

CECELIA AHERN

*If You Could  
See Me Now*



HarperCollins *Publishers*

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# ONE

It was a Friday morning in June when I first became best friends with Luke. It was 9.15 a.m., to be precise and I happen to know exactly what time it was because I looked at my watch. I don't know why I did, because I didn't need to be anywhere by any specific time. But I believe there's a reason for everything so perhaps I checked my watch at that time just so I could tell you my story properly. Details are important in storytelling, aren't they?

I was glad I met Luke that morning because I was a bit down after having to leave my old best friend, Barry. He couldn't see me any more. But it doesn't really matter because he's happier now and that's what's important, I suppose. Having to leave my best friends is all part of my job. It's not a very nice part, but I believe in finding a positive side in everything, so the way I see it is, if I didn't have to leave my best friends then I wouldn't be able to make new ones. And making new friends is my favourite part by far. That's probably why I was offered the job.

We'll get on to what my job is in just a moment but first I want to tell you about the morning I first met my best friend Luke.

I closed the gate to Barry's front garden behind me and I

started walking, and for absolutely no reason at all I took the first left, then a right, then a left, went straight on for a while, took another right and I ended up beside a housing estate called Fuchsia Lane. It must have been called that because of the fuchsias growing all around the place. They grow wild here. Sorry, when I say 'here' I mean a town called Baile na gCroíthe which is in County Kerry. That's in Ireland.

Baile na gCroíthe somewhere along the line ended up being known in English as Hartstown, but as a direct translation from Irish it means the Town of Hearts. Which I think sounds nicer.

I was glad I ended up back here again; I had done a few jobs here when I was starting out but hadn't returned for years. My work takes me all over the country, sometimes even overseas when my friends take me away on holidays which just goes to show, no matter where you are, you always need a best friend.

Fuchsia Lane had twelve houses, six on each side, and all were different. The cul-de-sac was really busy with lots of people buzzing about. It was a Friday morning, remember, and June too, so it was really sunny and bright and everyone was in a good mood. Well, not *everyone*.

There were lots of children playing on the road, cycling, chasing, enjoying hopscotch, tip the can and loads of other stuff. You could hear the sounds of delighted screams and laughter coming from them. I suppose they were happy to be on their school holidays too. As much as they seemed really nice and all, I just wasn't drawn to them. You see, I can't just make friends with anyone. That's not what my job is about.

A man was cutting the grass in his front garden, and a woman tending to the flowerbed with big mucky gloves on her hands. There was a lovely smell of freshly cut grass and the sound of the lady snipping, clipping, cropping and pruning was like music in the air. In the next garden a man whistled a tune I wasn't familiar with while he pointed the garden hose towards his car and watched as the soapy suds slithered down the side, revealing a new sparkle. Every now and again he

whipped round and sprayed water on two little girls who were dressed in yellow and black striped swimsuits. They looked like big bumble bees. I loved hearing them giggling so much.

In the next driveway a boy and girl were playing hopscotch. I observed them for a spell but none of them responded to my interest so I kept on moving. I walked by children playing in every garden yet none of them saw me or invited me to play. People on bicycles and skateboards, and remote controlled cars were whizzing by, oblivious to me. I was beginning to think that coming to Fuchsia Lane was a bit of a mistake, which was rather confusing because usually I was so good at choosing places and there were so many children here. I sat down on the garden wall of the last house and began to think about where I could have taken a wrong turn.

After a few minutes, I came to the conclusion that I was in the right area after all. I very rarely take wrong turns. I spun on my backside to face the house behind the garden wall. There was no action in this garden so I sat and studied the house. It had two storeys and a garage with an expensive car parked outside that glistened in the sun. A plaque on the garden wall beneath me said 'Fuchsia House', and the house had blooming fuchsia climbing up the wall, clinging to the brown bricks over the front door and reaching all the way up to the roof. It looked pretty. Fractions of the house had brown bricks and other sections had been painted a honey colour. Some of the windows were square and others were circles. It was really unusual. It had a fuchsia-coloured front door with two long windows with frosted glass in the top two panels, a huge brass knocker and letter box beneath; it looked like two eyes, a nose and a mouth smiling at me. I waved and smiled back just in case. Well, you can never be too sure these days.

Just as I was studying the face of the front door, it opened and was slammed shut rather loudly and angrily by a boy

who came running outside. He had a big red fire engine in his right hand and a police car in his left hand. I love red fire engines; they're my favourite. The boy jumped off the front step of the porch and ran to the grass where he skidded to his knees. He got grass stains all down his black tracksuit bottoms, which made me laugh. Grass stains are so much fun because they never come out. My old friend Barry and I used to slide all of the time. Anyway, the little boy started crashing his fire engine against his police car and making all these noises with his mouth. He was good at the noises. Barry and I always used to do that too. It's fun pretending to do things that don't usually happen in real life.

The boy rammed the police car into the red fire engine and the head fireman, who was clinging to the ladder at the side of the truck, slid off. I laughed out loud and the boy looked up.

He actually looked at me. Right into my eyes.

'Hi,' I said, nervously clearing my throat and shifting from one foot to the other. I was wearing my favourite blue Converse runners and they still had grass stains on the white rubber tips from when Barry and I went sliding. I started to run the rubber tip against the brick garden wall to try to scrape it off and thought about what to say next. As much as making friends is my favourite thing to do I still get a bit nervous about it. There's always that scary chance that people won't like me and it gives me the collywobblers. I've been lucky so far but it would be silly to presume that the same thing will happen every time.

'Hi,' the boy replied, fixing the fireman back onto the ladder.

'What's your name?' I asked, kicking my foot against the wall on front of me and scraping the rubber tip. The grass stains still wouldn't come off.

The boy studied me for a while, looked me up and down as though trying to decide whether to tell me his name or

not. This is the part of my job I absolutely loathe. It's tough wanting to be friends with someone and them not wanting the same back. That happens sometimes but in the end they always come round because, whether they know it or not, they want me to be there.

The boy had white-blond hair and big blue eyes. I knew his face from somewhere but couldn't quite think where.

Finally he spoke. 'My name's Luke. What's yours?'

I shoved my hands deep into my pockets and concentrated on kicking my right foot against the garden wall. I was making parts of the bricks crumble and fall to the ground. Without looking at him I said, 'Ivan.'

'Hi, Ivan,' he smiled. He had no front teeth.

'Hi, Luke,' I smiled back.

I have all mine.

'I like your fire engine. My bes— my old best friend Barry used to have one just like it and we used to play with it all the time. It's got a stupid name, though, because it can't drive through fire because it melts,' I explained, still keeping my hands shoved into my pockets, causing my shoulders to hunch up past my ears. It made things a little quieter so I took my hands out of my pocket just so I could hear what Luke was saying.

Luke rolled on the grass laughing. 'You put your fire engine through *fire*?' he screeched.

'Well, it is called a *fire* engine, isn't it?' I replied defensively.

Luke rolled onto his back, kicked his feet in the air and hooted. 'No, you dummy! Fire engines are for putting *out* fires!'

I thought about that one for a while. 'Hmm. Well, I'll tell you what puts out fire engines, Luke,' I explained matter-of-factly. 'Water does.'

Luke hit himself lightly on the side of the head, screamed 'Doh!', made his eyes go cock-eyed and then fell over on the grass.

I started laughing. Luke was really funny.

‘Do you want to come and play?’ He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

I grinned. ‘Of course, Luke. Playing is my favourite!’ and I jumped over the garden wall and joined him on the grass.

‘What age are you?’ He looked at me suspiciously. ‘You look like you’re the same age as my aunt,’ he frowned, ‘and my aunt doesn’t like to play with my fire engine.’

I shrugged. ‘Well, then your aunt is a boring old gnirob!’

‘A *gnirob*!’ Luke screamed with mirth. ‘What’s a gnirob?’

‘Someone who’s *boring*,’ I said, scrunching my nose up and saying the word like it was a disease. I liked saying words backwards; it was like inventing my own language.

‘Boring,’ Luke repeated after me and scrunched up his nose, ‘uugh.’

‘What age are you anyway?’ I asked Luke as I crashed the police car into the fire engine. The fireman fell off the ladder again. ‘You look like *my* aunt,’ I accused him, and Luke fell about the place. He had a loud laugh.

‘I’m only six, Ivan! And I’m not a *girl*!’

‘Oh.’ I don’t really have an aunt but I just said it to make him laugh. ‘Well, there’s nothing *only* about being six.’

Just as I was about to ask him what his favourite cartoon was, the front door opened and I heard screaming. Luke went white and I looked up to where he was faced.

‘SAOIRSE, GIVE ME BACK MY KEYS!’ a voice yelled desperately. A flustered-looking woman, red in the cheeks, frantic eyes, with long unwashed red hair swinging in strands around her face, came running out of the house alone. Another shriek from the voice in the house behind caused her to stumble in her platforms on the step of the front porch. She cursed loudly and reached out to the wall of the house for balance. Looking up, she stared in the direction of where Luke and I were sitting at the end of the garden. Her mouth widened into a smile to reveal a set of crooked yellow teeth. I crawled

back a few more inches. I noticed Luke did too. She gave Luke the thumbs-up and croaked, ‘See ya, kiddo.’ She let go of the wall, wavered slightly and walked quickly to the car parked in the driveway.

‘SAOIRSE!’ The voice of the person inside the house screamed again. ‘I’M CALLING THE GARDAÍ IF YOU SET ONE FOOT IN THAT CAR!’

The red-haired woman snorted, pressed the car keys and the lights flashed and beeped. She opened the door, climbed in, banged her head on the side, cursed loudly again and slammed the door shut behind her. I could hear the doors locking from where I was at the end of the garden. A few kids on the road stopped playing and stared at the scene unfolding before them.

Finally the owner of the mystery voice came running outside with a phone in her hand. She looked very different from the other lady. Her hair was tied back neatly and tightly at the back of her head. She wore a smart grey trouser suit, which didn’t match the high-pitched, uncontrolled voice she currently had. She too was red in the face and out of breath. Her chest heaved up and down rapidly as she tried to run as quickly as she could in her high heels to the car. She danced around beside the car, first trying the door handle and, when finding it locked, threatened to dial 999.

‘I’m calling the gardaí, Saoirse,’ she warned, waving the phone at the window on the driver’s side.

Saoirse just grinned from inside the car and started up the engine. The lady with the phone’s voice cracked as she pleaded with her to get out of the car. Jumping from foot to foot, she looked like there was somebody else bubbling under her own flesh, trying to get out, like the Incredible Hulk.

Saoirse sped off down the long cobble-stoned driveway. Halfway down, she slowed the car. The woman with the phone relaxed her shoulders and looked relieved. Instead of stopping completely, the car crawled along as the window of the

driver's side was lowered and two fingers appeared out of it, held up proud and high for all to see.

'Ah, she'll be back in two minutes, so,' I said to Luke, and he looked at me oddly.

The woman with the phone watched in fright as the car sped off again down the road, narrowly missing hitting a child on the road. A few hairs escaped from the tight bun on her head, as though attempting to chase the car themselves.

Luke lowered his head and quietly put the fireman back on his ladder. The woman let out an exasperated screech, threw her hands in the air and turned on her heel. There was a crack as the heel of her shoe became lodged between the cobbles of the drive. The woman shook her leg wildly, growing more frustrated by the second, and eventually the shoe flew out, but the heel remained lodged between the crack.

'FUUUUCCCK!' she yelled. Hobbling on one high heel and what was now one flat pump, she made her way back up the front porch. The fuchsia door was slammed shut and she was swallowed back up by the house. The windows, door knob and the letter box smiled at me again and I smiled back.

'Who are you smiling at?' Luke asked with a frown on his face.

'The door,' I replied, thinking it an obvious answer.

He just stared at me with the same frown, his mind evidently lost in the thoughts of what he had just seen, and the oddity of smiling at a door.

We could see the woman with the phone through the glass of the front door, pacing the hall.

'Who is she?' I asked, turning to Luke.

He was clearly shaken.

'That's my aunt,' he almost whispered. 'She looks after me.'

'Oh,' I said. 'Who was the one in the car?'

Luke slowly pushed the fire engine through the grass, flattening the blades as he went along. 'Oh, her. That's Saoirse,' he said quietly. 'She's my mom.'

‘Oh.’ There was a silence and I could tell he was sad. ‘Seer-sha,’ I repeated the name, liking how it felt when I said it; like the wind blowing out of my mouth in one big gust or how the trees sounded when they talked to one another on windy days. ‘Seeeeer-ssshaaaa . . .’ I eventually stopped when Luke looked at me oddly.

I picked a buttercup out of the ground and held it under Luke’s chin. A yellow glow appeared on his pale skin. ‘You like butter,’ I stated. ‘So Saorise’s not your girlfriend then?’

Luke’s face immediately lit up and he giggled. Not as much as before, though.

‘Who’s your friend Barry that you mentioned?’ Luke asked, smashing into my car much harder than before.

‘Barry McDonald is his name,’ I smiled, remembering the games me and Barry used to play.

Luke’s eyes lit up. ‘Barry McDonald is in my class in school!’

Then it clicked. ‘I knew I knew your face from somewhere, Luke. I used to see you everyday when I went to school with Barry.’

‘You went to school with Barry?’ he said, surprised.

‘Yeah, school was fun with Barry,’ I laughed.

Luke narrowed his eyes, ‘Well, I didn’t see you there.’

I started laughing. ‘Well, *of course* you didn’t *see* me, you silly sod,’ I said matter-of-factly.

## TWO

Elizabeth's heart hammered loudly against her chest, as, having slipped on another pair of shoes, she paced the long maple-floored hall of her home. With the phone pressed hard between her ear and shoulder, her mind was a blizzard of thoughts as she listened to the shrill ring tone in her ear.

She stopped pacing long enough to stare at her reflection in the mirror. Her brown eyes widened with horror. Rarely did she allow herself to look so bedraggled. *So out of control.* Strands of her chocolate-brown hair were fleeing from the tight French pleat, causing her to appear as though she had placed her fingers in an electric socket. Mascara nestled in the lines under her eyes; her lipstick had faded, leaving only her plum-coloured lipliner as a frame, and her foundation clung to the dry patches of her olive skin. Gone was the usual pristine look. This caused her heart to beat faster, the panic to accelerate.

*Breathe, Elizabeth, just breathe,* she told herself. She ran a trembling hand over her tousled hair, forcing the wild hairs back down. She wiped the mascara away with a wet finger, pursed her lips together, smoothed down her suit jacket and cleared her throat. It was simply a momentary lapse of concentration on her part, that was all. Not to happen again. She transferred the phone to her left ear and noticed the

impression of her Claddagh earring against her neck. Such was the pressure of her shoulder's grip on the phone against her skin.

Finally someone answered and Elizabeth turned her back on the mirror to stand to attention. Back to business.

'Hello, Baile na gCroíthe Garda Station.'

Elizabeth winced as she recognised the voice on the phone. 'Hi, Marie, Elizabeth here . . . again. Saoirse's gone off with the car,' she paused, 'again.'

There was a gentle sigh on the other end of the phone. 'How long ago, Elizabeth?'

Elizabeth sat down on the bottom stair and settled down for the usual line of questioning. She closed her eyes, only meaning to rest them briefly, but at the relief of blocking everything out she kept them closed. 'Just five minutes ago.'

'Right. Did she say where she was going?'

'The moon,' she replied matter-of-factly.

'Excuse me?' Marie asked.

'You heard me. She said she was going to the moon,' Elizabeth said firmly. 'Apparently people will understand her there.'

'The moon,' Marie repeated.

'Yes,' Elizabeth replied, feeling irritated. 'You could perhaps start looking for her on the motorway. I would imagine that if you were heading to the moon that would be the quickest way to get there, wouldn't you? Although I'm not entirely sure which exit she would take. Whichever is more northerly, I suppose. She could be headed north-east to Dublin, or, who knows, she could be making her way to Cork; perhaps they've a plane that can take her off this planet. Either way, I'd check the motor—'

'Relax, Elizabeth; you know I have to ask.'

'I know.' Elizabeth tried to calm herself again. She was missing an important meeting right now. Important for her, important for her interior design business. Luke's babysitter was standing in as a replacement for his nanny, Edith. Edith

had left a few weeks ago for the three months of travelling the world she had threatened Elizabeth with for the past six years, leaving the young babysitter inexperienced to the ways of Saoirse. She had rung her at work in a panic . . . again . . . and Elizabeth had to drop everything . . . again . . . and rush home . . . again. But she shouldn't be surprised that this had happened . . . again. She was, however, surprised that Edith, apart from the current trip to Australia, was still turning up to work every day. Six years she had been helping Elizabeth with Luke, six years of drama, and still after all her years of loyalty, Elizabeth expected a phone call or her letter of resignation practically every day. Being Luke's nanny came with a lot of baggage. Then again, so did being Luke's adoptive parent.

'Elizabeth, are you still there?'

'Yes.' Her eyes shot open. She was losing concentration. 'Sorry, what did you say?'

'I asked you what car she took.'

Elizabeth rolled her eyes and made a face at the phone. 'The same one, Marie. The same bloody car as last week, and the week before and the week before that,' she snapped.

Marie remained firm, 'Which is the—'

'BMW,' she interrupted. 'The same damn black BMW 330 Cabriolet. Four wheels, two doors, one steering wheel, two wing mirrors, lights and—'

'A partridge in a pear tree,' Marie interrupted. 'What condition was she in?'

'Very shiny. I'd just washed her,' Elizabeth replied cheekily.

'Great, and what condition was Saoirse in?'

'The usual one.'

'Intoxicated.'

'That's the one.' Elizabeth stood up and walked down the hall to the kitchen. Her sun trap. Her heels against the marble floor echoed loudly in the empty high-ceilinged room. Everything was in its place. The room was hot from the sun's

glare through the glass of the conservatory. Elizabeth's tired eyes squinted in the brightness. The spotless kitchen gleamed, the black granite counter tops sparkled, the chrome fittings mirrored the bright day. A stainless steel and walnut heaven. She headed straight to the espresso machine. Her saviour. Needing an injection of life into her exhausted body, she opened the kitchen cabinet and took out a small beige coffee cup. Before closing the press she turned a cup round so that the handle was on the right side like all the others. She slid open the long steel cutlery drawer, noticed a knife in the fork's compartment, put it back in its rightful place, retrieved a spoon and slid it shut.

From the corner of her eye she saw the hand towel messily strewn over the handle of the cooker. She threw the crumpled cloth into the utility room, retrieved a fresh towel from the neat pile in the press, folded it exactly in half and draped it over the cooker handle. Everything had its place.

'Well, I haven't changed my licence plate in the past week so yes, it's still the same,' she replied with boredom to another of Marie's pointless questions. She placed the steaming espresso cup on a marble coaster to protect the glass kitchen table. She smoothed out her trousers, removed a piece of fluff from her jacket, sat down in the conservatory and looked out at her long garden and the rolling green hills beyond that seemed to stretch on for ever. Forty shades of green, golds and browns.

She breathed in the rich aroma of her steaming espresso and immediately felt revived. She pictured her sister racing over the hills with the top down on Elizabeth's convertible, arms in the air, eyes closed, flame-red hair blowing in the wind, believing she was free. Saoirse meant freedom in Irish. The name had been chosen by their mother in her last desperate attempt to make the duties of motherhood she despised so much seem less like a punishment. Her wish was for her second daughter to bring her freedom from the shackles of marriage, motherhood, responsibility . . . reality.

Her mother had met her father when she was sixteen. She was travelling through the town with a group of poets, musicians and dreamers, and got talking to Brendan Egan, a farmer in the local pub. He was twelve years her senior and was enthralled by her mysterious wild ways and carefree nature. She was flattered. And so they married. At eighteen they had their first child, Elizabeth. As it turned out, her mother couldn't be tamed and found it increasingly frustrating being held in the sleepy town nestled in the hills she had only ever intended to pass through. A crying baby and sleepless nights drove her further and further away in her head. Dreams of her own personal freedom became confused with her reality and she started to go missing for days at a time. She went exploring, discovering places and other people.

Elizabeth, at twelve years of age, looked after herself and her silent, brooding father and didn't ask when her mother would be home because she knew in her heart that she would eventually return, cheeks flushed, eyes bright, and speaking breathlessly of the world and all it had to offer. She would waft into their lives like a fresh summer breeze, bringing excitement and hope. The feel of their bungalow farmhouse always changed when she returned; the four walls absorbed her enthusiasm. Elizabeth would sit at the end of her mother's bed, listening to stories, giddy with delight. This ambience would last for only a few days until her mother quickly tired of sharing stories rather than making new ones.

Often she brought back mementoes such as shells, stones, leaves. Elizabeth could recall a vase of long fresh grasses that sat in the centre of the dining-room table as though they were the most exotic plants ever created. When asked about the field they were pulled from, her mother just winked and tipped her nose, promising Elizabeth that she would understand some day. Her father would sit silently in his chair by the fireplace, reading his paper but never turning the page. He was as lost in her world of words as she was.

When Elizabeth was twelve years old her mother became pregnant again and, despite the new-born baby being named Saoirse, this child didn't offer the freedom her mother craved, and so she set off on another expedition. And didn't return. Her father, Brendan, had no interest in the young life that had driven his wife away so he waited in silence for her in his chair by the fire. Reading his paper but never turning the page. For years. For ever. Soon Elizabeth's heart grew weary of awaiting her mother's return and Saoirse became Elizabeth's responsibility.

Saoirse had inherited her father's Celtic looks of strawberry-blond hair and fair skin, while Elizabeth was the image of her mother. Olive skin, chocolate hair, almost black eyes; in their blood from the Spanish influence thousands of years before. Elizabeth resembled her mother more and more with every passing day and she knew her father found that difficult. She grew to hate herself for it, and along with making the effort of trying to have conversations with her father, she tried even harder to prove to her father and to herself that she was nothing like her mother – that she was capable of loyalty.

When Elizabeth finished school at eighteen she was faced with the dilemma of having to move to Cork to attend university. A decision that took all her courage to make. Her father regarded her acceptance of the course as abandonment; he saw any friendship she created with anyone as abandonment. He craved attention, always demanding to be the only person in his daughters' lives, as though that would prevent them from moving away from him. Well, he almost succeeded and certainly was part of the reason for Elizabeth's lack of a social life or circle of friends. She had been conditioned to walk away when polite conversation was started, knowing she would pay for any unnecessary time spent away from the farm with sullen words and disapproving glares. In any case, looking after Saoirse as well as going to school was a full-time

job. Brendan accused her of being like her mother, of thinking she was above him and superior to Baile na gCroíthe. She found the small town claustrophobic and felt the dull farmhouse was dipped in darkness, with no sense of time. It was as though even the grandfather clock in the hall was waiting for her mother to return.

‘And, Luke, where is he?’ Marie asked over the phone, bringing Elizabeth swiftly back to the present.

Elizabeth replied bitterly. ‘Do you really think Saoirse would take him with her?’

Silence.

Elizabeth sighed. ‘He’s here.’

The name Saoirse had brought more than something to call Elizabeth’s sister by. It had given her an identity, a way of life. Everything the name represented was passed into her blood. She was fiery, independent, wild and free. She followed the pattern of the mother she could not remember, so much that Elizabeth almost felt as though she were watching her mother. But she kept losing sight of her. Saoirse became pregnant at sixteen and no one knew who the father was, not least Saoirse. Once she had the baby she didn’t care much for naming him but eventually took to calling him Lucky. Another wish. So Elizabeth named him Luke. And once again, at the age of twenty-eight, Elizabeth took responsibility for a child.

There was never as much as a flicker of recognition in Saoirse’s eyes when she looked at Luke. It startled Elizabeth to see that there was no bond, no connection at all. Elizabeth had never planned on having children – in fact she had made a pact with herself *never* to have children. She had raised herself and raised her sister; she had no desires to raise anybody else. It was time to look after herself. But at twenty-eight years old, after having slaved away at school and college, she had been successful in starting up her own interior design business. Her hard work meant that she was the only member of the family capable of providing a good life for Luke. She

had reached her goals by being in control, maintaining order, not losing sight of herself, always being realistic, believing in fact and not dreams, and above all applying herself and working hard. Her mother and sister had taught her that she wouldn't get anywhere by following wistful dreams and having unrealistic hopes.

So now she was thirty-four years old and living alone with Luke in a house that she loved. A house she had bought, and was paying for, all by herself. A house she had made her haven, the place she could retreat to and feel safe. Alone because love was one of those feelings that you could never control. And she needed to be in control. She had loved before, had been loved, had tasted what it was to dream and had felt what it was to dance on air. She had also learned what it was to land back on the earth with a cruel thud. Having to take care of her sister's child had sent her love away and there had been no one since. She had learned not to lose control of her feelings again.

The front door banged shut and she heard the patter of little feet running down the hall.

'Luke!' she called, putting her hand over the receiver.

'Yeah?' he asked innocently, blue eyes and blond hair appearing round the doorpost.

'Yes, not yeah,' Elizabeth corrected him sternly. Her voice was full of the authority she had become a pro at over the years.

'Yes,' he repeated.

'What are you doing?'

Luke stepped into the hall and Elizabeth's eyes immediately went to his grass-stained knees.

'Me and Ivan are just playing the computer,' he explained.

'Ivan and I,' she corrected him, and continued listening to Marie at the other end of the phone arranging to send a garda car out. Luke looked at his aunt and returned to the playroom.

'Hold on a minute,' Elizabeth shouted down the phone, finally registering what Luke had just told her. She jumped

up from her chair, bumping the table leg and spilling her espresso onto the glass. She swore. The black wrought-iron legs of the chair screeched against the marble. Holding the phone to her chest, she raced down the long hall to the playroom. She tucked her head round the corner and saw Luke sitting on the floor, eyes glued to the TV screen. Here and his bedroom were the only rooms in the house she allowed his toys. Taking care of a child had not succeeded in changing her as many thought it would; he hadn't softened her views in any way. She had visited many of Luke's friends' houses, picking him up or dropping him off, so full of toys lying around, they tripped up everyone who dared walk in their path. She reluctantly had cups of coffee with the mothers while sitting on teddies, surrounded by bottles, formula and nappies. But not in her home. Edith had been told the rules at the beginning of their working relationship and she had followed them. As Luke grew up and understood his aunt's ways, he obediently respected her wishes and contained his playing to the one room she had dedicated to his needs.

'Luke, who's Ivan?' Elizabeth asked, eyes darting around the room. 'You know you can't be bringing strangers home,' she said, worried.

'He's my new friend,' he replied, zombie-like, not moving his eyes from the beefed-up wrestler body-slamming his opponent on the screen.

'You know I insist on meeting your friends first before you bring them home. Where is he?' Elizabeth questioned, pushing open the door and stepping into Luke's space. She hoped to God that this friend would be better than the last little terror who had decided to draw a picture of his happy family in magic marker on her wall, which had since been painted over.

'Over there.' Luke nodded his head in the direction of the window, still not budging his eyes.

Elizabeth walked towards the window and looked out at the front garden. She crossed her arms. 'Is he hiding?'

Luke pressed Pause on his computer keypad and finally moved his eyes away from the two wrestlers on the screen. His face crinkled in confusion. 'He's right there!' He pointed at the beanbag at Elizabeth's feet.

Elizabeth's eyes widened as she stared at the beanbag. 'Where?'

'Right there,' he repeated.

Elizabeth blinked back at him. She raised her arms questioningly.

'Beside you, on the beanbag.' Luke's voice became louder with anxiety. He stared at the yellow corduroy beanbag as though willing his friend to appear.

Elizabeth followed his gaze.

'See him?' He dropped the control pad and stood up quickly.

This was followed by a tense silence in which Elizabeth could feel Luke's hatred for her emanating from his body. She could tell what he was thinking: why couldn't she just see him, why couldn't she just play along just this once, why couldn't she ever pretend? She swallowed the lump in her throat and looked around the room to see if she really was missing his friend in some way. Nothing.

She leaned down to be on an even level with him and her knees cracked. 'There's no one else but you and me in this room,' she whispered softly. Somehow saying it quietly made it easier. Easier for herself or Luke, she didn't know.

Luke's cheeks flushed and his chest heaved faster. He stood in the centre of the room, surrounded by computer keypad wires, with his little hands down by his side, looking helpless. Elizabeth's heart hammered in her chest as she silently begged, *please do not be like your mother, please do not be like your mother*. She knew only too well how the world of fantasy could steal you away.

Finally Luke exploded and, staring into space, demanded, 'Ivan, say something to her!'

There was a silence as he looked into space and then giggled hysterically. He looked back at Elizabeth and his smile quickly faded when he noticed her lack of response. ‘Do you not see him?’ he squealed nervously. Then, more angrily, repeated, ‘Why don’t you see him?’

‘OK, OK!’ Elizabeth tried not to panic. She stood back up to her own level. A level where she had control. She couldn’t see him and her brain refused to let her pretend. She wanted to get out of the room quickly. She lifted her leg to step over the beanbag and stopped herself, instead choosing to walk round it. Once at the door, she glanced around one last time to see if she could spot the mystery Ivan. No sign.

Luke shrugged, sat down and continued playing his wrestling game.

‘I’m putting some pizza on now, Luke.’

Silence. What else should she say? It was at moments like this she realised that reading all the parenting manuals in the world never helped. Good parenting came from the heart, was instinctive, and not for the first time she worried she was letting Luke down.

‘It will be ready in twenty minutes,’ she finished awkwardly.

‘What?’ Luke pressed Pause again and faced the window.

‘I said it will be ready in twen—’

‘No, not you,’ Luke said, once again being sucked into the world of video games. ‘Ivan would like some too. He said pizza is his favourite.’

‘Oh.’ Elizabeth swallowed helplessly.

‘With olives,’ Luke continued.

‘But, Luke, you hate olives.’

‘Yeah, but Ivan loves them. He says they’re his favourite.’

‘Oh . . .’

‘Thanks,’ Luke said to his aunt, looked to the beanbag, gave the thumbs-up, smiled, then looked away again.

Elizabeth slowly backed out of the playroom. She realised she was still holding the phone to her chest. ‘Marie, are you

still there?’ She chewed on her nail and stared at the closed playroom door, wondering what to do.

‘I thought you’d gone off to the moon as well. I was about to send a car over to your house too,’ Marie chuckled.

Marie mistook Elizabeth’s silence for anger and apologised quickly. ‘Anyway, you were right, Saoirse *was* headed to the moon but luckily she decided to stop off on the way to refuel. Refuelling herself, more like. Your car was found blocking the main street with the engine still running and the driver’s door wide open. You’re lucky Paddy found it when he did before someone took off with it.’

‘Let me guess. The car was outside the pub.’

‘Correct.’ Marie paused. ‘Do you want to press charges?’

Elizabeth sighed. ‘No. Thanks, Marie.’

‘Not a problem. We’ll have someone bring the car home to you.’

‘What about Saoirse?’ Elizabeth paced the hall. ‘Where is she?’

‘We’ll just keep her here for a while, Elizabeth.’

‘I’ll come get her,’ Elizabeth said quickly.

‘No,’ Marie insisted. ‘Let me get back to you about that. She needs to calm down before she goes anywhere yet.’

From inside the playroom Elizabeth heard Luke laughing and talking away to himself.

‘Actually, Marie,’ she added with a weak smile, ‘while we’re on the phone, tell whoever’s bringing the car to bring a shrink with them. It seems Luke is imagining friends now . . .’

Inside the playroom Ivan rolled his eyes and wiggled his body down further into the beanbag. He had heard her on the phone. Ever since he had started this job, parents had been calling him that and it was really beginning to bother him. There was nothing imaginary about him whatsoever.

They just couldn’t see him.