

Prologue

The old man looks up at us, over the top of his reading glasses, and says the *cunillo* is wonderful.

Erika lifts her glass and goes, ‘Happy New Year,’ but I’m too in shock to return the toast. So her and the old man end up just clinking glasses.

‘It will be,’ he goes. ‘It will be now.’

I look at *him*, then back at her. I don’t see it. I don’t see any resemblance at all. Or maybe I don’t want to see it. It’s one of those shocks that’s, like, too big to take in all at once.

I stand up. Except I don’t actually *remember* standing up? Let’s just say I find myself suddenly standing up.

He turns to her and goes, ‘Oh, here comes the waiter – have you decided what you’re going to have?’

She’s practically popping out of that black satin bustier, but of course I’m not allowed to even notice shit like that anymore.

I’ve got to get out of here. I start walking. I hear *him* call me. I hear *her* call me as well. But I keep going.

I walk out of the restaurant, out of the hotel and out onto the street. It’s snowing – coming down pretty heavy, in fact.

I get in the cor, turn the key – still in a daze – and point her in the direction of actual Barcelona.

I put my foot down and I’m suddenly tearing along all these narrow cliff roads in the pitch dark with the snow blinding me, not giving a fuck – if I’m being honest – whether I even crash?

But then my phone suddenly beeps. It’s, like, a text message

from Sorcha, saying that she and Honor are thinking about me and that they're hoping that we beat Ireland A. She obviously knows fock-all about rugby, but it's still an amazing message to get and I kill my speed, suddenly remembering everything I have to live for, and realizing at that moment exactly where I'm headed.

What happened back there in the restaurant has made me realize that I need to be with my family. I need to see my own daughter and I need to find out if there's still a chance with Sorcha. I focked things up there like only I know how. But I need to know if there's still something there. Because it's with her and Honor that I actually belong.

I notice a set of lights in my rearview and somehow I *know* they belong to Erika.

Soon I arrive at the border crossing. The dude operating the barrier can't believe it's me. His eyes are out on practically stalks. 'I hear eet on the reddio,' he goes. 'It hees true? We score a try hagainst Island?'

I nod. 'We also kept them to less than a hundred points,' I go, which *is* the bigger achievement.

'A try hagainst Island!' he goes. 'You are hero to all of Handorra!'

He waves away my passport. No interest in even seeing it. I look in the mirror and watch Erika's lights approach.

'Dude,' I go, 'can you do me a favour? I'm trying to give this bird behind me the slip . . .'

He's there, 'Ha crezzy fan, yes?'

I'm like, 'Something like that. Can you make sure there's some kind of paperwork she's got to fill in? As in, a lot of it?'

'For you,' he goes, lifting the barrier for me, 'effery theeng hees poseeble.'

I put the foot down and off I go again, snaking through the Pyrenees, and I'm suddenly having one of my world-famous

intellectual moments, thinking about how much your life can change in the space of an hour. It's like, there I was earlier tonight, being carried around the pitch shoulder-high, the hero of a – pretty much – country, which I've now left behind and will probably never see again. *And* it turns out that Erika's my sister.

My mind drifts back to a day, whatever, six, seven years ago, the day her old dear's divorce from Tim became final. Erika was majorly upset. I called around, supposedly to offer my sympathies, and we ended up going at it like two jailbirds on a conjugal visit.

I snap back to reality, realizing, very suddenly, that the border guard won't be able to hold her for long – not with her charms. And not in that bustier.

I put the foot down again.

It takes, like, two and a half hours, but I finally reach the airport. It's, like, two o'clock in the morning when I pull up outside the main terminal building, throwing the rental car in a set-down area, not even bothering my hole to return it, just leaving the keys in the basically ignition.

I realize that I don't even have any baggage. All my clobber's still back at the apartment.

I peg it in and check the departures board, my eyes going up and down what to me is just a mass of letters, waiting for two words to jump out at me: Los Angeles. There they are.

LA. The Windy City. Call it what you want – but that's where I'm headed.

I miss Honor so much that when I think about her, it feels like I'm having a heart attack. And, if I'm being honest, Sorcha too, even *if* she's with an auditor now.

The flight leaves at, like, 7.00 a.m. I order a first-class ticket using my old man's credit card – the least he owes me in the circumstances.

There's, like, a major crowd hanging around the actual departure gate. As I get closer, I realize that it's the Ireland A team. They must be going out on a charter.

Suddenly, roysh, they're all turned around, looking straight at me, all in their blazers and chinos. We're talking Keith Earls. We're talking Jeremy Staunton. We're talking Johnny Sexton. I'm expecting words like *traitor* to be suddenly banded around like there's *no* actual tomorrow? But someone – might even be Roger Wilson – starts clapping, roysh, then one by one they all join in and before I know it the sea of Ireland A players has suddenly ported, and I'm being given a guard of honour through the departures gate.

It's actually just what I need.

But it's as I'm reaching the end of the line that I hear her voice. 'Ross!' she goes.

Of course, I should keep walking – I don't know *why* I don't? Maybe because I hear one or two wolf-whistles from the Ireland A goys. I turn around. She's obviously been crying, from the state of her boat.

She goes, 'Please don't go!'

I'm there, 'I need to get my head around this – time, space, blahdy blahdy blah.'

'Do you think *I'm* not confused?' she goes. 'Do you think *I'm* not angry? How can I ever trust my mum again?'

I go to turn around. 'I'm going to spend some time with my daughter and my – still – wife.'

'*I* could come with you,' she goes. 'We could get to know each other.'

I'm there, 'Maybe down the line. Right now, I need to get my head straight – see Sorcha, maybe find out if there's still . . .'

'A chance?'

'I was going to say a sniff. But yeah.'

She suddenly throws her arms around me, buries her head in my chest, then on go the waterworks. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see one or two of the Ireland A players looking at me, obviously thinking, whoa, rather you than me, Dude.

I rub her bare back and tell her she should be wearing more. She pulls away and looks at me, rivers of mascara running down her face, and says she left the restaurant in such a hurry, she forgot her coat.

I kiss her on the forehead and her hair smells of, I don't know, almonds and dandelions. I feel a sudden and familiar tightening in my trousers and, hating myself, I quickly turn away from her and tell her that I'd love to stay longer, but I've got, like, a plane to catch?