

## Chapter 2

Sleep still wouldn't come. There were still too many thoughts chasing each other around in her head; still far too much mental noise. Julie tried to make her mind a blank, but of course the conscious act of doing that simply kept her awake anyway. Insomnia had always been the bane of her life, and if she went to bed stimulated in any way by pleasant experience, like the conversation on the sofa (and not to mention the aftermath), that was it. You could forget about sleep. She really envied Derek sometimes, the way he could just drop off instantly, anytime and anywhere, as easily as falling off the proverbial log.

Oh well; it didn't really matter. Sleep would come eventually, although it might help if Derek didn't snore.

She returned to reminiscing about the last four months.

Like the first time he'd asked her out. Her astonishment at it. Her: dull, ordinary little Julie Brennan from Sligo, Ireland, being pursued by a tall dark handsome (well he was, quite) English policeman, of all people! She'd wondered at first what Mammy, staunch supporter of Sinn Fein, would make of it. Not that she really cared, particularly. In the light of past events, she owed Mammy no loyalty at all. She could think what the hell she liked, so she could.

Julie smiled, remembering.

It had been totally unexpected, and just a touch embarrassing, him turning up out of the blue like that, in the middle of the afternoon, in his smart uniform. She'd forgotten all about him and there he was, a week after Stacey's little misdemeanour, standing on the doorstep of her flat in its scruffy Edwardian villa, paint peeling off the front door and window frames, grinning and saying he just finished his shift, happened to be passing and thought he'd just check that everything was okay with the two of them. *Oh yes?* she'd thought. *Really? Pull the other one!*

She could have been knocked down with a feather. She'd stuttered affirmation that, yes, she was fine, thanks, and he'd said 'Great,' or something like that, and continued to smile that oh-so-winning smile at her until she'd finally taken the hint and invited him (well, he was a policeman after all; she

wouldn't have done a total stranger) into her decidedly unprepossessing flat, up the threadbare-carpeted, paint-chipped stairs, on the first floor.

It had made her blush a little, showing him into her dingy living room with its hideous, grubby wallpaper, Stacey's toys strewn all over the stained carpet and the sofa festooned with her freshly washed clothes, straight from the laundry, conspicuously including her underwear. She'd apologised for the mess and quickly scooped the embarrassing articles up, hurried into the bedroom and dumped them on the bed. Then she'd switched the television off, bid him be seated on the now less-cluttered sofa, and offered a cup of tea, or something.

He'd accepted (milk, one sugar, please), removed his cap and immediately begun talking to a wide-eyed but already grinning Stacey as she'd bustled about in the kitchenette, diving through the pale blue folding plastic screen that separated it from the living area, searching for one of her best mugs and plates and the packet of milk chocolate hobnobs that she tried to eat sparingly because of her thickening waistline.

She'd perched nervously on the edge of the single armchair with Stacey, clutching a beaker of Fanta, standing at her side, wrapping a sticky little hand around her too-chubby thigh. She'd desperately hoped she wouldn't spill it. He'd led the way in small talk: 'Nice flat' (*seriously? Come on!*); 'lived here long? How old is Stacey now then? Be starting school soon then!' And so it had gone on, as she sat almost mesmerised, hanging on his every word. After a while she'd plucked up the courage to ask a little about him too: the sly salient things like: where did he and his wife live? To which he'd replied, looking suddenly serious, that he was single now.

The conversation had drifted on as he'd steadily worked his way through the frequently-offered hobnobs, helped messily and enthusiastically by Stacey (she'd been too wound up to take one herself) until, after an hour or so, although it had felt like five minutes, he'd made to get up and leave, picking up his cap, and then hit her with the proposal. Would she like to go out sometime? Perhaps for a drink? If she could get a baby sitter?

That had completely floored her, both in its unexpectedness and the problem it posed. There was no obvious person she could entrust the care of Stacey to for a couple of hours or so. It would be pointless asking sister Maeve, who would only purse her lips in silent disapproval. Maeve, herself married (lucky cow!) with two little ones of her own, was snooty to put it mildly about

her adventures with always-unsuitable men. And she hadn't worked since having Stacey (couldn't have afforded the child care), or for that matter for a couple of years before that, things being as they had been, so she had no workmates she could ask. And she had no social life, of course, and therefore no ordinary friends to speak of either.

But she'd found herself saying, trying not to sound too eager, that yes, she'd like that. He'd said, 'Shall we make it this coming Thursday then? It's my next evening off.'

And she'd replied, without a moment's thought as to how she'd arrange for Stacey to be babysat, 'Yes, fine. Lovely!'

Then he'd got up, said goodbye to Stacey, told her he'd call for her around eight if that was okay (she'd quickly affirmed that it was), said, 'Fine; see you then, then,' and seen himself out, leaving her to her thoughts.

On Thursday! Holy Jesus; that was only three days away! That evening she'd phoned Maeve with little optimism about babysitting, and her fears had proved real. All she'd got was a patronising lecture about steering well clear of men as she made such bad choices in that department, in spite of her insisting that this one was different: he was fine and upstanding and reliable and a policeman; and anyway, it was only a first night out for God's sake. She wasn't about to shack up with him, or even spend the night. It probably wouldn't come to anything.

But still Maeve had wriggled out it, saying it was too short notice anyway. She knew what it was really though. Maeve didn't want to lower herself to spending an evening in her crummy flat in an unprepossessing street where a good many of the houses were boarded up or squats. Her big sister had got a very comfortable lifestyle, thank you very much: marriage to Tony, two kids, two cars and a detached house on one of the swankier estates on the edge of the city. Maeve had to keep up appearances.

She was committed to going out with this Derek now though. She couldn't stupidly admit when he turned up on Thursday night that she couldn't get a babysitter now, could she? She'd look an utter fool and he'd probably just walk away, exasperated. And she didn't want him to do that.

The following day, in desperation and unable to think of anything else, she'd written a notice: *Babysitter needed. About three hours on Thursday evening. £3 per hour* and drawing pinned it to the outside door. That would attract

someone, surely? But then someone had come to her rescue, in the form of matronly, middle-aged, divorced Irene from the flat downstairs, who'd knocked on her door that evening brandishing the note and telling her in no uncertain terms that she was being very silly advertising like that. That you should only ever entrust your child to the care of someone you knew and could trust. You never knew who might turn up out of the blue. They could be anybody. A paediatrician, even, as Irene had put it. Contrite and embarrassed, trying not to laugh hysterically at the malapropism, she'd said she didn't know anyone she could ask, and it was only the one evening, probably. She'd felt close to tears. It was all very well people dishing out good advice but what else was she to do?

And then Irene, bless her heart, had said that she'd willingly sit in her flat and keep an eye on things. She was a grandmother after all; she'd done it many times for her Dean and his wife and her Debbie. And she wouldn't want no money for it, as long as she could make herself cups of tea. At that she *had* burst into tears, at the kindness of it, and Irene had patted her shoulder and come in to say hello to Stacey (they'd met before, obviously, but hadn't got far beyond saying hello; had barely reached passing the time of day) and they'd had a good old chinwag and she'd told the motherly old dear all her troubles, not to mention many of her hopes.

And that first evening out! The big problem had been solved, but she'd been in an agony of indecision as to what to wear then, her confidence with men having suffered considerably in recent years. She hadn't wanted to come across as tarty at all, with her well-endowed chest, and had settled for a red roll-neck jumper with a baggy beige linen jacket over, to tone it down a bit, and her best jeans, although they did make her hips look wide. But definitely no cleavage on display. She'd wanted to come across as demure.

Yes, that first time! It had been brilliant. It had gone far better than she'd nervously anticipated. He'd arrived in his pale blue Ford Escort and stood smiling on the doorstep, looking really quite hunky in the same leather jacket and possibly the same jeans as the first time they'd met. He'd enquired whether she'd got a babysitter okay (just a tiny bit over-protectively, she'd felt) and she'd assured him that she had, and off they'd gone to the Star and Garter, and found a nice quiet corner of the lounge with its red buttoned chenille

seating and faux-Tudor decor, and begun a long, relaxed after a few initial butterflies, chat.

Holy Mary, it had been so long since she'd been out for a drink! Literally years in fact; not since her wild days. But what a contrast! Derek was so different from other men. He'd looked the epitome of responsibility; had ordered just a half of bitter for himself, which he sipped, making it last, and a small lager for her. Clearly, he took considerations of drinking and driving seriously. The conversation had soon begun to flow easily; at first light-hearted but gradually more frank, more revelatory as they'd each probed cautiously with questions. He was twenty-nine, he'd told her; had been a policeman for six years, a beat-bobby rather than on cars (that hadn't appealed), and he had aspirations to join CID, if he did alright with his exams.

He'd admitted a bit sheepishly that he was divorced, for nearly four years now; had a little boy, Jack, who was six and lived with his mum, ex-wife Sandra. He'd said, eyes downcast, that he regarded it as some sort of failure. Had quite assumed that marriage would be for life. But Sandra had disliked the lack of a settled family life that his uneven working routine necessitated. Amongst other things. Like his traditional values of being head of the household, final arbiter when it came to decision making. She'd thought wryly, when he'd said that; that personally she wouldn't mind a bit of that sort of hierarchy; have a strong man dictating things and looking after her. There'd be some emotional security in it at least. To hell with women's lib.

When he'd asked about her background she'd squirmed inwardly with embarrassment and frantically edited her life story, wondering wildly how much she dare confess. Okay; it was obvious that she was a single mum, but there wasn't for her the slender dignity of being divorced, amicably or otherwise. In her case it had been desertion; Brett, the bugger, simply walking out and leaving her high and dry. And how much should she disclose, at a first outing when it was so important to try and give a good impression, of her sad and sorry upbringing and teenage years? Those unhappy times in Sligo, in that big (and it had to be faced, sometimes dysfunctional family) with the constant malignant pall of Da's alcoholism and violence over all, and then, after he finally left to shack up with a younger, more nubile model, Mammy's depression rather than relief at his going?

And how could she have told him about those dark, complicated years after she left home aged sixteen and escaped to England, financially helped by Maeve to do a secretarial course? That would have put him right off.

So she'd answered as circumspectly as she could, glossing over the tricky, delicate parts, hoping he wouldn't, with his policeman's sharp cynical eye, probe too much. But thankfully, he hadn't. She'd risked it and pretty well told the full truth about Brett's departure, and about the other sorry episodes she'd felt brave enough to relate. But not all. He'd nodded sympathetically, real concern clouding those lovely brown eyes. He'd been the perfect, understanding gentleman. She could have stayed there all night talking to him.

And then of course, after that first, entirely chaste meeting, there'd been an agonising wait for what she'd hoped would be a follow-up. After the coffee drinking back at her flat (Irene having left them to it, but not without giving her a sideways, warning look) he'd got up as she hovered uncertainly, wondering whether he would make a pass or anything (and if so, how should she respond?) and simply left, with a non-committal, polite, 'Thanks for a nice evening' followed by a 'See you around then.'

But he had been in touch again, really quite quickly, and their romance had blossomed until here she was now, little undeserving Julie Flanagan from Ireland, lying awake in Derek's bed as he snored on, hugging the prospect of a rosy future tight to her chest.

1993

And here she was again, nine months later, again doing battle with insomnia, as her husband of a few hours again snored beside her. Julie sighed happily, turning towards his back (he always, slightly irritatingly, slept facing away), fitting herself closely, duplicating his foetal shape, right hand finding his furry chest. As it had been a special night (and how!), he was still naked, as she was too. Perhaps later he could be persuaded to wake up for a reprise. After all, you only got married once; only had one wedding night. Hopefully. Please, Holy Father?

She was beginning to get a headache, which was hardly surprising. There'd been a lot of alcohol consumed, quite like in the old, wild, stupid days, not to mention the second helping an hour ago. There'd almost certainly be a raging

hangover as the price to pay in the morning. Oh well; so what? It was only the once. She wished she could go to sleep. She really ought to go out like a light, like Derek had done after the very boozy passion of ten minutes ago, but as usual, and tonight particularly, there were too many thoughts orbiting around inside her head again. And too many dreams.

She let her thoughts drift back across recent hours.

It had been a rather low-key affair, but she hadn't been disappointed. She had her prize; that was all that mattered. It could hardly have been a full church wedding anyway, as Derek wasn't Catholic. In fact he wasn't anything, slightly to Julie's regret. She couldn't really imagine that: having no faith at all. And apart from anything else, her church wouldn't have married him anyway, as he was a divorcee. But never mind. He was a good man, a necessary, dependable rock, for all that. That was what mattered.

Thankfully, Maeve had mellowed over recent months as she came to believe that her little wayward sister had at last landed on her feet and found herself a reliable man. Occasional contact between them had resumed, which was nice. There was even some, although sparing, with her other sisters, Siobhan and Lucy, over in Ireland. Although there was nothing with Billy, Patrick and Seamus, but then they were males. What did you expect?

So there had been a reasonable representation of her family: all her sisters and their husbands and boyfriends (who of course had entered enthusiastically into the spirit of the occasion afterwards, although Derek had been at pains to check that none of them would be driving later), and Patrick out of the brothers, at any rate, who had been persuaded to come by Siobhan. Mammy hadn't been able to make the journey across the Irish Sea as she was currently having one of her down periods, and would have only put the dampeners on things, so she would. And Irene had been invited. She'd struck up quite a friendship with her, and the redoubtable Irene had done the honours with many more baby sittings before she moved in with Derek.

Indeed there'd been more from her side than Derek's, which could only boast one brother, John, and his wife Lindsey, his mam and dad and a couple of friends. But the register office ceremony room (which actually, to her surprise, was quite nice, considering it wasn't a church or anything) had been nicely filled, at least. Also to her surprise, the ceremony had been quite brief, but then there'd been no hymns or anything, obviously. But there had been a

little music, of the canned variety. As yet another surprise, Derek's parents had brought their cassette player with, at the instigation of him, a tape of the Beach Boys' *God Only Knows*. Although an oldie, it was one of her all-time favourites and they'd played it at the end, and it had made her cry and her mascara run.

There'd been enough people to make a nice big group for the photos, taken by John, outside. Although she'd been a touch disconcerted by the noisy arrival in the car park of the next happy wedding group on the office's schedule that day, before they'd even finished. It had seemed a touch like being on a conveyor belt.

And then the do afterwards, in the upstairs function room of the Stag and Pheasant, had been brilliant. She'd felt a tiny bit guilty knowing that Derek had footed the bill for it all, but then she had no parents of her own to do the traditional thing and bear the cost, had she? Stacey had loved it all of course although she didn't really understand what was going on. She'd tried to explain the subtle difference between the three of them simply living together as heretofore and actually being married, but the little girl hadn't really grasped the concept. But Stacey's big cousins Trixie and Samantha did, right enough, and had seemed a bit disappointed at the absence of a bride wearing a proper frock, and probably also that bridesmaids hadn't been called for.

But she herself had thought it just wonderful, being the centre of attention for a day. Alright; so she hadn't had a gorgeous floaty virginal bridal gown and bouquet and all the accoutrements, but she didn't really care. She considered herself lucky to be married at all and never mind the somewhat modest procedure of achieving that longed-for state. After much deliberation in the weeks before, touring the clothes shops in the mornings that were her own now that Stacey was at school, she'd settled on a pretty lilac two-piece costume of skirt and jacket, with a ruffed white blouse beneath. Derek had told her she looked stunning, although Maeve had commented, a little unkindly she thought, that the colour didn't match her hair. Which was typical, really. Trust her to pour cold water on things!

The reception had wound joyously and increasingly boozily on into the middle of the afternoon. It had been buffet-style, not a sit-down formal wedding 'breakfast' (what a silly expression that was!), mainly because it was cheaper, and also so that, with the tables ranged around the periphery of the

room, space could be left in the middle for dancing. John, in addition to his photography duties had been the designated disk jockey and he and Derek had pooled record collections. Between them they had quite an eclectic library, including stuff like ABBA for Derek's parents and his older friend Ben from the force and his wife.

Of course there'd been slow, smoochy tracks too, including *God Only Knows* again, to which she and Derek were expected to dance and make exhibitions of themselves, but that had been fine. She'd been quite convinced that every female in the room (well, apart from Derek's mum, obviously) was green with envy as she stumbled around in her heels, feet beginning to kill her, out of time with the music, in the arms of her policeman prince.

And then it had come time to Go Away; not to drive to the airport to wing it away to some sunny foreign clime (Derek couldn't afford that either) but to head south out of the city and then westwards, to the North Wales coast and Llandudno, and a middle-range, white painted, wonderfully situated hotel, up high overlooking the town, the seaside and Great Orme's Head.

Reliable Irene, bless her, had been only too willing to have Stacey stay with her for a week. They'd debated whether to take her with them – Derek had said that he had no problem with that – but she'd really, sentimentally, wanted it to be just the two of them. After all, you didn't generally take children on honeymoons now, did you?

No, this wasn't a sun-soaked holiday in some exotic place, to acquire an impressive tan and brag to her friends about (not that she had any). But as far as she was concerned, Llandudno was just divine. You could keep your Torremolinos and all that. Derek, who knew about these things, had told her all about the tourist honey pots they could visit, like going over the Thomas Telford bridge to the island of Anglesey (which she dimly remembered coming through when she first came to England all those years ago); and Caernarvon with its splendid castle; and a trip up mount Snowdon on the railway, if the weather was fine and clear (not much point if it wasn't though, he'd said authoritatively); and the scenic wonderland of Betws-y-Coed. Well she'd leave it all to him to organise. But it all sounded lovely.

They'd arrived at just after eight-thirty on that late spring evening, as it had been an easy, rapid journey on motorways and dual-carriageways with the grey-green mountains of Snowdonia looming on their left; too late strictly

speaking for dinner. But, after freshening up and changing, and being as it was a special occasion, the proprietor, Mavis (from Liverpool, funnily enough) had organised a meal specially for them anyway, with an (admittedly not the most expensive but a nice thought all the same) complimentary bottle of champagne which, now that Derek was freed of the constraints of moderating his drinking, they'd polished off between them. It had been nice to be alone together at last; have the other entirely to themselves. There'd been all the corny clichés, like him calling her 'Mrs James' (which was thrilling), and asking her what she thought of married life so far, to which she'd replied, in true Eric Morcambe style, 'Rubbish' and then nearly wet herself laughing at her own jocularly.

At ten o'clock, having lingered long over the meal and feeling a little guilty that they were keeping the catering staff (who probably wanted to get cleared away and everything) waiting, they'd returned to their bedroom, stumbling and giggling up the slightly faded blue fleur-de-lis carpeted stairs to the second floor. She'd tried to calculate the timing of her monthly visitations from several months earlier, when they'd first set the wedding date after Derek's bliss-inducing proposal, to ensure there'd be no impediment to sex (Derek disliked doing it when she had *The Curse*), and more by luck than judgement, her mathematics had worked out right.

Of course they weren't exactly virginal and naive, either of them; it hadn't been an eagerly and nervously awaited first-time event, but all the same, their lovemaking had assumed, for her anyway, an extra glow. After all, it was the first time with a husband. Now it was fully legitimate. There could be not the slightest hint of shame; not now. Not as far as her church was concerned, or anyone else either. Even Mammy would approve now, surely; would un-purse her bitter, clamped lips. What a shame Mammy hadn't been able to come to see her married though! Become respectable. Her, Julie, the second-born, the wild one, the family black sheep. Fences could be mended now, Holy Jesus, couldn't they?

Ah yes; the past. What was it they said? 'The past is a foreign country,' or something like that. Well it certainly felt like one now. Or like a bad dream; a nightmare of drifting, of anxiety, of pain, of fear, of self-loathing. Best forgotten, anyway. Consign it to history. Bury it. So what that she hadn't been entirely truthful about everything with Derek? It was the past; another life.

Another Julie, so it was. She certainly felt entirely different now. Like a new and better person. It was a new start; a second chance. And by all the Saints, she meant to take advantage of it.

Derek stirred and snorted in his sleep. She hoped he would wake up and turn to her and take her into his arms. Or even, better still, gently lay her on her back and spread her thighs and put his hand, so delicately, in that special place that she loved him to touch. She certainly felt up for it again. Wanted to give herself to him again. *Take me, my sweet love*, she silently implored, beginning to ache at the prospect. *I'm yours. All yours. For ever and ever. 'Till death do us part.*

But he didn't awaken. The snoring resumed. Never mind. It didn't matter. There would be lots of other times. Lots and lots. She snuggled closer still; soft belly against his small round buttocks, trying to resist the urge to seek his groin. Tried to compose herself for sleep.