



*Susanne O'Leary*  
Secrets  
of Willow  
House

A heartwarming and uplifting page turner set in Ireland

# SECRETS OF WILLOW HOUSE

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A HEART-WARMING AND UPLIFTING PAGE-TURNER  
SET IN IRELAND

SUSANNE O'LEARY

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Acknowledgements

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*To Margaret, Katie and Mairead, my favourite Kerry girls.*



## ONE

When Maeve was still in the office at eleven thirty on Saturday night, searching online for a loo seat with a floral design, she had a feeling something had to be wrong with her life. And when a client phoned her at six the next morning, screeching that the curtains in her bedroom were the wrong shade of purple, she knew things had to change. But it wasn't until she was at the surgery of her local GP a week later and heard the words 'exhaustion' and 'panic attacks that could turn into heart arrhythmia' that she was forced to make a decision.

'You need to take some time off,' her doctor said as she lay like a dead fish on the examination table.

'Not possible,' she mumbled. She struggled to sit and buttoned up her shirt. 'We have taken on a huge amount of work at the office and I'm one of the top—'

He looked at her sceptically. 'Top what? Rocket scientists?'

'No. Interior designers.'

'And that's so stressful you end up in casualty twice with panic attacks and a pulse of over a hundred?'

'You haven't met our clients.'

'I don't think I'd like to.' He put his stethoscope back around his neck and pushed his glasses up his nose as he sat down behind his desk. 'I'm going to give you a prescription for some beta blockers. But that doesn't mean you can pop them like Smarties and carry on.' He looked at her sternly. 'I've seen so many young women like you ending up with serious health problems because they're so bloody driven. Please don't be one of them. Take some time off, relax, get some exercise and then see if you can't manage your time a bit better.'

'I'll try,' she promised, knowing it would be next to impossible. Her mobile rang as she put on her shoes.

'Ignore that,' the doctor ordered as she reached for it. 'Learn to turn off your phone and not be available all the time.'

'Is that what you do?' she asked cheekily. The doctor looked quite tired himself.

He looked startled. 'Er, okay,' he said with a wry smile. 'Maybe not as much as I should. But my job is a tad more important to humanity than yours, I would imagine.'

Maeve had to giggle. 'Yeah, I know. The wallpaper clashing with the upholstery is not exactly life-threatening, of course.' She paused and looked at him. 'Your waiting room needs a little update, now that we're on the subject.'

'I know,' he said with a sigh. 'The magazines are out of date.'

'Yeah, well, that too. And they were all messed up, so I straightened them and organised them in chronological order.' Maeve felt a dart of pride. He was sure to be grateful for that little favour.

'You do need a break, my dear,' the doctor said, with a hint of exasperation. 'Could you try to turn your mind away from such things for a while? Maybe go out with your boyfriend to a movie or dinner?'

'I would if I had one,' Maeve said wistfully. 'But going out alone isn't much fun.'

'Oh. Sorry. I had no idea. But do try to take time off in any case.'

'I will,' Maeve promised. 'I just want to tell you about the waiting room. It's very depressing, you know. That green paint on the walls and the burgundy fabric on the chairs clash horrendously.'

The doctor lifted one eyebrow. 'That's hardly any concern of yours.'

'It is if I have to sit there waiting for half an hour,' Maeve argued. 'It would give anyone a headache. But you know what? It's easy to fix. Dulux does this lovely white paint with a pink undertone. And IKEA has some great chairs right now. I got a few for a client recently. Very cheery colours and really comfortable.'

'Lovely,' he said and handed her a prescription. 'Take these beta blockers and a couple of weeks off and you'll be fine. I want to see you back for a check-up in a month with a tan, a smile on your face and a little more flesh on your bones. Stop even thinking about design or other people's houses. Go out there and have fun, drink wine – and why not even fall in love, if that's possible.'

'I'll do my best,' she said, knowing the falling in love bit was the greatest challenge. Fat chance of finding some man out there in the dating jungle. Been there, done that, got dumped and picked herself

up. Bitter? No, but still in pain – even after three years – and determined not to get fooled again. She didn't have the mental energy to go out there and be fascinating enough to catch whoever might take her fancy.

Maeve took the prescription, wishing it included some kind of medicine for broken hearts.

'He said I have to slow down,' Maeve told her boss later that day. 'Or I will have a heart attack... or something,' she ended lamely. She looked at Ava across the desk, which was littered with bits of fabric and books of wallpaper samples. 'I'm run down. Burnt out. I need a break. Right now. Doctor's orders.'

Ava fixed her with a steely look. 'A break? Right now? You mean you won't finish the townhouse in Knightsbridge? Or the flat in South Kensington?'

'I can do the Knightsbridge one,' Maeve sighed. 'But not the South Ken one. That woman is driving me nuts.'

Ava rolled her eyes. 'Don't they all?' Her mobile rang. She looked at the caller ID and turned it off. 'The rich bitch in Battersea. For the fifth time today. You were saying?'

'I need some time off,' Maeve stated. 'My doctor is worried.'

Ava lifted a perfectly arched eyebrow. 'Worried? About a young woman like you? You're only in your thirties. What could possibly be wrong with you? Wait till you're my age, then we can talk about health problems.'

Maeve sat up straighter. 'Look, Ava, I'm about to turn forty. Not that I'll be shouting it from the rooftops, but that's the fact. My workload has been impossible lately. You have given me all the new clients we've been flooded with since that house was featured in *Vogue*. It's nearly impossible to keep up.'

Ava fixed Maeve with a steely look in her pale blue eyes. 'We *can* keep up. We have to, and we will. End of story. I'm doing two houses, a flat and a boutique hotel at the moment. If I can cope, so can you.'

Maeve met Ava's gaze with a stern look of her own. 'You've given me six new clients in the past two weeks. That's more than I can

cope with. My dreams are full of wallpaper designs and sofa cushions, and clients call me at six in the morning. On a fucking Sunday!' She paused and lowered her voice. 'I'm taking two weeks off. Doctor's orders. My summer holidays are overdue anyway. I was supposed to have my break three weeks ago, remember? I delayed it because of all the new jobs.' Maeve sighed, feeling a knot of tension in her chest. She took a deep breath and tried to relax her shoulders. 'Please?' she asked. 'Just two weeks. My doctor told me to take a break or I'll have to go on sick leave. Can't you get Rufus to take over? He's been chomping at the bit since he started last spring. And then there's that nice trainee we took on – she seems terrific.'

'I gave Rufus all the house doctor jobs so you could have more time for the new clients. And the new girl has to be broken in slowly.'

'I know. But you can free up Rufus by giving the trainee the house doctor jobs, can't you? Those are quite easy and the most fun. I loved making houses and flats look enticing for the property market when I first started.'

'We're not here to have fun.' Ava sighed and flicked her sleek blonde mane behind her shoulders. 'Okay, then. It's against my better judgement to let you take leave now, but I have to say you do look bloody awful. Not a sight we want our posh clients to be confronted with. But I want you back in time to prepare for the interior design fair in October. We'll have a stand there and I'll need you with me.'

'I'll be back in plenty of time, I swear,' Maeve said in a near whisper, knowing she'd promise anything so she could have some time off. She knew without glancing in the mirror that she looked more than a little under the weather. Her usually rosy cheeks were a sickly white, there were bags under her normally sparkly green eyes, and her thick auburn hair hung lankly down her back. She had lost at least five pounds in the last few months, not because of dieting, but because she hadn't had time to eat properly.

'Where are you going?' Ava asked.

'Home,' Maeve said. 'To Ireland.'

She met Ava's eyes and noticed a flicker of concern. Her boss wasn't without empathy, she was just a very driven woman who

fought hard to make her business run smoothly and to keep earning enough money to support her family. Two teenage girls, a flat in Chelsea and an actor husband constantly 'resting', as actors say when they're out of work, didn't come cheap.

Maeve had joined Ava's firm three years earlier, having left everything behind in Ireland following a painful breakup with her boyfriend. The breakup had struck her like a thunderbolt, shattering her well-ordered life, which had included a job at an interior design firm in fashionable Ballsbridge, a good enough income and a wide circle of friends, all fun-loving young professionals with money to spend. Marriage and a family had never been part of her plan. She just wasn't the motherly type – or so she'd been told by her stockbroker boyfriend of the time, who had declared he was not into that scene at all either. Until he'd fallen in love with someone else, and had marched his blushing and heavily pregnant bride down the aisle in double-quick time following his and Maeve's breakup. Maeve had read the announcement of their wedding in the *Irish Times*, swiftly followed by the news of the bouncing baby boy born shortly afterwards. It had been like a stab right into her heart. Breaking up was bad enough, but finding out by the timing of the pregnancy that he had cheated on her had been a huge betrayal. He had been carrying on with this other woman for months before he and Maeve had broken up, lying and going behind Maeve's back. She couldn't begin to understand why. If he'd wanted children, why hadn't he said so? Or was it that he hadn't wanted to have children with *her*? Was there something wrong with her? These sort of thoughts went on and on, and still popped up now, when she was feeling low. She now felt herself bristle whenever a man tried to get close. Would those wounds never heal?

'Where in Ireland?' Ava asked, pulling Maeve out of her thoughts.

Maeve shrugged. 'Haven't decided yet.'

'You have family in Dublin?'

'My parents retired to Spain a few years ago but I might stay with my sister in Dublin for a bit. Then maybe a week in the west. I'll think of something. Ireland is lovely in September.'

'Oh?' Ava looked surprised. 'I thought it'd be overrun by tourists.'



‘Some parts, yes. But if you stay out of the tourist hot-spots, it’s pretty quiet.’ Maeve suddenly had an idea. She felt a spark of something akin to excitement. Why hadn’t she thought of it before? ‘I have an aunt who lives in a very remote part of Kerry. I might see if I can go and stay with her. Old wreck of a house, but it’s very pretty.’ She hadn’t thought of her aunt or the old house in Kerry for a long time. But now, the more she thought about it, the better an idea it seemed.

‘Sounds nice,’ Ava said, picking up a brochure. ‘Okay, then, darling. You can go on your break on Monday. Make sure you have everything tied up in the Knightsbridge place, and I’ll take over that cow in South Ken. Get Rufus to help you. It’s time he started earning the rather generous salary I pay him. And if you could be available by email so we can discuss all the other pending jobs, that’d be terrific.’

‘Of course,’ Maeve promised, knowing that would mean several emails a day, but this was better than being up close and personal with demanding clients. ‘I can do lots of stuff online, no problem.’

‘Super,’ Ava said and picked up her phone.

Maeve slowly got to her feet and tried not to stagger as she went to her cubby hole of an office to tie things up and see what could be left for Rufus to do. Waves of fatigue hit her as she slumped in her chair. *Two weeks*, she thought. It seemed like a mirage. Two weeks of doing nothing. She would go down to Kerry, to her aunt, after a short stint with her sister in Dublin. Sandy Cove... A little village on the edge of the Ring of Kerry, an enchanting place in the summer. And Willow House, where she had spent so many childhood summers, right on the wild beach against a backdrop of the constantly changing lights of the ocean and sky. Not a wildly fashionable place, but Maeve had had enough of that sort of thing after her busy London life.

Who would have thought interior design would be so stressful? Ava’s was one of the most sought-after firms, which had been fun and glamorous to work in at first. That was before Maeve had seen the ugly side of spoilt rich people snapping their fingers at anyone they hired. Suddenly, they thought they owned you and had the right to order you around, even on Sunday mornings. There was

absolutely no creative freedom in simply doing what the clients wanted, in having to agree with everything – even if they wanted a horrific stuffed polar bear in the middle of their living room.

Maeve closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. *I just have to get through this week and I'll be there*, she thought, and jumped as her phone rang. She was about to answer, but someone standing behind her reached over and grabbed the receiver.

'Ava McDonald Interiors,' Rufus' silky voice answered. 'How can we help you?' He listened for a while. 'She's just stepped out of the office for a moment, but I think I can help you with that. The Italian silk curtains, you said? I know the fabric was being woven in Milan to your specifications, but I'll have to check and see if it's ready. Can I call you back in few minutes?' Rufus said goodbye, hung up and directed his velvet brown eyes at Maeve. 'That was the old thing in Chelsea. The one who can't decide what to have for breakfast, never mind fabrics and stuff. I have a feeling she wants to change the design of the drawing room curtains. Again. Do you want me to handle that?'

'Oh, Rufus, would you? That woman is a total nightmare. I'm so tired and I've been ordered to take some time off by my doctor. I just managed to convince Ava to give me two weeks' holiday.'

'In that case I'll deal with the old bat. Anything for you, my darling.' Rufus picked up the receiver and dialled a number. 'Hello there. It's Rufus at Ava McDonald again. I'll check that order for you straight away, but I just wanted to know if you're positive you want that particular—' He paused while he listened to the high-pitched chatter at the other end. 'Yes, that's what I thought. I could hear by your voice that you were a little unsure... Of course. I can call around with some samples for you this evening. Maeve is going away for a break, but I will be available for you whenever you need me.' More excited chatter. 'Fabulous. See you at six, then, Mrs Hetherington.' He hung up, turned to Maeve and winked. 'There. I just poached that client from you.'

'You can have them all,' Maeve sighed. 'Except the client in Holland Street. I like him and we get on. His fiancée never comes to the meetings any more, so he does it all now. So refreshing to work

with someone who's courteous even if he doesn't follow all my advice.'

'I know what you mean.' Rufus smiled, showing nearly every one of his perfect, dazzling white teeth. 'But I like them. I wish Ava would give me a bit more responsibility. House doctoring is fun, but I could do it in my sleep. I need something real to dig my teeth into.'

Fascinated, Maeve looked at him. 'You have gorgeous teeth. How do you get them so white?'

'Regular bleaching.' He shook his head and laughed. 'But we were talking about challenges, not teeth.' He touched her shoulder. 'You do need that time off. And a haircut.'

Maeve tucked her hair behind her ears. 'I know.'

'My partner is a hairdresser at Gielly Green. I could get you a special deal.'

'Gosh, aren't they incredibly busy? But...' She hesitated. It would be nice to be pampered before she set off to Ireland. She hadn't treated herself to a good haircut in months. 'Maybe you could call him and see if he can fit me in?'

'*She*,' Rufus corrected. 'Bloody hell,' he groaned. 'Why does everyone think I'm gay? Is it because I'm an interior designer?'

'No,' Maeve laughed, trying to cover her embarrassment. 'It's because you're so handsome, so impeccably dressed and so... well, fecking *nice*. And hey,' she added. 'Don't tell me you don't play that card with clients.'

Rufus smiled cheekily and adjusted the handkerchief in the top pocket of his Armani blazer. 'Yeah, okay. I go over the top a bit. But that's what they expect. And they feel safe with me.'

Maeve giggled. 'You're a hoot, Rufus.'

He grinned and winked at her. 'I'll miss you.'

'Yeah, right. I'll come back and find myself with no clients. But that's okay. Except for the nice guy in Holland Street. He's mine.'

'I won't go near him,' Rufus promised. 'Where are you going for your break?'

'First to see my sister. And then to Willow House,' Maeve replied, feeling a strange calm as she said it. 'An old house on the very edge of the Irish Atlantic coast.'

'Sounds magical.'

'It is,' Maeve said dreamily. 'The house is lovely. Built by my great-great-grandfather in 1912. And the coast there is amazing. Wild, windswept, beautiful and remote.'

'But...? I hear a "but" in your voice.'

Maeve shrugged. 'I haven't been there for ages. And I haven't kept in touch with my aunt. My uncle died a year ago and I couldn't go to the funeral because I was stuck with a client in the Cotswolds, but I wrote her a letter. She sent me a thank you note, but I haven't heard from her since then. Or her from me. I haven't had time to keep up with my family lately.' She sighed, suddenly overcome with guilt. 'I haven't even had time for me.'

Rufus put his hands on her shoulders and looked into her eyes. 'But now you do. Go, Maeve. Go to Willow House and find yourself again.'