

YOU INVITED HER IN.
THAT WAS YOUR FIRST MISTAKE.

HOME SWEET HOME

'Deliciously
chilling'
Emma Curtis

RUTH IRONS

For my parents, Thirza and Rick

‘I have always depended on the kindness of strangers’

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-one](#)

[Chapter Twenty-two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-six](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

Chapter One

I noticed her as soon as she walked into the pub that night. There wasn't anything particularly stand-out about her, but she had a certain presence – a way of moving through a space that drew the eye. A sharp pinch of January air swept through the door with her, carrying the faint traces of a floral perfume. She wore a cropped leather jacket and an oversized woollen scarf in forest green. A paisley maxi skirt flicked up at the heels of her brown leather boots. Her arms were crossed over her front in a self-conscious pose that seemed at odds with the way she strode.

‘Jules?’

Scott's voice drew my gaze back to his face. ‘Sorry, what?’

‘The lodger thing. I just wondered if you'd thought any more about it?’

I sighed. I had thought more about it but I wasn't sure Scott wanted to hear what I had to say.

‘Come on,’ he said, his playful mock frown creasing his forehead. ‘Hit me with it. I'm a big boy, I can take it.’

I smiled. Even the serious conversations in our lives were never immune to Scott's sense of humour. Perhaps that meant we sometimes ended up laughing when we should have been tackling grown-up issues, but I wasn't complaining.

‘OK, since you've laid your cards on the table, I'm going to be brutally honest.’

He closed his eyes as if bracing himself.

‘I'm not entirely convinced by the lodger idea—’ I held my hand up to stop him interrupting. ‘It's just . . . I know the house is big for the two of us, and I know we could do with the financial help, but . . . I'm a bit worried about opening up our home to a complete stranger.’

‘OK, OK,’ he said with a placatory nod. ‘I completely hear where you're coming from, but – and you know it pains me to say this – we might have to be sensible here.’

I took a breath and blew the air out slowly. When *Scott* was suggesting sensible behaviour, you knew things were serious. And maybe he was right. The fact neither of us had particularly well-paid jobs meant a three-bedroom house in Kingston upon Thames took its toll on our finances.

‘And it wouldn’t be forever. Just until we pay off most of the loan.’ He shrugged and I saw a familiar twinkle in his eyes. ‘And maybe save up a bit for when we start trying for a baby—’ now it was Scott’s turn to hold up his hand to stop me interrupting ‘—which may or may not be soon, you know, whenever, I don’t mind, I’m relaxed about it.’ He raised a hopeful eyebrow as he took a swig of his pint and I couldn’t help laughing.

‘You are such a softie, honestly. I think you’re the broodiest man in the history of would-be fathers.’

‘Guilty as charged, and completely unashamed,’ he said, placing his pint back down and smiling at me.

‘OK, *maybe* I can see where you’re coming from with the whole lodger thing—’

‘Amazing!’

‘*But* . . . I’m the one who works from home every day, so if we did decide to go ahead with it, we’d have to be super selective. You know, get someone who’s busy in the day and isn’t in my space the whole time.’

‘Absolutely! Oh my God, of course.’ He was nodding with unbridled enthusiasm. ‘We’d hold proper interviews, get references, DBS checks, primary-school behaviour reports—’

‘You’re a nutcase.’

‘You married me.’

‘Well, I guess I’m a nutcase too then.’

He grinned, clearly feeling this was progress in his mission to get me on board, and thus decided to end this evening’s coercion here rather than push his luck.

He downed the remains of his drink and stood up. ‘I’m going to get another pint. Red wine again for you?’

I looked at the crackling log-burner next to our table, then leaned back against the ancient, peeling leather of the sofa. ‘Actually, I think I’ll have a Baileys,’ I said in a conspiratorial whisper.

His eyes glittered and he gave me a cheeky grin. ‘Cosy. Like it. Think I’ll have one of those too.’ He nodded his approval, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet.

I watched him approach the bar and stand next to the woman in the floaty paisley skirt, who was leaning over to give her order to the barman. As she stood back, I noticed she was almost the same height as Scott. He wasn’t exactly a giant, but at five eleven he was a good six inches taller than me. She flicked a smile at him while they waited for their drinks, and Scott nodded, his eyes creasing and narrowing in the smile he reserved for greeting strangers.

He carried our drinks back to the low table, the ice clinking against the cut-glass tumblers. The woman at the bar slid her purse back into her handbag, throwing a ‘thank you’ to the barman. Her golden hair fell forwards in waves as she rummaged in her bag.

‘Cheers!’ said Scott, and we clinked glasses.

I sipped the creamy liquid, feeling the soft burn of it down my throat. The Wych Elm was one of our favourite haunts. Cosy and welcoming, it was close to the station but tucked away down a residential street. We’d stumbled upon it when we first moved here a year ago, and now a couple of Friday-night drinks had become a bit of a routine.

The log-burner was throwing out some serious heat, and one side of my face tingled with the warmth it cast. I turned away, my gaze alighting again on the woman, who was now standing in the open space in the middle of the pub. I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Because now her bag-rummaging had become more urgent, her movements jerky and deliberate. Her pretty face was set in a scowl and she was mouthing something to herself. Something that contained the word *fuck*.

I glanced at Scott to see if he’d noticed, but he was scrolling on his phone. The woman was looking around the pub now, as if expecting someone to

come and help with whatever her bag-related emergency was. Two young blokes by the door, probably in their twenties, were eyeing her up. But the way their eyes swept over her it seemed they were more in observation mode, rather than poised to spring up and offer help.

Now she was pacing left and right, as if she didn't know what to do with herself. She swept a hand through her hair, shook her head, looked up to the ceiling and this time, audibly, said, 'Please, no.'

Something squirmed inside me. I couldn't ignore her distress any more, so I set my drink down, stood up and walked towards her.

'Hey – are you OK?'

She looked at me, eyes widening. 'Oh my God, I'm such an *idiot*!'

'What's happened?'

She reached out a hand and squeezed my arm, a strangely intimate gesture. I took it to be a thank you for coming to her assistance. 'I've just been to see a friend's new flat on the South Bank – and I've gone and left my bloody keys there. My housemate's away on tour and I have no way of getting into my sodding flat. Shit! This is the worst bloody thing that could happen . . .' Her voice trailed off as she went back to rummaging violently in her oversized leather bag. 'My other friend was supposed to meet me here, but she's just stood me up, so basically I'm completely screwed.' She stopped her rummaging and stared at me with a defeated expression.

'Umm . . . could your friend – the one on the South Bank – meet you halfway to give you the keys back?'

She turned to me and blinked twice. 'I suppose I could ask him, yes. Good idea.' She looked to be about our age, mid-thirties, with pale blue eyes, like the shallows on a sunny beach, a thin nose and pale eyelashes, delicate features in a narrow face. There was a certain vulnerability about her that belied her self-assured mannerisms and the way she spoke.

'What's up?' Scott's cheery voice interjected. He'd come to stand next to us.

We filled him in on the situation, speaking in almost perfectly alternate sentences, like children reading in a school assembly. I was aware that we

sounded bizarrely rehearsed.

‘Well, call your mate now, and let’s see if he’s up for bringing the keys halfway. What would that be – Wimbledon?’

Scott was in problem-solving mode, a role he relished. And he was good at it. Always looking out for the best way to proceed, the most logical conclusion to draw.

‘Of course.’ The woman brought out her phone. ‘You’re right, that’s what I’ll do.’

She tapped at the screen and held the phone to her ear. Scott and I looked at each other, and a strange awkwardness settled on me. The three of us were standing in a huddle in the centre of the pub, Scott and I watching a complete stranger make a pleading phone call to her friend. I thought the two of us should go and sit down, but when I imagined it, I realised that would feel even odder, like we’d abandoned her to her problems and didn’t want to engage any more. So we just stood there, watching her brow crease as the seconds ticked by. She began chewing her bottom lip, then whispering, ‘Come on, Matt, come on. Pick up.’

Eventually she brought the phone down and stared hopelessly at the screen. ‘He’s not picking up. Fuck!’

‘He might do in a minute . . .’ My voice lacked conviction. It’s a funny thing, but even at this point I think I realised he wouldn’t answer. There was a sort of acceptance within me that we would be finding some other solution to this woman’s problem. I don’t know, perhaps I’m projecting backwards and thought no such thing. All I can say for certain is that an unease had settled in the pit of my stomach. An unease to which Scott was clearly oblivious.

‘Could your other friend help you out?’ I asked. ‘The one who stood you up?’

She gave a frustrated sigh. ‘No, unfortunately she’s from out of town and was only on a flying visit. Missed her train connection, so God knows where she is now.’

‘Look, come and sit with us and try Matt again in a few minutes, yeah?’ Scott’s voice was casual and friendly.

‘That’s so kind of you.’ She cast a tentative smile at me, as if seeking reassurance.

‘Of course, come and join us. No point in you standing in the middle of the pub on your own.’

Her face suddenly broke into a dazzling beam, her eyes wide and glittering. I half expected her to say something like *I thought you’d never ask!*

In what seemed like one deft movement, she whirled towards the bar, her skirt swishing around her shins as she scooped up the glass of white wine she’d ordered before discovering her house keys were missing. The three of us sat down on the worn leather sofas, the woman next to me, and Scott opposite.

She put her wine down on the table and set her palms on her knees. ‘I’m so sorry, I’ve been in such a flap I’ve not introduced myself. My name’s Orla.’ She pressed one hand to her chest as she said this, and I heard a very slight pushing down on the ‘r’ sound.

‘I’m Jules, and this is my husband Scott. Orla . . . is that Irish?’

‘It is!’

‘Are you from Ireland? You don’t have much of an accent,’ I said.

She gave a girlish laugh and tucked her hair behind one ear. ‘That’s what drama school does to you! You spend so much time analysing your voice and your tone, as well playing different parts of course – and that’s before you even consider what a melting pot places like that are. I think all of us on that course came away with some sort of generic south-of-England accent.’ She wrinkled her nose and took a sip of her wine.

‘And is that what you do now?’ Scott said, shuffling forwards on his seat, suddenly fascinated. ‘Are you an actor?’

‘Yes. Which is nowhere near as glamorous as it sounds, believe me.’ She took another sip. Her phone was resting in her lap and I saw the screen light

up. Her eyes flicked down, but she ignored it. It went dark again. ‘What do you guys do?’

‘Well, I work in HR for the council – it’s Jules who has the interesting job!’ This was a typical Scott response. He was always glossing over his own job in favour of hearing me talk about mine.

‘Oh?’ Orla swivelled towards me, her eyes wide with expectation. Or did I detect the hint of a challenge there? A trace of *come on then, impress me*.

‘Scott always bigs me up like this, but like you say about acting, my job sounds a lot more glamorous than it is.’ I was downplaying. I adored my job. ‘I’m actually a children’s book illustrator.’

‘Oh my God!’ She clutched her hand to her chest again. ‘That sounds amazing! Wow, how did you get into that? I mean . . . obviously by being bloody good at drawing, right?’

I laughed. ‘Well, I suppose so. Yes, it’s kind of that simple. I always loved drawing, and used to draw characters from the chapter books I read – you know, as I imagined them in my head. Then I went to Goldsmiths to study children’s book illustration and that’s where I met Scott.’

‘And do you work for specific authors all the time, or . . . how does it work?’ Orla had shifted closer to me and was studying my face as if hanging on my every word. It was flattering.

‘Um . . . I have two or three authors I always illustrate for, but generally I’m freelance so I never know what’s coming up next or how busy I’ll be. Much like acting, I imagine.’

‘Absolutely.’ She nodded. ‘Everyone always says to me, “How do you cope, not knowing when you’re going to get paid, or how much money you’re going to make, or how available you’re going to be?” and you know what I tell them? I cope because I absolutely bloody love it.’ She flashed me a bright smile. ‘And I can tell you feel exactly the same way.’

I raised my glass in salute. ‘I wouldn’t change it for the world.’

Something thawed inside me then. She got it. Very few people understood the life of a freelancer, especially one that didn’t earn very much money. They didn’t understand that doing something you love every day was

so much more valuable than a predictable routine, or earning shedloads of money. Then I felt the familiar pang, and my internal monologue gave its usual refrain: *That's easy for you to say – you have a partner with a sensible job, and a mortgage-free house. You're not exactly suffering for your art.*

'Anyway.' I suddenly wanted to change the subject. 'What type of acting do you do?'

'Well, whatever I can get really.'

'Will we have seen you in anything?' Scott asked.

I rolled my eyes. 'Does everyone ask you that?'

'Yes they do, actually, and I always give the same response – not unless you have a particular penchant for badly paid, poorly attended fringe theatre.' She gave a self-deprecating wince and Scott and I laughed. 'Although,' she continued, 'if you were into Irish TV in the early 2000s you might have spotted me in *Kilcroom High*.'

This sounded like a throwaway comment, but I noticed her eyes dart quickly between us, and I knew she was waiting for a reaction. Because everyone of our generation had heard of *Kilcroom High*, even if you didn't watch it. I took the bait.

'You were in *Kilcroom High*? I used to love that show!'

'Oh, that's great to hear!'

'Wow!' Scott looked like an excited puppy. 'Even *I've* heard of that, and I was barely interested in anything that wasn't *Star Wars* from the age of about ten. Wasn't that the show set on the beach, like a sort of Irish *Home and Away*?'

Orla laughed. 'That's the one. *Home and Away* crossed with *The Famous Five*. I wasn't one of the big stars of the show, but I appeared in one season.'

Scott had grabbed up his phone and was googling. 'Yes, here you are!' He turned his phone to show us and I leaned forwards to take it from him. Sure enough, there was a barely teenage Orla, same honey-coloured hair, posing with a group of about six other similar-aged children on a beach. She was leaning an elbow on the shoulder of the boy next to her, and was dressed in

wide-legged jeans and a red crop top which showed her bare, narrow waist. She wore a choker around her slender neck. They were all sitting or standing on rocks, the sky cornflower blue and a shaggy dog at their feet.

Scott took his phone back, tapped the screen and read. '*Orla Sullivan joins the cast of Kilcroom High in a captivating performance as Alice's younger cousin, Riley.*'

'I think I even remember watching some of your episodes now I see that photo . . .' The red crop top and the dog had stirred something in my brain. 'Wasn't there one where you had to rescue the dog from a cave or something?'

'Yes! That's right, good memory!' Orla's face was alight, her eyes twinkling. 'Monty got caught in the pirate's cave and the water was coming in—'

'—and you ran and got a rope and some dog food from somewhere . . . Oh! The old guy who manned the car park!'

'Old Henry! Ha ha, yes, that's it. That was one of my first episodes, actually. It was meant to be the middle of summer but we filmed it in October and it was bloody freezing in that cave.'

Orla downed the dregs of her wine and picked up her phone. 'Right, I should try Matt again, see if I can get my keys back.'

Something deflated inside me then. For all my initial uneasiness, I felt I'd mellowed over the course of our conversation. I wanted to talk to Orla for longer. I wanted to tell her more about my illustrating, to watch her fascinated face as she listened. I wanted to hear more stories about filming *Kilcroom High*, and learn about the fringe theatre she did.

I watched her tapping her phone and holding it to her ear for the second time. Her face was set once more in that serious frown, and when she caught my eye she waved her crossed fingers at me as if to say *wish me luck*. The bell rang for last orders.

Eventually she opened her mouth and I thought her friend must have answered. But no.

‘Hi Matt, it’s Orla. I’ve been a complete tit and left my keys at your place. Anyway, give me a call when you get this so we can hatch a plan about me getting them back. Sorry to be a pain.’ She hung up and then started typing. ‘I should probably text him too just in case he doesn’t bother listening to the message. To be honest, he’s a bit of a party animal so he’s probably in a noisy club right now and the last thing he’ll be doing is looking at his phone.’

Scott and I glanced at each other as if to say, *what do we do now?*

Orla threw her phone into her bag and sat up straight. ‘Right, well, thank you both so much for lending me your ear and for the lovely chat! Sorry to gatecrash your romantic evening.’

‘You haven’t gatecrashed at all,’ Scott said. ‘It’s been great meeting you.’

‘But . . . what are you going to do? I mean, do you have another friend you can stay with?’ I asked.

‘Or a way of breaking into your flat?’

‘Scott, she’s not going to do that!’

Orla laughed. ‘Actually, some of the places I’ve lived that would have been easy enough, but unfortunately this flat is pretty secure, plus our landlord’s a nightmare, so I wouldn’t risk damaging anything and losing our deposit.’

She stood up and rummaged one last time in her bag, as if hoping the keys would magically appear.

‘But what are you actually going to do?’ Scott said.

‘Um . . . I’ll probably head into town and book into the Premier Inn or something. Bang goes this week’s rehearsal pay!’ She gave a tight laugh then, as if she was trying to make light of the situation, but not finding it funny.

Scott and I flashed each other a look, and I knew we were both thinking the same thing. I gave the tiniest twist of my mouth, wondering what my next question would be, but Scott seemed to take this gesture as giving him the go-ahead.

‘I mean . . . it’s not ideal, you spending your week’s pay on a hotel, is it?’ he said. ‘Why don’t you crash at ours? It’s only round the corner. Then you can get your keys from Matt tomorrow.’

I felt something slipping away from me.

Orla's mouth opened slightly, her gaze darting from me to Scott and back. She licked her lips and I noticed her delicate chin wobble. 'Guys, that's honestly above and beyond . . .'

'Don't be silly. We've got a comfy spare room and we're going home now anyway.' Scott gave a nonchalant shrug. 'And I know we've only just met, but I'm not getting serial-killer vibes from you, so . . .'

Orla hooted with laughter at that, wiping under one eye with the back of her index finger. 'You know, maybe if I gave off serial-killer vibes I'd be getting more interesting roles at the minute! No, but seriously, are you guys sure?'

I wasn't sure, but what could I say?

'Absolutely,' we chimed in unison.

So then it was settled. We stood, put on our coats and made our way out of the pub in our newly formed triangular friendship. It was such a small act of kindness, I told myself. And it had seemed that way at the time. So inconsequential.

Chapter Two

‘Oh my God, look at this place!’ Orla said as we approached the front door. ‘It’s humongous!’

I felt a familiar twist of guilt that sometimes accompanied showing people the house. We really had lucked out. It was far from palatial, but it was certainly above what most people in their early thirties could afford. The neatly paved driveway was home to our little red Fiat 500, but there was room for at least one other car in the space. The house itself was semi-detached, with a wide bay window, redbrick lower half, and mock Tudor-style beams with white render above. Scott’s aunt had kept it well, and in the year we’d been here we’d even managed to keep the plants that bordered the driveway alive.

Seymour Avenue was a wide road, the houses set back from the kerb by a strip of grass, then a pavement. They all had large front areas, some used for parking and others as gardens. Gnarled, old trees were dotted along the road, their giant roots cracking pavement slabs in places.

We entered the house and I flicked on the lights, dropping my keys on the side table. ‘We’re actually really lucky . . . Scott’s aunt left us the place.’

Orla nodded, looking around at the pale blue walls, the crisp white paintwork, the caramel oak flooring. ‘It’s beautiful.’

Scott always tells me we don’t owe anyone an explanation as to how we’ve come to live in a place like this. ‘You don’t need to apologise for having a nice house, Jules.’ And I knew he was right, but knowing we could never have afforded it on our salaries, I somehow felt compelled to explain. Yes, we still had a loan that needed to be paid off (which we’d taken out to cover inheritance tax), but that was much less than a mortgage on this place would have been. Not declaring the truth about the house somehow felt like cheating. Especially when speaking to an underpaid actor who was sharing a rented flat.

‘Nightcap?’ Scott said, rubbing his hands together.

‘Sure!’ said Orla, and we followed Scott through to the kitchen.

Settled around the breakfast bar, nursing the last of a bottle of Limoncello I found at the back of a cupboard, we fell into comfortable conversation.

Orla told us about the play she was currently rehearsing, which was opening on Monday at a pub theatre called the Black Lion in Southwark. It was a modern retelling of the story of Persephone and Hades, set in an office block in New York. Orla was playing Demeter, reinvented as the CEO of the company. Her face was serious as she explained all this, which made us crease up with laughter when she ended her spiel with, 'It's really the biggest pile of shite you've ever seen.'

'And *can* we see it?' asked Scott with his excited puppy-dog face.

I expected her to recoil at this idea if she found the project as embarrassing as she'd just implied, but her eyes lit up. 'Yes! Come along, it'll be great craic. Just make sure you drink enough at the bar downstairs first so you're happy to endure two hours of abysmal American accents and overused strobe lighting.'

I noticed more traces of an Irish accent seeping into her voice the more she relaxed, her 't's softening and her 'r's becoming more pronounced.

Eventually, we'd finished the Limoncello, and it seemed the evening had run out of steam.

Orla raised her arms above her head and stretched, before letting them fall to her sides. 'What a beautiful evening, thank you so much, guys. Considering I've been rendered homeless for the night, I'm in unexpectedly high spirits.'

'Well, don't speak too soon,' said Scott. 'We haven't shown you the dungeon you're sleeping in yet.'

Orla laughed. 'I'll take a dungeon, no problem. I'm so exhausted, honestly, I could sleep anywhere right now.'

We showed her up to the spare room in the attic. This was the largest bedroom, but had been the most tired-looking when we'd moved in. We'd moved our own stuff into the first-floor bedroom at the front of the house

while we decorated the attic, and then we'd started having this discussion about the lodger, so hadn't moved back in yet.

It really was the perfect room to rent out. It was large, with two oak beams spanning the ceiling space. The walls sloped down to eaves storage on both sides, and a tall window with a Juliet balcony overlooked the back garden. A two-seater sofa sat against one wall, facing a wall-mounted TV, and there was a tiny boxed-in bathroom. The bed was a king-size and the mattress had taken me, Scott and our friend Nick the best part of two hours to manoeuvre up from the ground floor.

'Oh my God, it's just stunning,' Orla said, throwing her handbag onto the bed before collapsing onto it herself in a starfish pose. 'I'm going to be right at home here.'

Scott was up at stupid o'clock the following morning for his habitual Saturday morning run in Richmond Park. As always, he'd thrown me a 'fancy joining me?' as he pulled his T-shirt over his head, prompting me to issue my usual response of groaning and pulling the duvet over my head.

By nine thirty I was sitting at the breakfast bar, sipping my first coffee of the day. My fingers played with the torn edge of the envelope Scott had left on the table. I'd only briefly glanced at the glaring red repayment amount, before shoving the letter back in, my mind replaying the conversation we'd had in bed last night.

'It kind of seems like fate has dealt us a helping hand here,' he'd whispered as we lay in the dark.

'Fate? Since when did you believe in that bloody nonsense?'

'Since tonight when the Good Lord sent us an Irish angel to rent our spare room—'

I'd whacked him with my hot water bottle then, trying to stifle a laugh. 'Oh my God, you meet an attractive blonde in the pub and suddenly you're religious?'

'The Lord works in mysterious ways, Jules . . .'

I laughed. '*You* work in mysterious ways, you absolute nutcase.'

‘No, but in all seriousness, don’t you think it could be a good idea just to think about it? I mean, you were saying you would be wary of a stranger . . . well, we’ve just spent a great evening with Orla and we definitely know we’d get on with her. Plus, you wanted someone who’d be out a lot – and this is perfect! She’s an actor, doing shows right left and centre, back-to-back rehearsals during the week, then performances in the evening—’

‘But she’s already got somewhere to live.’

‘Yeah, a crappy flat in town with a landlord who’s a “nightmare” apparently. Don’t you think it’s worth at least asking?’

And that’s the question I’d been mulling over as I drifted off to sleep, and it was the same question I was mulling over now as I played with the envelope. It had been lovely hearing the optimism in Scott’s voice last night as he talked about Orla being the answer to our financial conundrum. When his aunt had left us this place, we hadn’t realised quite how much the house would cost. Scott’s initial elation had turned to despair. This was a house he remembered from his childhood. It was special. And with him having no close family left, I knew he really didn’t want to lose it. Of course it made financial sense to sell up and move to a smaller two-bed further out – but if we did, I wasn’t sure we’d ever manage to work our way back up to the type of house we had now. And Scott would have lost that link to his family.

‘Morning!’

I felt myself flinch. ‘Oh, hi. Morning.’

‘I’m so sorry, I made you jump! Did you forget I was here?’

‘No, not at all, I was just . . . how did you sleep?’

‘Like a baby, seriously that bed is so comfortable. I don’t know how to thank you both for coming to my rescue last night. You absolutely didn’t have to do that, and I’m so grateful.’

‘Honestly, it was nothing.’

‘Your home is insanely beautiful, and you’re both gorgeous – I had such a fun evening.’

‘We did too. Would you like some coffee?’