

## Prologue

So I check the time. It's, like, eight o'clock in the morning? I peel back the duvet – slowly, roysh, so as not to wake her. I swing the legs out of the bed, again gently, then stort gathering up the old threads, like Hansel and Gretel, following the trail to the living room, where it all kicked off last night.

One of my better one-night stands, it has to be said. Breege. A lady Gorda, of all things, the spits of Vida Guerra, and that's not just me trying to cover over the fact that she's from, like, Mullingor.

I throw on the old Apple Crumble, step into my chinos and my Cole Haans, then fix my hair in the mirror.

Cheeky focker on the door of Copper's, by the way. See, I actually met the bird in, like, Kehoe's? The usual. Gave her one or two of my lines and it turned out Horcourt Street was where she was headed.

Well, I wasn't going to break up the party.

Of course the bouncers in there know me and they know my MO. 'Bringing a bogger *to* Copper Face Jacks,' one of them went. 'That's a new one for you, Ross. We probably should charge you corkage.'

It *was* a good line, though, and I decided to be the better man and just laughed.

I tiptoe back out to the hall, passing the bedroom, where she's still spitting zeds. Out of the game. I'm not bragging but bulled groggy.

I try the handle of the front door. Except it's locked. It's like, fock!

Not to worry. It's far from a new situation for me.

I tip back into the living room and, using my, you'd have to say, vast experience, start looking for a key. I check practically everywhere. On top of the bookshelves. Under the sofa cushions. In the Nigella Lawson Living Kitchen bread bin in beech and blue.

I literally turn the place over but it's no good. I can't find one.

I *do* find her bag, though, and I have a quick mooch in there. No keys, just her Wolfe Tone. I whip it out and scroll down through her contacts, just out of curiosity. I find my number, then delete it. I can't believe I gave it to her. Getting slack in my old age.

I tip over to the door that leads out on to the balcony and it's like, jackpot!

It's one of those, like, sliding doors – the same as mine – that you open by just, like, flicking the catch?

So I *flick* the catch and then I'm suddenly out on the balcony. It turns out we're a lot of storeys up. It's incredible, roysh, given the number of times I've done this over the years, that I've never developed, like, a head for heights.

I'm suddenly like a monkey sizing up a tree. I'm thinking, if I can climb over the railing there, then hang down, off the edge of the balcony, I could step down on to the rail of the balcony below. Then do the same again, then again, then again. I'll be back on terra whatever-the-actual-phrase-is in sixty seconds, then in a taxi home.

I swing one leg over the balustrade, then the other. Then I take, like, a deep breath and try to, I suppose, *gather* myself? It must be, like, a seventy-foot drop. The obvious crosses my mind. The big question. Is it worth risking my life just to avoid an awkward goodbye?

And the answer – as always – is probably yes.

I take another deep breath. Then for some reason I look back up. And I end up nearly having a hort attack.

Breege is standing on the balcony in front of me, staring at me like she can't believe what she's *actually* seeing?

I feel automatically bad. 'I just didn't want to wake you,' I try to explain. 'No offence but I only wanted it to be, like, a one-night thing?'

She's, like, 'What?' obviously pretty pissed off.

I'm thinking, hey – hate the game, baby, not the player. 'Look, it's nothing personal,' I go. 'I've just never been one for, like, post-match chat?'

And her reply, I have to admit, causes me to nearly lose my grip on the rail.

'Ross,' she goes, 'we're in The Grange. This is where *you* live.'