



For all that Jane was surrounded by the cream of television's crop, there was no one more important than Courtney Cox Arquette and the envelope which she held, oh so casually, between her well-manicured fingers. All the glittering personae, the relentless buzz of gossip and tattle, the murmurs of deals being made and broken across rows of beautifully groomed 'players' – all despite the 'distraction' from onstage – meant nothing compared to the sound of her own forcibly measured breathing, the thump of her heart against her sternum, the dampness of Darren's palm in hers. Nothing. Nothing but that little white rectangle and the information contained in its pristine folds. Jane sat still and straight, the way she'd practised for the last four months, and lifted her chin another quarter of an inch. Lauren Bacall (sitting three places to Jane's right) had nothing on her and, swathed as she was in Narciso Rodriguez, Jane was as ready as she'd ever be, as ready as—

The announcement had her rising elegantly to her feet, but then a momentary flash of horror – have they actually called my name or someone else's? I think they've called mine – and then the podium, and her voice, her own voice ringing out, confident, cool, echoing in her ears as she delivers her witty and perfectly timed speech, Courtney beaming at her elbow, the faces blurring, the stage lights shining directly into

her eyes, the endless flash of the bulbs of the paparazzi as she does what she's been doing in the shower with a bottle of shampoo: she raises it aloft, the Emmy, the Golden One, raises it up on high and smiles gracefully and triumphantly; and then backstage, in the journalists' scrum, standing serenely in close range of the relentlessly popping flashes, regally turning her head this way and that as the photographers and hacks demand her attention by calling out her name: 'Jane!' 'Jane!' 'Jane!' 'Jane!'—

'Jane!' Darren screeched. The Greene Street Bar was crowded and noisy, but it certainly wasn't *that* noisy. He meaningfully arched his eyebrows at Miranda, who slid further down into her seat, out of boredom and the kind of discomfort that only Manhattan can inspire when you're wearing the wrong clothes. She pulled churlishly at the neck of her pullover and recrossed her legs, her cropped trousers riding up a little further than was de rigueur. She scowled around the fashionable SoHo bar, and wished for Wicklow, and Niall.

Miranda's gaze drifted out of the bar's large plate-glass window on to the Manhattan evening, and a small smile replaced the scowl. It had been . . . she surreptitiously counted on her fingers . . . ten months, two weeks, and four days since she'd taken the plunge, in more ways than one.

*Right*, she thought to herself: she and Niall had known each other through friends, so he wasn't a complete stranger. And sure, they *had* been dating, here in New York, before she'd taken the chance to emigrate. But to have just moved in with him, practically fresh off the plane . . . she shrugged to herself, and wanted to giggle. Not really her style, and Dar and Jane had certainly been shocked, but holistically minded Miranda trusted in fate. Since they'd been literally heading in the same direction, she to work on a big photography

contract and Niall moving home from Brooklyn to take up a big visual arts gig . . . well, that was good enough for her.

So, she'd had a professional reason to go to Ireland – but did she have good enough personal reasons to stay?

She sighed, and absentmindedly picked up the outrageously priced cocktail she'd been sipping halfheartedly. What she'd give for a pint of Guinness – a proper pint, which she knew she couldn't really get in New York (never mind the marketing), much less in this infuriatingly posh little place.

Ten months, two weeks and four days without the buzz of Manhattan, without the convenience of a Yellow Cab a mere raised arm away, and without her two best friends from college, both of whom she was sitting with at the moment, and both of whom were engaged in that annoying head-swivelling thing, that up-and-coming 'dahling-let's-have-lunch' types did to ensure that they were seeing in addition to being seen. It was like having drinks with two closed-circuit television cameras.

Sitting with his back to the door was Darren, surely the most highly therapised interior designer in the five boroughs. She took him in, from the top of his thick blond head (of which the cut and colour was breath-takingly reminiscent of Robert Redford in *The Great Gatsby*) down over his lean, six-feet-two-inch frame clad in very low key, but very designer clothes, to the tips of his lethally pointy Kenneth Coles. Top to bottom, he was the sweetest, most thoughtful, overly solicitous gay male friend a girl could have. He had been a constant in her life since college, he and Jane – and lately, far more so than Jane. He'd not only been over to see her twice in the past ten months, two weeks, etc. etc., but over the length of her stay in the last six days had tirelessly helped her find temporary storage for all the stuff she wanted to keep, and had ruthlessly pushed her into selling the stuff that she didn't. She was now the proud owner of a

pocketful of cash, and there was definitely enough to splurge on a new lens for herself and a nice big gift token from Pearl Paint for Niall.

And then there was Jane. Miranda's eyes narrowed as she assessed the woman sitting opposite. In contrast to Darren's fairness, Jane was olive-skinned, with jet-black hair and piercing green eyes. Her stunning cheekbones lent sophistication to her heart-shaped face, and were framed by a timeless bob. Her gift of genetic slenderness was enhanced, Miranda knew, by an unflagging four-times-a-week gym habit. This evening's outfit was designer, but unlike Darren, Jane liked the general public to be aware of who she was wearing. Tonight, it was some punky Italian man-of-the-minute, but Miranda couldn't be sure. Who knew, she shrugged. Who cared?

What she did care about, in her heart of hearts, was that Jane had been a totally crap friend for the past ten months, etc. She'd always figured that success would inevitably go to Jane's head, and upon winning the Emmy last year, what little contact the two women had had – chatty, lengthy, descriptive emails from Miranda reciprocated by a terse three-line reply from Jane – had dribbled off into nothing. Even during her short stay, Jane was not returning phone calls or trying very hard to meet up.

On top of it all, Darren was in a state about Jane, over God knew what, and wouldn't stop talking about it. Miranda slouched even further down into the leather club chair. Here she was, in this snooty little bar, supposedly to meet her friends for a quiet drink so they could catch up with each other before Miranda left for Dublin *the next day* – and it turns out to be some feckin' work thing for WCTV and their cooler-than-thou shaggin' attitudes. She leaned forward to complain, just in time to watch Jane rise and bestow air kisses on some overly made-up actressy-type who was clutching an almost imperceptibly small dog.

‘Do you see what I mean?’ Darren hissed.

‘Dar, I don’t know what you’re talking about. She seems absolutely the same: thin, well-dressed – although I will say she’s even more self-absorbed than ever.’ Miranda set her glass down on the impossibly tiny table. ‘That drink is shite.’

‘Oh, good,’ Darren muttered absently, his eyes glued to Jane. ‘Let’s get another round.’ He signalled to the gaunt waitress, who was as spindly as her stilettos, and leaned towards Miranda, grabbing her arm. ‘Miranda, I have no one else to turn to. You and I are the only people that really know her. I mean, *look* at her!’

They both turned towards the bar, to which Jane had drifted. There was a great burst of applause as Jane simply tossed her platinum card at the bartender, who caught it deftly and waved it in the air for all to see. Jane tossed her head, her gleaming hair shimmering in the candlelight, and smirked triumphantly as she accepted air kisses from everyone.

‘She seems fine, for fuck’s sake.’ Miranda sat back, annoyed. ‘I don’t see what you’re on about.’

‘Didn’t you see her before, staring out into space, lost to the world? She’s brittle. She’s edgy. And there’s no reason for it.’ He drained his cocktail just as the well-heeled waif came over with fresh drinks. ‘She was perfectly fine, totally composed, up to a month before the Emmys. And of *course* she would get a bit stressed before such a momentous occasion. The wardrobe issue alone was exhausting. We had a lovely, if low-level tense time, up until the evening of the awards, and when she won’ – his eyes filled with tears, and Miranda regretted, really regretted, that she hadn’t been there with them both – ‘it was extraordinary. Wonderful.’ Darren ran his fingers through his thick blond hair. ‘But she didn’t relax after that. You know she’s not exactly relaxed at the best of times, but now she’s über-tense. She’s been working fourteen-hour days, Saturdays, Sundays! And she’s

turned down all sorts of offers, big offers, major network stuff, ABC, CBS, Fox – for no good reason – *and* she’s become secretive, not answering her phone; I know that she dumps me, nine times out of ten, when I ring her cell phone! If I didn’t know better, I’d say she’s become a cokehead! She is utterly not herself!’ Darren finished dramatically, sweeping his arm around in the air, almost knocking over Miranda’s drink. He looked at her expectantly.

*Oh, Jesus.* ‘Maybe it’s not such a bad thing.’

‘What are you talking about?’

*Christ.* ‘Maybe she needs to, I don’t know, crack up a bit. She’s not in therapy, she doesn’t do anything to cope with the stress that she’s routinely under. As we’d say in Ireland, she’s practically disappeared up her own hole. Maybe she needs to fall apart so that she can take the time to put herself back together. Is she seeing anybody?’

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’ Darren’s voice was colder than the vodka in his Martini. ‘If anyone knows, it’s me. I still care about her.’

Miranda sat forward and took his hand. ‘I’m sure you two are as close as ever, but she hasn’t been the best of friends to me since I left. She never came to visit, she doesn’t answer emails . . . in fairness, she wasn’t very supportive of the move in the first place. She was, in fact, ruder than even I could imagine her to be. And I’m not too happy about what happened to tonight’s plan, I know Jane talked you into this—’

Darren feared confrontation more than he feared ageing and self-assessed taxation combined. ‘Honey, honey, please. OK? Let’s just have a nice time on your last night! Just, maybe, try to suss her out a bit, tonight, really casual, over our lovely drinks, you know . . .’

Doo do *do* do doo doo *doo* doo doo . . . saved by the bell! Miranda fished her mobile out of her pocket and

smiled apologetically at Darren. ‘Let me get this – hallo?’

‘Do *doo* do do, *doo* do do do do.’ Niall finished singing her tango ringtone.

‘Heeey.’ Miranda sat back and sighed.

‘Howya, gorgeous! Miss me? You in a pub?’

‘Yes to the first, and emphatically no to the second. Darren is here with me—’

‘Good man—’

‘He is, he’s very good.’ She smiled at Darren, who smiled and turned away, pretending not to listen. ‘We’re at some crap drinks things for Jane’s network.’

‘Oh. Her. She who can’t even answer a bloody email.’ Niall’s voice took on an uncharacteristic gruffness – the few times he and Jane had met, while he and Miranda were still in NYC, had been fraught with tension. ‘I know she’s your college mate, and all, but you’re too soft in the heart, Miranda.’

Miranda heard the hiss of the boiled kettle, the tinkle of spoon against mug, and longed for a cuppa with her fella, imagined him looking out over the back garden of his Aunt Sile’s cottage.

‘I know, I know.’ Miranda smirked and looked out over a Manhattan suddenly less alienating and grotesque. Who would have guessed? Living in Ireland and with a handsome lover at that. She was soft in the heart. She sighed – certainly she was, and when it came to him . . .

As Miranda’s whole demeanour began to glow, Darren became aware of a feeling, a feeling that was moving up his body, painfully, from his toes, through his knees, through his belly, to lodge like a stone in his heart; a feeling he’d never imagined he would experience in relation to one of his most beloved friends, a feeling that was now roaring through his skull like a runaway train.

He was so jealous of Miranda he could scream.

‘– not until shagging July, maybe, or August, which seems a stupid time to bring out a book of photos; they may as well wait until autumn, or Christmas, even!’

‘They must have their reasons,’ Niall soothed. ‘Don’t worry about it, you’ll get loads of work.’

Miranda scowled at the next batch of transparently thin women slinking their way through the door. ‘Things seem a bit thin on the ground for photographers these days. But I was going to convert that wee toilet downstairs—’

He could absolutely screeeeeeeam with it, this jealousy. Now, if Dr Spitz were here he would say: ‘How do you feel about that, Darren?’ Guilty! I feel so *guilty*! My sweetest, most deserving friend, and I am ready to snatch her bald-headed, listening to this fibre-optic billing and cooing! Then Dr Spitz would say: ‘But unless you act on it, you have nothing to feel guilty about. Do you want to harm your friend physically?’ NO! Of *course* not! I just . . . I just . . . I . . . I don’t know. And if he were in his shrink’s office, he would, at this point, disassociate himself by staring off at an object, usually the Chagall print that hung over the small sofa, to the right of the client chair; today, he stared into his drink.

‘Don’t be silly! I’d love to!’ Miranda all but sang her approval.

‘I wasn’t sure with the jet lag and all—’

‘Niall, it’s lovely, I really want to.’

‘Sure, I’ll book it tomorrow, then—’ A sound approximate to that of an eighteen-wheel lorry slamming into a brick wall came crashing down the line.

‘Jesus!’ Miranda pulled the phone away from her ear. ‘What was that crash? Did the shed fall down?’

‘Emmmm . . .’

Oh, shite! thought Miranda. ‘It’s Shay, isn’t it?’

‘Now, darlin’, it’s only temporary—’

‘What’s he doing? Opening up a used car lot?’

Niall peeked through the curtains and watched his cousin wheel a rickshaw into the converted cowshed. ‘Em, no. Not exactly.’

‘It’s not that I don’t like Shay – OK, he gets on my

nerves, but it's mostly because I just want us to have some time to ourselves, in our – in the cottage.'

'Our cottage. It's our home, Miranda.'

'I don't want to go there right now.' Dammit.

'Right. So . . . I miss you, and all.'

'I miss you, too . . .'

As Miranda's sighs flew invisibly across the Atlantic Ocean, Darren calmly breathed in through his nose . . . out through his mouth . . . in through his nose . . . out through his mouth . . . while repeating an affirmation he'd read in *GQ*: 'I wish my friend well in his (her) joy (promotion, pay raise, porn-star girlfriend/boyfriend), and know that I deserve joy all my own.' I wish my friend well, I wish my friend well, Iwishmyfriendwelllllllll—

'Sorry, Dar. The time difference is a bit of a pain in the hole.'

'Nooooo problem. Nooooo problem.' I wish my friend well, I wish my friend—

'All right?'

Darren stopped affirming and let his breathing return to normal. 'Fine, fine. So how's loverboy?' Ouch. Too arch?

*That* was a bitchy . . . 'He's grand. We're going to fly off to Paris when I get back.' So there.

*In* through the nose . . . *Out* through the mouth. 'Lovely.'

'Yeah.' Miranda gazed off, imagining a canoodle at that café in Rue de Saint André des Arts. 'Except, well, he's got this cousin – remember the tons of cousins that you met when you came over? There's this other one, I forget which aunt or uncle on whose side, this guy Shay, he's been moving all this stuff into Niall's studio, all this theatre rubbish. It's like he's moving in to stay.'

'Is he a producer?'

'He's a *lawyer*,' Miranda sneered. 'Or was. Now he's got pretensions to "theatuh, dahling", or something – he inherited a load of old shite from, wait for it, a relative,

and he thinks he's going to set up a theatre in Dublin.' She shook her head. 'Whatever. He'll be gone by the time we get back from Paris.' She smiled. 'I love Paris.'

'You sound really happy.' That ought to gain him back some friendship points.

'I am. Yeah. Really. Wish I had more work going right now, but I'm trying not to worry about it too much. Niall's been a bit blocked as well . . .' Miranda stared into the depths of her Martini. She sighed. 'It'll be grand, we're just getting used to being around each other all the time, too.'

Ah. 'Is that why you didn't take all your stuff with you?'

'Why what?' Miranda sat up, on the defensive.

'Are you having doubts . . . or anything?'

Darren's 'shrink voice' was truly annoying. 'I'm merely being cautious. It's not even a year yet, only ten months, two weeks and four days. And we haven't talked much about the future, or whatever.' Darren had a thought on that, but Miranda was on a roll. 'And I don't want to ship all my stuff without knowing what happens next. That's all. Just being cautious.'

'It sounds like you're talking yourself out of something before it's even begun—'

'Oh, nooo, trouble in paradise?' Jane slid into her seat and crossed her legs.

'Excuse me?' Miranda snapped. Now I'm getting belligerent, she thought. Maybe I should just go.

'I'm assuming that you're talking about Mr Wonderful, since that's all you talk about these days.'

'Unlike you, who only talks about yourself,' Miranda shot back. If she was surprised at herself, it was nothing to the shock that Darren was visibly experiencing. He'd start hyperventilating if it got out of hand. Wimp.

'Very nice, Miranda, and on my special night.' Jane pretended to pout, her eyes slits of aggression.

'I didn't know this soiree was *pour toi!*' Darren leaned towards Jane, practically climbing into her lap. *Ugh,*

thought Miranda. I hate it when he starts pretending he can speak French. I hate it when he tries to 'handle' Jane. I want to go . . . home.

'It's a teeny bit contrived, but it's practically the one-year anniversary of The Emmy' – Miranda rolled her eyes – 'and the pitches are coming up day after tomorrow. There should be plenty to celebrate.' Darren toasted her and she returned the gesture, her gaze once more jerking to the door as it swung open.

'So, Miranda. What's it like, being a kept woman?' Jane spun a Marlboro Light over and under the fingers of her right hand, like a magician, just like she used to do in college, when she'd spent an entire weekend perfecting the move.

That was less than twelve years ago, but right now, it felt more like a million. Miranda looked at the woman who had been her coolest friend, cool without being cold, her craziest friend always up for some wild plan whether it was going to The Rainbow Room when they were flat broke and flirting with Midwestern businessmen for drinks, or sneaking up the fire escape of the main building on campus to have a midnight picnic. Jane had practically been her role model in her early twenties, brashly negotiating the strange new world of reality away from the highly creative and protective environs of art school; Jane who'd always be available for late-night identity crises; Jane who always managed to be the centre of attention with room for a friend . . . Jane, who was sitting there like a snake ready to strike, spitefully ignoring Miranda, refusing to meet her halfway.

Bitch. This situation was complete rubbish. She was just pondering instigating a healthy row, even though she wasn't sure she was up to it, when her mobile went off again.

'Sorry.' Not. Miranda rose as she answered, her voice infused with pleasure as she pushed her way out of the bar and on to the street.

Jane watched Miranda pace in front of the window, her entire face lit up, her hands gesturing, her head thrown back in laughter. Miranda's long curly red hair and curvy figure was attracting a lot of attention out in the street – even in that dull outfit – and Jane shrugged. Well, regular sex must be agreeing with the kid. Jane didn't have anything against regular sex, far from it, but when the sex was all tangled up in a relationship, that's where she drew the line – had been drawing the line for more than twelve years . . .

And Miranda's conversation! It had become decidedly dull after she'd left the City: cottages and hill-walking and dinner parties and weekends away in the West of Ireland, her terrific, fabulous little expatriate existence, with her charming Irish boyfriend, her fake Irish accent, her photography career, her book deals, her international representation and her herbal remedies and God knew what else, all happy and snug living in some house in some mountains or something, somewhere in *Ireland*. She watched Miranda shove her phone in her pocket, and turn to look in the window. Their gazes met, and Jane was surprised that it was herself who looked away first.