down endless memories. She had stood in a hole in the ground once and watched a digger dump countless broken bodies in to its centre. People who had to be buried to avoid the spread of disease but whose loved ones would never know where they'd ended up. She'd been fresh out of university then and was unhardened by tragedy. It is amazing what the mind can process. She'd written to her parents that evening, a letter which probably hadn't reached them until after her father had died anyway.

'They want to see you next,' Robert said to Eleanor, his mouth turned down and his eyes deep in his head.

'Me?' She stood up, not completely ready yet.

'They appear to have set up some sort of interview room in the drawing room. They're going to want to talk to all of us today.'

'Whatever for?' Pearl asked.

'To get a complete picture.' Robert said the words as if they were enclosed in speech marks, his anger and frustration bubbling so close to the surface, Eleanor fancied she could see it rippling through him. 'And while they do that the bastard who did it is probably getting on a plane to Acapulco.'

'I'm sure they know what they're doing,' Eleanor tried. At least Zara had stopped crying for a moment, her head was even lifted to look at her father.

He waved towards the stairs. 'They're waiting for you.' She left with the feeling that he was angry with her, maybe he had been too quick to relieve her of responsibility last night.

DS Daniels from the day before was waiting in the drawing room, but the one who hadn't spoken had vanished and in his

place sat another much sterner man, dressed in a smart uniform instead of a suit.

‘Ms Meakins,’ DS Daniels said as she came in. ‘Please sit down.’

It felt odd to be invited to sit in Nancy’s drawing room. Eleanor perched on the edge of the chair facing them.

‘So.’ He looked down at his notes. ‘You’ve known Nancy Hennessy for twenty-eight years, I believe.’

‘Yes, we met at university.’

‘And you’ve always been close?’

‘Oh yes, since almost the first day, Nancy, Mary and me.’

‘Mr Hennessy mentioned Mary.’ He looked back down at his pad. ‘Mary Smithson. We’ll be contacting her today.’

‘I was with her last night.’ She could feel their eyes on her and nothing she said sounded right. ‘She’s very upset.’

He ignored this. ‘Would you say the three of you are the closest of friends?’

Eleanor looked at the man in the uniform but his stare was impenetrable. ‘Yes, absolutely.’

‘Told each other everything?’

‘Well, I suppose—’

‘You see the thing is –’ he sat forward ‘– when my missus gets going with her friends there’s no stopping her. They yabber on for hours and I don’t reckon there’s a subject that’s not discussed. If one of them was having an affair there is no way they’d keep it quiet.’

Eleanor felt her colour rise with her anger. ‘Not all women are the same.’ The other man coughed.

‘No, of course not, my apologies, Ms Meakins. I do have a very chatty wife.’ He tried to hide his embarrassment with a laugh, but it came out all wrong, like a school-boy’s giggle. ‘But I do find it hard to believe that the three of you were so close

and Nancy told you next to nothing about the affair. Perhaps she told Mrs Smithson more details?’

‘Mary knew nothing about it. And why would I be lying? I mean, if you knew who he was then you could arrest him, couldn’t you, and all this would be over.’ She hated him suddenly and the stupid man in the uniform, who was clearly playing some pathetic power game. She turned to him. ‘Sorry, and who are you?’

He held out his hand. ‘Detective Chief Inspector Farrelly. Forgive me, I’m just observing at the moment.’ She took his hand and it was hot and limp.

‘What does that mean?’ She had the sensation again that this was being used as a training exercise.

‘Well, this is DS Daniels’ case, but as the Senior Investigating Officer I’m in charge of the operation, as it were. There are still quite a few unanswered questions surrounding this case, and at the moment it’s a top priority for us.’

Eleanor thought he was making it sound like a sales conference.

‘It’s imperative we know the identity of the man Nancy was having an affair with,’ DS Daniels said. ‘Sometimes we think we’re doing the right thing protecting people and that’s completely understandable.’

‘What on earth are you saying?’ Eleanor stopped herself from shouting. ‘Who would I be protecting?’

‘How well would you say you know Mr Hennessy?’

‘Robert?’ His change of tack threw her off guard. ‘I know him very well. I mean, I’ve known him nearly as long as I’ve known Nancy.’

‘Of course, because you were all at university together, weren’t you?’ Eleanor thought she heard a sneer in his voice.

‘Yes. But also we work in the same field, Robert and I, so...’

Eleanor felt herself trailing off. She had always thought of her relationship with Robert as special; she had in fact often felt a sense of ownership around him. Once, many years before, when Nancy had such a hard time after Zara's birth, Robert had called her and they'd spent over an hour discussing what might be wrong with Nancy. Eleanor had felt grubby afterwards, realising that she had been way too quick to agree with Robert's exasperated version of her friend, rather than allowing herself to tell him what it meant to be a woman. How for women it wasn't simply a question of wanting to be one thing and then going about doing it. How so much got in the way, how feelings could derail you, how often life felt like a knife scratching against your skin.

'What do you do, Ms Meakins?' DS Daniels asked, interrupting her thoughts.

'I run a charity that helps with overseas relief.'

He nodded. 'And because Mr Hennessy is a human rights lawyer, you see him through work, is that what you mean?'

'Yes, I've helped him with a couple of cases over the years. People trafficking and things like that.'

'So you must have all spent a lot of time together, you and Mr and Mrs Hennessy?'

'Well, I've travelled a lot. But yes, of course we have.'

'And you've never ...?' He blushed with his words but Eleanor held her ground, refused to make it easier for him. She'd given up doing that for people a long time ago. 'I mean, have you ever had a husband?'

She almost laughed. 'No, I've never been married.'

'Career woman.' He smiled as he spoke and she thought he was actually trying to be nice because he felt sorry for her. Sorry that no man had ever risen her to that pedestal of wife. She

refused to acknowledge his words, so he bumbled on. 'What sort of relationship would you say Mr and Mrs Hennessy had?'

She felt herself blush for reasons she couldn't place. How she answered seemed important, but it was also absurd because how on earth was she expected to sum up all she knew about Nancy and Robert in a few sentences. 'They've had their ups and downs, like any couple. But they've also always been pretty solid, which I know sounds unlikely because of the affair, but it is true. I don't think she'd ever have left him.'

'So why was she having an affair?'

'I don't know. Nancy was like that, impetuous. Cosy domesticity was never enough for her, even though she loved Robert and Zara.'

DS Daniels sat back and rubbed at a spot on the bridge of his nose; Eleanor thought it was all put on. 'I have to admit I'm finding this all very confusing. Mr Hennessy has said the same sort of things. It's hard to understand.' Eleanor sat still. 'Why do you think Mr Hennessy called you when he realised Nancy hadn't come home?'

'Because Nancy and I had been out to dinner that evening. He wondered if she'd come back with me.' The heat rose through her body.

'Had she ever done that before?'

'Not for about twenty-five years.'

'Yesterday you told me Nancy left the restaurant before you and you stayed on to pay the bill. Are you absolutely sure that happened and you didn't leave together?'

Eleanor laughed. 'What on earth are you implying?'

He shook his head. 'Nothing at all. It's just we find in very distressing situations people often forget things, or get muddled.'

'Well, I'm not doing either of those things. As I said, Nancy left the restaurant on her own at about quarter to ten, I stayed

on to the pay the bill and left about ten minutes after her, by which time she'd gone.'

'You said yesterday that Mr Hennessy knew Nancy was having an affair?'

'Well, I didn't exactly ...' She stammered over her words for reasons she couldn't place. 'I said he said that he'd suspected.'

'Had he ever discussed those suspicions with you before?'

'No.'

The policeman wrote something in his book. 'You also said yesterday that Mrs Hennessy was scared of her husband finding out about the affair. I wondered what you meant by that?'

Eleanor looked between the two men, but neither met her eye. 'I just meant that Nancy didn't want her marriage to end, so she didn't want Robert to find out. I suppose in case he couldn't forgive her.'

DS Daniels hesitated for a moment. 'But you used the word scared. Would you say Mr Hennessy is a jealous man?'

The room blurred round the edges. It didn't seem possible that they could be thinking this and yet it was also obvious that they would. She remembered some statistic she'd read ages ago about how something like 90 per cent of murders are committed by people close to us. 'No, I mean, I wouldn't have thought so.'

He looked back up and the atmosphere shifted. 'And finally, Ms Meakins, can you confirm the information you gave us about the man Mrs Hennessy was having an affair with?' He looked up, so she nodded. 'He was called David, she met him at a work party and he was married with children?'

'Yes.' They seemed like such flimsy pieces of information and she wished she had more to give them, especially Robert and Zara, locked in their grief in the room beneath her feet.

'You're absolutely sure that she didn't go in to any more details.'

Like what his job was, or where he lives, or something about his family? Anything she said, however insignificant it might seem.'

Eleanor felt totally washed out. 'I'm sorry, really there was nothing else.'

'Thank you, Ms Meakins.' The detective shut his book as a signal that the interview was at an end, but Eleanor stayed sitting, weighted in place by the things she needed to know. 'You've been very helpful,' he said, clearly in the hope she'd leave.

Eleanor felt her face flush, but held her ground and willed herself to speak, because she felt lost in what was happening. There were so many possibilities and variables surrounding Nancy's death and she couldn't get a handle on it, couldn't work out what they were even dealing with. 'I was wondering if you could tell me, I mean, what happened to Nancy, exactly?'

'Do you mean, her injuries, how she died?' DS Daniels glanced over at the silent man, who nodded.

'Yes.' Eleanor felt like there was a wedge of bread stuck in her throat. She also wanted to clamp her hands against her ears and not hear.

She heard the dry click of his mouth as he opened it to speak. 'Mrs Hennessy died from a large wound to the back of her head. At the moment we can't say if this blow was inflicted by a weapon or if it happened as she fell. But it caused internal bleeding in her brain, which she would have been unable to recover from.'

'Did she die instantly?'

'She would have been unconscious in minutes.'

It was rare, Eleanor thought, ever to get a direct answer to any question. 'I saw marks on her face.'

DS Daniels stuttered when he spoke. 'There was evidence of a fight. She did have a couple of injuries to her face, as if she'd been hit. They weren't injuries that would have killed her on

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their own, but they do obviously indicate that this was not an accident.'

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