

CHAPTER 1

A bead of sweat drops down the back of my neck as I get down on my hands and knees one more time to check. Maybe I was wrong the first three times.

‘Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty, fifty-one.’ I’m sucking the numbers in through my teeth like a teacher doing a headcount on a bus, praying to God she hasn’t left anyone behind at Clara Lara. Maybe I’ll just stay under the tree and never come out. Or at least until this afternoon is over.

Fifty-one presents. Fifty-three people for Secret Santa and fifty-one presents. Two useless articles haven’t bothered their holes coming in today to put something under the tree. Probably decided they were going to treat themselves to a day at home seeing as it’s the Christmas party tonight and generally seen as a bit of a doss around the office. It’s not a doss if you’re head of the Christmas Party Social Committee and took it upon yourself to organise Secret Santa. Donna used to do it, and even though I don’t miss her scraping the porridge off her spoon with her teeth beside me every morning, I do miss her at this very moment. She used to swing wildly between calling it ‘Kris Kindle,’ ‘Kris Kingle’ and ‘Kris Kringle’ instead of simply ‘Secret Santa,’ which nearly drove me to distraction, but she was militant about making

sure everyone who signed up had their presents under the tree in time for the big swap. Losing her and her uncanny festive organising during the recent scandal at PensionsPlus was probably the biggest casualty of the whole debacle. Well, that and the millions of euro that went missing in a fecked-up transaction, but it's not millions of euro I'm missing right now: it's two presents. And every eye will be on me after lunch when the big exchange is due to happen. What will I do?

Standing up nonchalantly beside the tree I cast a furtive eye around the office to see if there's anything lying around I can wrap up as stand-in presents. I had planned on getting a curly blow-dry at lunchtime for the party later. I have a lovely lace dress I got in Dorothy Perkins and I remembered to nab a pair of 'sandal toe' American tan tights in M&S yesterday (€8 for a pair of tights! Only it's Christmas I would have left them there) to go with my heels. Now I might have to forego the blow-dry to go and buy two presents so nobody is left empty-handed. Is there anything at all that might do?

My eyes fall on a promotional baseball cap on a desk over at IT. Could I pass that off as a gift? Could I Tippex over the gaudy lettering? What about the bottle of Ouzo somebody in Accounts brought back from a week in Mykonos? Although why you wouldn't just bring giant Milkas is beyond me. I have been known to buy my holiday Toblerones and Milkas in Tesco. I'm not paying airport prices! I would never bring back a sticky bottle of undrinkable poison though. At least make it a nice Pinot Greej or a West Coast Cooler duo gift set if you're going to arrive in with something that isn't chocolate. Anyway, I don't think I'll get away with

passing the ouzo off as a Christmas present. I'll have to fly out now at lunch and panic buy some things for €10 or under. I don't even know who they're for! And I don't have time to go through the list and mark off the names that are missing from the assortment of wrapped bits under the tree. The stress!

If I'm not mistaken Declan Ryan is actually wearing his giant novelty Santa tie. You press a button on the back of it and Santa's beard falls away to reveal he's showing his arse while a tinny version of 'Jingle Bells' plays. Not my proudest moment, present-wise, but after sweating around the Dunnes food hall up the road and emerging with the most neutral things I could find (a bottle of wine, an abnormally large sleeve of After Eights and an eight pack of AAA batteries) I panicked and bought the tie from the Bits 'n' PCs phone and computer shop on the way back to the office to pair with the After Eights. Well, I say phone and computer shop but you can buy an assortment of things there while you're waiting to get your screen fixed. And you can send a fax, if the fancy takes you. I've never had to get my screen fixed, of course. My trusty flip cover means my phone is safe at all times. I wouldn't be getting it done anywhere dodgy anyway. Sure doesn't that void your insurance? And they'd probably be out the back stealing your contacts and sending nudes and what have you.

Anyway, Declan seems thrilled with his tie. He's swinging around there on the dancefloor flashing the arse to anyone

who'll look. Siobhán from HR was equally thrilled with the wine but understandably baffled by the batteries. I think she suspects they're from me because I had to present them to her from under the tree in the absence of her actual Secret Santa. My 'oh ho, a little elf must have brought this in for you specially' didn't fool her. I'd be thrilled to get batteries if it was me. So handy for remotes.

Notably absent from the party, and the two people with presents back under the tree with their names on them, are Donal from IT and Marie from reception. I'll be presenting them with receipts for the wine, After Eights, batteries and arse-tie tomorrow.

'Will we dance, Ais?'

Sadhbh swings past me, swigging a glass of red and holding out her hand. She got a new colour put in her hair last week and even though she's my housemate I still get a fright every time I see her, although I think I hide it well. Grey. What twenty-nine-year-old dyes her hair grey? Sometimes I think she has a screw loose. But since she went from HR executive on the floor above me in PensionsPlus to my best Dublin friend, I've gotten used to her hipster ways. For the night that's in it she's put some purple through the ends of it and she looks gorgeous as usual. That's Sadhbh for you. She'd look good in a plastic bag, which I'm fairly sure I've seen her in. You'd never think we'd get on so well to look at us but opposites attract – isn't that what they say?

We had to do drinks tokens this year since the free bar last year landed three people in hospital after a particularly raucous rendition of 'Fairytale of New York'. People get too giddy with free drinks and go mad ordering double brandies

and fancy gins, frantic the tab might run out. Besides, I was told by the powers that be that the budget was to be reined in after the money scandal. The hotel ballroom and dinner were already booked, so there was nothing we could do about that, but the four drinks tokens were received with not an inconsiderable amount of grumbling earlier this evening. It hasn't stopped the entire Escalations team dragging an unsafe-looking human train up and down the dancefloor to 'All I Want for Christmas Is You', poor old Des, the long-suffering team leader, clinging onto the back for dear life.

Sadhbh had wondered if I wouldn't pass the organising off to someone else, given all I had been through recently with Daddy's death, and minding Mammy, *and* with the organisation of Elaine's last-minute hen party on top of it. I was glad of the distraction and staying busy, and I'm always at my calmest in hen-planning mode, believe it or not. I've been dreading Christmas, though. Absolutely dreading it.

Elaine tried to get away without having a hen at all, but I was determined to squeeze one in before her New Year's Eve wedding. I still can't believe it took me so long to realise her and Ruby were a couple right under my nose. I was living in Elaine's swanky apartment for months and never really wondered why Ruby was there for breakfast five times a week. I just thought they were great pals who shared a Netflix account. In hindsight it was fairly obvious they were *together* together. Majella, my best friend from Down Home who lives over in Phibsboro, still slags me about it, although she didn't cop it either and she was a regular at our Friday Night Wine Downs. So much for her famous gaydar. Anyway, they were getting away without a hen over my

dead body! Of course I wasn't a bit surprised when she insisted she didn't want one. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised. In the year I've known her I don't think she's been to a single one even though I have reason to believe she was invited to three. Imagine turning down an invitation to someone's hen? One of them was her first cousin too. I wouldn't be able to live with the guilt. I was born and raised on hens – as far as I'm concerned a proper send-off for the bride is just as important as the Big Day.

It took a while, not that we had that long anyway, but I eventually talked her into it. Even Sadhbh, who'll do anything to get out of 'organised fun' (her words), did some cajoling because she could see I was up to ninety over it. We've been officially designated bridesmaids. Elaine was all 'I'm not having bridesmaids' but I told her that was unacceptable and dragged Sadhbh around every bridal shop this side of the Shannon until we found our dream dresses. Well, my dream dresses. Then when we left the shop I ordered them straightaway from China. They arrived perfect – I think it was my proudest achievement to date, even though Elaine said we could just wear jeans for all she cared. Imagine! We're lucky, though – we could have had a scenario similar to Eleanor Bolger's wedding last year when she insisted on teal multiway dresses for her four bridesmaids and her busty cousin nearly took the priest's eye out. They looked good in the pictures, which I suppose is all that matters, but the cousin spent the day tucking herself in and shooting daggers at Eleanor. Anyway, as Elaine's housemates and friends we'll naturally take on the duties, and I was born to bridesmaid. Bring on the table plan, to be quite honest.

Sadhbh interrupts my train of thought and drags me onto the dancefloor like her life depends on it, and to be fair I do love a bit of a 'Single Ladies' boogie. I feel just like Beyoncé, flipping my hand around the way she does. Six years of Irish dancing lessons and I always felt like I had spot-on natural rhythm. Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-OOOHHHH! Suddenly, Des crashes into us sending me flying and Sadhbh's red wine all over her cream – I suppose you'd call it a dress. Something from Cos, no doubt. Or one of those shops with no names and just a few dots or a picture of a fox where their sign should be and rail after rail of deconstructed 'garments'. If you wanted something with the threads hanging out of it would you not just go back to fourth-year Home Ec. and whip something up from a pattern? I don't know how Sadhbh pays good money for some of the yokes she wears but she always looks lovely and stylish, and her mad jewellery helps I suppose. She even looks elegant now with the red wine dripping off the sleeve of her cream flour sack and Des nowhere to be seen.

'Come on and we'll give it a rinse,' I roar, dragging her in the direction of the bathroom.

The 'Single Ladies' effect means that almost every woman in the place is on the dancefloor, so we get to a sink with relative ease. 'It's grand, Ais,' Sadhbh insists. 'It'll wash out I'm sure.' She's so cool about it. I'd be at home already, elbow deep in a vat of Persil, cursing the tag on the dress which no doubt gives little information about washing instructions but tells you about the yurt in Mongolia where they sourced the fabric. She's probably right, though – dabbing at it with two-ply bright-blue toilet roll isn't going to improve it much.

And anyway, the red wine splash looks like it could almost be part of the dress. 'Maybe I'll sling a blue WKD at you too, Sadhbh, make the whole thing a bit more colourful!' She laughs, turning to the mirror to apply a slick of deep red lipstick. I'd put a bit of Rimmel Heather Shimmer on earlier but it's all gone now, lost to the turkey dinner and the multiple glasses of wine.

I always feel like a bit of a heifer beside Sadhbh, although I'd take my light-brown hair over the grey any day, even if the natural kink does get out of hand in the drizzle. She was in fits laughing when I first told her I've never dyed it. Why would I, when the sun gives it lovely blonde streaks in the summer? You'd be mad to jeopardise that with chemicals. I smooth my dress down over my hips in the mirror. It's very flattering, I must say. I've been semi-successfully doing Weight Watchers for the past six years but these last seven pounds are being very stubborn. According to my leader, Maura, I've 'plateaued' and she's insisting I swap the Kerrygold for one of those spreads. Jesus, Daddy would turn in his grave.

I've been doing my best to alternate the glasses of water and wine but after the stress of the Secret Santa and with the party successfully underway I'm letting my hair down. Work tomorrow should be interesting. There's been no mention of being allowed to come in late. In fact, there's been very little communication on anything from the powers that be in the past few weeks. Not a sniff of an email about Christmas bonuses. Maybe it will come tomorrow. I need four new tyres and I have the bonus earmarked for the third-dearest ones. 'Never scrimp on tyres or towels and your

journey will be safe and your arse will be dry.’ One of Daddy’s pearls of wisdom.

I smooth my hair in the mirror too. I never got the curly blow-dry so I’ve had to let the natural kink speak for itself this evening. ‘You’ve loads of hair,’ hairdressers are always telling me as they battle through it. ‘I know,’ says I, proud as punch. No higher praise from a hairdresser than having loads of hair.

‘Will we go?’ Sadhbh turns on her heel ready to head back to the ballroom, where the unmistakable strains of ‘Livin’ on a Prayer’ are sure to send Escalations into new heights of frenzy. Hopefully Des is having a sit down somewhere. Just as we exit, Maureen, one of the executive PAs, pushes past us, calling, ‘Did you hear?’

‘Hear what?’ says Sadhbh. Her HR hat is never too far off and she’s all ears. ‘There’s something big happening tomorrow,’ breathes Maureen to the half-dozen women she’s dragged into the bathroom with her. ‘Shermer is making some kind of announcement. I had to patch through the call and then pass the memo on to the other partners.’

Sadhbh turns and runs from the bathroom, no doubt in search of her team to find out what the hell is going on. One of the other girls speaks up. ‘What do you think it is?’

Maureen shrugs. ‘I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s not good.’