

# Heart and Soul

Maeve Binchy

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## Chapter One

They had told Clara Casey that there was a small budget to furnish her new office. A tiresome administrator with a loud voice, tousled hair and irritating body language had gestured around the dull, awkward-looking room with its grey walls and ill-fitting steel filing cabinets. Not the kind of room that a senior consultant would consider much of a prize after thirty years studying and practising medicine. Still, it was never wise to be negative at the outset.

She struggled for the man's name. 'Yes, indeed . . . um . . . Frank,' she said. 'It certainly has a lot of what might be called potential.'

This was not the response he had expected. The handsome, dark-haired woman in her forties, wearing a smart, lilac-coloured knitted suit, was striding around the small room like a caged lioness.

He spoke quickly. 'Not unlimited potential, Dr Casey, not financially speaking, I fear. But a coat of paint here and a piece of nice furniture there, a feminine touch will do wonders.' He smiled indulgently.

Clara fought hard to keep her temper.

'Yes, of course, those are just the kind of judgements I would bring to decorating my own home. This is entirely

different. For one thing I can't have a room hidden miles away down a corridor. If I am to run this place I have to be in the centre of it and run it.'

'But everyone will know where you are, your name will be on the door,' he spluttered.

'I have no intention of being locked away in here,' she said.

'Dr Casey, you have seen the funding, you were aware of the set-up when you took the position.'

'Nothing was said about where my desk would be. Nothing at all. It was left to be discussed at a later date. This is the date.'

He didn't like her tone. It was definitely like the tone of a schoolmistress.

'And this is the room,' he said.

She was tempted to ask him to call her Clara, but remembered he would have to recognise her status here if she was to get anything done. She knew his type.

'I think not, Frank,' she said.

'Can you show me where else you could be placed? The dietician's room is even smaller, the secretary has just room for herself and the files. The physio has to have his room laid out with equipment, the nurses need their station, the waiting room must be near the door. Can you kindly inspire me as to where we can find you another room if this perfectly serviceable place doesn't suit?'

'I'll sit in the hall,' Clara said simply.

'The hall? What hall?'

'The space when you come in the glass doors.'

'But, Dr Casey, that wouldn't do at all.'

'And exactly why not, Frank?'

'You'd be at everyone's beck and call,' he began.

'Yes?'

'There would be no privacy, it wouldn't look . . . it wouldn't be right. There would only be room for a desk.'

‘All I need is a desk.’

‘No, Doctor, with respect, you need much more than a desk. Much more. Things like a filing cabinet,’ he finished lamely.

‘I can have one of those in the secretary’s office.’

‘A place for your patients’ case histories?’

‘In the nurses’ room.’

‘You’ll need some privacy sometimes to talk to patients.’

‘We can call this room that you like so much the consultation room, we can all use it when needed. You could paint it calm, restful colours, get new curtains; I’ll choose them if you like. A few chairs, a round table. Okay?’

He knew it was over, but he gave one final bleat.

‘That was never the way before, Dr Casey, it just wasn’t the way.’

‘There never *was* a heart clinic here before, Frank, so there is no point in trying to compare it with something that didn’t exist. We are setting this place up from scratch and if I am going to run it then I’m going to run it properly.’

Clara knew that he was still looking at her disapprovingly from the door as she walked towards her car. She kept her head high and a false smile nailed to her face.

She zapped to unlock the car and swung herself into the driving seat.

After work today someone would certainly ask Frank what she was like. She knew just what he would say. ‘Ball-breaker, big-time.’

If pressed he would say that she was power-hungry and couldn’t wait to get into the job and throw her weight around. If only he knew. No one must ever know. No one would know just how much Clara Casey did *not* want this new job. But she had agreed to do it for a year. And do it she would.

She pulled out into the afternoon traffic and felt it safe to

let the false smile fall from her face. She was going to go to the supermarket and buy three kinds of pasta sauce. Whatever she got one of the girls objected. The cheese was too strong, the tomato was too dull, the pesto too self-consciously trendy. But out of three they might find something that would suit. Please may they be in good humour tonight.

She couldn't bear it if Adi and her boyfriend Gerry had yet another ideological disagreement about the environment or the whale or battery farming. Or if Linda had yet another one-night stand with some loser who hadn't bothered to call her.

Clara sighed.

People had told her that girls were terrible in their teens but became fine in their twenties. As usual Clara had it wrong. They were horrific now at twenty-three and twenty-one. When they had been teenagers they hadn't been too bad. But of course that bastard Alan had been around then so things had been easier. Sort of easier.

Adi Casey let herself into the house where she lived with her sister and her mother. *Menopause Manor*, her sister Linda used to call the place. Very funny, really humorous.

Mum wasn't home yet. That was good, Adi thought, she would go and have a nice long bath, use the new oils she had bought at the market on the way home. She had also bought some organic vegetables; who knew what kind of shop-bought thing Mum might bring home next, filled with additives and chemicals.

To her annoyance she heard music from the bathroom. Linda had beaten her to the bath. Mum had been talking about a second bathroom. Shower room, anyway. But there had been no mention of it recently. And what with Mum not getting the big job she had hoped for, this wasn't the time to mention it. Adi gave a little at home, but she didn't earn much as a teacher. Linda gave nothing. She was still a student but it

never crossed her mind to get a part-time job. Mum ran the show and was entitled to call the shots.

Before Adi got to her room, the phone rang. It was her father.

‘How’s my beautiful daughter?’ he asked.

‘I think she’s having a bath, Dad, will I get her?’

‘I meant you, Adi.’

‘You mean whoever you’re talking to, Dad, you always do.’

‘Adi, *please*. I’m only trying to be nice, don’t be so cross over nothing.’

‘Right, Dad, sorry. What is it?’

‘Can’t I just call to say hello to my—’

‘You don’t do that, you ring when you want something.’  
Adi was sharp.

‘Will your mother be at home this evening?’

‘Yes.’

‘What time?’

‘This is a family, Dad, not a facility where people check in and sign books.’

‘I want to talk to her.’

‘So call her then.’

‘She doesn’t return my calls.’

‘So turn up.’

‘She doesn’t like that you know. *Her* space and all that.’

‘I’m too old. This game between you has gone on too long. Sort it, Dad, please.’

‘Could you and Linda be out tonight, I want to talk to her about something.’

‘No, we will *not* be out.’

‘I’ll treat you to supper somewhere.’

‘You’ll pay for us to go out of our own home?’

‘Try to help me on this.’

‘Why should I? You never tried to help anyone anywhere along the line.’

‘Why won’t you do this small thing?’

‘Because Mum has arranged to cook us a supper to celebrate taking a new job. Because it’s long planned and I am not cancelling it now. Sorry, Dad.’

‘I’m coming over anyway.’ He hung up.

Linda came dripping out of the bathroom wrapped in a damp towel. Adi looked at her without pleasure. Linda, who ate junk food, who smoked and drank, looked just beautiful, her long wet hair as good as anyone else’s would look coming from a salon. There was no fairness in life.

‘Who was on the phone?’ Linda wanted to know.

‘Dad. Like a bag of weasels.’

‘What did he want?’

‘To talk to Mum. He said he would pay us to go out tonight.’

Linda brightened. ‘Really? How much?’

‘I said no. No way.’

‘That was very high-handed of you.’

‘You call him and renegotiate if you want to, I’m not going out.’

‘I suppose it’s the big D,’ Linda said.

‘Why should they bother to get divorced *now*? She didn’t throw him out when she should have. Aren’t they fine as they are? Him with the bimbo and Mam here with us?’ Adi saw no reason to change things.

Linda was shruggy. ‘Bet she’s pregnant, the bimbo, bet you that’s what he’s coming to tell her.’

‘God,’ said Adi, ‘now I wish I *had* agreed to take his bribe if that’s what it’s all going to be about. I think I’ll call him back.’

In the end she sent him a text: ‘House will be daughter-free from 7.30 tonight. We have gone to Quentins. Will send you the bill. Love, Adi.’

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‘Alan? Alan, the phone is a bit fuzzy. Can you hear me? It’s Cinta.’

‘I know it is, darling.’

‘Have you told her?’

‘I’m just on the way to her house, darling.’

‘You won’t bottle out like last week?’

‘That’s not exactly what happened . . .’

‘Don’t let it happen again *please*, Alan.’

‘No, darling, you can rely on me.’

‘I’ll need to, Alan, this time, I need to.’

Clara let herself in. The house was suspiciously quiet. She would have expected both girls to be at home. There were wet towels on the bathroom floor. Linda had been home having a bath. There were leaflets about recycling plastic on the kitchen table, so Adi had been back too. But no sign of them now. Then she saw the note on the fridge.

*Dad is coming round at 8 to talk to you; he sort of implied he wanted this to be a one to one. Without us being there. He implied rather heavily as it happens. Actually, he offered to pay for a meal out for us, so we’re going to Quentins.*

*Love from us both,*

*Adi*

*What* could he want tonight of all nights? At the end of a long, tiring, disappointing day which had involved seeing the place without a soul which was going to be the centre of her work for the next year?

At the end of hours of role-playing and attitude-taking about territory with a tiresome bureaucratic hospital official. After hunting through three different delicatessen sections to get pasta sauces for her picky daughters. And now they were both going out to a fancy restaurant and Clara had to face



Alan and whatever cracked scheme he had worked out to take something back from their financial settlement.

Clara put the food away; there would be no sharing of anything with Alan. Not any longer. Those years were long over. She took two bottles of fizzy water out of the fridge. She put the two bottles of Australian Sauvignon Blanc at the very back of the fridge behind the yoghurts and low-fat spreads. He would never find them there. And she might well need them badly after he had gone.

At Quentins restaurant Adi and Linda settled down happily.

‘You could run a small country for a week on what they’re paying at that table over there.’ Adi was disapproving.

‘Yeah, but not with any sense of fun,’ Linda said.

‘I wonder are we really blood sisters?’ Adi asked.

‘You’ve always wondered that.’ Linda slowly sipped her Tequila Sunrise.

‘What time do you think he’ll go?’ Adi wondered.

‘Who, the guy at the table?’

‘No, Dad, you fool.’

‘As soon as he gets what he wants. What makes him different to any other man?’ Linda caught the waiter’s eye. Another Tequila Sunrise and she would be ready to order.

Clara had intended to change into home clothes but the phone never stopped ringing so there was no time. Her mother wanted to know what the new office was like.

‘Do you have a carpet on the floor?’ Her mother was down to basics.

‘It’s sort of modern flooring throughout the whole place.’

‘You don’t then.’ She could see her mother’s mouth closing like a trap. The way it had when she had got engaged to Alan, got married to Alan and got separated from Alan. There had been many closed-trap moments.

Her friend Dervla had called to know what the mood of the place was like.

‘Mushroom and magnolia,’ Clara had told her.

‘God, what on earth does that mean?’

‘That’s the colours it’s painted in at the moment.’

‘But you can change all that.’

‘Oh yes. Definitely.’

‘So it’s not really just the colour scheme that’s upsetting you.’

‘Who’s upset?’

‘I can’t imagine. Did you meet any of the people you’ll be working with?’

‘Nope, it was tombstone city.’

‘It’s a question of nothing will please you? Am I right?’

‘As always, you are right, Dervla.’ Clara sighed.

‘Listen, Philip is out at a meeting and he won’t be buying for food. Would it help if I were to bring round a bottle of wine and a half kilo of sausages? Used to work in the old days.’

‘Not tonight, Dervla. That bastard Alan has paid the girls to go out to Quentins because he wants to tell me something, ask me something. What’s left to ask at this stage, I ask myself?’

‘I was at a meeting yesterday and one of the items on the agenda said TBA. I actually thought it meant That Bastard Alan because you never call him anything else.’

Clara laughed. ‘What *did* it mean?’

‘I don’t know. To Be Agreed, To Be Arranged, something like that.’ Dervla wasn’t very certain.

‘No one would ever know you had a brain, Dervla, you always put on this vague fluffy act.’

‘For all the good it does me.’

‘I wish I had your know-how. I don’t know *what* he wants but whatever it is I don’t want to give it to him.’

‘If it doesn’t matter to you then give it to him. Make a big

deal out of it of course, but if you don't care then give it and walk away.'

'But what can it *be*? He can't have the house. He doesn't want the girls, they're big enough anyway to go wherever they want and they hardly go near him.'

'Maybe he has a touch of angina and wants an examination.'

'No, I never treated him. I always made sure from the start that he went to Sean Murray.'

'Maybe he wants to marry the young one, and needs a divorce.'

'No, he's running headlong from marrying her.'

'How do you know?'

'The girls tell me, *he* even tries to tell me when he thinks I might listen to him.'

'And will you listen to him?'

'Not much. I know you all think I should have finished this totally ages ago. Who knows? I might. I might not.'

'Good luck, Clara.'

'I wish we *were* having those sausages and wine.'

'Another night, Clara.'

Then there was an email from the paint shop saying that she could pick up a colour chart next morning; a text from her cousin in Northern Ireland to say that there was going to be a Ladies Club Outing to Dublin and could Clara suggest somewhere good value where they could park a bus and lunch, buy souvenirs and get a bit of country air at a reasonable price; a neighbour came in to ask for support about banning a pop concert which would deafen them in three months' time. And then it was eight o'clock and Alan was on the doorstep.

He looked well. Annoyingly well. Much younger than his forty-eight years. Under a dark jacket he had an open-necked, lemon-coloured shirt. Easy-care, Clara noted. No careful

ironing of collars and cuffs for the bimbo. He was carrying a bottle of wine.

‘More civilised, I thought,’ he said.

‘More civilised than what exactly?’ Clara asked.

‘Than sitting glaring at each other. God, you look well, that’s a lovely colour. Is it heather? Or mauve?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘Oh yes, you are, you were always great with colour. Perhaps it’s violet or lilac or . . . ?’

‘Perhaps it is, Alan; will you come in.’

‘Girls out?’

‘Yes, you paid for them to go to Quentins, remember?’

‘I said I’d stand them a bite of supper. I didn’t know they’d go upmarket. Still, that’s youth today.’

‘Yes, well, you’d know all about it, Alan. Come in and sit down since you’re here.’

‘Thank you. Shall I get the opener?’

‘This is *my* house. I will get *my* opener and *my* glasses when I am ready.’

‘Hey, hey, Clara, I brought you a pipe of peace, well, a wine bottle of peace. Where’s all the aggravation coming from?’

‘I can’t think. I really can’t. Could it have anything to do with your cheating on me for years, lying to me, promising things were over when they weren’t, leaving me, fighting me through all the lawyers in the land?’

‘You got the house.’ To Alan it was simple.

‘Yes, I got the house I paid for. I didn’t get anything else.’

‘We have *been* through all this, Clara. People change.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘But you *did*, Clara, we all did. You just didn’t face it.’

She suddenly felt very tired. ‘What do you want, Alan? What do you actually want?’

‘A divorce,’ he said.

‘A what?’

‘A divorce.’

‘But we *are* divorced, separated for four years, for God’s sake.’

‘Not divorced, though.’

‘But you said you didn’t want to remarry. That you and Cinta didn’t need any bonds like that.’

‘Nor do we. But you see, she’s gone and got pregnant and so, well, you see?’

‘I don’t see.’

‘You *do* see, Clara, you just won’t admit it. It’s over. It’s been over for a long time. Why don’t we just draw a line in the sand?’

‘Get out, Alan.’

‘*What?*’

‘Get out, Alan, and take your wine of peace with you. Open it at home. You really picked the wrong night.’

‘But it will happen anyway. Why can’t you just be gracious, decent, I wonder?’

‘Yes, Alan, I wonder too,’ Clara said, standing up and sliding his unopened bottle back across the table to him.

She wished she felt a sense of closure about it all. It was unsatisfactory leaving it up in the air like this, but Clara was not going to play along, doing things according to *his* timetable. Was it possible she thought it wasn’t entirely over?

So even if it was unfinished, that’s what she wanted just now. She stood there long enough for him to realise that he really did have to go; and so he went.

‘Cinta? Darling?’

‘That you, Alan?’

‘How many other men call you Cinta and address you as darling?’ His laugh was tinny.

‘What did she say?’

‘Nothing.’

'She must have said something.'  
'No, she didn't.'  
'You didn't go.'  
'I *did* go.' He was stung by the injustice of it.  
'She can't have said nothing.'  
'She said, "Get out."'  
'And you did?'  
'Love, it doesn't make any difference.'  
'It does to me,' Cinta said.

Clara had always been a great believer in putting worries out of your mind. Years back they had a wonderful professor of general medicine who had managed to inspire them all. He was Dr Morrissey, her friend Dervla's father.

'Never underestimate the curative powers of being busy,' he had advised them. He said that most of their patients would benefit from having more rather than less to do. He had achieved a near legendary reputation for curing insomnia simply by advising people to get up and sort out their tape collection or iron their table napkins. What would he say now? Kind Dr Morrissey who had been more of a father to Clara than her own remote, withdrawn father ever had been.

Dr Morrissey would have said, 'Tackle something that will absorb you. Something that will put that bastard Alan and his divorce and his infantile girlfriend way out of mind.' Clara poured a glass of wine and went upstairs. She would fill every corner of her mind with this bloody centre which she had signed on to run.

In Quentins Adi was watching her sister with disapproval. Linda was twining her long blonde hair around her fingers and smiling at a man across the room.

'Stop it, Linda,' Adi hissed.

'Stop what?' Linda's eyes were big, blue and innocent.

‘Stop attracting his attention.’

‘He smiled. I smiled back. Is this now a hanging offence?’

‘It could end up being complicated. Will you *stop* smiling, Linda!’

‘All right, prune-face. Whatever happened to being pleasant?’ Linda sulked.

At that moment a waiter bristling with disapproval came to their table. ‘Mr Young’s compliments and would the young ladies like to choose a *digestif* with his compliments.’

‘Can you please tell Mr Young no thank you very much,’ Adi said.

‘Please tell Mr Young that I’d love an Irish coffee,’ Linda said.

The waiter looked helplessly from one to the other. Mr Young, from across the room, had seen the situation and materialised at their table. A tall man in his late forties, in a well-cut suit and with the appearance of being a person who could manage most situations.

‘I was just thinking about how life is so short and how sad it is to have to spend it talking business with men in suits,’ he said, a practised smile on his suntanned face.

‘Oh, I do agree,’ Linda simpered.

‘So do I,’ Adi said. ‘But we are the wrong people to waste the rest of your life on. Mr Young, my sister here is a twenty-one-year-old student. I am a twenty-three-year-old teacher, we’re probably not much older than your own children. Our father has paid for us to have a nice dinner here while he tells our mother that he wants a divorce. So you see it’s a fraught time. And really you would probably find it more fun with the suits.’

‘Such passion and strength in one so young and beautiful.’ Mr Young looked at the elder girl with admiration.

Linda didn’t like that at all.

‘Adi’s right, we *do* have to go home,’ she said and the

waiter's shoulders relaxed. Problems didn't always sort themselves out so easily.

'And you just actually got out because she said "Get out"?' Cinta was disbelieving.

'God, Cinta, what did you expect me to do? Take her by the throat?'

'You said you'd ask her for the divorce.'

'And I did . . . I did. We'll get it eventually. It's the law.'

'But not before the baby is born.'

'Does it matter when we get it, we'll both be here for the baby? Isn't that what counts?'

'So no wedding?'

'Not yet, you can have the biggest, best wedding in the world later.'

'Okay, later then.'

'What?'

'I said all right, it's hard for you. *I'm* not going to nag you. Why don't you get that wine you were going to give her and we'll open it now.'

'I left it there.'

'You gave her the wine, and left without the divorce? What kind of clown are you, Alan?'

'I really don't know,' Alan Casey said truthfully.

Clara had met Alan when she was a first-year medical student and he had been working for his first year in a bank.

Clara's mother said that there were very few people in the world who did not make money while working for a bank. Alan Casey, however, was one of these. He placed rather too much faith in the more speculative and wilder aspects of investment. They never had much material comfort. Alan was always being pipped at the post for some house or some really great property. Clara just saved steadily from her salary. She



closed her ears to the unasked-for advice from her mother and her friends. This was her life and her decision.

Alan had always been the ambitious one: enough was never enough and there had to be more. That came to include women as well. For a time, Clara pretended it wasn't happening. But then it became too hard and she faced it.

When Clara and Alan had split up officially, Clara made sure that each of the three bedrooms should be furnished with shelves and desks. This way they could all work in their own space without interfering with the others. Downstairs was meant to be a more general area. Clara's room was cool and elegant. On one side of the room were her bed, dressing table and large fitted wardrobe. The other half was a work station with filing cabinets, but it looked like quality furniture rather than cheap office supplies. She had a comfortable leather chair and a good light. She opened a drawer and took out a large box file called Centre. For three weeks she had been avoiding looking at it. It brought home the realisation of all she had lost and the small consolation that had been offered in return. But this was the night she would attack it. Maybe after she had watched the nine o'clock news.

When there had been a special offer on television sets in the huge warehouse, Clara had bought three sets. The girls had said she was behaving like some mad exhibitionist millionaire, but Clara had thought it well worth the investment. It meant that Adi could watch programmes about the planet being in decline, Linda could see pop shows and she, Clara, could relax with costume drama.

She reached around for the remote control but she remembered that Dr Morrissey had always said that we found excuses to put off doing something that would take our minds off our worries. It was as if we didn't *want* to lose the luxury of worrying. So she opened the large box and looked with some small degree of pleasure at her neat filing system. There was

the documentation about the whole nature of the heart clinic, what it was meant to do, how it would be funded, her own role as its first director. There were her own reports of educational visits to four heart clinics in Ireland and three in Britain and one in Germany. Tiring visits all of them, wearying hours touring facilities which would not be appropriate or relevant to her own centre. Note-taking, head nodding, murmuring approval here, asking questions there.

She had seen money scrimped here, money wasted there. She had observed no planning, excessive planning, making do with what was already there. Nothing to inspire her. Some idiotic decisions like placing a heart clinic on a third floor in a place without proper elevator access. Like the casual attendance of staff on no regular basis. She had seen duplication of files and reports. She had seen trust and hope among patients who felt that they were learning to manage their disease. But surely you could get that in any good GP's office or an out-patients department.

Clara had taken notes on what she had liked and hated in two different coloured pens. It would be easy to summarise her findings. Then she saw a file called Personnel. The pool on which she was allowed to draw, for assistance. She would need the services of a dietician, and a physiotherapist. She would need at least two trained cardiology nurses, the services of a phlebotomist for taking bloods. They would have to have a houseman or woman working there for six-month periods, a system of referral from doctors and the general hospital. They would have to get a campaign of public awareness going, arrange interviews in the national press and on radio.

She had done it all before. When she had been at the forefront, and that was when she was going somewhere. Or thought she had been. Still, it had to be done, and she would do it right. What else was she in this for if it weren't that?

She started to look through the files.

Lavender. What a name for a dietician. But she had a good CV, she said she wanted to specialise in healthy eating for the heart. She sounded lively, young, dedicated. Clara put a tick beside her name and reached for the phone. Might as well start now. Okay, so it was nine o'clock at night, but this was the girl's mobile phone. She would no doubt be surgically attached to it.

'Clara Casey here, Lavender. I hope it's not too late . . .'

'No, of course not, Dr Casey, I'm delighted to hear from you.'

'Perhaps we could have a chat tomorrow if you could come to the centre. There's a sort of conference room there. When is best for you?'

'I'm working from home tomorrow, Doctor, so any time is fine.'

They fixed a 10 a.m. appointment.

Now she needed a physio but she didn't know how many hours a week. She went through the applications to see who was available for part-time. A big bluff face came through the photographs. Square, reliable, not handsome, looked like an ex-boxer, but there was something about his story that she liked. He did a lot of work in inner-city clubs, he had been a late student; the word 'mature' didn't really apply to him. He had a lopsided grin. Great, she thought, I'm choosing staff on their pictures now.

He answered his mobile first ring. 'Johnny,' he said.

Clara Casey explained and, yes, he could make eleven o'clock, no sweat. It was going well. She lined up two nurses and got the name of a security man as well. Tim. She rang his mobile phone. A slightly American accent told her that he would get back to her. If she was going to start to tear this place apart tomorrow she would need someone to keep the building safe.

To her surprise she heard the key in the door and the sound

of her two discontented daughters returning. They came in to her room without knocking. That was something else that annoyed her these days.

‘What did he want?’ Linda asked.

‘Who?’

‘Dad.’

‘A divorce, he wants to get married again.’

The girls looked at each other. ‘And?’

‘And I told him to get out.’ Clara seemed unconcerned.

‘And he went?’

‘Well, obviously. And did you have a nice night? No? Well, he left you some wine downstairs. You could kill that, I suppose.’

Linda and Adi looked at each other, confused. Their mother’s phone rang.

‘Oh, Tim, thank you for getting back to me. No, of course it’s not too late. Could you come in tomorrow to discuss a small security job? I am going to knock down a lot of walls and leave a place wide open for a few days, so that will be full-time. After that it will just be on regular routine patrol. Fine. Fine. See you then.’ She smiled vaguely at her daughters.

They were uneasy. It had not been a hugely successful dinner at Quentins, their father was going to marry a girl of their own age, and now it appeared that their mother had gone raving mad.

The next morning flew by. The interviews went remarkably well. Lavender turned out to be trim and businesslike. She was realistic about the number of hours needed to give dietary advice. She suggested a weekly cookery class, and said it had worked well when she had been in a clinic in London. A lot of the patients had no idea how to cook vegetables properly or make a healthy soup and were astounded at the possibilities. Lavender was a no-nonsense person, a single woman in her

forties. She took two months off in January and February every year and went to Australia but would arrange a substitute herself. She would help Clara to set up the kitchen and could start work in two weeks' time.

Clara found it very reassuring.

Johnny the physio was indeed big and bluff but seemed to have huge reserves of patience. He said that heart patients had seen too many movies where people clutched at their chests and died in seconds on the floor. This made them terrified of taking any exercise in case they over-exerted themselves and brought on the heart attack that would kill them. Instead they allowed their muscles to waste. He enquired whether Clara would be able to wire the patients up to an ECG so that their progress could be monitored.

'Doubt if they'll give me the equipment,' Clara said.

'We could make a case for it,' Johnny said and joined the team.

Tim the security man had lived in New York for two or three years. He had done a lot of hospital work there, so he knew just what was needed. He could give it his full time for the next couple of weeks as he was hoping to go into business on his own and needed a couple of major satisfied clients. But he didn't want to tread on any toes.

'Why aren't you using the existing hospital security?' he asked.

'Because I want to run my own show.' Clara was equally direct.

'And will they pay for it?'

'Yes, if you give us what those guys in the offices might consider a fair quote. They love to think they're saving money. It's all they care about.'

'Same everywhere,' Tim said pragmatically.

'You came back from America?'

‘Yeah, everyone I knew out there worked fourteen hours a day. All the people I knew here were wearing designer suits and buying property in Spain. Thought I’d come back and get a bit of that for me. I’m really no better than the men in suits.’

‘Glad to be back?’

‘Not totally sure,’ he said.

‘Early days yet.’ Clara was practical. She felt at ease with this quiet man.

The first nurse she interviewed, Barbara, was exactly the kind of person she would have hand-picked. Outgoing, direct and very much on top of the subject. She answered the routine questions about heart medication, blood pressure and stroke.

The second woman was older but not at all wiser. Her name was Jacqui and she spelled it twice in case there should be any misunderstanding. She said that she was applying for the job so that she would have no evening or shift work. She said that existing holiday arrangements would have to be honoured. She said she would need an hour and a half for lunch to walk her dog who would sleep peacefully in her car once he knew that an extended ‘walkies’ was included in the day. She said that her present job was like working in the Third World. Most of the time was making yourself understood to foreigners. Clara knew in moments that this woman would not be part of the team.

‘When shall I hear from you?’ Jacqui asked confidently.

‘Many, many more people to interview. I’ll let you know in a week.’ Clara was clipped.

Jacqui looked around her without much pleasure. ‘You’ll have your work cut out for you here,’ she sniffed.

‘Indeed, but isn’t that where the challenge lies?’ Clara felt the smile stiffen on her face.

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