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Always and Forever

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For Dylan and Murray

PROLOGUE

The woman stood as still as the mountains around her, taking in the view from Mount Carraig House – the windswept, overgrown gardens and the ragged path leading down to the small lake. Behind her towered Mount Carraig itself. Rob, the estate agent, had told her that ‘Carraig’ meant ‘rock’ in Irish, and that’s exactly what Mount Carraig was: a spectacular rock dominating a smaller range of mountains known as the Four Sisters, which swelled to the southwest.

Spread out before her lay Carrickwell, the bustling market town that took its name from the mountain. It was bisected by the silver line of the River Tullow, and from here, high up, she could make out the gently winding main street, the sprawl of houses, shops, parks and schools, and the medieval cathedral at the centre.

A quarter of a century before, Carrickwell had been a sleepy backwater, within reach of Dublin but still very much a rural community. Time and the price of houses in the city had turned it into a busier town, but the air of tranquillity had remained.

Some said this was because of the ancient ley lines that crossed it. Druids, early Christians, religious refugees –

all in their turn had come to Carrickwell and set up home in the benevolent shadow of Mount Carraig where they could seek refuge and thrive on the pure mountain spring water.

On a slope to the left of the mountain were the ruins of a Cistercian monastery, now a honey pot for tourists, water-colour painters and scholars. There was also the remains of a round tower where the monks had raced up rope ladders to safety when invaders came.

Across the town, near the pretty but slightly crumbling Willow Hotel, was a small stone circle that archaeologists believed to be the site of a druidic settlement. Mystical Fires, a small shop in the town that sold all manner of alternative artefacts, from crystals and tarot cards to dream catchers and angel pins, did a roaring trade in books about the druids at midsummer.

At Christmas, visitors drifted unconsciously away from Mystical Fires to The Holy Land, a little Christian bookshop, where they could buy recordings of Gregorian chant, as well as prayer books, delicate Hummel Holy Water fonts, and the shop's speciality, mother-of-pearl rosary beads.

The respective owner of each shop, a pair of lovely septuagenarian ladies, each devout in her chosen creed, didn't mind in the slightest that their businesses waxed and waned in this manner.

'The wheel of fortune turns in its own way,' said Zara from Mystical Fires.

'God knows what's best for us,' agreed Una from The Holy Land.

With all the spiritual vibes, there was a great sense of peace hovering over Carrickwell and it drew people to the town.

It was certainly this aura that had drawn Leah Meyer to Mount Carraig House on a cold September morning.

Despite a thick woollen jumper under her old ski jacket, Leah could feel the chill sneaking into her body. She was used to the dry heat of California, where cold weather meant 68 degrees Fahrenheit, and the possibility of using less sunscreen. Here, the climate was so different and the unaccustomed cold made her feel achey. I'm beginning to feel my age, she thought, shivering, though she knew everyone marvelled at how young she looked.

She'd taken good care of herself over the years, but time had marched on and, eventually, no cream could keep away its mark. It had taken a discreet eye and brow lift a few years ago to give her back the finely sculpted face she'd been born with. Sixty really could be the new forty, Leah smiled to herself – as long as you had the right plastic surgeon.

And she could put up with the aching joints for a while because she'd finally found it, the place she had been looking for for years in which to build her spa. Carrickwell and Mount Carraig House were perfect. And in that state of mind, she didn't feel the air as cold, but as pure and cleansing.

'Calm,' she said finally, turning to the estate agent, who was standing a polite distance away. 'That's the word I was looking for. Don't you feel instantly calm when you stand here?'

Rob, the estate agent, studied the tumbling wreck that was Mount Carraig House and wondered whether it was he who needed his head examining or whether it was the elegant American visitor. All he saw was a ruin in a wilderness that had been on his agency's books for four years with ne'er a sniff of serious interest from anyone.

A few people had come to look, all right, drawn by the lyrical description written by a one-time employee who had a definite flair for making a silk purse out of the proverbial pig's ear.

This elegant eighteenth-century family house, once home to the famous Delaneys of Carrickwell, is designed in the grand classical style and boasts the fabulous high-ceilinged rooms of the period. The sweeping gravel drive and the great portico are reminiscent of a romantic era of horse-drawn carriages, while the abundant formal rose gardens, sheltered from the mountain breezes, need only a skilled gardener's hands to bring them back to their former glory. The views of the fierce beauty of Mount Carraig and the valley below are unrivalled, and a stately rhododendron walk, planted over a hundred years ago, leads down to the majestic Lough Enla.

The blarney had worked its magic on Mrs Meyer, for sure, because she'd seen the house on the firm's website and now, here she was, clearly captivated. Rob could tell when clients liked a place: they stopped noticing him and noticed only the property, imagining their furniture in the rooms and their family's laughter echoing in the garden. This woman showed all the signs of being besotted. He knew she had money too, because she'd arrived in a sleek black chauffeur-driven car from the airport. It had to be said she didn't dress like a millionaire – she wore jeans, a very ordinary blue padded coat, simple soft cream pumps and no jewellery.

It was hard to work out how old she was. Rob liked to put a date to property and people: eighteenth-century house; 'seventies bungalow; forty-something rich businessman buyer. But this woman's age eluded him. Elegantly slim, with silky chestnut hair and big dark eyes, she could have been anything from thirty to sixty. Her olive skin was unlined and glowing, and she looked so happy within herself. Early forties, perhaps . . .

‘I love the house,’ Leah said, because there was no point beating around the bush. ‘I’ll take it.’ She clasped Rob’s hand and smiled. Now that she’d made the decision, she felt peace flooding through her.

She’d felt tired for so long, but already she was impatient to start work. Mount Carraig Spa? The Spa on the Rock? The name would come to her. A name suggestive of a haven, not a place where bored women would have their toes painted and men could do a few lengths in the pool and hope they were staving off the onslaught of Father Time.

No. Her spa would be about making people feel good from the inside out. It would be a place where people would come when they were exhausted, drained and didn’t know where else to go. They could swim in the pool and forget about everything, they could lie on the massage mat and feel their worries drain away along with their aches. With the refreshing water from the mountain running past the door, and the tranquil vibes of Carrickwell in the air, they would be revitalised and healed.

The magic of a similar place had once given her back some semblance of peace and serenity. Cloud’s Hill had been its name, from the ancient American Indian name for the hill on which it had been built, and suddenly Leah realised that the same name would be perfect here.

The other Cloud’s Hill, where she’d learned to enjoy life again, was a world away from here, but there was magic in this place too, she knew it. And with this spa she could do for other people what the original Cloud’s Hill had done for her. Giving something back was her way of saying thanks, and setting up the spa was what she’d dreamed of for years, but had never found the perfect place to do so before. And, she calculated, if she started the work straightaway, the spa would be open within a year – or a year and a half at the latest.

‘You . . . you mean you’ll buy the house?’ said Rob, shocked at the speed of the decision.

Leah’s face was serene. ‘I will,’ she said softly.

‘This calls for a drink,’ said Rob, relief washing over him. ‘On me.’

CHAPTER ONE

January, a year and a half later.

Mel Redmond dumped her fake Italian leather briefcase onto the cubicle floor, pushed the loo seat down with a loud clang, sat on it and began trying to rip the cellophane from the packet of ten-denier barely blacks. Haste made her clumsy. Damn packet. Was everything childproof?

Finally, the packet yielded and the tights unfolded in a long, expensively silky skein. The convenience store beside Lorimar Health Insurance was out of black and barely black sheers – ridiculous really, given that the store was bang in the centre of Dublin’s office-land – so Mel had had to rush to the upmarket boutique beside the bank and shell out a whopping €16 for a pair. She would get a ladder in her tights on a day when the firm’s chief executive was addressing the troops.

Years in public relations had taught Mel one of the central tenets of the working woman: look great and people notice you; look sloppy and they notice the sloppy part, whether it was smudged eyeliner, chipped nail polish or *omigod, look at her roots!*

Anyway, Hilary, head of Lorimar’s publicity and marketing

departments and Mel's boss, would probably turn chalk white under her Elizabeth Arden foundation if Mel committed the crime of turning up at the meeting with ripped tights.

Mel joked that Hilary was the person she wanted to be when she grew up: always organised, as opposed to doing her best to *look* organised, and with an emergency supply of headache tablets, tights and perfume in her briefcase, which was real Italian leather.

Mel's fake one contained her own emergency supplies of half a chocolate bar, a tampon with the plastic ripped off, one fluffy paracetamol, several uncapped pens and a tiny toddler box of raisins so desiccated they now resembled something from Tutankhamen's tomb. Raisins were great for snacks, according to the toddler-feeding bibles, but Mel had discovered that chocolate buttons were far better for warding off tantrums in the supermarket at home in Carrickwell.

'Score another black mark for being a terrible mother,' Mel liked to joke to her colleague in marketing, Vanessa. They joked a lot about being bad mothers although they'd have killed anyone who'd actually called them such.

When you were a working mum, you had to joke about the very thing you were afraid of, Mel said. Her life was dedicated to making sure that two-and-a-half-year-old Carrie and four-year-old Sarah didn't suffer because she went out to work. If she could possibly help it, nobody would ever be able to describe Mel Redmond as lacking in anything she did.

She loved her job at Lorimar, was highly focused and had once vowed to be one of the company's publicity directors by the time she was forty.

Two children had changed all of that. Or perhaps Mel had changed as a result of having two children. Like the chicken and the egg, she was never quite sure which had come first.

The upshot was that she was now forty, the publicity

directorship was a goal that had moved further away instead of closer, and she was struggling to keep all the balls in the air. As motherhood made her boobs drop, it made her ambition slide as well.

‘When I grow up, I want to be a business lady with an office and a briefcase,’ the eleven-year-old Mel had written in a school essay.

‘Aren’t you the clever girl?’ her dad had said when she came home with the essay prize. ‘Look at this,’ he told the rest of his family proudly at the next big get-together, holding up the copy book filled with Mel’s neat, sloping writing. ‘She’s a chip off the old block, our little Melanie. Brains to burn.’

Mel’s dad would have gone to university except that there hadn’t been enough money. It was a great joy to him to see his daughter’s potential.

‘Don’t you want to get married at all?’ asked Mel’s grandmother in surprise. ‘If you get married you can have a lovely home, with babies, and be very happy.’

Mel, who liked the parts of history lessons where girls got to fight instead of stay home and mind the house, simply asked: ‘Why?’

Her father still thought it was hilarious, and regularly recounted the story of how his Melanie, even as a child, had her heart set on a career.

Mel loved him for being so proud of her, but she’d grown to hate that story. As a kid, she’d assumed that being smart meant you could have it all. She knew better now.

These days she had two jobs, motherhood and career, and even if everyone else thought she was coping, she felt as if she wasn’t doing either of them right. Mel’s standards – for herself – were staggeringly high.

The third part of the trinity, marriage, wasn’t something she had time to work on. It was just freewheeling along with its own momentum.

‘How does a working mother know when her partner has had an orgasm?’ went a recent email from an old college pal. ‘He phones home to tell her.’

It was the funniest thing Mel had heard for a long time, funny in an hysterical, life-raft-with-a-hole-in-it sort of way. But she couldn’t share the joke with anyone, especially her husband, Adrian, in case he remarked how accurate it was.

In their household, lovemaking occupied the same level of importance as time spent with each other (nil) and long baths with aromatherapy products to reduce stress (also nil).

Mel’s fervent hope was that if she kept quiet and jollied the house along, cheerily smiling at Adrian, Carrie and Sarah, then nobody would notice the places where her love and attention were spread thin.

‘Delegate, have some me-time and don’t let your family expect you to be superwoman,’ cooed magazine articles about the stress of the working mother.

After her years working with journalists, Mel knew that these articles were written by one of two types: glamorous young women in offices for whom the notion of children was a distant one; or working mothers who were freelancing at the kitchen table in between picking up the children from school, having long since realised that you couldn’t do it all, but were making a decent living telling people you could.

Me-time? What the hell was me-time? And how could you delegate the housework/weekly shop to a pair of under-fives and a man who didn’t know how to check can labels for sodium content or benzoates?

She ripped her laddered tights off and stuffed them into her bag before straggling into the new ones. With one last tug at the tourniquet-tight bit cutting into her thigh, she smoothed down the fabric of her plum-coloured skirt – last season Zara, designed to look like Gucci – and raced out of the loo to the mirrors, where she hastily combed her

short blonde hair with her fingers. Her roots had grown beyond the boundaries of good taste and were teetering on the line between funky and couldn't be bothered. Another task for her list.

At least she didn't look forty yet, which was handy, because she had neither the time nor the money for Botox. Looking younger than she was had been hell when she was eighteen, looked four years younger and had to produce her student card to get into grown-up films. Now, two children and endless sleepless nights later, it was a blessing.

Nature had given Mel a small face with a pointed chin, pale skin and arched brows above almond-shaped eyes the same clear blue as the sky after a storm, with hints of violet around the pupils. Maybelline New York had given her thick black lashes and kiss-proof cherry lipstain that would survive a nuclear attack. A sense of humour meant she had plenty of smile lines around her mouth and she didn't think she could stand the pain of doing anything about them. After her second labour, the one that had required the rubber ring for a week, she'd gone right off the idea of any sort of delicate stitching.

She looked at her watch. It was five past ten. Damn, damn, damn. Late. Too late for the lift. She galloped up the stairs, managing to find her lipgloss as she ran.

Edmund Moriarty, the chief executive of Lorimar Health Insurance, had just taken his seat at the top of the big conference room but there was still a mild hum of conversation, allowing Mel to slip in and make her way to a free seat on the left.

One of the biggest health insurance companies in the country, Lorimar had been a market leader for twenty years, but lots of new international firms were now on the scene and business was tough. Today's gathering was a strategy meeting about how Lorimar could face the increased threat of competition.

Normally, strategy meetings were for high-level executives, and someone like Mel, who was one of the company's four publicity managers, wouldn't have been invited. But this was a 'cheer up the team' meeting, 'to remind us that we're still tops,' as Hilary said, so lesser beings were there today with the firm's big-hitters. Privately, Mel thought that the only things that would cheer up the Lorimar team were a pay rise and bringing in that Calvin Klein underwear model as post boy. She just thanked God it was merely a meeting today instead of paintballing in the back of beyond, which had been last year's concept of team-building. Those paint balls bruised like hell.

Edmund Moriarty tapped his microphone to gain everybody's attention and all heads snapped round in his direction.

'How do we go forward? – that is the question,' he began, his voice gravelly. 'Lorimar is the market leader but stiff competition means we must keep striving.'

The seventy people in the room listened carefully. Mel took a pad of paper from her attaché case and uncapped the onyx and gold pen her parents had given her for her fortieth birthday. Although she dated the top piece of paper and kept her gaze on the boss, her mind was on the second sheet of paper. The top sheet was ready to be covered with gems of wisdom from the chief executive so that it looked as if she was paying attention. The other was the list of things Mel had to achieve that day – a day that was diminishing as Edmund pontificated to everyone about what they already knew. The list read:

Speech for Publicity Forum lunch.

Go over brochure photos with fine-tooth comb.

Phone *Sentinel* journalist *re* psychiatric case.

Pick up nappies, wipes and vegetables. Chicken, beans
and kids' yogurts.

Talk to Adrian about Saturday. His mother? Can't ask mine.

Buy tights!!!

Fairy costume – where to buy?

Multitasking – a way of life, Mel knew, so that working mothers could hold on to their jobs and still keep the home fires burning.

She could see her female colleagues concentrating – or at least pretending to be – on what Edmund was saying. Hilary's face wore that serene expression that said she was listening intently, but Vanessa was staring glassy-eyed at where he was standing and simultaneously trying to text on her mobile phone. Vanessa had a thirteen-year-old son, Conal, and apparently, thirteen-year-old boys were even harder to control than two under-five girls.

Vanessa was divorced and was Mel's best friend in the company. They were nearly the same age, they had the same sense of humour and they'd both admitted privately to each other that balancing work and home life was ten times harder than doing the actual job at Lorimar.

'If management knew just how good we were at doing four things at once – like organising to get the washing machine fixed, sorting out after-school activities, remembering to pick up groceries, and fire-fighting in the office, then we'd both be promoted like a shot,' Mel had said the week before, when they were enjoying their once-a-month blow-out lunch at the Thai restaurant with the handsome young waiters.

'Yes, but if we were promoted, we'd have to stay even later in the office in the evening and be even guiltier about it. So why even try to break the glass ceiling? Sorry, the guilt ceiling!' Vanessa laughed, remembering their joke.

The promotion ceiling wasn't made of glass for working mothers, they'd decided – it was made of maternal guilt.

‘Or possibly a gilt ceiling,’ Mel added thoughtfully. ‘Looks great but is fake close up. Like false boobs.’ She looked down at her own now-modest 34B cup. ‘I wish I had the money and the courage to get them done.’

‘Oh, stop going on about your boobs,’ Vanessa groaned. ‘They’re fine.’

‘Yeah, if fine means they droop down to my knees, then they’re perfectly fine,’ Mel grinned. ‘Anyway, we’ve got to stop using the word “fine”. Do you know what it stands for? Fucked-up, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional.’

‘Sounds just like me,’ said Vanessa. ‘Next time anyone asks me, I’ll say “I’m fine”.’ Hearing about struggles with Vanessa’s son made Mel feel sorry about how easy she had it by comparison. She had left having children until she was that bit older, which meant she was ready to settle down into motherhood when she became pregnant at thirty-five. Vanessa had found the double blue line when she was twenty-four.

Plus, Mel had a husband to share it all with. Vanessa had an ex-husband who had a new wife, a new family and no real interest in the mistakes of his youth apart from trying to weasel out of his maintenance payments for Conal. Sure, the washer/dryer was a mystery to Adrian, and he still laboured under the impression that elves filled the fridge at night by magic. But despite all that, he was there, another grown-up to share the parenting burdens. Nobody who’d seen him painstakingly doing jigsaws with Carrie or making dinosaurs out of Plasticine with Sarah could deny that he was a brilliant, incredibly patient dad. Mel’s own dinosaurs always looked like giant slugs.

She was lucky with childcare too. The Little Tigers Nursery beside Abraham Park on one of Carrickwell’s prettiest tree-lined roads was a fantastic place for children. Mel had heard such horror stories about day care: babies who were allergic to dairy products being given milk; toddlers getting gigantic

bites from other children . . . There had never been any such problems with Little Tigers. But what would it be like when Sarah went to school? Mel wisely decided that she'd worry about that later.

She counted her blessings. Look at all the people who'd kill for what she had – a great job, a great husband and wonderful kids. OK, so there was never much time for herself, but there was some. And she was working, something she'd sworn she'd never give up when she had her babies. She was living the modern woman's dream, wasn't she?

An hour later, Edmund Moriarty was still going strong. 'We care,' he intoned now. 'That's the message we have to deliver to each and every one of our customers: Lorimar cares.'

Mel nodded along with everyone else: We care – message received, O glorious leader.

When Edmund's laser gaze swept past her, like prison camp searchlights seeking out escapees, she went back to writing diligently on her notepad and sucked in her pelvic floor as she'd been shown in her one and only Pilates class. Might as well get something from the meeting.

Suck and hold for a count of ten. Pilates was the way forward and was even featured on the company's health website – which Mel was involved in – as a way for people to get into shape. Mel still wished she'd been able to manage more than one class after childbirth but she'd been back in work three months after Sarah was born, two after Carrie, and there just hadn't been the time to fit in Pilates. Her pelvic floor would have to stay as droopy as her boobs.

Finally, Edmund shut up and Mel was able to escape back to her desk. There were seventeen messages on her voice mail. They were all work-related except for the last one: 'Hi, Mel, this is Dawna from Little Tigers. Just to remind you that tomorrow's the zoo day for Sarah so she'll need extra

warm clothes, and that Carrie can go if you'd like, but if it rains we won't take the little ones. I know it's a bad time of year but the Siberian tigers are only going to be there for another week and we've promised the children we'd go. It's fifty euro for both children – that covers the bus hire, entrance fee and lunch. Or twenty-five euro if it's just Sarah. See you tonight. Bye.'

Mel added another note to her list. 'Zoo day for girls. Leave money out for Adrian.'

Wednesday was Adrian's morning for taking the girls to Little Tigers. Mel did the nursery run the other four mornings before getting the train from Carrickwell into the Lorimar offices in Dublin, but on Wednesdays there was a breakfast meeting of the marketing and publicity departments, so Mel had to be in work early. She remembered when getting up earlier on Wednesdays had been a total pain because she had to set her alarm clock for seven instead of half-past. That was before the children had come along, and before they'd moved to Carrickwell. Seven was a lie-in these days, now that Carrie woke up bright and breezy at six every morning.

'Heyyo, Mummy,' she'd lisp when Mel hurried into the darkened, Winnie-the-Pooh-papered bedroom, showered but sleepy. It was hard to be grumpy when that little smiling face shone up at her, eyes bright with anticipation of the day ahead and small, fat hands outspread to be scooped from the cot. Although she was two and a half, she still didn't like to clamber out of the cot on her own, unlike her older sister, who'd been doing it from the age of two, but Mel knew it would happen any day now.

Early morning was one of Mel's favourite parts of the day. The pure unadulterated joy of being with her children, them kissing her hello, their childish pleasure at another day – it was what kept her going.

No perfume in the world was as beautiful as the morning

scent of baby skin, a magical smell of toddler biscuits, baby shampoo and pure little person. Carrie loved being cuddled and wanted at least five minutes of snuggling before she'd consent to being dressed. Mel was usually torn between wanting just as much cuddling but knowing that the clock was ticking on.

Sarah was a morning person, all questions at breakfast.

'Why is Barney purple?' was her current favourite.

It was Mel's job to come up with funny reasons as she raced round the kitchen, sorting out breakfast for all of them.

'He fell into some purple custard and he liked it so much he didn't wash it off. Now he jumps into purple custard every day.'

'Mommy, that's silly!' Sarah had giggled that morning.

Carrie, slavishly adoring of her big sister, giggled too.

At her desk in the tiny cubicle on Lorimar's third floor, with its stunning views of Dublin's docklands, Mel reached over and touched the shell photo frame with Adrian, Sarah and Carrie's faces beaming at her. The three people she loved most in the whole world. The three people she did it all for.

Mel spent two hours working on the website with the help of two coffees and a Twix bar. Lunch was for people who had time to make sandwiches before they left the house in the morning, or the money to buy the overpriced ones from the guy who came round the office every lunchtime.

As she drank her second coffee, Mel looked at her list and idly circled the word 'zoo'. She and Adrian had taken Sarah to the zoo for the first time when she was two. Showing your child real tigers and elephants after so long looking at them in picture books was one of those parental milestones. How many parents never got to do things like that any more? she wondered. How many mothers missed the actual trip and instead got to read the nursery school diary: 'Carrie saw lions and seals, and piglets in the petting zoo. She had an ice cream

and got upset when she saw the monkeys because of the noise. She was a good girl!’

Lunch over, Mel went through the most recent pages for the website, scanning every line and photo like a hawk. The previous month, a huge error had occurred when a paragraph on new procedures for hip replacements had slipped into an article about erectile dysfunction. There had been much giggling in the office at the idea that ‘innovative keyhole surgery under local anaesthetic may do away with the need for painful replacement operations and would mean that patients will be back in action in just twenty-four hours’.

‘I’d say a lot of male customers vowed to keep away from the doctor when they read that bit,’ Otto from accounts had teased, as he’d delivered the expenses cheques. ‘Willy replacement isn’t exactly what every man wants to hear about when he’s having trouble in that department.’

Mel’s boss, Hilary, had been less amused, and completely uninterested in Mel’s explanation that the error had surfaced mysteriously when the web designer was working on the page. Mel was responsible, end of story.

‘This is an appalling mistake,’ Hilary had said in that cold tone of disappointment that was far more scary than if she’d actually screamed at Mel. Hilary was Olympic standard at making people feel as if they’d failed. ‘Maybe someone in design did it as a juvenile joke, but you should have spotted it. I’d bet my bonus it’s going to be in all the Sunday papers’ quote of the week sections.’

Hilary *hadn’t* said that Edmund, who noticed everything, would undoubtedly blame Mel and that this would not look good on her file. Mel knew that herself. And mistakes on the file of a working mother were multiplied by a factor of ten. Being a working mother was like being a marked woman in Lorimar. Once a woman had children, no matter what sort of ambitious powerhouse she’d been beforehand, she

was living on borrowed time afterwards. One child was seen to be careless, two was asking for trouble.

The fact that Hilary herself had three children was not a help. In all the years Mel had been working for Hilary, she'd never seen her boss either leave early over some child emergency or take a sick-baby day off.

'How does she do it?' Vanessa used to ask in September, when she was up to her eyeballs getting Conal sorted out with school books and uniform, desperately trying to take half-days here and there, while Hilary was at her desk at all times, mercilessly watching out for people skiving off.

'They can't be kids, they're robots,' Mel decided. 'That's the only answer.'

'Or is it having a husband who works from home and a nanny who gets paid more than the chairman of Microsoft?' asked Vanessa.

'You could have something there,' Mel agreed.

By five, Mel had returned all her phone calls and was finishing a batch of letters. There was still a report on the month's publicity activity to write for Hilary but she had to be out the door by five fifteen or she'd miss her train and be late to pick up the girls. She'd have to take the work and do it on the journey home.

Twenty minutes later, Mel swapped her heels for her commuting flats, filled her travel Thermos with coffee, and raced off into the cold. With luck, she'd be home by seven.

It was ten past seven before Mel parked the car in the drive and she helped Sarah and Carrie out and gathered up all their bags. It was a relief, as always, to be home.

'Carrickwell is such a gorgeous, mellow place,' their friends had all agreed when Mel and Adrian had given up their apartment in Christchurch to move to the country. Sarah was still a bump beneath Mel's 'Under Construction' maternity

T-shirt then. ‘Perfect for bringing up children. And the schools are great.’

Mel and Adrian had agreed and, catching each other’s eye in the almost telepathic way of a couple who knew each other inside out, had said nothing about how they’d muddled their way to their decision.

Both of them were city people, born and bred, so the idea of this country idyll wasn’t as appealing as everyone else seemed to think. There were other factors involved.

Mel’s parents had moved out of the city ten years before to a small house halfway between Carrickwell and Dublin, which meant Mel’s mum would be nearby to help take care of the bump.

In Dublin, they wouldn’t have been able to afford a four-bedroomed semi in such a pretty road. And both of them felt it would be good for the children to have the countryside on the doorstep, perfect for family picnics. Or that was the theory. In reality, all Mel saw of the countryside now was from the confines of the train to and from work.

The clincher had been the local schools. However, they were now made to feel they had missed the boat there. Sarah and Carrie were down for all the best Carrickwell schools but the local Mummy Mafia had it that they should have had their names listed when they were embryos to guarantee a place in the very best, the Carnegie Junior School. Not to mention the fact that learning the recorder wasn’t a part of the curriculum at Little Tigers. Serious mummies had their four-year-old poppets playing Bach on their recorders to impress the panel at the Carnegie. Sarah could play the television remote pretty well but Mel suspected this wasn’t the same thing.

It was the large back garden at Number 2 Goldsmith Lawn that had really sold Carrickwell to them.

‘We could have apple trees in it,’ Adrian had said as they

flicked through the auctioneer's brochure and saw the long, narrow swathe of lawn with a shabby green shed at the end.

'And we could put a swing on the cherry tree,' sighed Mel.

They'd smiled and she'd patted her burgeoning belly, conveniently forgetting that neither of them was able to so much as hammer in a nail without bringing down a shower of plaster.

Five years later, there were still no apple trees in the garden and the weeds had declared an independent state over by the shed, but there was a plastic swing under the cherry tree. Sarah loved it.

She ran happily ahead of her mother to the front door now, holding her pink and white spotted rucksack, while Mel struggled in behind with her briefcase, Carrie, and all Carrie's belongings.

The front door of Number 2 was a glossy green, flanked by two dwarf conifers in matching green wooden containers on the step. When they had moved in, Mel and Adrian had spent two months' worth of weekends sorting out the front garden so that it was maintenance-free and would fit in with their neighbours' beautifully cared-for gardens. The tiny sliver of grass had been replaced by beige gravel with various ornamental grasses and plants grouped in the two planting areas at either end. It all looked well cared for but this was a clever illusion.

Once Mel opened the front door, reality prevailed. The hall looked tired, the peeling paintwork and battered wooden floor badly in need of a month of DIY enthusiasm. Everything in their house needed work – don't we all? Mel thought grimly. There was never enough time. Adrian worked in IT in an industrial estate thirty minutes' drive from their home and since he'd been doing a Masters degree at night, he never had a moment for anything as mundane as Destroy It Yourself.