

The Jigsaw Maker / Dines

THE JIGSAW MAKER

by

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Usually when she opened the shop on a Monday morning a whoosh of quiet greeted her - a sort of gentle acceptance that because it was five to nine, Lizzie Flynn would be turning her key in the door. And because she took precautions, there were never surprises: no opportunist burglar broke in; no errant sparks set off a fire; nobody else got there first. Unlike today.

On the table that served as a counter there was a large cardboard box, its tissue-wrapped contents spilling out. Some of them Lizzie recognised. She stood holding the door open, unsure whether she should go for help or stay and investigate. She left the key in the lock and inched into the shop. Whoever it was, was still there. She could hear shuffling in the cupboard at the back of the shop and, as she came nearer the box, marvelled at her intruder's cheek. Scattered round the table, broken bits of Lizzie's dried flower arrangements were swept into little piles, other items had been packed already - items that should have been on the shelves behind, where they always were. Bloody hell! Not only was he stealing her stock, he was packing it first. She bristled. Picking up a paperweight she crept to the cupboard.

'Good morning, Lizzie. What are you doing here so early?'

Lizzie started, amazed, as her sister backed out, arms laden. She looked dishevelled, long greying hair swept up in a careless bunch tied with a flowery scarf and her glasses askew.

'What am *I* doing here?' Lizzie glared at the mess in the shop. 'I'm not anywhere I shouldn't be at this time on a Monday.' She pointed at the table. 'This is where I come to start my week's work but it looks like I won't be able to do that today, will I? Because I can't. Because my table is covered in muck and I won't be able to do a thing till you clear it.' She stormed to the door and pulling the key out, slammed it shut. 'What are you doing here anyway?'

Anne dropped the boxes in a heap onto the table and pushed stray hair off her face. Then she stood, hands on hips and apparently unmoved by Lizzie's anger, skimmed the shop, pausing momentarily to frown at something she saw. 'I dunno, Liz,' she said eventually. 'This place is a heap. You really must do something with it.'

Lizzie looked around the shop in amazement. What on earth was Anne talking about? Apart from the mess on the table and the spillage beneath it, the shop was as it had always been, as it was supposed to be. She started to say that but Anne was already moving towards the soap display.

'I mean, look at this!' She picked up a bar of Lily of the Valley soap and held it out, her face wrinkled as if she found it offensive. 'Who'd want to buy this? Or this?' The soap was dropped and a small tin of talc proffered.

Lizzie shrugged. 'It's talc. Lots of people buy talc.'

Anne smiled. 'They do indeed. But nobody's bought this particular talc have they?' Her smile turned to a laugh. 'It must have been on that shelf for twenty years!'

Lizzie took the tin from her angrily. 'No, it hasn't. I don't stock out of date items and you know it.' She turned the tin upside down and searched for a 'use by' date on its base. There wasn't one. Anything that had been printed there was long faded. Lizzie felt the colour rise in her cheeks. It wasn't old, it just wasn't required at the moment. She pushed the tin back into its place on the display. 'I don't know what you're on about anyway. What does it matter to you? I stock quality items - everyone knows that.'

Anne leaned her head to one side and regarded Lizzie. There was an expression on her face that looked dangerously like sympathy. Lizzie could feel herself bristle. She hated when Anne did the big sister bit, the I-know-better-than-you bit. Eventually Anne sighed. 'That's

the problem, Lizzie. You stock the best, you just don't sell any of it.' She pointed to the box on the table. 'This stuff has been here so long it's lost its edge and these - ' she pulled some postcards from the rack. The ones at the front were faded where they had been exposed. 'Who's going to buy these, for God's sake?'

In the harsh early morning light the cards did look a bit colourless but if she reduced the price, they'd be sure to sell quickly. Or maybe if she moved some of the others from the back. Lizzie crossed her arms defensively in front of her. 'It's not your business.'

Anne stuck the cards back onto the rack. 'You're quite right,' she said. 'It's not my business, it's yours.' When she turned round again her face was set. 'I am merely the supplier of home-made confectionery - which is definitely fresh and which you have not any stock of at the moment because unlike nearly everything else,' she swept the shop disdainfully, 'it sells.' She went over to the table and started to take the packed items out of the box. 'And if this is the sort of tat you want to spend your life and waste your livelihood surrounded by, go ahead. You have yourself in a rut, you've been moping about for weeks. I was only trying to help.'

As she unpacked each arrangement and placed it back on the shelf, Lizzie watched her miserably. She tried to think what to say, how to unsay, but no words came. When Anne finished, she swept the last of the dried stems into her palm and looked around. Lizzie pointed to the bin.

'Over there.'

'Thank you.'

'Anne - '

Anne turned to face her, 'Well?'

Lizzie shrugged. She looked at the arrangements back where they should be, looking neat. And faded. 'Maybe you're right.' She pointed to the shelf. 'I suppose they're looking a bit, well, dull.' She could see Anne's shoulders relax. 'Maybe I could think about replacing some of them.'

Anne shook her head. 'Lizzie, this place is like a mausoleum. You have stuff here since the year dot. You have to have a clear out and brighten the place up. Move with the times.' She held her arms out. 'It's the twenty-first century for God's sake! The Celtic tiger is up and roaring and the tourists are flocking to hear him. And here you are.' She dropped her arms as if defeated. 'Owner of the quaintest knick-knack shop in Kilkenny and not a thing in it anyone would like to buy. It's rubbish - throw it out!'

The cheek of her! A glorified fudge maker and to listen you'd think she was marketing magnate of the century. Lizzie pulled her coat off and flinging it on the chair, brushed past her sister angrily. The coat stayed for a minute then slid traitorously to the floor. Anne picked it up.

'Lizzie,' she said gently, as she laid the coat across the chair back. 'You know I'm right. I supply sweets to every tourist trap in the county and most of them are raking it in. They're tapping into the boom and you're living in the past.'

Enough already! 'And what's wrong with that? You got a problem with the past?'

The words were out before she had a chance to stop them. As the sisters glared at each other the air in the room froze and Lizzie could feel it on her forehead, pushing back her hair and making her scalp tingle. She held Anne's eyes as long as she could before she turned away and lifted the empty box onto the floor. Then she took a key from her pocket and unlocking the drawer of her desk, pulled out her accounts book and opened it. As she made a show of running her fingers down the

column she heard Anne cross the room and open the door quietly. As she shut it behind her the air shifted and rustled the dried flowers on the shelf. They scratched against each other and for a moment Lizzie could have sworn they were whispering together. Whispering about her. She kept her head down and tried to focus on the figures on the page in front.

Suddenly, the shop door was flung open and Lizzie braced herself for Anne's retaliatory tirade. She took a deep breath and lifted her head to face the music.

A man was standing in the doorway. With the light behind him she couldn't see his face - just the silhouette of a tall, thin figure with a greatcoat. As he bent his head to come into the shop, the hairs on the back of her head stood on end. So familiar. But his face as he came towards her was a stranger's. She put her pen down. When he reached the table he swung a leather satchel off his shoulder and laid it carefully on the floor beside him.

'Are you Lizzie Flynn?'

'I am.'

His face cleared and he smiled broadly. 'Thank goodness! Then I'm in the right place.' He held his hand out to her. 'I've been looking for you. I'm Jim Nealon. I'm the Jigsaw Maker.'

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Lizzie's first inclination was to shake the proffered hand politely, explain that she did not do business with peddlers and then send him on his way. She didn't want to have him there if Anne came back. She couldn't afford to lose the moment. Anne wasn't fiery like her - Anne simmered. And she could sulk for Ireland if given the opportunity.

But he didn't give her the chance. He picked up his satchel and laid it on the table as if he feared whatever was inside might break. He undid the buckles and started to unpack some boxes. They were brick sized and covered in brown paper, thick and flecked with lighter colours, tied with raffia.

'They don't look like jigsaws,' Lizzie said. 'Where are the pictures?' She picked one up and turned it over. 'How do you know how it's supposed to turn out?'

Jim smiled. 'We never do.'

She put the box back on the table. 'How very cryptic. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm not really in the market for new stock.'

He put the box he was holding down and looked around the shop. 'That's a pity,' he said. 'I thought this was perfect for you - something new, something different.'

For goodness sake, what's with the need to ring changes all of a sudden? She opened her mouth to tell him that she had no intention of buying anything from him, new or not, when the flash of Anne's green Polo passed the window. Inside she caught a glimpse her sister, leaning forward on the steering wheel as she always did, singing to herself. Not a care in the world. Lizzie bit her lip.

'Are you all right?' His voice was gentle. 'If you're too busy, I'll pack up and go away.'

She turned back to see him pick up one of the boxes and start to re-pack.

'No,' she said. 'I'm not busy. Let me see.'

He handed it to her.

Lizzie untied the raffia and one end of the box eased open. She tipped the contents onto a space on the table and spread them out. The pieces were beautiful, tiny, intricately shaped. The backs of them were wood, in this case beech, finely cut so that they were more like buttons than jigsaw pieces and on the fronts varying

shades from black to white. Lizzie held one out to him, puzzled. 'What is it?'

Jim took the piece from her and turned it over. 'This side's beech - I didn't plunder it.' He showed her the other side. 'And this is where the beech is from.' He smiled at her confusion. 'Look here.' From the envelope he took some papers. One was a photograph and the other hand-written sheets. He handed the photograph to her.

'It's lovely, where is it?' She took it over to the window to have a better look. It was a black and white picture of an old house, once fine but now rundown, the ivy and roses overgrown. 'It must have been wonderful in its day.'

'It was - here, read this.' He handed her the other pieces of paper.

Lizzie read. '*Balmullen House, Kildangan, Co Kildare, once the residence of...* oh, the full history. What a nice touch. So you provide the picture and the background and...'

'No, read on.'

Lizzie scanned the rest of the page. The handwriting was slanted and old-fashioned. After the initial introduction, the writer identified herself as Mel Sheedy, the daughter of the last housekeeper to have served in the house. For paragraph after paragraph she told of her childhood, the parties, the work and the hardship. It was like being there.

'It's not just a history,' Jim said. 'It's real life. You don't just know what it looks like now; you get a feel for what it was like in its heyday. It's a personal memory.'

'I see. I like that.' Lizzie looked at the picture again. 'But why black and white? That makes it so much harder to put together.'

Jim picked up a few pieces and rolled them in his palms. 'Yes, but so much more rewarding. He held them out. 'What colour are your memories, Lizzie?'

She wasn't expecting that question. It hit her like a wet slap and she could feel it shatter and drip onto her shoulder where it spread and dried in purple stains. She shook her head to clear the image. 'I don't know. Multi-coloured, I suppose.' She could hear her voice, hard.

Jim didn't seem to notice. 'Okay, so look at the photograph and then shut your eyes and imagine that you're Mel. Describe the house, the front of it.'

Lizzie did as she was told and to her surprise the picture sprang into her mind almost straight away. She could see the long drive up to the front and she could hear the sound of carriage wheels on gravel as they slowed to a halt. She saw herself getting out and standing at the front door. There was a breeze and the air was full of the smell of the roses on the trellis to one side and the steady hum of bees.

'You can feel it, can't you?' Jim whispered.

Lizzie nodded.

'Ha!' Jim dropped the pieces back onto the table. 'There you are then! It's personal.' He started to scoop them back into the box. 'I took the photograph, you know. It was a beautiful summer's day and the air was clear and all the colours vivid. But they were just the colours of that day. If I had gone the following day, the sky would have been overcast and grey and it would have been a different picture altogether.' He turned and looked at her. 'You see? A coloured picture would have pinned it down, made it particular to one moment in time.' He folded the letter and slid it back into the envelope. 'But this house doesn't belong to one particular day. When you read Mel's memories they're of lots of days - happy, busy, dull - real life days.' He tied the package up again. 'That's what I hope to do in Rathshannan.'

Lizzie sat down and shook her head. 'Well, I think they're beautiful, I really do. But I can't for the life of me see why you'd want to make jigsaws of Rathshannan. It's probably the least exciting village in the whole of County Kilkenny. Nothing ever

happens here.' There was a heat in her cheeks. She held up her hand. 'Honestly. In almost every other place there's something to visit. We're not like that. We're just a place to rest your head en route from one exciting day out to another.'

Jim leaned forward on the table, and placed his palms on either side of the jigsaw he had just repackaged. 'And is that what people want who come to visit a place, do you think? Do you think they want excitement?'

Lizzie shrugged. 'I suppose so.'

Jim shook his head. 'No, they don't, they go to theme parks for that. In country places like this they want memories. They want to understand about a place, feel part of it, even identify with it. Why do you think so many Americans come to Ireland summer after summer? They're looking for their roots, that's why. They don't just want to see the grand buildings, the churches and castles - that's other people's history. They want to see the other places too, the hidden places, the places they might have lived in.' He pushed the box towards her. 'They want to read stories like Mel's and make those memories their own. And then, after they've gone home, they want to sit by the fire, or at the kitchen table and put the pieces of their memories together. And they don't want those memories confined to one particular day either. I give them the outline in black and white and they make whatever colour of it they please.' He looked so intense. 'Don't you see? They want to colour it for themselves - in their own heads. That makes it theirs.' He sat back and was silent.

For a minute Lizzie wasn't quite sure what to say to him. He was deadly serious.

'I see. And are they all on wood... your puzzles?'

Jim was businesslike again. He pulled another couple of boxes out. 'Yep, look here.' He turned the boxes on their ends and showed her some tiny writing in the corner of each. On the one she had seen was written *Balmullen on Beech*. Another said *Clary Bridge on Rowan*. 'I didn't plunder the wood. I wasn't joking about that. It's one of the conditions of the puzzle. It has to be cut from a piece of wood local to the particular scene. In the case of Balmullen, there had been a storm a couple of years before I went there and some of the trees on the grounds were damaged. I managed to salvage some bigger branches and turned the wood till I had pieces suitable.'

'So all the wood is native to the memory?'

'Yes, and that's what I hope to do here. This village may not be exciting in the usual sense but it's old and friendly and has lots of wonderful buildings full of memories that people could share - and lots of trees to work on.' He smiled. 'And you, of course.'

'What do I come under - living memory or dead wood?'

Jim laughed. 'I'm told there isn't a thing about Rathshannan, past or present, you don't know. Definitely living memory.'

Lizzie pointed to the boxes. There were rowans, oaks, yew and sycamore but there was mostly beech. 'And all of it native, you say. Don't you ever cheat?'

'Sometimes.' He smoothed the paper on the box he was holding. 'But I much prefer to get it right.' He smiled at her.

Lizzie smiled back. Even back in their boxes, the wooden jigsaw pieces gave off a smell. It pervaded the usual scents of candles, soap and talc. Old soap, unsold talc. The wood smelt fresh and clean. Lizzie looked at the rows of dried herb arrangements on the counter above the desk. Then she reached over.

'Do you know what, Jim? It's a great idea and I think we might be in business.' She took his hand and shook it warmly. 'Welcome to Rathshannan, Jigsaw Man.'

By eleven o'clock that morning the day's excitement was over. A strong wind brought grey clouds that hovered for a while then unleashed a drizzle that stayed all day. Lizzie watched the deserted street and sighed. If there was a good downpour people would wait till it was over then come out in the air afterwards to celebrate its end, potter around and maybe buy themselves something to celebrate their release. Or else they'd don macs and grab umbrellas and go for it, armed with a sense of purpose and a certain opening to any conversation they might get the opportunity to start. *Dreadful weather, isn't it?*

Drizzle was a different matter. Nobody ventured out in drizzle, it was too insidious, 'wettin' rain'. By two in the afternoon she gave up all hope of a customer and, fuelled with thoughts of the morning's conversations, made up her mind. While Anne was not completely right about the state of her shop, there was a hint of truth in her observations and it wouldn't harm anyone if she were to make a few alterations. She would move the seasonal stock into the window and clear a few shelves behind the counter for the new. She wracked her brain trying to recall Jim's definition of his jigsaws - *harnessing one person's memories so that another could feel part of them* - something like that. And her role was to write the history of the scene. That should be easy. She smiled as she predicted the places he would choose to photograph.

One was bound to be the old church in Kilfane, Norman built, with its tombstones engraved with effigies of knights. No American tourist would have anything like that at home. Neither could she imagine the water fountain at the crossroads being in their experience. It was so old nobody knew when it was built or who had built it though there were legends that stretched back hundreds of years. Thinking about it, Lizzie could feel a tingle of excitement. Writing about these ancient places, with their lore and mysteries, would be the perfect task for her and a bonus that she would get commission on each sold. As she packed and sealed the boxes to store in the cupboard against the time they might be fashionable again, she determined to stay a step ahead of her intriguing new friend. If the rain didn't let up, she'd close early and go home and make some notes in preparation. He would definitely be impressed.

Lizzie stopped. Oh, you foolish old woman! Without realising it, she had paused and was running her fingers through her hair as if to release curls she never had. She almost laughed aloud. What has gotten into you, Lizzie Flynn? You haven't taken a notion of the Jigsaw Maker, have you? For a start he's at least a decade too young and while that mightn't be an issue if the decade in question was between twenty and thirty, Lizzie was getting on for fifty. Skinny busy Lizzie, spinster of the parish, with her out-of-date shop with its out-of-date stock.

'Well that's fine,' she said aloud to the empty shelves above her counter. 'Someone has to keep all the pieces together, keep things ticking over so that it doesn't all come apart. Someone had to take responsibility.'

In the quiet of the shop with the pattering of drizzle on the windows, Lizzie's voice distorted and came back to her ears sounding different. It sounded like her mother berating her. *Someone has to take responsibility*. She looked at Anne's empty basket and flushed with shame. Anne was trying to help and if she hadn't, then maybe Lizzie wouldn't have been so receptive to the propositions of a perfect stranger and wouldn't now be looking forward to a new venture.

Jigsaws.

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It was two weeks before the Jigsaw Maker reappeared. Lizzie surprised herself by not worrying about his absence in the slightest. Usually, if a delivery was supposed to be

there at nine, and didn't arrive till ten past, the delivery man got short shrift - heavy traffic on the Kilkenny road or not. And if someone, by dint of a comment made, led her to believe that he would turn up in a week and didn't, he'd suffer for expectations created. Lizzie Flynn did not tolerate unpredictability.

Jim Nealon was so enthusiastic, Lizzie expected him to turn up by the end of the week. The weather cleared by Wednesday and there were blue skies. The light was good for taking photographs. Every day as she sat at her table scouring catalogues she watched the door out of the corner of her eye, waiting for an unkempt figure with a leather satchel to appear.

And now he hadn't returned and Lizzie didn't mind at all. Even if he never did, his initial visit, coming so soon after her conflict with Anne sparked something off in her. Together and separately, both had pinpointed a rut she'd let herself slide into. Life was uneventful, humdrum, and that was such a safe place to be. With her fiftieth in view, Lizzie could feel the burden of safety grow heavy and stifling. Wouldn't it be nice to break out a bit, take a risk for once in her adult life? As she turned the pages of the catalogues, bizarre items, the ones she usually ignored, were the ones to which she paid most attention. Maybe she should fill her shelves with them, have a refit, even close up for a while and reopen with a whole new look.

'Hello.'

She hadn't even heard the door open. Some cards were knocked off the display as Jim came into the shop; knocking things with his satchel as he passed.

'Sorry, I was always clumsy.'

Lizzie raised an eyebrow. 'That doesn't seem likely - your jigsaw pieces are so precise.'

'Ah yes, but have you tried putting them together?' The corners of his eyes creased with merriment as he took an A4 sized envelope out of his bag. He laid the envelope on the table. 'They mightn't fit.'

Lizzie took the envelope and opened the flap. 'Great,' she said, 'now he tells me. A jigsaw maker whose pieces don't fit - that should be popular.' She motioned him to sit down. 'You look very pleased with yourself.'

Jim was still smiling. 'To tell you the truth, I'm delighted. This village of yours is a treasure trove of the most beautiful, evocative places. You can walk around a corner and there it is, living history, humming with atmosphere.'

Lizzie sniffed. 'History, yes; living, no; humming; maybe.' She pulled some photographs out of the envelope and laid them on the table without looking at them closely. 'I bet I can guess what these are.'

He smiled but said nothing.

Lizzie slid her reading glasses onto her nose and picked up the first picture. For a minute she stared at it then slid the next one from behind and laid it on top, then the next. She didn't say a word until she had digested every detail then handed them back to him and exhaled slowly.

'I don't understand,' she said eventually.

'Understand what?'

'These,' she gestured at the photos. 'I don't understand what these are.'

He spread the three pictures out and leaned over them. 'Rathshannan,' he said. 'These are, to my mind, some of the most evocative images of this village. Anyone could look at one of these and recognise it. Take this,' he picked up the top picture. It was of the village school - or rather the old village school which had shut its doors to pupils two seasons ago. Talk was that some developer had it now and was planning to turn it into apartments - posh weekend retreats for city-weary high earners. 'How

many National Schools in the country look like this?'

'Most of them probably. The old ones anyway.'

'Exactly. They were everywhere once but now they're an endangered species. Soon they'll be ripped down, soaped up, changed. And what good will they be to us then?'

Lizzie felt cross. Whether at being wrong in her predictions or because she couldn't see what he was getting at, she wasn't sure. 'Jim,' she said, 'I don't see what good they are to us now. I thought you were going to come back with the old church on the Thomastown road or the fountain at the crossroads. They're unique.'

'You can get photographs with those places on, everyone goes there. But nobody belongs. It's just history. This is different; this is personal. If the people who buy our jigsaws haven't been to one of these schools themselves, their fathers and mothers will have. They'll have walked up a path like that,' he prodded the path on the photograph, 'rushed in a door like that. It'll be a part of their past in a way that old Norman effigies never could.'

Lizzie picked up the picture and looked at it. 'You're right, of course, but I don't see what you want me to do for you. I can tell you when the school was founded, how many pupils went there, who were the nuns who ran the place and when it closed, but apart from that, nothing exciting happened there at all.'

Jim shrugged. 'Depends on what you call exciting. For someone looking to confirm their identity - as so many of our tourists are - it's the most ordinary things that are the most exciting. Being part of the everyday humdrum is the goal.'

Lizzie yawned and stretched. 'Oh dear. Well, you've got your expert there. Humdrum is my middle name.' She picked up the other pictures as well and fanned them out in her hands. 'Go on then. Tell me exactly what I am to do.'

Jim took the first picture from her. 'You were a pupil here, circa...?'

Lizzie felt herself blush. 'The sixties, if you must know.'

'Perfect.' He turned the picture over and pulled a pen from his pocket. 'So let's imagine that Lizzie Flynn is back in Rathshannan National School in... say 1969, and that's where you start.' He wrote some notes on the back of the photo. 'Take this home with you and look at it, think about it for a few days, really get into the scene and then write me up all you can recall about that particular year in that school. Everything, the big events, the outings, the ordinary. I want to be able to read it afterwards and really feel that I was there.' He pointed to the other two photos. 'Maybe we should leave these for the time being. They might be distracting.'

Lizzie held on to them. 'No, let me have these too.' She looked at them again and smiled. 'Funny you should have picked 1969.' She could hear the shake in her voice and hoped that he couldn't. 'That was quite an eventful year.'

He sat watching her, saying nothing.

'Really,' she said. 'I spent eight years in that school and the only year anything happened was that one. The only year, in fact that everything happened.' She was silent then and he sat watching her. 'So, 1969, Rathshannan National School. I can't think where to begin.'

Jim took one of the jigsaws from his satchel. 'When Mel wrote the story of Balmullen House, she told me she just shut her eyes and let the years pass away. And when she opened them again, she wrote without stopping as if what she was writing was what she was seeing in front of her. Maybe that might work for you.'

'It might.'

'Great!' Jim stood up and slung the bag over his shoulder. 'I'll leave you to it so and get to work on superimposing this image onto wood. I've got the most beautiful

pieces to work on.'

'Really? Sourced, cut and turned to perfection in a fortnight? You are a quick worker, Jim Nealon.'

Jim grinned. 'And you're a sharp one, Lizzie Flynn.' And then he was gone.

Watching as he walked past the window and on up the street, Lizzie shivered then berated herself. Honestly, she was practically flirting! In the distance, she could see him climb into an old Land Rover, like himself unkempt and bordering on scruffy. She waited till it disappeared from view. It wasn't even as if she found him attractive - he wasn't - he was just relaxed, like someone you'd known forever and from whom there'd be no point in keeping secrets. Not that she had any secrets to keep. She looked at the picture.

Not from the Rathshannan National School in 1969 anyway.

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'You are not going to believe what those twins have gone and done - bloody hell! What's happened here? Have you been burgled?' Teresa Callaghan dumped her bags beside the counter and fell into the chair.

Lizzie laughed. 'I decided it was high time I had a clear out. I'm thinking of carrying some new lines - more crafty things, more exclusive.'

Teresa raised an eyebrow. 'Oh yea? Lizzie Flynn breaking out? What's all that about?'

Lizzie closed her account book and slid it into the drawer. 'Fancied brightening up, that's all. So, tell me, what have the twins gone and done that has you so upset?'

Teresa sniffed and it was clear she'd been crying. 'Tattoos,' she said eventually. 'They took themselves into Kilkenny and found some *gombeen* man with a needle and ink who did tattoos on the both of them.'

'But they're only fifteen. Is that legal?'

'I don't know. Whatever it is, it's a bloody disgrace. You should see the state of Kylie's arm.' She leaned forward and rolled up her sleeve. 'It's infected, of course.' With her palm cupped she indicated a swelling the size of a tennis ball. 'And up to here. There's probably God knows how much disease swilling around in there - enough to infect a continent by the look of it. And Jason's not a lot better - fecking eejit.'

'Whose idea was it?'

Kathleen raised her eyes to Heaven. 'You know what that pair are like - thick as thieves. Both claim full responsibility and that the other had to be coerced. He says a fellow in school had it done and she says she saw it advertised at a concert and so they each decided it would be a good idea.'

'Oh dear.' Lizzie felt a rush of sympathy for Teresa with her wayward twins. They'd been a handful since birth and the strain of their high spirits and sleeplessness had eventually sent their father into bed in a quieter household. 'How big is the damage?'

Teresa picked up the stapler and held it sideways on. 'This. When the swelling goes down and the pus is all squeezed out, it will apparently read *We are the future*. Some future - only two fecking functional arms between them!'

Lizzie smiled. 'Poor Teresa, I don't know how you cope.'

Teresa sniffed. 'I don't, Lizzie, and that's being honest with you. They're wild and I can't keep control of them at all. And do you know the worst of it?'

Lizzie shook her head.

'Their bloody father - he and his slut are expecting! Mam was over that way

visiting and one of the women there told her about it. Apparently he's going around the place with his hand on her big fat belly, telling the world what a great fellow he is and how much he's looking forward to being a father! Being a father - can you believe the cheek of it. Where does he think the twins came from - the bloody fairies? It's not right.'

Now she was crying openly and Lizzie put her arms around her. 'It's not fair, you're right. He's a shit and the twins aren't being much better, giving you all this grief.'

In her arms Teresa stiffened. 'There's nothing wrong with the twins, Lizzie Flynn, if you don't mind.'

'I didn't - '

'Well don't. I have enough grief from my mother without criticism from you as well.'

Lizzie sighed. Teresa was impossible. She could spend hours on the dreadful escapades of her offspring and how difficult they were but as soon as you agreed with her, she was up in arms. 'I'll put the kettle on.'

By the time she came back with two mugs, Teresa seemed a bit calmer. She had tipped the Balmullen jigsaw onto the table and was fingering the pieces. 'These are lovely, like fine buttons.'

Lizzie pushed the mug towards her. 'That's exactly what I thought. They're a new line.' Recalling Jim's words as accurately as she could she told Teresa about the plan.

'It sounds great. Does he do any other stuff?'

'Like what?'

'Coasters, family photos, that sort of thing. My cousin has place mats with pictures of her kids on them. If your man is a photographer and he's good with the wood as well, maybe he could do that too, earn a bit of money while he cuts his fancy jigsaws.' She turned the piece over in her hands. 'I mean, this can't be very cost-effective, can it? How long do you think it would take a fellow to do a puzzle like this? And he's planning to sell it for how much?'

Lizzie took the piece from her and examined it. Teresa was right. It was beautifully turned. Where he cut the shapes he had smoothed the edges and drawn a fine line in black or white or shades of grey, depending on where the piece was to fit. It was a labour of love.

'They won't be cheap. He reckons if they sell, he might do the preliminary work then send it off somewhere to be finished.' She tapped the side of her nose. 'He has connections, you know.'

Teresa frowned. 'Who is he anyway? Do you think he's above board?'

'Teresa Callaghan! What a suspicious mind you have!' Lizzie was smiling but she didn't feel amused. Why would Jim not be above board? Of course he was above board. He was a jigsaw maker.

Teresa shrugged. 'Maybe. It's just that these really are beautiful - he's obviously good at what he does so why does he choose to do it here and why now?'

'I don't know.' Lizzie drained her mug, disregarding the scalding on her tongue. Teresa's provincial mindedness was getting up her nose. 'Maybe he likes the countryside; maybe he likes the air; maybe - '

'I've got it!' Teresa slammed her mug triumphantly on the counter, slopping tea over the jigsaw. 'He's a down and out artist, looking for a rich wife. He's done his research and found out that in the sleepy village of Rathshannan there lives a rich bachelor woman, with a small shop and farmland to let. He's come here looking for

you! A sugar Mammy!' Her eyes were bright with merriment.

Lizzie laughed. 'I don't think so somehow. Anyway, Anne's the sugar mammy. I'm hardly a catch at this stage - he's years too young for me.'

Teresa was enjoying herself now. 'I don't know. The older the fiddle and all that. Anyway, why did he want *you* to write up the spiel for each? Couldn't one of the old nuns have done it just as well?'

Lizzie lifted the mug and started to wipe the spots of tea off the jigsaw pieces. 'You'd better ask him that.' Through the window she could hear the rumble of Jim's Land Rover. Yesterday she'd mentioned that she'd be getting in a supply of Anne's home-made fudge and his eyes lit up as he confessed to a sweet tooth. He passed the window now and was approaching the shop door. 'Here he is.'

As he paused, hand on handle to examine the rack she'd hung outside with the papers on, Teresa squinted and then turned to Lizzie. 'Why didn't you tell me? He's bloody gorgeous! He's like Clint Eastwood only with more flesh and no orang-utan!'

Lizzie smiled. 'I suppose he is - I hadn't noticed.'

Teresa pushed her hair off her face. 'In that case, you're not joking, Lizzie - you *are* past it.'

'Thanks!'

'And he's not married, did you say?'

'I don't know.'

'Well, for the love of God, would you find out?' Teresa picked up her bag and opening her coat so that her ample bosom would be apparent to anyone she might run into in a doorway, she winked. 'I'm off!' And rushing to the door in order to facilitate a collision, she walked straight into Jim as he came in.

'Oh!' she said. 'I didn't see you there.'

Jim held out his arms to steady her. 'My fault, I didn't realise anyone was coming out. You okay?'

Teresa batted her eyelashes. 'I'm sure I'll recover.' She looked at Lizzie hopefully as if she might be invited to stay but Lizzie was still mopping the spilt tea off the table and she obviously decided it was better not to hang around while he discovered someone had been careless with his handiwork.

'Bye then Lizzie.' Her voice had risen at least an octave.

'Bye, Teresa. Hope the twins are better soon!'

Teresa shot her a glare that said *Bitch* and Lizzie tried not to laugh. The door was shut with a bang. Jim looked from one to the other bemused.

'Friend of yours?'

'When she's after something.' Lizzie dried off the last of the spill. 'Ah no, that's just me being nasty. Actually she's grand - has a rough time of it with two demon twins, teenagers.'

Jim winced theatrically.

'You know about teenagers, then?'

'Who doesn't?' Jim leaned over the basket on the counter and ran his fingers down the selection of neatly packaged bags of fudge that Anne left in earlier. There were seven different flavours and he was taking his time deciding. 'These look lovely.'

'They are, wickedly lovely.'

He picked one up and examined the bag carefully. 'And they're made...'

'Locally. My sister is the mastermind. She provides the recipes and the expertise and local women do the stirring.' She took the bag from his hand and gave him a piece. 'Here, try before you buy, the secret's in the stirring.'

'I'm sure you're right.' Jim put the sweet in his mouth and closed his eyes.

While it dissolved he was silent and Lizzie waited for him to speak again. Teresa was right, he was a handsome man, in an untidy, lived-in sort of way. His dark hair fell over his forehead and she fought the impulse to push it back behind his ear. To touch it.

'Perfect.'

Lizzie started as she realised that Jim's eyes were open and he was looking at her. She felt the blushes and turned away. 'So you like it then?'

'Absolutely! It's exactly as I remember - ' he fished in the bag for another piece, 'it's proper fudge made the way it should be. I suppose it's an old recipe?'

'Could be.'

He took another piece. 'I used to get a bag, every year on my birthday. Don't know where my mother got it but there was always a little note in it, a love note.'

'Aah, sweet.'

Jim grinned at the teasing. 'Right so,' he rummaged in his pocket and pulled out two notes. 'How much can I get for this?'

Lizzie took the notes. 'Practically all of it, ten bags. You'll be sick, rot your teeth and suck your way through life if you're careful.' She handed him a carrier bag. 'Here, take your pick.'

Jim chose a variety. 'You sound just like my mother.' He was laughing.

Lizzie's face burned. His bloody mother! Great. She wasn't that old, and comparing her with his mother would do little to endear him. That was for sure.

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'I was right - I knew I was,' Teresa announced the following morning.

'And good morning to you too.' Lizzie didn't look up. Sister Moira from the National School had requested an array of ribbons, small baskets and decorative paints for their school harvest display and she wanted them by lunchtime.

'Here, I'll give you a hand.' Teresa left her coat on the chair and rolled up her sleeves. 'These are nice.' She held the ribbon up to the light. 'Is it for the school?'

'Um.'

Teresa sniffed. 'I remember when my two did things like this. They were lovely then, innocent.'

Lizzie looked up and smiled. In her memory there was never a time when the Callaghan twins could accurately be described as innocent.

'We used to make bows around the baskets, like this,' and taking a length of ribbon she wrapped it round and tied it loosely in a soft bow at the front. Then she held it up. 'There, what do you think?'

'It's lovely.' Lizzie took the basket from her. 'I can never do bows properly, the knot's always too tight. How did you do that?'

Teresa showed her but no matter how often Lizzie tried, she could not get it right. In the end she undid her efforts and handed the ribbon over. 'I give up. I bow to your superior ability to get knotted. I'm too tight myself.'

'You said it.' Teresa was grinning. 'So tell me, what's the latest on your man?'

'Ah ha! The purpose of the visit. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you but there is no latest and he is not my man.'

'Wish he was mine.' Teresa was smoothing the ribbon between her fingers. 'I could really do with a good man in my life just now. Especially with Gerry's slut expecting.' She sighed and put the ribbon down. 'Not that I want him back or anything but life's so unfair. He's the one who walked out; he's the one who broke his marriage vows; he's the one who abandoned his kids. And now he's the one with the partner, the new baby on the way and by all accounts, a grand new flat over looking the river!'

'He's never - the new ones?'

'Yea.'

Lizzie pushed her work to one side and stood, hands on hips. 'That stinks, it really does. What are you going to do about it?'

Teresa shrugged. 'What can I do? Obviously I hope the baby's fine but, God forgive me, I hope its mother has the most unmerciful piles after the birth that no amount of creaming or sitting on ice packets will shrink...'

Lizzie smiled.

'And I hope its father is shat on, spat on and puked over at every possible opportunity - and especially when he has his best shirt on - for at least the first three years. After which I hope they have triplets.' She banged the table. 'And that's how I feel about it!'

Lizzie nodded. 'I see - you don't really mind then.'

'No.'

'And there was I thinking you might have a vindictive streak in you.'

Teresa made a face. 'How could you - bad-minded old woman that you are.'

Lizzie smiled but the comment stung. 'I'm not that old, you know, I'm not fifty yet.'

'Okay then, just bad-minded. When's your significant birthday anyway?'

'A couple of years.'

'We should have a party.'

Lizzie shook her head. 'You can if you like. I don't intend to.'

'Why not? You're hardly going to keep it a secret. Everyone round here knows you anyway and so there'd be little point in trying to knock off a few years at this stage.'

'Not everyone knows.'

Teresa opened her mouth but as a thought struck her she closed it again and a sly gleam came into her eyes. She sucked in her cheeks and nodded slowly. Lizzie could feel the irritation growing.

'What?' she said at last. 'What's so amusing?'

Teresa shrugged. 'I didn't come down in the last shower. I know why you want to keep your approaching decade a secret. *We* all know how old you are but someone new around here mightn't.' She nudged the jigsaw box on the edge of the table.

Lizzie reddened. 'Teresa Callaghan, you talk a lot of bull. Jim Nealon is at least a decade younger than I am and while you may be desperate to have a man in your life I am perfectly happy thank you. I am neither dependent nor depended on and that suits me just fine.'

Teresa looked sceptical. 'And what about keeping warm at night?'

Lizzie reached over and took two floppy corduroy bags off the shelf. They were filled with something that rustled and gave off a faint smell of lavender. She handed one to Teresa. 'I use these. Filled with wheat and scented with aroma therapeutic oils, they are heated in the microwave for three minutes and retain their heat for ages. They don't snore, take up too much space, smell disgusting after a night in the pub and they don't - ' she patted the top of hers, 'get you pregnant and abandon you when your twins are nine months old.'

Teresa dropped the bag she was holding. She looked as if she had just been slapped.

'Thanks, Lizzie. I needed that.' She picked up her coat and without bothering to put it on, left the shop.

Lizzie watched her walk up the street, stiff and defensive, and her cheeks

burned with shame. What on earth had come over her? She looked around her empty shop, and the basket on the table caught her eye. The wheat bag had crushed Teresa's lovely bow as she dropped it. Lizzie picked the bag up and put it back on the shelf. The calming scent of lavender seemed to be mocking her. Didn't work that time, did it? She tried to fix the bow where it was creased but as she smoothed it, she pulled the knot too tight and it was ruined. Damn! She could do nothing right. Beside it on the table, Anne's last few bags of fudge reminded her that she hadn't made peace with her sister yet either. And she had been squiffy with Jim after he made the remark about her sounding like his mother - a perfectly innocent remark that anyone could make who was being preached at. She could feel tears threatening. I'm losing it, she thought, losing my marbles and throwing away everyone else's. She flopped back into her chair and fought the temptation to cry like a baby. I am nearly fifty years old and I don't belong to anyone and nobody belongs to me. And other people don't like me because I am turning into a caustic old woman.

She held her hands out and looked at them. The palms were smooth - testament to a life with all the appliances, the washing machines, dishwashers - but age had squeezed its mark onto the back. Where once the dimples dented plump fingers, now her knuckles were lined and creased. Her mother's engagement ring was on the fourth finger of her right hand but her left hand was unmarked. Untouched.

A shiver ran down her spine and she felt ashamed. She stood up and moved the school pile into the middle. She'd get this lot ready and drop it in to Sister Moira at lunchtime. If that didn't take too long she'd go around to see Anne and apologise for her surliness - blame an impending menopause or something. Then she'd go and see Teresa. With all the talk of bows and beaus Teresa had never managed to reveal what it was she had been right about.

This time Lizzie would listen and keep her own nasty mouth shut.

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Sister Moira was delighted with her collection of paraphernalia - baskets, ribbons, stickers and things that sparkled. She pulled some pages of sticky-back farmyard pictures out of the box and held them up.

'Now you know what'll happen, don't you?' She put the pages to one side. 'All the boys will want to cut things out, just so that they can stab one another with the scissors when my back is turned and the girls will pull the fluff off the feathers and stick them to their ear lobes - jewelled princesses by three-thirty.'

Lizzie laughed. 'Is it worth the bother?'

'It is really. With a bit of careful rearrangement our harvest display will look fine by the time the Mammies and Daddies arrive to see it. And anyway, if I'm being honest, it isn't for the glorification of autumn that I do it at all.' She swept the bits back into the box and put it aside. 'When it's all finished, the colours make a lovely backdrop for the school photos next week. They have to be ordered and delivered in time for the Christmas cards. Piles of fruit and bread and little colourful baskets look a lot nicer than anaemic school walls or a curly-sided map of Ireland.' She pointed to the huge map that dominated the far wall.

'You ought to get a new one. I'd swear that was in use when I went to the old school.' Lizzie pulled the edges of the map and tried to flatten them.

'It probably was.' Sister Moira waved a hand. 'If you look closely you'll see that most of the furniture was salvaged too. The powers that be have promised to get some new tables - but always next year.' She went to one of the desks and opened its lid. 'Look here, there are names on this that go back years; the hinges are rusty; and whatever unfortunate child has to sit on the seat will end up with splinters in her

backside if she slides off it too quickly.'

Lizzie nodded. 'Ah yes, I remember it well. Splinters in your knickers - that's when you find out who your friends are.'

'Lizzie Flynn! You're a bit fruity today!'

'Sorry,' Lizzie smiled. She looked around the classroom which, though it was not the classroom of her childhood, had the same feel about it, the same smell. A thought struck her. 'Moira, is it just furniture from the old school that you have, are there any old photographs?'

'From when?'

'My time, the sixties, the olden days?'

'We have actually.' She closed the desk lid and beckoned to Lizzie to follow her. 'We threw out a lot of paperwork when we moved over but someone suggested we keep class photos, in the faint hope that one of our past pupils might achieve great fame in the future and we might acquire great fortune selling their photograph.' Fiddling with her keys she opened the store cupboard at the end of the corridor. 'Needless to say we are still in possession of a heap of yellowed pictures that usually nobody wants to look at and not even space in the cupboard for a pencil.' She indicated a pile of dusty boxes on the shelf and passed it to Lizzie. 'Here,' she said, 'stored carefully between sheets of dust for years and all of a sudden they're in great demand. Do you want to have a look at them? They're all organised in class years and it goes back to the thirties.' She smiled at Lizzie. 'At what stage were you wishing to see yourself? What was your best year?'

Lizzie scanned the labels. 'It's not vanity, I'll have you know. I'm doing research. Have you any photos from 1969?'

Moira rubbed the dust off the labels and peered at the writing. 'Let me see. They're not in order at the minute because someone else was asking about photos recently and Sister Helen had a rummage.' She turned and smiled. 'A very short, unsuccessful one actually because there are as many spiders as anything else in here and Helen is terrified of anything with more legs than herself. I think she told him she couldn't find any and spent the rest of the day grappling with her guilt.' She started to pull a box out. 'Here you go, 1960 to 1969.' She peeled off the drying sellotape and lifted the lid. 'Aren't you the spring chicken - some of these are in colour!'

Lizzie took the box from her. 'Thank you and why wouldn't they be?' Mindful of her recent sharpness with Anne and Teresa, she smiled. 'Is there something people are trying to tell me? This is the fourth time recently I have been reminded that I am out-of-date, ageing or generally past my prime.'

'Never. You could take them away if you like and bring them back in a decade or two.'

Lizzie took the box. 'Thanks - don't you want to tell Helen we have them?'

'No, don't worry. I don't think it was important. Just some fellow wanted to know if we had information about the old National School and asked if there were photographs. Helen said he didn't seem too bothered when she said there weren't and he went away.'

The box felt heavy in her arms. 'A fellow? A past pupil, was he?'

'No.' Moira pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and gave the top of the box a cursory wipe. 'An English fellow. He's staying somewhere locally I think, some sort of an artist.'

'A photographer?'

'Could be.'

More than could be - Lizzie smiled. 'I know the fellow. He's doing a series of

local photographs, pretty scenes to make into jigsaws. He's a jigsaw maker. I'm helping him with the background.'

'Ah ha! Hence the research.'

Lizzie nodded. 'He took a gorgeous shot of the old school. He was probably looking for some pictures taken from the same angle when the school was still open so that so that he could see if it had changed much in appearance - capture the authentic flavour.'

Moira shook the dust from her handkerchief. 'Um, now, are you all right with those? Don't rush back with them, it's a grand excuse to give that cupboard a clean out. All I need now is a few bold children in need of punishment who can be assigned the job of sorting and dusting for a few hours and then I won't have to do it myself.'

'You're a wicked woman, Sister Moira.'

Moira smiled. 'I am, thank God - it gets the chores done very quickly. Here, let me get the door for you. Oh! And your cheque, for the display material...' seeing Lizzie about to protest she held up a hand, 'which you will accept or I will never ask you for anything again.' She disappeared into the classroom and came back with a cheque that she folded and slipped into Lizzie's bag. 'There you are - are you all right now?'

'I'm always right,' Lizzie smiled.

Sister Moira held open the car door for her. 'Nearly always,' she said.

Lizzie slid the box onto the passenger seat and went around to open her door. 'What am I wrong about?'

'Your man,' Moira called as the bell went and there was the sound of children thundering into lines in the playground.

'What about him?'

'Helen said he was quite specific. Asked if there were photographs of a particular year - '

'1969?'

'That's right. And it wasn't photographs of the school he wanted. He didn't ask about the building,' she waved as she went back inside, 'so you were wrong in your supposition. Your jigsaw maker wanted photographs of the children.'

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There was a blue mini-van parked in the yard outside Anne's when Lizzie pulled up. Inside, Matt Devine had the seat tipped back, the window open and was snoring soundly. Lizzie crept up and watched his sleeping face for a few moments, surprised to see the streaks of grey in the thinning hair of his temples and the laughter lines at the corner of his eyes. Everyone's growing old, she thought and turned to walk away. As she did, he opened one eye and regarded her suspiciously.

'What time is it? Am I early for something or are you late?' He eased himself free of the seat belt and opened the door. 'And which one of us isn't supposed to be where?'

'It's gone three. Where are you supposed to be?'

'Here, but I'm early. What are you doing skulking around admiring men at rest?' As he climbed out of the van, his elbow hit the horn.

Anne's door opened and Bernie Collins stuck her head out.

'You're impatient today, Matt Devine. We're not done with the order yet so keep your hair on will you!'

Matt rubbed his palm over his balding head. 'If I could.' He glared at Lizzie. 'Of course, it'd help if I was getting enough sleep.'

Lizzie laughed. 'Hey, don't blame me, I'm not keeping you awake at night.'

Matt leaned his elbow on the sill and winked at her. 'You could if you wanted, though. You know what they say about bald men...'

'They should wear a hat?'

'Ah, feck off, you.' Matt got back into the van and lay back again grinning to himself.

Bernie laughed. 'He deserves points for trying anyway.' She wagged a finger at him. 'Behave yourself or I'll tell.' Then she ushered Lizzie inside.

Anne's house smelled wonderful. Although it was the house the sisters had grown up in, it never smelt like this when they were children. The kitchen door was shut but the smell of fudge and fruit was everywhere. Lizzie stood in the hallway and inhaled deeply.

'A new recipe. The blackcurrant fudge went really well so we're trying it with raspberries. Do you want to be the taste tester?'

'You bet.'

Bernie opened the kitchen door. 'Anne! Lizzie's here. We can try it on her.'

Anne didn't look up. 'Why not?' She cut a triangle off the slab of cooled fudge on the sideboard and held it out. 'Lizzie always likes to be adventurous.'

If it was meant as a slight, only Lizzie caught it. Anne passed the piece over and cut another. 'Do you want to try it, Bernie? Here - and take some out to prince charming outside.'

Bernie took the fudge and left the sisters alone. Lizzie popped the fudge into her mouth and let it melt. As always, it was perfect - smooth and sweet but with just enough of a fruity tang to make it more-ish. When it had melted she licked her lips till the taste disappeared and waited for Anne to speak.

'Well?' Anne's voice had an edge to it. 'Too innovative for you, is it?'

'Enough now.' Lizzie spoke quietly. 'I was unkind and I shouldn't have been and - ' she bit her lip. Apologies were fine in her head but she hated saying them aloud. She opened her mouth to finish the sentence but no words came.

Anne smiled. She picked up another piece of the fudge and held it out. 'I know, you're sorry for being such a cow. You don't know what came over you but it was probably a menopausal moment which you've regretted ever since.' She turned her attention to the slab, which she started cutting into small squares. 'What's up anyway? I'm sure you didn't come all this way just to add a few inches to your waistline.'

Lizzie pulled out a chair and sat down. 'Actually, I did - ' she saw Anne pause, 'though that was only part of the reason.' She took a deep breath. 'The rest was that you're right about me being a cow. I've been snappy with everyone recently and so I've decided to turn over a new leaf - spring clean my life.'

'Goodness!' Anne put the knife down. 'So you were listening! I never knew I had such influence.'

'You don't - it wasn't all you. I have a new enterprise.'

'Oh dear, what is it? Triangular guest soaps?'

Lizzie bristled. 'Now who's the cow?' She took a disposable glove from the box on the table and started to count out the pieces of fudge into little piles with one for luck, so that Anne could scoop them into the plastic liners. 'Actually, I'm starting a writing project about Rathshannan in conjunction with a very nice man...'

Anne frowned. 'Not Matt Devine surely?' She looked from Lizzie to the window where she had a perfect view of the van outside. 'I saw you admiring him.'

'As if! I was just looking. He's aged a bit, hasn't he?'

Anne shrugged, 'Hadn't noticed. Maybe he has things on his mind. Anyway, if

not him, who?'

Lizzie took a deep breath. 'I was going to mention it to you last week but I thought I'd wait till I was sure. And now I am...' and between nibbles of sweet, she told her all about Jim's jigsaw project and her part in it. With their recent falling out in mind, she expected that Anne would be enthusiastic, encourage her to undertake new ventures. Instead, she listened quietly.

'And he's really getting into it. According to Moira he was over at the school looking for old photos as well.' She finished and looked to Anne for reaction.

Anne said nothing. She shook the liner open and began to count squares of fudge into it.

'You don't have to do that,' Lizzie said. 'I've counted them out already.'

'Thanks,' Anne's voice was quiet.

'So what do you think?'

Anne held a piece of fudge mid-air and examined it closely. 'Is he the same fellow Teresa saw over at the church looking at records?' When Lizzie didn't answer, she motioned to Bernie outside talking to Matt. 'She called in here yesterday to give her mother a message and mentioned that there was some artist staying in town who was doing some sort of history of the place, said he was shifty.'

Lizzie laughed. 'Jim's not shifty. Teresa's sulking because she didn't catch his eye, despite her very obvious attempt to squeeze him into the doorframe.'

Anne smiled. 'That good-looking, eh?'

'In a rangy sort of way,' Lizzie could feel the blush starting. 'A bit young and skinny for me. Looks a bit like what's-his-name, that actor, with the monkey? You should come over and meet him, you'd like him.'

'You do anyway.'

Lizzie nodded. 'I do actually. Shame he isn't older.' She pointed a warning finger at her sister. 'And don't say, *or you younger*. I've had enough growing old comments recently to justify a HRT fest.'

Anne winced, 'Sounds painful. Anyway, I need to get these orders filled before your man outside has to fly off on another job so if you're not busy, do you mind giving us a hand?' She lifted some boxes off the shelf on the back wall and passed one over to Lizzie and one to Bernie as she arrived back. 'Thirty in each, rows of six of each flavour, then a box of thirty plain.' The women started counting bags of fudge into neat lines. 'You won't need any extra for the minute, will you, Liz?'

About to shake her head, Lizzie suddenly remembered that she had only a few left. 'Actually, I do. Jim practically cleared me out. Apparently fudge is a weak spot,' she smiled, 'reminds him of his childhood.'

Bernie looked at Anne and winked. 'Ah, sweet! Teresa said you were interested in his weak spot.'

'For goodness sake!' Lizzie sealed the box and handed it to Anne who was now stacking the load in a crate ready for the van. 'Are you lot starved for a bit of gossip or what! I only know that because he happened to mention that he always had a bag of fudge on his birthday when he was a kid and he loves it.' She had to raise her voice to be heard over the crackling of the confectionery bags.

Anne put the last box on the pallet and straightened up. 'Sorry, I missed that. What did you say?'

'Doesn't matter.'

'Right so. Let's get this lot loaded and we can relax.' They each picked up a crate and headed for the door. When they were finished, Anne gave Matt his delivery order and they waved him off. The women headed back to the kitchen and surveyed

the mess. There were bits of wrapping, spills of sugar and crumbs of sweet everywhere. 'Thank God that's done for another day!' Anne said. 'If we keep on at this rate I'm going to have to take on more staff. Cup of tea?'

Lizzie looked at her watch. 'Thanks but I'd better be off.' She looked at Bernie and smiled guiltily. 'I need to pop in on Teresa.'

'Right so. Take a box of plain with you if you want and I'll send some more over later.' Anne wiped her hands on her apron and started filling the kettle.'

'And tell that daughter of mine to take it easy, won't you. She should pack the twins off to their father and his floozy for a week.' Bernie scowled at the thought of her errant ex-son-in-law.

Lizzie picked up the box. 'Thanks. I'll put this in the account book and settle for the lot later. Okay?'

'Okay, and Liz?' Anne raised her hand to wave. She looked pensive. 'Be careful with that jigsaw man, won't you? He sounds too good to be true.'

'And a bit snoopy, if you ask me.' Bernie added.

'I didn't.' Too late. Lizzie's sharpness was not lost on her audience as they looked at one another and tried to hide the smirks. Lizzie managed a weak smile.

'I meant...'

Bernie nodded. 'I know, you meant mind your own business, but you are far too polite to say it outright.' She hustled Lizzie out of the kitchen. 'Don't worry. Nice to see someone round here having a bit of excitement in her life,' she winked at Anne, 'even if she isn't really!'

'You're hopeless.' Lizzie left them to it. She was conscious that her cheeks were still red as she turned off onto the main road and knew it wasn't the heat from the kitchen. *You are a silly old woman, Lizzie Flynn. This is definitely a mid-life crisis you're having.* She glanced at the box of photos on the seat beside her. Teresa could wait for another day. The sooner she started on the school recollection the better.

Rathshannan National School, she wrote on the top of the page. The year was 1969 and I was eleven years old... Our teacher was Sister Cillian... and this is so bloody boring it's like drawing the proverbial blood out of stone and I haven't a clue where to start! She threw her pen on the desk and got up to make another cup of coffee. She'd already had three mugs and her nerves and bladder were on edge. It wasn't stimulation she needed - more divine intervention. She prayed for inspiration: none came.

Outside the window a large truck passed by, sending a spray of wet mud over the side of her car. Damn! She should have put it into the garage. She kicked her slippers under the radiator and went into the hall to get her shoes. As she opened the front door, another truck whizzed by and then braked heavily. Something was causing an obstruction in the road further ahead and there was a hold-up both ways. Serves him right. Lizzie pulled her coat across her shoulders and went out to her car. The box of convent photographs was still on the floor on the passenger side. Maybe something in there would give her inspiration.

She backed the car into the garage and was reaching in to get the box when there was a knock on her window.

'What are you doing, skulking in your own garage?'

Lizzie jumped. 'More to the point,' she said crossly, 'what are you doing skulking in my garage?'

'I'm not,' Jim laughed, 'I'm lurking, loitering even.'

Lizzie got out and shut the door. The queue had built up now, and all along the road weary car drivers watched her as she locked the garage with one hand and

balanced a grubby box that threatened to fall apart at any minute with the other. Jim held out his hands to help her. As she passed the box to him, she remembered what Moira had said and felt suddenly uneasy.

'Lurking and loitering? That sounds seedy.'

Jim laughed. 'Thanks, Lizzie. Being seedy is not my chosen state really - it's more the one thrust upon me by the massive hold-up.' He leaned towards her and spoke in a low voice. 'Apparently a truck, going too fast, has misjudged the bend and is now jack-knifed on the bridge.' He indicated the queue. 'And unlike the patient, unmotivated people of this worthy village, I was not prepared to sit in my car for the next hour while they clear it. I parked on the kerb, walked to the front, found out what was going on, and I was en route back to collect a few things before abandoning it there for the next few hours while they decongest. Hence the loitering. It's my unique way of getting on with my life as best I can - car-less.' He made a face at her, 'And instead of sympathy, I am accused of being seedy!'

Lizzie smiled. 'Well it's better than being frustrated anyway!'

Jim furrowed his brow in mock concern. 'Lizzie Flynn, are you sure you want to share that with me?'

The flush to her cheeks caught her by surprise. 'I didn't mean...!' She grabbed the box and pushed past him through the door. 'You'd better come in.'

Jim was laughing openly now. 'I don't know if I should.'

Lizzie dropped the box onto the table. She pulled off her coat and glared at the slippers she had kicked at the radiator earlier. They looked old - like granny slippers. Jim was following her into the kitchen but she gestured towards the study door. 'No,' she said. 'In there. I'll bring in the coffee and show you what I mean.'

When she came into the study, Jim was standing by the fireplace looking at her books. 'You're quite a reader, then?'

'More a collector of books I would like to read. There's never time. Have a seat. Milk and sugar?'

Jim turned and sat. 'What has you so busy then? Do you have family?'

'Don't you know? I thought you'd done your research.'

Jim looked at her in surprise. Lizzie flushed. What on earth had she said that for? What was wrong with her?

'I meant, when you were looking for someone to help with the jigsaws.' She held out a cup and the milk.

'I like it black, thanks.' Jim took the cup but he was still looking puzzled. 'I didn't do research. I drove through, spotted some places which were pretty, evocative or both and checked in to the nearest B&B. After a couple of days of wandering around, I went to the library and asked the lady there to recommend an authority on Rathshannan who was also sufficiently literate,' he glanced again at the shelves of books, 'to help me research the village. She said you.' He sipped the scalding coffee and looked at her.

Lizzie spooned two sugars into her cup and stirred noisily. She would be up all night. 'Oh, right.' That sounded perfectly reasonable. She hoped he would say more, tide her over the awkward silence which was growing, but he said nothing. She took a mouthful of coffee and made a face. She didn't even like sugar. 'I have a sister,' she said. 'Just the one. She's nearly five years older than I am but she doesn't look it. She's divorced and lives on the other side of the village in the house where we were brought up. It was a farm then but now she runs it as a cottage industry with a few of the local woman.'

'Making homemade fudge?'

'That's right.'

Jim sipped his coffee again. 'And the women she employs...?'

'All old friends.' Lizzie smiled. 'Anne likes to keep things close. She was away from Rathshannan for years, studying then working. When she'd saved enough to start her own business, she came back. She's done well.'

'I know, I tasted it. And you, did you ever marry?'

Lizzie shook her head. 'No. I was the one who stayed at home.' She paused. 'Our father died young and our mother couldn't carry on alone. I looked after her. She died just before Anne came back.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Don't be. The timing was perfect. I didn't want to stay in the house so Anne bought me out and I moved here. The farmland is let so that looks after itself and I run a small curio shop for the local in need of a birthday present and the tourist in need of a souvenir.' She put her cup down. 'Speaking of which - ' she reached over to the table and pulling the sheaf of papers towards her, handed him the top one, 'read this.'

Jim skimmed the few lines. 'Oh dear, it's not going so well then?'

'No, I haven't a clue where to start.'

'*Rathshannan National School...*'

'Ha bloody ha.' She took the page from him. 'I mean, what do you want me to say? What exactly do you want to know?'

Jim shrugged. 'What it was like, to be there, you know.'

Lizzie remembered the box she had just carried in.

'Is that why you were looking for pictures at the school?'

Jim smiled and held out his hands. 'Caught red-handed. I thought I could do the groundwork myself. But they couldn't find them so - I need you.'

'And fat lot of good I am. I've drawn a blank.' She got up and left the room. When she returned, she was carrying the box. 'But I got what you wanted. Here,' she pulled a brown envelope out and passed it to him. 'There are only a couple of '69. They're at the top - I had a look earlier.'

Jim eased the photos out as if they were fragile. 'These ones?'

'Yep.' She took one from him and pointed to a skinny girl sitting on a bench at the front of a class group. 'This was taken at the beginning of the year. That's me.' Then she placed another photo on top. 'And this was the end of that school year.' She laughed. 'One of the fathers had just bought himself a brand new Yashica camera and he offered to take photos of all the classes for free. Of course the nuns didn't say no. There's me again.'

Jim held the two photos side by side. He studied them for what seemed a long time until his wrists must have become tired because his hands started to shake. Lizzie put hers out to steady them.

'Coffee,' Jim said softly. 'It kicks in eventually.'

Lizzie sighed. 'I've had it by the bucket today.' She wiped a speck of dust from the photo. 'So what do you think?'

Jim shrugged. 'It must have been a good camera for its day. These are very clear.' As if to belie his statement, he leaned closer and peered into the faces. 'You look a lot older in the second one.'

Lizzie straightened up. 'It was a strange year.'

'Some of the other girls look different too.' He pointed to a couple in turn, tracing one from the first to the second picture and commenting on hair cut, heights achieved. Then he stopped, pointing to a large girl at the back of the first photograph. 'She looks old for the year.' His voice was shaky too. He wasn't joking about the

coffee. He ran his finger along the line in the second. 'And she's missing from this one. Where'd she go?'

Lizzie peered over his shoulder. 'That's Bernie - Bernie Healey that was.'

Jim sat very still. 'So why's she missing here?'

Lizzie put her finger to her lips. 'Scandal, I'm afraid.' She took the photos. 'Like I said, '69 was the year it all happened.' And as she slipped them back into the envelope, she sighed. 'Poor Bernie, she had to leave school after that.'

'And when did she die?'

Lizzie frowned. 'Who said she died?'

'You did - Bernie that was.'

'Eejit, I said *Healey* that was. She married since. She's not *Healey* any more.'

Jim opened his mouth then shut it again.

Lizzie sat down again. 'Anyway, all this talk of people past doesn't solve the problem of my writer's block. I need to get back to the point.'

Jim nodded. 'They are the point, Lizzie. Our jigsaws aren't about places, they're about the people who belonged to them in the past and the people who want to belong to them now. And that's what you have to do. Evoke the feel of the place by reawakening the people who made it real.' He noticed his photo on the table and pointed to it. 'At the moment, your memory is in black and white. Get right into it and look around at who's there with you. Once you can see them, you can see the colours, hear the sounds, smell the smells. Actually,' he put his cup down and leaned towards her. 'That's a good place to start. Shut your eyes and go back to, when did we say, '69. What can you smell?'

Lizzie grimaced. 'Chalk dust, sweaty bodies, the sharp oniony smell of prepubescent girls...' She opened one eye. 'Do you need to hear any more?'

Jim wrinkled his nose. 'No thanks.' He put his cup down and stood. 'Can I leave you to it then?'

'Yep. What you say makes sense but I still don't know how to do it.' She made a face. 'That's what I meant when I said frustration, young man.'

'I know.' He smiled. He reached into his satchel and pulled out a small Walkman. 'Here, d'you want to use this? It has a mike so you could shut your eyes and just recall everything. Afterwards, play it back and pick the bits you want to keep.'

Lizzie took it. 'Thanks, that's a good idea. I have some blank tapes somewhere. You sure you won't need it.'

'No.' He took a tape out and put it into his pocket. 'I use it to remind myself of routes to good places to shoot but I think I've got notes on all I need for the minute.' He slung his bag over his shoulder. 'Bye then. Good luck!'

'Bye!'

As she opened the door to let him out, the queue started to move and a slow procession of cars crawled past the house. In the middle of it was a small green Polo with Anne and Bernie inside. Anne was concentrating on the traffic ahead so she didn't turn but Bernie did. She raised her hands to wave and Lizzie was about to point her out to Jim as the girl in the photo but he had noticed the traffic too and was already hurrying to get his car into the flow before it all stopped again.

So Lizzie stood there, one hand mid-air, waving into space. Bernie was smiling at her, eyebrows raised in enquiry. Lizzie dropped her hand and hurried back into the house, where Jim's cup was still warm where he had left it.

Beneath the radiator in the kitchen her slippers were warm too.

The Jigsaw Maker / Dines