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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Secrets of a Happy Marriage**

Written by Cathy Kelly

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# Secrets of a Happy Marriage

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*For Lucy,  
my incredible sister without whom I would be lost,  
and for Emma,  
who is like another sister to me.  
Love you both.*

## *Prologue*

In the San Francisco February dawn, Faenia Lennox sat at an off-white chalk-painted desk facing the Bay with its familiar and beloved fog visible beyond the Japanese maples in her garden and typed at speed, the same speed she'd learned from Mrs Farmsworth's classes in New York all those years ago. Over forty years ago, in fact.

'Do not look at the keyboard, girls!' Mrs Farmsworth had said in those commanding tones that made immigrants like Faenia wonder if she'd been a lady general in the war. Faenia, fingers quivering with tiredness and heart leaden with loneliness, had wondered if she'd ever have the strength of someone like Mrs Farmsworth, who stood ramrod straight and yet whose old eyes were kind beneath sharp-edged spectacles that edged off the end of her patrician nose.

Faenia had grown strong, with time.

Once a quivering skinny little thing in darned pantyhose given to her by her housemates in the narrow, creaking house in Brooklyn, Faenia Lennox had become a woman Mrs Farmsworth would be proud of.

She was strong enough in her sixties to take time away from her life to reassess.

It was a lesson she'd learned a long time ago but lessons sometimes needed to be relearned, returned to, particularly where love and marriage were concerned.

Faenia looked down at slender tanned fingers, now manicured, with a ring on each ring finger – a Celtic Claddagh ring on her wedding finger and a gold and blue chrysoprase ring

on the other hand – and a pretty stainless-steel Cartier tank watch on her wrist.

In Lisowen, the tiny Kerry town where she'd grown up, nobody had jewellery like this. Or a house like this art deco one, perched on the hill like an adorable eyrie, full of exotic plants the likes of which the gardeners of Lisowen couldn't imagine, and real art – not expensive – on the walls, and books filling up white bookcases so that when Faenia came home from work, she could slip off her work clothes, put on soft shoes and sink into a couch with a book, lamplight warming her home.

And Nic's home – if Nic wanted it. But Nic wasn't brave enough to take the step, to walk out of the façade of a complicated life.

'Dearest Isobel,' wrote Faenia,

'Thank you for news. I still can't get my head around it all, to be honest. I knew it was coming and yet so much has been going on here at work and everything. But Eddie turning seventy – how did *that* happen? It seems like only yesterday we were kids playing round the back of Lady Margaret's orchard in Lisowen, stealing crab apples and hoping nobody knew because Lady Margaret, for all that she let the crab apples rot on the avenue, would have had a fit if she knew we'd stolen them. I do feel sorry for her now: her whole world was changing. At the time, we hated her, remember? She was rich, we were poor: it was all so simple in our heads. When nothing's simple, is it?

I don't know what I'd do without your telling me all the gossip – I'd know nothing. Although, it seems so distant to me now. Lisowen, Eddie, Mick, Kit and Nora. From another world and another life. Do you ever feel that?'

Faenia broke off the email at that point, feeling stupid.

Isobel, who'd been to the tiny, wooden-framed school with her in Lisowen all those years ago, would not feel the same at all. Isobel had stayed in Kerry and had married a man who'd

gone on to be a police sergeant in Lisowen itself, which gave her an interesting view into the inner workings of a busy Kerry tourist spot.

It also meant Isobel had had to remain on the outskirts of things. She could be involved but people didn't always tell her things as she was considered an unpaid part of the police force.

The person who asked how Isobel was feeling was her long-time friend so many thousands of miles away, the friend who'd reached out to her from New York all those years ago because Faenia knew Isobel would never tell anyone, that her secret would be safe.

There was a comfort, Faenia knew, in telling someone you never saw so many personal things. An email to an old friend in another country was like therapy without the 170-dollar price tag – one could be straightforward and honest, knowing the person you were writing to would not meet the other parties described, knowing there would be no judgement. Just kindness, understanding and the odd comment of such clarity that it cut through hours of meaningless chatter from other people.

And yet, Faenia could not say everything, not any more.

Thirty years before, she'd told Isobel, via the flimsy paper of an airmail letter, that her marriage to Chuck had broken up and the hideous irony of why.

Years later, when Isobel and Faenia herself had thought she was married to her job, she'd revealed how surprising and wonderful it had been to meet the much-older Marvin, and how they'd married in a civil ceremony that made it easier to meld Jewish and lapsed Catholic faiths. She'd written, when email had eventually taken over, about Marvin's adult children and grandchildren and what a joy they were in her life.

She'd written about Marvin's inexorable decline into dementia, how that cruel disease made her feel like a widow for four years before she'd actually become one, how she'd cared for Marvin with such love, how her heart had broken when he'd had to go into full-time care.

And she'd written about the shock of his death, how she'd slowly come out of the ache of widowhood from a marriage that had for months been in name only with a man who would smile that familiar smile at her in the care home and say: 'Who are you?' when she'd visit. She went every day: it was only right. Marvin had cared for her and her last act of kindness to him had to be caring for him.

In the same way, Isobel had written and later emailed about the goings-on of Lisowen, of her own family and why her daughter was still going out with that lout who ran the tour bus company.

'I can't say it to anyone else, Faenia, in case she finds out that I hate him but he won't ever marry her, she's stone mad about him and her fertile years have practically slipped away waiting for him.'

Faenia, who worked in a chic downtown department store as *the* personal shopper to the rich women of San Francisco, had seen many of her staff and many of her clients caught in the same trap.

All the arguing and convincing in the world could never convince these women that their man – the man they adored – might one day leave them for a younger woman when their chance of babies was gone.

'He loves me. We need each other!' they'd say to Faenia, starkly elegant in her work uniform of Marc Jacobs dark tailored pants – the best for small, slender women – crisp white shirt, a cotton blend with stretch added for all the racing around the store she did all day, and a piece of giant costume jewellery like one of her Navajo silver and turquoise pieces.

With her urchin-cut silver-white hair that clung to that fine-boned face, that air of wisdom, of having *seen*, Faenia was considered a guru on all things, not just which blouse would work with which jacket for which event or should couture be



considered for a society wedding. Her clients told her things, asked her things.

But even then, the lovely young women never listened. Neither did women of nearly forty, like Isobel's daughter.

She told Isobel this: 'There is almost nothing you can do, Isobel. Except tell her how you feel, just once. And explain that you are there for her, always, no matter what.'

Wisdom was so easy to pass on – much harder to practise.

If only she could practise some wisdom about Nic.

This was the love story she'd waited all her life for without actually knowing she was waiting or what she was waiting for. She'd met Nic when she was sixty and it had been like the clouds had parted and shone rays of divine sunlight upon this glorious late romance.

*Had shone. Past tense.*

If they couldn't be together, then she didn't want a half-hearted relationship. Faenia was too old to do anything half-hearted now.

The eighteen-year-old child who'd come to America was long gone, her wide-eyed innocence a thing of the past. In her place was a sophisticated woman who would hardly be recognised in her hometown.

'I have some time due to me at work,' Faenia typed, which was an understatement, as she had weeks of holidays stored over the twenty years she'd worked at the store, a job for which she'd been headhunted from Bergdorf's in New York.

'It will be strange to come back to Ireland after so long. They'll have cardiac arrests if they see me after so many years. I keep thinking the past is best left in the past and that Ed will have to be seventy without me. And how do I explain...?'

She knew that Isobel would email back that explanations were useless, that people forgot about the past and only worried about themselves.

Faenia stopped typing, thinking sadly of so many things lost in those years since she'd left Lisowen. She had lived far more

of her life away from Lisowen than in it. She was American now, had a US passport, had completed the citizenship exam.

Her accent no longer made people look at her strangely: she spoke with the cadences of a well-travelled American woman.

But she could still see her birth home in her mind's eye: the tiny town, with great swathes of green, shades of glorious trees bent by the Atlantic, rocky fields leading down to the darkening sea, and the stone monolith of the castle standing feudally over it all, the small farms scattered around like windfall apples dropped from a great tree.

In another era, the castle had belonged to some powerful lord and not much had changed when Faenia had been a child apart from the powerful owner. This time, no warrior lord stood in the keep and looked over people who could die on his word: instead, the grand, if impoverished Villiers family owned the castle, both a part of and not a part of the small village.

Faenia had been a different person growing up on the Kerry coast: innocent, stupid perhaps, and more trusting.

Information was certainly power.

Her life in America had helped her grow up and her whole life was here: her beloved stepchildren, Lola and Marc, and their families. The friends she'd made over the years, her friends from work, her work itself which she adored.

She had built a life here and she was thinking of dropping out of it to visit a country that had not treated her well so long ago.

But the fight with Nic – 'I can't do it, Faenia, I can't move in. It would kill the kids if I left' – had left her shattered.

This from an adult with adult children who had their own lives. It was an excuse and Faenia had grown weary of excuses.

The Claddagh ring Nic had given her sat in front of the keyboard because she'd taken it off to put cream on her hands. Funny how hands showed your age. Your skin could be

discreetly firmed up on your face thanks to the gentle caress of dermal fillers but the hands so often gave it all away: liver spots, skin as crêpey as an old gown, veins like snakes. Faenia had tried to take care of her hands, but still they gave away her age like nothing else about her, the Irish skin coming to the fore with its paleness and tendency towards sun spots.

She was a California sixty, which was the same as fifty anywhere else, as long as you stayed out of the sun and took care of all the beautiful dermatology work that had cost a fortune.

The ring Nic had given her gleamed at her. It was the prettiest Claddagh ring Faenia had ever seen: white gold, delicate and with a sheeny opal stone shining iridescently in place of the traditional heart.

With a traditional Irish Claddagh ring, one wore it with the apex of the heart towards oneself if one was attached and away from oneself, and on the right hand, if one was not.

A handy way for people long ago to tell who was affianced and who was not.

It was time to wear it away from her heart, Faenia thought, wanting to cry and not letting herself.

Or maybe she should not wear it at all any more. Maybe she should go home for the grand birthday party in Lisowen just to get away.

She'd visited so much of the world over the years but had never gone back to Ireland. It had felt too painful. How could she tell them what had happened, about all the mistakes she'd made...?

And yet with Nic gone from her life – and there was no doubt, Nic was gone – perhaps this was her chance to visit her homeland and make peace with the past.

# One

‘A diamond is a chunk of coal that  
did well under pressure.’

*Henry Kissinger*

In London, Cari Brannigan kicked the door of the empty office shut with one of her killer heels and went over to the window where she stared out at the imposing metropolitan skyline.

Most of the time, the view from Cambridge Publishing, a whole building housing a veritable pantheon of imprints, made Cari feel proud to be part of such an organisation.

Right now, she just wondered if the windows were plate glass or not and if there was a TV set anywhere on this floor full of books and conference rooms so she could fling the TV out, just to watch it ricochet fifteen floors down as if she were Aerosmith or Led Zeppelin or some wild rock band hellbent on 1970s-style destruction.

Half an hour ago, she'd thought she had a good career, a brilliant career for a thirty-four-year-old woman on the verge of total breakthrough with the possibility of moving to London from the Irish division – a move she'd never considered possible three years before when everything about her life had fallen apart because of The Break Up.

Cari called it The Break Up in her mind because Wedding Called Off at the Altar made her feel like such a loser, as if Jerry Springer and Jeremy Kyle would fight to the death to go through the grisly details on TV: ‘And you didn't have a clue your fiancé was cheating on you till you were standing at the altar in your dress ...?’

‘No!’ the TV Cari would have sobbed and then launched

herself at Bastard/Barney and ripped his eyes or other important bits out with her gel nails – she'd need gel nails, right? – in front of a chanting audience telling her to 'Get him, girl!'

Post The Break Up, everything in her life had felt hellish, but she'd clambered her way out thanks to work, finding a fabulous author, the author who meant that career-wise she was finally on top of the world.

She'd won Editor of the Year at the prestigious trade industry awards. Her author was one of the company's top three authors in terms of both earnings and prizes won.

Next stop: Cari Brannigan moving to London to take a higher-up job as publisher which would mean leaving her family and her cousin Jojo, who was her best friend: the people who'd helped her through her pain. But there was a position open in the company, and she was tipped to take over the job, desperate for it...

And then, just twenty minutes ago, another man had tripped her career plans up as neatly as if he'd dumped her at the altar. Which was why the idea of throwing something or someone out of the glassy Cambridge building was so tempting.

Cari had been sitting at the monthly sales and editorial meeting of the Xenon imprint along with lots of other editors and five of the Irish team who'd flown over from Dublin that morning on the red-eye. She should have been listening to the presentation about the heartbreaking new non-fiction title the rights department had bought from a Swedish agent – a tale of animal cruelty and how one scarred fighting dog had changed the lives of several hardened criminals.

Instead, and this was weird because she loved dogs, she'd found herself thinking about what sort of apartment she'd get when she moved to London. Cool loft? Quirky mews? A houseboat, even? Or a swish apartment she could decorate in classic New York style with an all-white bathroom with those subway tiles? All rented, obviously: no way she could

afford to buy anything. Her cousin Paul and his wife, Lena, had just such a New York-style apartment in Manhattan and Cari loved it.

She was getting better, she decided. She was recovering, coming out of the last stage of grief – what was it: raging fury? Whatever. Cari had made up her own stages of grief, ones far more fun than the Kübler-Ross ones.

Wanting to kill someone was first. Next up was buying shoes she couldn't afford. She forgot what three was but four was misery-eating ice cream and promising never to touch a man again.

Yes, she'd come through all those stages and had graduated with honours.

A little twinkle of joy filled her. In London, she could shop for shoes all the time. Despite her coolly androgynous look – straight, mannish trousers, dark shirts to hide her D-cup breasts, minimal make-up and midnight-dark hair cut short and curving round a face emphasised with eyeliner and glossy nude lips – Cari Brannigan loved shoes. Soft leather. Teeny bows in surprising places, suede with narrow straps to wrap elegantly round her slender ankles, insane colours like from an artists' palette: she loved them all. The higher the better.

Also, high shoes made her look taller, which was handy because since *The Break Up*, she had developed a wild hunger for chocolate. Not any old muck, no. But fabulous quality chocolate: proper stuff that cost proper money.

It still made you put on weight, though. With gorgeous high heels, Cari could hide the extra pounds and pretend she was a lean five foot seven, instead of a not-so-lean five foot four in flats, which she almost never wore.

She'd already scanned the list and knew she needed to pay attention in about five minutes' time, when the talk would move on to books likely to sell in her territory, because with so many books released every moment, a person would go mad trying to remember them all. Books that sold well in Australia

might do zilch in Ireland and vice versa. A wise publishing person knew the difference.

New book meetings were long and exhausting and Cari was dying for the afternoon ten-minute tea break so she could fill her mug with strong coffee, snaffle a chocolate biscuit, and be ready for the final round.

Cari had hoped to get a moment alone with the UK office's publishing director, Jennifer, a charming but tough woman with a Cleopatra black bob rippled through with grey streaks, but Jennifer hadn't returned her email earlier in the week and throughout the day-long meeting had appeared to be in a very bad mood and hadn't met Cari's eyes. Strange and unsettling.

When tea break finally rolled around, Edwin Miller, the managing director of all of Cambridge, had gently asked her to stay back for a moment.

Gavin Watson, a publisher in London and therefore higher on the food chain than Cari, stayed in the room also, along with Jennifer, who was looking more annoyed than ever.

'I don't want the Irish contingent to miss your flights and I'd hoped to talk to you afterwards, Cari,' Edwin was saying.

He managed to shove Jeff Karan, the Irish MD and Cari's direct boss, out the door and Cari felt the danger.

Jeff was looking at her with that hangdog expression he often wore, as if he wanted to stay, wanted to protect her, but he was no match for Edwin, who had been managing director so long the joke was that his first printer had been a certain Herr Gutenberg.

Edwin closed the door.

Cari felt all her focus hone in on him. The animal instinct that told her danger was afoot had pinged up from 'mild emergency' to 'oh hell, sound the alarms, children and women first'.

'As I said, I'd hoped to get you on your own afterwards, Cari,' Edwin said in his charming way, 'but we're running late, as ever, so let's do it now.'

His complicit gaze at Gavin, who was beyond connected in the British publishing world, made Cari hit Anxiety Level Four. Gavin's grandfather had founded Cambridge Publishing, the grand old publishing house which was home to all the imprints. While the various imprints, like record labels, dealt with different areas, there were two other commercial imprints other than Xenon, but Xenon was the biggest.

Edwin wasn't just the managing director of Xenon, but deputy managing director of Cambridge.

Gavin was tipped for the top – mainly for his connections and his ruthlessness, certainly not for his ability to edit or to manage human beings, Cari thought.

'Cari, do sit,' said Edwin, and she knew then things were bad.

She sat, nervously, like colt about to run.

'This is going to be hard,' Edwin began, shooting his cuffs which were, as always, French and decorated with cufflinks from some wealthy, aristocratic ancestor, 'but we have to think of the company and of the authors. You know how they are – capricious, certainly. Tricky. And sometimes—' Edwin faltered. 'Sometimes they want change.'

'Who wants change?' Cari said.

Sitting be damned, she got to her feet and began to pace. All her life, she'd been a pacer. If she was going to the scaffold, she wanted to be on her feet so she could poke a spike heel into a captor's foot.

She looked over at Gavin who was smirking. He was younger than her, certainly. Doing that cool thing with a beard and a fake-manly sort of shirt in a lumberjack style. Probably never held a damn axe in his life. She narrowed her eyes at him.

'John Steele wants a new editor.'

Edwin's words sucked all the air out of the room for a moment. Cari thought she might not be able to breathe.

'John wants what? A new editor? Not me? I'm the only person he trusts, you know that. Why didn't he tell me? We're



on the phone all the time. Or get Freddie to talk to me. I'd have talked him out of it—' She stopped. She was babbling.

Freddie was John's agent, the only other person in publishing that John said he trusted, apart from Cari herself, who had discovered his first book on the slush pile and championed it fiercely.

'I told you this wasn't the way to do it, Edwin,' said Jennifer now. 'We should have discussed this in advance with you, Cari, but—'

'But John Steele's contract is coming up for renewal, Jennifer, and he is very important to the company,' said Edwin. 'It's all happened at very high speed but he wants Gavin to be his new editor,' Edwin added, putting the final nail into the coffin.

'It's a guy thing, Cari,' Gavin said, speaking for the first time and smirking.

'Authors sometimes like to change editors: John feels he's losing his edge, he wants change,' put in Edwin.

'Writers are artists, Cari, we must think of them,' interrupted Gavin.

'Bull,' snarled Cari. 'You always say they're spoiled little prima donnas who earn far too much and expect us to put in their commas. *I'm* the one who tries to make you see that they get anxious about writing, worried about what we think of their first drafts, and their second drafts, hideously anxious about selling books and letting us all down, and that yes, they *are* artists.'

Gavin, who had won, after all, smiled as she repeated his bitchy words back to him.

'I was afraid you'd take it like this,' he said, with a fake, pitying smile.

'Like what? Angrily?' snarled Cari. 'Honestly, why would I be angry when *you are stealing my best author?*'

Authors wanted lots of things but generally they told their editors, either in person or via their agents.

They didn't do it by discussing it with the MD, publishing

director and another editor, and then letting them stick the knife in at the tail end of a new books meeting.

‘I told him I’d tell you, smooth it all over,’ said Gavin silkily. ‘As you know, John can’t bear scenes. I was over at his place in Cork on Monday. That’s a lovely new extension they’re building onto the house, and the landscaping is exquisite, isn’t it? I’m going to help him with the London flat he’s thinking of buying. Go the extra mile. He’ll need a base here as he’s agreed to do more publicity. He’s agreed to tour, by the way,’ Gavin added, still smirking.

Cari heard herself gasp.

John Steele hated publicity, did perhaps one interview on each continent per book, which did not make him beloved of either the press or the publicity department. He had never toured, and had told Cari that the thought made him physically sick. Somehow, Gavin had succeeded where she had failed.

Cari knew there was no more to be said.

She stared at Edwin, who she’d admired, and Jennifer, who could have given her a heads-up to what was going on but hadn’t.

‘We need you in Dublin. You’re a fabulous editor, Cari,’ said Jennifer, dark eyes full of pity under that Cleopatra bob.

‘You knew I wanted to move to London, move up the company,’ Cari said to Jennifer, trying not to let her voice shake. ‘I found John Steele for us, championed him. I coaxed that first edit out of him when nobody said we’d be able to cut the book from three hundred thousand words down to one hundred and sixty. I coaxed the difficult second book from him. And you let this’ – she gestured in disgust at Gavin – ‘steal him away from me. Fine,’ she said, stalking to the door. ‘Since you’ve already agreed, it seems I’m surplus to requirements.’

It wasn’t the best way to leave a room when the company’s managing director and the publishing director were both there and when you had had hopes of a big move to London, a move

of which they would be in charge. But suddenly Cari didn't care.

Her career was in tatters. The move to London was all predicated on her involvement in John Steele's meteoric rise and now that he was no longer her author, she'd just taken a tumble down a snake in the corporate world of snakes and ladders.

Edwin and Jennifer let her go without another word. That told her a lot.

In the quiet of the lonely office she'd found to lick her wounds, Cari stared down at the street far below and stopped thinking about throwing a TV out the window. What good would that do? No, for the sake of all womankind, she needed to rid the world of Gavin Watson, the slimy, good-for-nothing toad who'd just shafted her.

Her editorial mind, used to dealing with killers from her beloved crime novels and how long it took for a person to die from a lung puncture, crystallised. What sort of weapon did she need? A retractable switchblade she could slide from her sleeve and flick into action, ready to put up against Gavin Watson's carotid artery? Was more hardcore better? A handgun, something menacing and heavy with a silencer on the business end, that she could aim coolly and tell him the warning shots were going straight into his head?

Or perhaps a bit of street fighting: a sharp blow with the edge of her hand into the soft cartilage of his throat. Then he'd be lying on the floor, flailing and trying to breathe and she could tell him what she was going to do to him next for stealing her author. If only she'd bought that staple gun on sale in Lidl...

No: Cari felt a film of cold sweat break over her body.

Not just stealing an author – stealing her best author, the man she'd nurtured for four years, the crime genius who said nobody understood him like she did.

John Steele was one of Cambridge's biggest authors. A quiet,

unassuming Sheffield man, he'd settled in West Cork in Ireland decades ago and had been writing ever since, although he'd supported his family by working as a carpenter of fine kitchens. When he'd finally summoned up the courage to send one of his novels to a publisher and it had landed on Cari's desk, she had felt the spark of excitement of which every editor dreamed.

The hairs on her arms had literally stood up. This, this crime thriller with a brilliant but broken – *naturally* – hero, was incredible. The book was quite unputdownable. She, who could speed read, had stayed up till three o'clock finishing the huge manuscript and she'd known they must have it. Yes, it needed vast tracts of editing because it was a huge book but it was clever, marvellously written *and* commercial, the holy grail of publishing.

A star was born.

For four years, she had been the conduit between John Steele and the outside world. She had taken care of him, helped make him one of the biggest writers in the world. She was the only person in publishing he trusted, apart from his agent, Freddie, another Sheffield man who also understood John's reticence with the press.

She was godmother to his young son, for heaven's sake! Not that she was the motherly type, she'd protested when he'd asked her, but still, John Steele, the man she'd pushed to number one on book sales' charts all around the world, had said he'd wanted it.

'I couldn't have done any of it without you, Cari,' he'd said. 'Mags and I want you to be Jake's godmother. You're family to us.'

As family, she'd bought two Minion teddies and a set of adorable clothes for Jake for his second birthday in September. Had braved Hamley's before Christmas to buy him a bag-load of things, had promised to be his spiritual helper for ever – OK, that had been pushing it because since the wedding, she still felt as if she might get ill every time she stepped

into a church, but still – and now John Steele, her finest, most commercial, biggest-selling author, one of the entire company’s biggest-selling authors *worldwide*, wanted to be edited by Gavin Watson.

Her position as ‘family’ was being usurped.

There had been no call from John, no call from his agent. Nothing. Nada. Zip. It was a bloody coup and Cari hadn’t had the slightest idea it was going to happen.

She sat down heavily in the office’s ergonomic chair and brooded.

The knife, definitely the knife. So she could watch the blood dripping out of him. Like in *Stone Cold Blue Killer*, not a John Steele book and one by a first-time Irish author, it had never sold much but she’d edited it years ago and liked it. The killer had been a hunter and he’d hung his victims up on a hunting trestle ...

Somehow, Cari went back into the boardroom after tea break and sat through the rest of the meeting. She nailed a smile to her face but she couldn’t bring herself to add much to the conversation, except when it came time to present her new books. As only one of two editors from Ireland, her remit covered many genres, unlike her UK colleagues who generally specialised, so Cari had fourteen books to present, nine non-fiction and five fiction.

With Jeff casting sympathetic looks at her across the table, Cari aced it with her acting.

She started with the small, sweet memoir about a childhood in a remote part of Ireland followed by a Broadway career of an Irish actress, a book she loved, and her presentation of it was delivered as if Cari had spent time on Broadway herself. The women’s fiction novel that dealt with adoption and infidelity had everyone at the boardroom sighing, saying, ‘This could be big.’

Someone – clearly John Steele’s defection had been on a

need-to-know basis so far, although by tonight, everyone, their authors, their agents, their former agents, their former publishers, and the NSA would know – praised Cari’s next book, a debut by a fledgling crime writer, by saying, ‘She has shades of John Steele, not that anyone can beat John!’

Everyone smiled at Cari, none of them having a clue that he wasn’t her author any more.

John Steele: saving careers left, right and centre, apart from the woman who’d made him and he was screwing up hers.

When the meeting finally ended, Cari was out the door faster than anyone else. Normally the small Irish team travelled together but not tonight. Tonight, Cari couldn’t bear to hear any sympathy.

She threw herself into a taxi outside Cambridge House and went to Paddington where she sat in lonely splendour on the Heathrow Express.

The betrayal filled her mind.

She wasn’t surprised at Gavin. Gavin would put his grandmother on the game if he thought it would give him an edge.

And as for Edwin – nobody could be that sweetly nice and remain as managing director for so long. He must have the negatives of so many hideously embarrassing/career-destroying photos. It was the only answer.

But John Steele ... That betrayal was absolute. After the heartbreak of her wedding, she’d felt as if she couldn’t trust anyone again and she’d learned to trust John as he, in turn, had learned to trust her. That he could turn his back on her now was devastating.

She rifled in her bag for a tissue, and found the post she’d grabbed from the hall floor that morning as she’d got the early flight. Bills, bills, and one hard card envelope, either a wedding invitation – to which she would not go – or maybe a party?

Her mind on Gavin, John and the pain, she ripped it open.

Expensive paper.

With a flashback to her own wedding, Cari remembered that she and He-Who-Must-Never-Be-Named-Again had spent good money on their invitations. Sage-green-lined envelopes, old gold writing on the card, a green card with gold writing for the RSVP.

Things of beauty. Expensive beauty. She'd burned the RSVPs and the few unused invitations ceremoniously in the back garden afterwards with her sister, Maggie, and cousins Trina and Jojo helping.

'Burn the bastard out of your life,' darling Jojo had said, and then opened a bottle of sparkling wine, because they were all a bit broke and, as Trina – who never had a ha'penny – said, 'Champagne would be a mistake in case you thought of champagne when you thought of—'

'Him!' said Jojo. 'We shall never say his name again.'

'Like Voldemort.'

Still thinking of this, she unthinkingly ripped open the envelope and stared at it in horror.

Edward and Bess Brannigan invite you to celebrate  
Edward's seventieth birthday party in the glorious surroundings of  
Lisowen Castle, Co. Kerry on the weekend of 25th March.  
We would be delighted if you would be our guests for  
a weekend of celebration.

She blinked: once, twice.

Was this a hallucination brought on by sheer temper? Or perhaps a sort of rare high blood pressure anomaly that made nightmares seem true by fizzing through the cerebral cortex with a last-ditch bypass into the optic nerve just to make the whole thing seem real.

Aeons ago, she'd edited a book about simple things to watch out for health-wise when she was an ultra-junior editor at Factual Anomalies, a small, slightly off-beat publisher of factual

manuals. They'd been the sort of publishers who were ahead of the internet curve for oddball information and had plenty of 'Teach Yourself How To Perform the Heimlich Manoeuvre On Every Species'-type fare. It was harder with dogs than you'd think.

Unfortunately, the last chapter of said book: 'If that fails, here's a guide to speedy, low-risk tracheotomies – you don't need to be a doctor to do this!' had been the one that had caused the trouble.

Allegedly low-risk, non-medically performed tracheotomies never went well, no matter how many manuals you read or how often you'd seen it done on *Grey's Anatomy*.

Factual Anomalies had gone down after a slew of civil injury cases, but still, Cari had learned a lot. Like where the carotid artery was and how easily it might be pierced with a flick knife. That had come from their urban survival guide: 'How to survive after an apocalypse with just a knife, water treatment tablets and a car battery', the blurb had said.

It had sold shedloads. People, male readers particularly, liked being prepared. Cari could still vaguely recall how to build an A-frame shelter from planks of wood and some tarpaulin. Not that there was much call for this in her life. But still, you never knew. In the apocalypse/revolution, Gavin would be first up against the wall, that was for sure.

She refocused on the stiff card.

The words remained the same.

She was invited to her Uncle Ed's seventieth birthday at an all-expenses paid weekend in Lisowen Castle in Lisowen, the small, blink-and-you'd-miss-it town where her mother, Nora, father, Mick, and uncles Edward and Kit had grown up. The invitation made it plain that this party was one where the entire extended Brannigan family could get together to celebrate the whole dynasty.



The concept of the word ‘extended’ was the one which made her feel ill.

Just the family and she could cope.

She’d seen most of them since her disastrous wedding morning. The immediate family of three brothers and their families had been at the few family events, most notably at Uncle Ed’s second wedding six months ago to Bess, whom her cousin Jojo called Bess the Impaler. Jojo’s mother and Edward’s wife, Lottie, had died horribly of cancer now more than three years before, and most of the family were astonished when he found a partner in Bess and then married her with what appeared to be unseemly haste.

However, Bess did not appear to be a touchy-feely sort of person and she had done a good impression of seeming utterly oblivious to the undercurrents of resentment coming from Jojo at the wedding. Cari had found herself feeling sorry for poor Amy, Bess’s grown-up daughter, because she had the air of a pound puppy who kept getting left behind while other, cuter puppies went home with forever families. It couldn’t have been easy growing up with Bess as your mama and not being perfect.

Amy, all curves and falling over occasional tables and with a complete lack of small talk, was clearly not her mother’s idea of the perfect daughter.

It had been a very small wedding and in respect over Lottie’s recent death, all of the extended Brannigan family had *not* been invited. Luckily that meant no Traci, Cari’s second cousin, who was married to Barney – the same Barney who’d left Cari stranded at the altar more than three years before, almost fainting with the scents of peonies and shock, after he’d said in a low, guilty voice: ‘I’m so sorry, Cari, but I can’t. I’m going to marry Traci.’

And then he’d left.

Marched down the aisle with half the guests staring at him open-mouthed and the other half staring at Cari, equally opened-mouthed at the sight of the groom legging it out the

church while the bride stood shakily at the altar, alone. In creamy, Celtic-maiden silk, as well as beautiful Jimmy Choo slingbacks in crystal and old gold that had cost a fortune and were a tad too small and hurt.

Jojo, maid of honour and saviour, had hustled Cari to the side and into the vestry, which the priest hadn't liked, but before Jojo had a chance to say anything, her darling Mum had arrived with Lottie and between the two of them they'd conjured up black opaque tights from the bottom of someone's handbag, as well as a man's long, just-in-case-it-turns-cold sweater. The priest had been sent out and they'd unhooked Cari from the wedding dress and into these semi normal clothes in a flash. The sweater was long enough to look like a mini dress. Not at all bridal. Jojo grabbed the shoes and the dress, shoved both into a giant jute shopping bag with *Vincent de Paul Give At Christmas* written on it, then shoved it at her mother.

She whisked Cari out the back vestry door and into Paul's car before the guests had begun streaming out of the church gossiping like mad. Jojo, still in full bridesmaid regalia, had driven to her and Hugh's house, which was – thankfully – not done up like a bridal bower. While Cari had stared at the kettle, wondering how to turn it on because her faculties seemed to have abandoned her, Jojo had pulled off her matron of honour gown and wriggled into her jeans.

Nora and Cari's sister, Maggie, rolled up fifteen minutes later with Cari's handbag, which she had whisked from the second wedding car where Trina, another one of the bridesmaids, was supposed to be minding it.

All the time this flurry of activity was going on, Cari stared into space.

'He's going to marry Traci,' she said to herself over and over, in a haze that two cups of strong coffee with sugar, and one laced with brandy, could not penetrate.

Now, three years later, she would have to see him and Traci once again at this blasted birthday party. Because from the

look of the glossy invitation, it was clear that Bess was going to invite every last member of the extended family to this big event. She'd make up for the small wedding now.

And Cari would have to face both Traci, fiancé-stealer, and Barney, ex-fiancé and total pig. Just great.

The Heathrow Express slid seamlessly into the airport. Cari ripped the invitation into very small pieces and, once off the train and in the steely caverns beneath Heathrow, threw the pieces into the first bin she saw.

That was one party she would not be attending.

She marched through the airport like a woman on a mission. She strode past the kind ladies wearily trying to flog perfume and through a hen party in stetsons and sparkles, with T-shirts announcing 'Little Devils Dublin Tour'.

For a brief moment, Cari paused, wedge-booted Robert Clergerie's (wickedly expensive but good for airport travel) resting as she considered informing the bride-to-be (pink, sparkle-encrusted T-shirt in the middle of many black T-shirts) that marriage was insane and it was a far better bet to find herself a lover. Or even a few lovers, instead of plumping for just one man.

Several lovers meant you could have a fabulous-looking commitment-phobe, a muscular guy who specialised in carrying you into the bedroom *and* a bespectacled professor who could talk in bed afterwards, depending on what mood you were in on a particular day. These men couldn't meet, obviously. Or maybe they could? Just to keep them on their toes.

Why be stuck with just *one* man with all his faults, foibles and issues? When a man was one of three, he knew to leave his issues at the door to Cari's apartment. Well, a girl could dream. She had a lovely bed but, in truth, it wasn't getting much action these days. Her libido had died at that altar. No man had warmed her bed since Barney. She decided she had

forgotten how to have sex and, actually, that was all right with her. Celibacy was the new ...? The new *something*, she was sure.

'Kerry, you look wonderful!' squeaked one of the hen party and Cari noticed that they were running back and forth between the Clarins and the Charlotte Tilbury counters trying out all the make-up.

The bride now boasted sexily red lips and her eyes shone with both the brilliance of the latest palettes and a blusher that made her glow. Sheer happiness was written all over her face.

It was, Cari could see, too late.

She had been overtaken by the pod people.

Like Scrooge muttering 'bah, humbug', at Christmas, Cari stalked off, and made her way into a shoe shop.

Heels, unlike men, never let you down.

She dumped her leather briefcase beside a display shelf, took down a patent leather shoe with a heel like a rapier and checked the size. It was her size: thirty-eight. Perfect.

'Can I help?' said a sweet young salesman, hovering eagerly.

'Does this look like it would rip through a man's crotch if you stood on him?' Cari said, holding up the shoe.

The young man gulped. He was new. His boyfriend had said he should go to the high street store. The airport was full of nutters: everyone knew that.

'Depends,' he said hesitantly.

'On what?'

'How hard you pushed?' He was looking around for the *Candid Camera* people because it was a good job and he'd only just started, and perhaps this was some sort of hazing thing ...

Cari ripped off one wedge, slipped her foot into the shoe and ground the heel into the hard shop floor. She thought of one face, one crotch, as she ground. Gavin's. No, Barney's. No, Gavin's.

She thought of the stupid girl getting married and going round announcing the fact, all happiness, stetsons and feather boas. Why wasn't there a warning with marriage? With life?

Everyone betrayed you in the end. Everyone except family. 'I'll try the other one,' she said, sitting down.

The assistant leapt off to the stockroom and returned quickly.

The woman looked normal: sleek business suit, dark coat, very masculine, a briefcase and a very nice Marc Jacobs handbag... But perhaps she was a dominatrix beneath it all? He'd seen male doms in the gay clubs but not many women ones. She didn't need a whip to be scary, she just was plain old scary.

The woman tried both shoes on and stomped around, long coat whirling around her like a female Batman. If Batman wore high heels and red lippie, she'd be a dead ringer for him.

'I'll take them,' she growled. 'In fact, I'll wear them.'

The sweet young man grabbed her own shoes and had them in the spike heels' box in a flash. He processed her credit card faster than he ever had in his life and then she was gone, stomping off.

He sighed with relief. He was definitely moving to the high street store.