

OUR DEADLY SUMMER

BY THE SAME AUTHORS

Oh My God, What a Complete Aisling
The Importance of Being Aisling
Once, Twice, Three Times and Aisling
Aisling and the City
Aisling Ever After

OUR DEADLY SUMMER

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& Sarah Breen**

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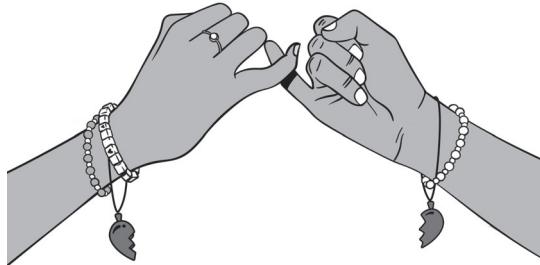
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THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER

Long Island, New York, 2001

The body lay on the floor between them. Laura's bare knees were starting to burn where they pressed into the rough carpet. Across from her, Deirdre was squatting on her hunkers. *God bless her thigh strength*, Laura thought, somewhat idly. A dog barked somewhere outside through the still, warm 2 a.m. air. Mad how dogs were out there barking as if in there, in that living room, everything hadn't changed.

'What the fuck happened, Dee?' Laura hovered her hand over his nose and mouth. The air was still.

'It was an accident!' Dee's voice was pleading and her cheeks were streaked with the mascara she'd applied just a few hours earlier. 'He fell. He fell over backwards and hit his head on the fucking step.'

Laura took him in from top to toe. He wasn't a particularly big guy, but the bulk of his body felt like it was increasing in mass with each second that passed. There was a photo of a much younger Laura on the mantelpiece back home, standing proudly beside a huge pumpkin, taller than herself. She was about ten, the photo taken at a harvest festival in Clonakilty. On top of the pumpkin a scarecrow rested, splayed out like he'd eaten too much dinner. His jeans and checked shirt were bulging with straw and his head was a comparatively tiny turnip. Someone had drawn on a deranged toothy smile and tiny piggy eyes. Laura liked the picture because it was one of the few of her on her own without her older sisters, the pair of bitches. She would sometimes find it on a bookshelf or a side table behind a vase of lilies, but she

always moved it back to the focal point of the room. There was something of that demented scarecrow about this body.

‘Should we call an ambulance?’ Despite her obvious efforts to sound calm, Dee’s voice edged on hysterical. It had a high-pitched tone that wasn’t familiar to Laura, and she was well used to Dee’s worrying.

‘I’m not sure there’s any point.’ Laura was surprised at how matter-of-fact she sounded. Dee’s breathing cranked up a few panicked notches. Laura cast her mind back for any useful nugget of knowledge gleaned from *ER*, which she’d watched religiously since the very first episode. For a second she wondered if she should try mouth to mouth. His lips were dry and puckered. No. *Puke*. She tentatively placed two fingers on his neck, not sure what she was even feeling for.

Whatever it was, it wasn’t there. She forced herself to poke his chest with her finger.

‘I wish I hadn’t been lying when I put that I knew first aid on my CV,’ Dee spluttered.

‘I don’t think it’d be any use.’ Laura’s head was starting to swim. ‘I’m fairly sure he’s dead.’

Dee melted onto the floor and tucked herself into the foetal position. Laura sat back against the couch, rubbing her knees. Her sort-of-boyfriend when she was fifteen had asked her what she’d do if she saw a dead body. He was into death metal and drawing the Iron Maiden mummy on his schoolbag. She had flipped her hair and told him that not only had she already seen a dead body, she’d touched one. Her mum had made her pat Granny’s granite hand and kiss her waxy forehead before they closed the coffin. Still, though, the boyfriend had seemed impressed. Imagine if he could see her now.

‘What am I going to do?’ Deirdre’s voice was muffled by her arms over her face.

Laura surveyed the scene and shrugged. ‘We’ll figure it out.’ She looked down at her own arms and scrubbed at a muddy patch with one with her knuckles. She sighed. ‘Once I’ve washed off this manky tan.’

DEIRDRE

August 2025

Deirdre is standing in the queue in Marks & Spencer when she feels her phone vibrate in her coat pocket. No matter what she does, she cannot get it to stop buzzing when she receives a text. An old-fashioned SMS. She managed to almost completely silence it about six years ago, so she can receive emails, WhatsApps and phone calls without a peep. But when a regular text comes in it springs to life. The only real person she knows who sends old-school texts is her father. He remained devoted to his Nokia until recently, maintaining it was the reason he had never been the victim of a mobile-phone-based scam. Margaret O'Shea, a lady in his boules club, was conned out of €2,000 after giving her number to a 'gutter man', which Dee had assumed referred to his profession rather than his social standing. It was probably both, now that she thinks of it. Her father used to get cross when she slagged him about his ancient phone. He can never know that she can't figure out the buzzing.

Marks & Spencer is Dee's happy place. It's her Tiffany's. Nothing bad could ever happen to you there. The food hall especially brings her unbridled joy. When she was in her first year in college, she thought it would be incredibly sophisticated to bring an M&S cheese selection and some dips home for Christmas. To impress visitors, or whatever. The only cheese she had been exposed to growing up was the upsetting flop of an Easy Single or a brick of bright orange Cheddar, so she felt very glamorous with a wedge of Brie and a sausage of smoked Gouda in her backpack on the bus. Although her mam politely

oohed and ahhed over them, she was suspicious, pushing them into the back of the fridge behind the turkey and the sprouts. Dee's parents were Christmas-pudding people, not cheeseboard people like many of her Trinity College classmates. The cheese ended up going in the bin but she ate the dips with red Pringles while she smoked out the window after they'd gone to bed on St Stephen's Day.

Dee loves tripping through the aisles, a basket on her arm, thinking about which high-protein wrap she might grab for lunch if she was a barrister on the way to defend a drunk who'd crashed his BMW, or what samosas she would pick up if she was rushing home to meet the girls for after-work drinks and nibbles at the kitchen island. That's the thing with Marks & Spencer shoppers – they're always on the go. They want their Percy Pigs yesterday. Too busy to slow-cook a joint of meat from scratch, too important to Parmentier their own potatoes. They buy scented bin bags and speak in a language of Yumnuts and mini bites and speculoos. They could not live without their brioche buns. Dee is not intrinsically one of them, but she does like to pop in occasionally to keep up.

Her favourite section to browse is the condiments. There's always something new and exciting happening there. Hazelnut and chocolate this, banoffee that. Thirty different types of mayonnaise in summer, a range of ketchups so vast that the executives at Heinz must cry themselves to sleep at night. She buys two bottles of Special Burger Sauce at a time because it sells out fast.

‘Excuse me, do you mind if I go ahead?’ The old lady who just knuckled her back has a smudge of pink lipstick on her chin and doesn't wait for Dee's response before pushing past. ‘I only have two things,’ she adds, like having two things is the same as having no things. A few months ago Dee's therapist, Kate, told her that people get more selfish as they get older; they care less and less about what people think of them and care more and more about what they deserve. And aren't they right, Dee thinks. They've earned the privilege of elbowing her to the side as they haul their granny trolleys onto the bus. She usually tries to help

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them. Sometimes they're grateful, but sometimes she's received like she's about to scam them, gutter-man style.

'No problem,' Dee mutters, reversing into the magazines with a benevolent smile. '*No problem*' – *Deirdre, you lickarse*, she berates herself while the M&S septuagenarian shuffles forward and pointedly ignores Dee's basket, which also has only two things: her bottles of sauce.

Dee's phone buzzes in her pocket again and this time she fishes it out. It's not her father, just a second, insistent nudge from her local salon, the Beauty Pit, reminding her they have 15 per cent off eyebrow lamination for the next two weeks and intimating that if she doesn't book in ASAP she'll miss the boat. Dee has long since lost her grasp on what size and shape her eyebrows are supposed to be. She's eternally grateful that they recovered from the ferocious plucking she subjected them to in the nineties as a teenager, pruning them into two wispy little arches. Obviously, she's spent the past few years on the soap-brow train, fluffing them out and brushing them up. Then she saw a photo of herself and wondered how long she'd been going around looking like a Neanderthal. She's going to give the lamination a miss.

There's a little red notification perched on top of her email icon. Dee taps it while the old lady rearranges her two things – Seville Orange Marmalade and Chocolate Orange Teacakes – on the conveyor belt and Dee spots another item, a secret third thing, which she's tried to hide behind the teacakes. Beef Gravy Granules. The tut escapes Dee before she can stop it.

Dee probably gets about fifteen emails a day, mostly from shops trying to tempt her with sales, or hotels she's stayed at asking her to check back in for a cheeky little midweek break. The last thing in the world she expects to see in bold at the top of her inbox is that name. Her heart jumps so violently that she feels it in her throat, knocking on her larynx. It's there, it really is, right above a message from the blood bank telling Dee her last donation saved a child's life. Laura Leahy. Her throat goes dry. She hasn't seen, or even spoken to, Laura Leahy in almost

twenty-four years. Maybe bad things do happen in Marks & Spencer after all.

Deirdre met Laura Leahy on her very first day at Trinity, in a statistics lecture. Dee had thought she might be able to rebrand herself as ‘cool’ in college. She was neither cool nor uncool in school, but one of the nice girls who largely got along with people. In sixth year she tried out for a spot on a youth leadership team. It was a coveted position school-wide because it meant collaborating with boys from the CBS up the road. She’d overheard one of the mean cool girls in the bathroom predicting that ‘Dee Finn and her gang’ would make the cut, and it definitely wasn’t meant as a compliment. Dee had, in fact, made the team, but even now she still plays the *Dee Finn and her gang* sneer over in her head regularly.

Dee’s mission to be cool in college was short-lived. Almost immediately she felt out of her depth. At St Joseph’s Mercy Secondary School she’d been one of the best students, but at Trinity it soon became clear that she was in a huge sea of people who’d not only been the smartest in their school, but had also gone to a network of schools that gave them a social leg-up.

Laura was sitting in front of Dee in that statistics lecture, and Dee couldn’t help but admire her long, glossy brown hair hanging over the back of her seat, a blue canvas FiloFax open on the desk in front of her. *Rich hair*, Dee thought. The kind that’s been fed with nice shampoos and a varied diet. Dee could tell Laura was cool, even from the back of her head. It was the way she sat, slouched and doodling, insouciance just oozing out of her.

Dee’s meditation on Laura was soon replaced with frantic note-taking as Professor Fennell outlined his demented academic expectations for the year ahead. Before long Dee’s hand was cramping, so much so that she’d actually groaned aloud. Laura had obviously also found Professor Fennell’s demands to be fantastical because she turned around and did such a theatrical eye roll that Dee let out an explosive snort. When Laura smiled

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back at her she'd been thrilled, but it quickly turned to mortification when Fennell singled Dee out for reprimand. She was always the good girl. *Dee Finn and her gang*. Even if she was adjacent to trouble – in a group caught underage drinking or part of a contagious giggling fit in Irish class – she usually got away with it.

Laura had apologised profusely to Dee after the lecture, immediately christening their professor 'Fennell, Friend of the Frogs' because of his bulging, unblinking eyes. She insisted that the incident was all her fault and had brought Dee for a pint of cheap lager in Doyle's pub, just across the road from Trinity. And that was it. They'd just clicked, becoming best friends almost immediately. They saved seats for each other from that day on, swapping life stories in whispered bite-sized chunks between lectures.

'I'm an only child.' (Dee)

'My mother started giving me cigarettes when I was fifteen.'
(Laura)

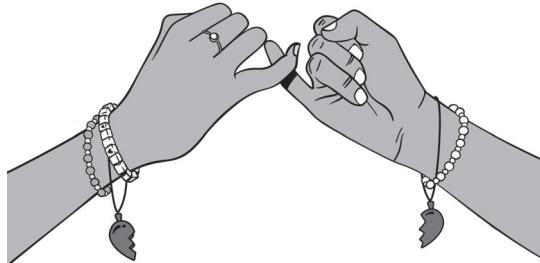
Dee abandons her bottles of sauce on the conveyor belt and stumbles out into the street, calling an apology over her shoulder. She sits down on the windowsill of a dry-cleaners, turning the phone over in her hand again and again. Laura's name is still there. Dee feels like she hasn't blinked in minutes. Is she in shock? Is this what being in shock feels like? Or is this a panic attack? She's often wondered over the years how she never developed some kind of panic disorder. Therapist Kate says it doesn't mean she's dead inside, but Kate doesn't know the half of it. Dee's hands are clammy, but her breathing is steady. Not a panic attack, she doesn't think. Just a very big fright. *Can't even scrounge up a few clinical fits of terror*.

It's not that Dee hasn't thought about Laura Leahy lots over the past twenty-four years. She thinks about her every time 'Drops of Jupiter' comes on the radio or if someone walks past in a cloud of Emporio Armani. She's always thought about her

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whenever she's seen one of those Audrey Hepburn prints, the ones that had a chokehold on millennials in the late noughties. She thinks of her every time she checks the Long Island subreddit, which she does regularly, just in case. She thought about her just last week when a pair of cute, ceramic salt and pepper cellars in a restaurant caught her eye. Dee had asked the server if he knew where they were from but Laura would have already had them in her handbag. Or she would have back then, anyway. Dee hopes she's wiser as well as older now.

Her thumb hovers over Laura's name. She knows if she opens the email, there might be no going back. She jumps as the wet nose of a passing dog slithers past her knee in search of her crotch, and waves the apologies of the owner away. She'll wait until she gets home to read it. She looks at her phone one more time before she slips it into her bag. The subject line reads: some news.



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‘What do you mean you’re going to wash off your tan?’! Dee made a grab for Laura’s wrist as Laura started rising to her feet. ‘He’s dead, Laura! People can’t be just having showers.’

‘Well, he’s not going to get any alive-r if I stay here,’ Laura countered, although she seemed to soften as her friend started rocking gently on her knees. No matter how many times Dee screwed her eyes shut and opened them, he was still there, between the TV and the pile of magazines they’d been using as a side table, deader than dirt.

Laura was feeling just as panicked; she was simply hiding it better. Dee was practically vibrating. Laura knew she had to calm her down. ‘You can come with me,’ she said, holding her hand out to her friend. ‘Come on or I’ll be mahogany. We need to figure this out and I do my best thinking in the bathroom.’

‘Fine.’ Dee struggled to her feet and followed Laura out of the room.

On the way upstairs, Laura double-checked that both the front and back doors were locked, while Dee made sure the blinds were all closed tightly. In the bathroom, Dee sat on the toilet lid while Laura showered. The sound of the water was soothing, and the fruity aroma of her shower gel covered up the sharp odour of the white wine that was drying into Dee’s jeans.

‘So how did he fall?’ Laura called casually, scrubbing at the dry skin of her kneecaps. ‘Was he hammered? Did he slip on one of the *Marie Claires*?’

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The living room was actually tidier than it had been for months. All summer long there had been piles of discarded flip-flops, cereal bowls and empty beer bottles, and a decent dent had been made in the clean-up. Still though, a house full of women gathered an inordinate number of magazines.

Dee hesitated. Laura heard it in her breath. ‘He didn’t trip,’ Dee said, and then hurriedly added, ‘but it *was* an accident. I didn’t expect him to die!’

Laura stopped lathering. The water was starting to cool. If she didn’t hurry up she wouldn’t have time to conditioner her hair, and it was truly in bits.

Dee remained silent, though, and something about the running water and the mouldy shower curtain between them made it feel safe for Laura to press her. ‘So what *did* happen then?’

Dee knew she’d have to explain. She’d probably end up having to tell this story a million times over before the day was out. Her limbs felt limp. Hard to believe she was the same person now who had summoned every ounce of her strength a few hours earlier.

‘I pushed him,’ she said.

LAURA

August 2025

Laura slams her laptop shut as soon as she hears the whoosh of the email leaving her inbox. When she got up this morning, dragging herself out of bed before dawn to feed her sourdough starter, she didn't think today would be the day she'd be contacting Deirdre Finn. After she got the two younger boys out the door and took her thirteen different supplements, each one offering a different promise about metabolism, collagen and, her new favourite, gut health, she assumed the most stressful part of her day was going to be a smear test in the afternoon. Then her phone rang and the world tilted on its axis and suddenly lying in the gynaecologist's office with her legs open and knickers carefully concealed under her coat on a chair didn't actually sound so bad.

The dog whines to be let out and Laura opens the back door and tells him to take his time. Milo is a good dog, really; he's just getting old and doesn't like to be left alone for too long. She can relate. When she closes the door behind him, the robot hoover whirrs to life and she watches fondly as it sets off on its daily trundle around the house, getting into the corners and doing its best to avoid chair legs. Laura always said she'd burn the place down if a household appliance ever appeared under the Christmas tree but, by god, she'd give the robot hoover a kidney if it needed one.

She wanders through the house, tidying things into piles, fighting an occasional lump in her throat, hoping that seeing clean surfaces will help calm her buzzing brain. The skirting

boards are dusty. There are cobwebs on the light fixture in the front hall that she needs a step ladder to reach. The bulb in her bedside lamp needs to be replaced. Her mother was right, it *is* a lot of house. The number of little jobs she has to remember is increasing so she reaches for a notepad and makes a list. And it does help, the tidying and list-making, just a little bit.

Downstairs she thinks putting on a podcast might keep her mind from wandering too far into the past. She'd like to be someone who listens to current affairs but she finds it too depressing. Instead, she opens Spotify and scrolls through the day's true-crime offerings. She chooses an episode about a woman in Australia in the nineties who just upped and disappeared into thin air. Laura has often thought about how much harder it must be to vanish these days with all the CCTV and dashcams and everyone having a Ring doorbell.

Monday is usually her day to get shit done. Grocery shopping, changing beds, worrying about how to increase her protein intake, religiously visiting Doctor Eustace for her Botox top-ups. Things that felt essential and important until this morning. They seem mundane and superficial now. Nothing that can't wait. The laptop stares back at her from the countertop. She fights the urge to open it and refresh her email. It's far too soon. Even if Deirdre has seen her message, she's probably not going to reply immediately. She'll need at least ten minutes to catastrophise and another ten to compose probably the most perfectly written response of all time. That's if Dee even still uses her DeeFinn81 Hotmail account. She does, though – Laura would put money on it.

She needs to make tea. That's what she needs to do. Tea makes everything better. There are about forty different options to choose from in the pantry, but her hand goes straight to the PG Tips box. Not her usual cuppa but fitting for the day that's in it. She reaches for her I'd Rather Be In Dublin mug. Dublin in say, 1999, though, when everything was simpler.

Laura had only ended up in Trinity College because that's where her older sisters Grace and Rebecca had both gone, and

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where her father expected her to go. ‘The best for the best,’ he’d say, despite the fact he had no third-level qualifications himself. He liked the sound of it, though. ‘Oh they went to Trinity, cost me an arm, a leg and a head,’ he’d tell his business friends when they asked about his daughters. It’s the reason he had bought the apartment with the thin walls and the condensation problem five minutes from the college. But Laura had no interest in business or anything about her university course, really. Every other aspect of the college experience, though? She was down for it all, especially moving out of her parents’ house in Cork. They’d barely noticed, having used up the last crumbs of their attention years ago on her sisters. Her mother had immediately replaced her bed with a rowing machine and it suited Laura just fine. College had been going grand until that summer. She feels guilty about what she and Dee did, for sure, but tells herself that everyone does crazy shit when they’re twenty. Their shit just might have been the craziest.

DEIRDRE

Dee throws her tote bag on the piano when she gets home. As far as baggage in a partner goes, she knows there are worse things to have to deal with than an upright Steinway, but it does take up more than a third of the tiny living room. Then, safe in her favourite armchair, she takes a deep breath and clicks on Laura's name to expand her email address. Gmail. Dee gets slagged in work for sticking with her Hotmail through thick and thin. 'It's like rings on a tree, useful for telling what age I am,' she'd quipped. She cringes now, thinking about that. *You middle-aged dose, Deirdre.*

She doesn't know why she thought Laura's email might be from her old Trinity account. They were both offboarded from those years ago.

Within weeks of meeting, her and Laura's friendship had spilled off campus and into real life. Dee felt like a baby, a rube, living at home in Wexford and commuting to Dublin on the bus every day, but Laura was generous with her attention and her one-bed apartment in the city centre. Both her sisters had used it for their stints in college before moving back to Cork, and then it was Laura's turn to call it home. She was a gorgeous slob who lived off Pot Noodles, cheesy popcorn and cans of Diet Coke procured in her pyjama bottoms from the Spar across the road. Her floors were littered with crumpled clothes and copies of *Heat* magazine. Dee never once saw her hoover. Sometimes she wanted to be Laura, sometimes she resented her because she had so much freedom, and then she hated herself for feeling like that.

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Laura's living room, with its wide cream-leather sofa, quickly became Dee's second home. Laura supplemented their nights out with her 'pocket money' – a credit card from her dad. They were inseparable, going out as often as they could to student nights and dive bars and to see the hopeless bands that Dee suspects are responsible for the creeping tinnitus she has now. A nice little souvenir of a time when she drank double vodka and Red Bull like water and didn't have chin hairs that grew from nothing to an inch and a half overnight. Even the smell of Red Bull makes Dee queasy now. She sometimes wonders how her life might have been different if her bus had been late on that first day they'd met, or she'd sat in a different row in the lecture theatre. It feels very of-her-generation to be in a near constant state of imagining a different *Sliding Doors* life. Gwyneth Paltrow has a lot to answer for.

It had been Laura's idea to go to America that summer after second year. She said she couldn't face staying in Dublin without Dee and her only other options were going home to Cork, where her older sister Rebecca would be minding the family home and holding court with her painful friends, or spending the entire break with her parents at their holiday home in Spain. The town was dead, Laura said. Full of restaurants with pictures of calamari on the menus and men in their sixties driving mid-life-crisis cars. Dee had never even had calamari. She might have been from a seaside town but the Finns had just about accepted Dolmio bolognese sauce into their lives. They weren't ready for squid.

America was the land of opportunity back then, Donald Trump just a property developer chasing his fifteen minutes of fame. Everyone had an aunt who'd emigrated in the eighties or a cousin who'd gone over to work on the building sites. When Laura pitched her plan of getting a J1 student visa, which granted three whole months of living and working in the States, Dee had told her to get a grip and went back to crying over her political science essay. She may have been twenty, but she was still living under her parents' roof and they were putting her through college. They'd never go for it.

No matter how many times Dee rebuffed her, Laura wouldn't let the J1 idea go. But Dee couldn't justify spending the money, or leaving home for those three months. Her parents ran a small shop selling ninety-nines and lilos to the tourists that descended on Abbeygad-on-Sea every year, and Dee had worked in it since she was twelve. She was expected to be there in the busy season. They had started paying her properly when she turned sixteen and she had dutifully begun saving. Her dad had instilled a fear of loans and borrowing in Dee from a young age, so scrimping money to avoid going into debt was in her DNA. The J1 visa cost a small fortune. She had been working towards buying a little car for herself so she could stop relying on the Murray's Rapid Transit coach service to get her to college. Living in Dublin and paying rent wasn't an option, not when the bus stop was right outside the shop and the commute was only ninety minutes. At least a car would give her a bit more freedom. Her friend Emma was going to be home from college in Carlow for the summer too. They were planning to hang out properly like they used to at school.

It was all right for Laura; her family were well-off. Laura didn't even have to work during the summer holidays, which Dee was forced to remind her when she continued to bring up the visa at every opportunity.

'Some of us are needed at home,' Dee tried to tell her.

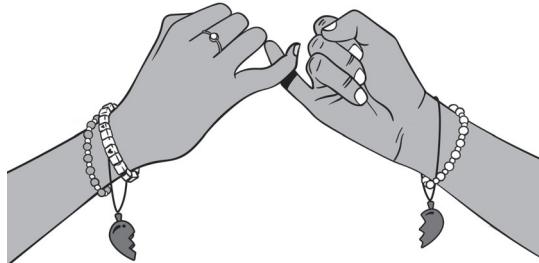
'And some of us just want our best friends to have a deadly summer for once,' Laura would reply. 'You have the money.'

Dee knew it annoyed Laura how closely she guarded her savings. When she'd say 'I can't afford it' about going to a music festival or to Galway on the train for a weekend, Laura would reply, 'You can afford it, you just don't want to spend the money.' She was right. Dee was afraid to spend it. Eventually, though, Laura wore her down, making the point that she was going to waste one of her best-looking summers in Wexford when she could be shifting hot American boys. Shifting Americans was high on Laura's agenda. Dee was less boy crazy, but keenly felt that she needed to make more of an effort. Plus, she had to

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agree they were bound to be more attractive than the lads in Abbeygad with farmer's tans, who thought wearing Lynx was the height of sophistication. She agreed to talk to her parents.

Dee delivered a whole spiel to her mam first, explaining what great experience it would be, how good it would look on her CV. She even had a list of girls – younger sisters of girls she'd gone to school with – who would jump at the chance to fill in for her in the shop for the summer. Her car savings almost covered the cost of the visa and flights; she just needed a couple of hundred pounds to get her going. Her father was finally convinced when she told him how much money Laura's sisters had made on their J1s. He agreed that she'd be able to invest in the SSIA scheme when she got back, where the government encouraged people to save all of their Celtic Tiger money by adding 25 per cent extra on top. Dee's dad was addicted to news about the Celtic Tiger, even though Ireland's roaring economy hadn't brought much difference to their lives apart from hearing about everyone's holiday homes in Bulgaria and the one time Santa came to her primary school in a helicopter. Laura booked their flights from Dublin to JFK the following week. They were going to have the best summer ever.



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After she had convinced Dee that taking a shower would help clear her head, Laura had quickly towelled her own hair dry and pulled on a clean T-shirt and a pair of shorts. Her brain felt like it might explode. There were clothes all over their bedroom floor, waiting to be washed before they left for home in two days. Laura thought about doing a load of laundry but then worried it would look bad when the police came. Would they think she was washing away evidence? Is that what Dee was doing right now? There had definitely been a bloodstain on the knee of her jeans.

‘You were right. I do feel a bit better, even though it was freezing.’ Laura jumped when Dee shuffled into the room wrapped in a towel, her wet hair loose at her shoulders.

‘Oh, Dee,’ Laura gasped when she looked at her friend properly. ‘Jesus Christ! ’

Terror clouded Dee’s face. ‘What now?’

‘It’s just...’ Laura steered her back onto the landing where they’d taken to keeping the one full-length mirror to avoid fights. ‘You’re black and blue.’

There were angry green and purple splotches on both Dee’s upper arms, to match a purple mark blooming at her temple, which had been hidden by her hair. Dee ran her hand up and down her left arm and then turned to Laura with a watery smile. ‘We’re twenty-year-old girls who drink five nights a week. We’re always covered in bruises.’

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‘Not like this, though.’ Laura shook her head. ‘These look like fingerprints.’ She touched a small oval smudge and Dee winced. ‘This is definitely a thumb mark.’

The thought of Dee being hurt, of being battered, sucked the air out of Laura’s lungs. She desperately wanted one of the many different harmless scenarios cycling through her head to be true. Dee dancing in the Clam Shack earlier in the night and falling over. Dee slipping on a stray splodge of tartare sauce in work and forgetting to mention it. Dee falling on that godforsaken step herself. Really, though, Laura knew none of these were true. She swallowed the lump in her throat. A red-hot rage was creeping over her like a rash. *‘He did this.’*

Their eyes met in the mirror. Dee’s were brimming with tears.

‘It’s okay, it’s okay.’ Laura put her arms around her friend as Dee’s chin started to tremble.

‘I was so scared, Laura,’ she whispered. ‘He was forcing himself on me. But I think I’m even more scared now.’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Laura said. ‘Anyone would have pushed him. I’d kill him myself if he wasn’t already dead.’

Dee stifled a smile and met Laura’s eyes in the mirror again. ‘Maybe we won’t tell the police about the push then.’

LAURA

Three days pass and there's no response from Dee. Maybe she hasn't read the email, or maybe she's on constant alert for updates from Shoreport and had already found out through her own means. Maybe she doesn't want to know. Maybe she's dead.

Laura directs the dog into the boot of the car and cracks all the windows. The morning is warming up and she doesn't need a nosy good Samaritan smashing their way in or calling the police because Milo is giving them the sad eyes out the back window. She just needs to run into the supermarket for two minutes. Inside, the security guard is following two teenagers around. Her cheeks flush when she thinks about all the things she stole when she was their age and, Jesus, way older. Dee hated her doing it. It stressed her out so much but Laura just thought it was funny. And so easy. She didn't look anything like the kind of teenager who needed to be followed. You could drop a mascara on the floor in Boots and just kick it out the door. She was a pro at kicking things out of shops. It was such a buzz. God, she was stupid. If she caught any of her boys stealing they'd never see another screen as long as they lived.

Not that her boys needed to steal anything. But Laura hadn't needed to either. She was what Dee used to teasingly call an 'oil heiress' once she found out Laura's dad was Pat Leahy, the petrol station mogul. 'Gaga Pat', as he was to Leo, Teddy and Patrick, had bought several Esso franchises in the mid-nineties after selling his own father's farm for a bomb, falling out with his siblings in the process. Laura got one of those 23andMe DNA kits in the

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Secret Santa at work and she would have loved to use it to track down some of her cousins, but she didn't dare.

The first time Dee had come to Laura's apartment on Townsend Street, one day after college, she'd fallen on the titbit of information that Laura's family owned it like a starving dog on a bone. 'Is your dad Bono or something?'

Laura had laughed. 'I wish. He owns petrol stations.'

It didn't take Dee long to put it together. 'Laura Leahy. Pat Leahy! Your dad is Pat Leahy!'

Pat Leahy was a minor celebrity in Ireland in the same way a mattress salesman or a meteorologist can become a celebrity. He was inspired by the expansion of the motorway services in the UK and was the first to start gussying up Irish filling stations. Pat Leahy, the petrol pump king of Ireland. It was his idea to start calling them 'plazas' and put in toilets that weren't like something out of *Trainspotting*.

Laura drops Milo off at the groomers and checks her phone again the second she's back in the car. She has time before she has to pick Teddy up from practice but there's nothing from Dee in her inbox. She's disappointed. She'd love to hear from her friend, she realises. No one had ever made her laugh like Dee did from the second she'd met her. She wasn't like the girls Laura had gone to school with. Girls who drove Volkswagen Beetles with eyelashes on the headlamps and had expensive, stripey highlights. Dee was quiet, with a broad Wexford accent and a dry sense of humour. She was sarcastic and self-deprecating about her imperfections while Laura was afraid to draw attention to hers.

Instead of going home to Wexford on the bus, Dee started staying up during the week in Laura's apartment. They were always on the lash, drinking outrageous amounts of vodka and waking up fresh and giddy and covered in black eyeliner. They shared clothes and went through a phase of watching old black-and-white films because they thought liking old black-and-white films made them seem clever and interesting. Dee had an Audrey Hepburn DVD boxset and they would lie in Laura's bed watching *Breakfast at Tiffany's* instead of going to

college, talking about how much they fancied George Peppard and eating the kind of cheap corn snacks they had to suck out of their teeth. They fantasised about being able to get McDonald's delivered. When Laura had met Dee's school friend Emma once after a concert in Dublin, she'd been friendly but not 100 per cent welcoming. There were a few digs about how Emma never saw Dee any more and when they did it was all 'Laura, Laura, Laura'. Laura had felt like telling Emma to grow up.

Dee had the most perfect, clear porcelain skin. Despite Laura's mother dragging her to both dermatologists in Cork city as a teenager, she was plagued with acne and would still have the scars today if it wasn't for Dr Eustace's magic laser machine. She'd inherited her mum's hair too, thick and coarse, the kind of hair that defied convention by being both dry and greasy at the same time. It definitely wasn't the hair of an oil heiress. Laura lost years of her life smoothing and blow-drying it until her mum bought her, Grace and Rebecca each a GHD straightener the week they came out in Ireland. She felt responsible for the hair. That was the only thing she apologised for on her deathbed. Dysfunctional right to the end. Laura was surprised she didn't crawl out of the grave to celebrate the Dyson Airwrap.

Laura had never related to the guilty devotion Dee had to her parents, but the only-child thing fascinated her. Laura used to fantasise about her sisters being decapitated in a car crash in the hope that her parents would have to pay her some notice. Meanwhile Dee's folks were involved in every aspect of her life. They always knew where she was and who she was with, or they thought they did. It was easier to lie before FaceTime and Find My Friends.

Laura can still clearly remember the day she got the J1 idea over the line. They'd made a pact there and then to really let their hair down and have the best summer of their lives.

'We're going to forget about college and just party and play so much beer pong we'll probably get alcohol poisoning,' she told Dee. 'And let's kiss loads of hot American boys. So many we lose count.'

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It was difficult to get a read on how Dee felt about this aspect of the plan, but after a couple of seconds she'd rolled her eyes and laughed. 'The summer of shifting.'

They'd even shook on it.

'We'll get a job in a bar and it'll be just like *Coyote Ugly*,' Laura said.

'And when we're back in college and someone tells me they like my top, I'll say, "Oh this? Picked it up in a vintage shop in New York."

'I might get my nose pierced.' Pierced noses had been forbidden in Laura's secondary school and her mother thought they made people look like bullocks. Her mother wasn't coming to New York, though.

'I might get a tattoo.' Dee had no more intention of getting a tattoo than the man in the moon, but Laura let her away with the fantasy.

A few months later they were breezing through the airport with their plane tickets in hand. Laura had brazenly asked the guy checking them in if he'd move them to first class since it was only Dee's second time on a plane and therefore a momentous occasion, but he'd laughed them out of the place. They had spent ages spraying each other with expensive perfume and slathering on face creams and trying on make-up in Duty Free. On board, they'd thought they were so glamorous and grown-up with their little glasses of wine, even if they were drinking them in economy. Dee's mother had given her a travel diary to keep memories of her trip. Dee had Pritt Sticked her plane ticket inside and she and Laura had scrawled notes around it. Laura thinks she wrote that one day Dee would thank Laura for convincing her to spend her life savings on this trip.

DEIRDRE

Laura wouldn't know for sure that she's still using her Hotmail address. She must have just taken a chance. Dee wonders if she'll know she received it. She sits on the couch and opens her laptop to google *can you tell if someone's opened an email*. Not really, is the answer. She'll only know for certain if Dee responds. Does she want to open it all up like that? She's been so careful all these years. She taps Laura's name.

Hi Dee,

**I hope you don't mind me contacting you like this out
of the blue, but I just thought you'd like to know that
Dolly passed away on Sunday.**

**I hope you're well,
Laura**

Dee sinks back into the couch. Dolly. Lovely Dolly. She closes her eyes and an image of Dolly standing in the ballroom, clipboard in hand, flashes into her mind so vividly she feels like she could reach out and touch her. She probably would have been in her seventies by now, early eighties at most. Their surrogate mother.

Dolly Kelliher had been the first person to get back to Laura about a job that summer. Their *Coyote Ugly* dreams of being two plucky gals in a dingy Manhattan apartment, tending bar, with

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handsome stockbrokers entranced by their accents, were short-lived. Dee was partly relieved. As much as she wanted to lean into their summer-of-shifting pact, constantly trying to spark the interest of men didn't appeal to her as much as it did Laura. Laura loved boys, and would have made a fortune in tips dancing on a bar with a bottle opener in her back pocket, but Dee didn't have her confidence. The J1 visa company had listings of the small number of businesses willing to hire international students for the summer. None of them involved finding the perfect jeans to give you the best arse and shaking it in punters' faces. There were exactly two openings in Manhattan and both were with moving companies. Dee was tall but her arms were like twigs. Laura was allergic to stairs. They weren't cut out to be the two newest employees at Stu Moves You, which was a shame because Stu did sound like a character.

If they couldn't spend the summer in Manhattan, they decided to go to the next best place: Long Island. Bayview Country Club was in Shoreport, on the north shore. Dee had studied *The Great Gatsby* for her Leaving Cert but that was about it as far as her knowledge of Long Island went. Dolly's email said the club would be happy to take them on as waitresses. Accommodation was included, which really sealed the deal for Dee. Between that and the tips she was sure she'd have more SSIA money than she could possibly spend.

They spent their first night in New York in a hostel assigned to them as part of the visa package. Dee can still remember the façade, the smells, the chronically bored woman on reception checking them into Stay Away on the Park on the Upper West Side. Stay away indeed. Laura had wanted to check out immediately when she saw the used tampon in the shower, but Dee couldn't face lugging her rucksack back onto the streets again that evening. They were both overtired and overstimulated. They'd walked about twenty blocks through the hot and sticky New York air to get there. It was boisterous and overwhelming and the smell from the hot-nuts vendors' carts was as thick as syrup. Dee had had a swagger in her step, though. They

weren't tourists. They were there to work. Dee's mother crying at the airport that morning felt like it had happened on another planet. Laura's dad had dropped her off outside departures with two fifty-dollar notes, one each. In hindsight, it must have been a kind of lonesome start to the summer for Laura. Dee was thrilled with the extra cash, though.

Dee's swagger quickly faded that night after it became clear that the four strange men and two Dutch lunatics they were sharing the hostel dorm with had no intention of sleeping. Even Laura, usually up for a party, was struggling. The only access to the impromptu DJ on the rooftop was through the window in their room. It was like the M50 and they'd been up for twenty-six hours at that point. Dee had put her sweatshirt over her eyes and cried. She woke in the morning with one of the Dutch girls rooting in her rucksack thinking it was her own. She was fairly sure someone had puked off the side of a bunk. They vacated Stay Away on the Park before 9 a.m. and trekked to Times Square. Laura wanted to spend her bonus fifty dollars on CDs. In the Virgin Megastore – which coincidentally was the nickname given to Dee's all-girls convent school by the boys in the CBS – they went ham in the soundtrack section. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Empire Records* and *10 Things I Hate About You* stayed in Dee's collection until she sold her old Vauxhall Corsa with its CD player in 2019. Harmless keepsakes, she'd reassured herself.

Dolly had sent an address and the combination of subways and trains they'd need to get to Shoreport. Dee remembers the Long Island Rail Road journey like it was yesterday. Nerves building and she and Laura sitting across from each other, their rucksacks on the seats beside them. Dee was wearing her new platform flip-flops and they'd cut the feet off her. They probably wouldn't look out of place on some Instagram It girl today.

Dee only allowed herself an Instagram account a few years ago, mostly to keep up with the girls from home and their kids. She only lurks, never posts. She tried to look up Laura a few times over the years but could never find a Laura Leahy that seemed

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to be her. Dee had long since erased Laura's old mobile number so only ever had her defunct Trinity email address. There was no way to contact her, even if she wanted to. And now poor lovely Dolly is dead and there Laura is, in her inbox, asking nothing of her except to hope that she's well.

LAURA

When Laura had shown her sister the ad for Bayview Country Club, Shoreport – ‘waitresses wanted for seasonal work, ideal for students’ – Grace had been quick to point out the club was in the ‘shit part’ of Long Island and not the Hamptons where she’d done *her* J1 and seen Bill Cosby buying a lobster. Her advice was to skip Long Island completely. One of her friends had worked in a bar near Wall Street and, even though she was only paid \$2.50 an hour, she had raked in the tips and bought half the Tommy Hilfiger shop on the way home.

But Laura was never going to New York to earn money – she just wanted a good time. Dee, meanwhile, was gunning to come back to Ireland with as much cash as possible. She was obsessed with it. They convinced themselves that with no rent to pay they’d be making a bomb, working near the beach and bopping into the city on the train whenever they could. Well, that was the grand plan, anyway. The train they’d taken to Shoreport after their night of hell in that kip of a hostel had quickly put an alarming amount of distance between them and Manhattan. They’d sniggered at the sing-song announcements calling out town names like ‘Syosset’ and ‘Little Neck’. ‘Hicksville’ had done them in completely and an older lady had given them the evils for skitting so much. ‘Older’ as in probably the age Laura is now.

‘Am I wearing something belonging to you?’ Laura had asked the woman directly as she’d stared at them. God, she’d been such a little rip. Dee made them switch seats so they were out of her eyeline. They reverted to one of their favourite

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conversations – which *Sex and the City* gal they were. Laura has wished so many times over the years that they'd been able to watch the finale together. Never mind the movies and the complete shambles of *And Just Like That*.

Neither of them could ever figure out what the attraction was with Mr Big. To be fair, Laura was probably well into her thirties before she recognised that he was a ride, and a millionaire. That summer she and Dee were both Carries because they fancied Aidan so much. Laura was a good bit of Samantha and a bit of Miranda. Only because she had had braces way too late into her teens. Dee was a lot Charlotte and also a good bit Miranda but no Samantha. She used to get thick if Laura dwelt on the 'no Samantha' part. If Laura's being honest, she used to do that because she was self-conscious about her *own* Samantha-ness. She brought lads home after a night out semi-regularly, whereas Dee rarely took her up on the offer of sharing the couch with someone.

Laura had always craved intimacy. She'd first experienced it when she had her first *proper* proper boyfriend, Eamon, at seventeen. One weekend she had slept over at his house, when his parents were away at a wedding in Scotland, and had felt like she'd never slumbered so soundly in her life than when she'd pressed her back into his chest, legs intertwined under the duvet. She realised then why people do it – get into relationships and get married. It was so they could feel that security whenever they wanted. Eighteen months later, just before she started college, he had ended it out of nowhere and shattered her heart. She had borrowed her dad's record player and listened to Thin Lizzy's 'Still in Love with You' over and over again for three months. Then she cut herself a fringe and decided that she would not be looking for another boyfriend while she was at Trinity. She looked like a tennis player with the fringe but it grew out quickly enough. Dee came along shortly afterwards, and with her as Laura's soulmate, Laura didn't need to yearn for another boyfriend. Lads were just for fun, and to spoon or cuddle into for however long they stayed in her bed. She knew

she was attractive when she was dressed up, and she loved to flirt, but she wasn't willing to give herself over to anyone like that again, not for a very, very long time.

As the train rattled ever further from New York towards Shoreport, Laura urged Dee to retell one of their favourite stories, and Dee obliged.

'So, it was a Wednesday night and I decided last minute to stay up in Dublin with you.'

This was a regular occurrence.

'And I was hoofing it up Grafton Street to get a cheap bottle of wine in Dunnes.'

They called it lady petrol and would decant it into Ballygowan bottles to drink on the bus on the way to the Temple Theatre.

'And I did my call home to save my credit – let it ring twice and then hang up. Except it wasn't Mammy who rang me back—'

Dee's mammy always interpreted the two-ring code, but not this night.

'It was your dad!' Laura couldn't help but interject.

'It was my dad,' confirmed Dee, 'and I was caught off guard! "Will you tape something for me?" I asked him. "On Sky One at ten o'clock?"'

"What is it?" says he. And I go, "It's on Sky One at ten, Dad. My 'do not tape over' tape is beside the video player. You can ignore the sticker."

Laura's fucking sisters never respected the sticker.

'And he goes, "You need to tell me what it is so I don't miss it," and I could hear that he was getting thick with me, not that it takes much. And I was going, "Please don't make me say it, please, please, please."'

Laura was squealing and squirming in her seat at this point.

'So, I stopped,' Dee paused there for drama – she always paused there for drama, 'turned my whole body in to the glass window outside Stephen's Green Shopping Centre so nobody else could hear me and mumbled, "*Sex and the City.*"'

Laura was full-blown screeching by now.

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‘And he goes, “What’s it called? I’ll get a pen and write it down,” and this man goes and gets a pen and I have to slowly say, “Sex. And. The. City.” And then there was silence on the line. Only a couple of seconds, but it genuinely felt like the longest stretch of time I’ve ever experienced. I had never, and have never since, said the word “sex” to my father.’

Laura could probably have had sex in front of her father and he wouldn’t have noticed.

‘But he did tape it. And do you know what he wrote on my sticker?’

This was the genesis of one of their favourite jokes. Even thinking about it now makes Laura snort but also makes her want to cry like an idiot. Dee’s dad had written ‘S and the City’ on the sticker. From that point on ‘sex’ was always ‘S’ to them. And the show was always ‘S and the City’.

The woman on the train hated them even more after the S and the City story and was surely glad to see the back of them when they finally alighted. They must have looked like two lost souls on the train platform in Shoreport. Dee’s feet were in ribbons and Laura was paying the price for packing her big bottles of John Frieda shampoo and conditioner. Her rucksack was like carrying a tank. It was roasting out and they were sweaty and wrecked. Dolly had said someone would collect them but was no sign, so Laura left her rucksack with Dee and went in search of refreshments. Cans of Diet Coke, glistening with condensation the second they got into the heat of the day. Jolly Ranchers, the epitome of American sweets. There had been a craze for them in secondary school, whenever anyone went to Disney World or wherever and brought back bags of them. It was watermelon or nothing. You could use them as social and coursework currency. You’d get an English essay on ‘Man’s Inhumanity to Man’ written for five watermelon Jolly Ranchers. Laura thinks they sell them in Tesco now. The gulf across the Atlantic might as well be a stream. Reese’s Pieces, baby showers, marshmallow fluff, Easter baskets. You could be in Skibbereen and shop like you’re in Montauk.