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The Faithless

Written by Martina Cole

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MARTINA COLE THE FAITHLESS

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Prologue

‘Ain’t It Grand To Be Bloomin’ Well Dead’

Leslie Sarony
Song title

2009

‘You are not going to make me listen to this shit, Gabriella. You are wrong, *very* wrong. Use your bloody head, girl! I loved that little boy with all my heart . . . and, as for your brother . . . I don’t believe a word of it – they must have the wrong person.’

But Gabby could see the fear in her mother’s eyes, and she knew that it was true. Every word of it.

‘I met your old mate, Jeannie, today. That’s how I know everything – she told me *all* about the house in Ilford.’ She could see her mother’s head working, trying to figure out exactly what she was saying, could almost hear her brain whirring as she tried to lie her way out of what they both knew was the truth.

‘What the hell have you been taking this time, eh? What the fuck are you on, Gabriella, to make you come out with this shit?’

Gabby found she’d picked up a large bronze statue of a cat. As she held it in her scarred hands she felt the weight of it. Her mother kept talking. The world according to Cynthia Tailor who, along with God Himself, was almost omnipotent in the lives of her family, who ruled everyone around her with a rod of iron. She could see her mother’s mouth moving constantly, but she couldn’t hear what she was saying any more; all she was conscious of was a rushing noise in her ears. Then she struck her.

She lifted the bronze statue back over her head and hit her mother across the face with it, using all the force she could muster, and enjoying the feeling of total retaliation. She was

determined now, determined to shut her mother up once and for all.

Cynthia fell sideways on to the white leather sofa. The spray of blood that came from her mother's face was like a crimson mist. Gabby hit her again and again, each blow easing the knot inside her, each blow seeming to calm the erratic beating of her heart.

She looked down at the bloodied form and, for the first time in years, she felt almost at peace. Her mother's face was unrecognisable, a deep red gash that was pumping out blood at an alarming rate.

Gabby looked at the woman she had hated nearly all her life. Then she sat down on the ladder-backed chair her mother was convinced was an antique, put her face into her bloodied hands and cried.

Book One

Long is the way
And hard, that out of Hell leads up to light

Paradise Lost (1667)
John Milton, 1608–74

For the love of money is the root of all evil

1 Timothy 6:10

Chapter One

1984

‘Come on, Jimmy, have another one. I’m celebrating.’

Jimmy Tailor grinned; he had an easy-going nature that some people took advantage of. He was a big man, big in all ways – over six feet and well built. Before his marriage he had been a body builder, and he still held traces of his former physique.

‘Nah, better get home, Cynthia’s waiting for me.’

It was Friday night and all his pals were going to have a few more pints before meeting their wives and girlfriends later on in a wine bar in the West End. He would have loved to have joined them, but he knew that Cynthia wouldn’t come.

‘Fucking hell, Jimmy, you’re married, mate, not joined at the hip.’

This from his best friend Davey Brown. Davey thought Jimmy was a mug and that he should put his foot down with Cynthia, but Davey didn’t understand her. No one did it seemed, except him. He smiled, but it was a tight smile. ‘We’re saving, what with little Gabriella and all.’

‘‘Course, mate, you get yourself off.’ Davey seemed immediately sorry for his jibe.

Jimmy left the pub a few minutes later, reluctant to go if he was honest, but even more reluctant to stay where he was. He walked along the road, feeling the cold hit him, making his face sting and, pulling up the collar of his overcoat, he made his way slowly home.

Chapter Two

Cynthia Tailor was pleased with herself. Her house looked lovely and festive – just how a home should look at Christmas time, from the scented pine tree, decorated in what she felt was a tasteful manner – no tinsel and no coloured lights – to the neatly wrapped presents underneath it. It couldn't be further away from the house she grew up in, with the dirt, the smell of frying bacon, and the garish, cheap hanging garlands. She shuddered inwardly as she thought of her mother's house. She had escaped from that life and there was no way she was ever going back.

Cynthia's sitting room was painted a pale cream, and the carpet was a thick Axminster. It had cost the national debt, but looked wonderful against the walls and the luxurious chocolate-brown velvet curtains at the windows. She knew her home was beautiful, and she never tired of cleaning it, or enhancing it. This was the first step on the ladder for them; they would go on from here, make their money on this place, and get bigger and better houses each time. She sighed with contentment at the thought.

James was a decent man, boring in some ways, but she knew that with his accountancy job in the city they would always be all right for money. And he was expecting some big news about a promotion any day now. Cynthia had come from a council estate in Hackney, and she had been determined from a young age that she wouldn't be staying there for longer than she had

to. Now here she was, with a lovely semi in Ilford, and the chance to go onwards and upwards.

She walked out into her kitchen, and checked on the casserole she had bubbling on her new halogen hob. The kitchen was like something from a magazine, all white doors and stainless steel sinks. It was Hygena, and she knew it was far too good for the house, but she saw it as an investment. James had balked at the price but she had won him over. He always saw the sense of her arguments in the end; after all, she was the one stuck here all day, and she was entitled to have what she wanted around her – at least that was what she thought, anyway. And she had her ways to make sure he knew who was the boss under *this* roof.

She heard her daughter's cry and, sighing, she left the kitchen and made her way up the stairs.

Gabriella was a handful, and this was the only bugbear in her otherwise perfect life. She should be clean at night by now. The other kids at Gabriella's playschool were all clean, so why was her daughter so late?

She went into the child's room. It was decorated as a girl's bedroom *should* be decorated, with pale pink walls, and cream carpet. Cynthia loved this room. She had been brought up in a flat and had had to share her bedroom with her sister. It had been scruffy, cold and damp and she had hated every second she had spent in it.

The small night-light cast a rosy glow in the room. Kneeling down beside her daughter's cot, she looked at her child.

'What's wrong, Gabriella?'

The little blue eyes held a plea, and she knew immediately that her daughter had wet the bed again.

'Oh, Gabriella, why don't you call me, and I'll take you to the toilet.' She lifted her daughter out of the cot with a heavy sigh, and set about cleaning her up, without another word.

Gabriella allowed herself to be stripped, washed and re-dressed in a clean nightie without saying a word either. As young

as she was, she could feel the tension filling the room. The unspoken disapproval and the knowledge she had done something wrong was enough to quieten her. She knew her mummy was cross, and she knew better than to aggravate her.

Ten minutes later, Gabriella was once more alone in her cot and, closing her eyes, she tried hard to get herself back to sleep.

Chapter Three

Jimmy came in as his wife was putting their daughter's pyjamas and bedding into the washing machine.

'Dinner smells good, Cyn.'

She didn't answer him. She could do that, just blank someone, make them feel an outsider in their own home. It unnerved Jimmy. He was from a family who were boisterous, noisy, happy – not that Cynthia allowed him to see them any more. He wasn't used to long silences that had some kind of accusation in them, even though nothing was actually said. He wasn't sure how to deal with them. Turning abruptly, he went into the hallway and removed his coat. Careful to hang it up *properly* to make sure it didn't look untidy. Why this was a necessity when they were locked away in a cupboard under the stairs he wasn't sure. But Cynthia wanted everything perfect, so he did it anyway; it was easier in the long run.

As he went into the sitting room, he smiled at Cynthia's efforts. The room looked lovely, and he reminded himself how lucky he was to have a wife like her. She was not just pretty, she was like sex-on-legs. With her stunning blue eyes and thick sovereign-coloured hair, she turned heads everywhere she went. He knew that other men envied him his gorgeous wife. Everywhere she went men looked at her, and she noticed them looking, he knew that. It pleased her, because it showed her that she was still attractive, even after having a child. It was important to Cynthia that she was wanted. Not that sex was her top

priority, unfortunately, but because she liked the power it gave her. She was a strange woman, cold – even towards their daughter. She only smiled when the child was doing what she wanted, acting as she felt a child should. Like him, poor Gabby had to behave just how Cynthia believed a daughter should, and not show her up. His wife had no room for reality, and that really worried him. Cynthia had two beliefs: that she was right, and that everyone else on the planet was wrong.

Now he had to give her some bad news and he wasn't looking forward to it. Not at all. No matter how he dressed it up, she frightened him; her colossal temper could erupt at any moment, and when it did she was like a madwoman. Most of the time she *acted* like a lady, he had to give her that. She was perfection personified – until you crossed her and told her something she didn't want to hear. Then she could swear like a docker and fight like the Irish. But then her family *was* Irish – not that she bragged about that.

He glanced at the TV set, but didn't put it on. Cynthia didn't think watching telly all the time was something *nice* people did. A good film or a documentary was fine, and *News At Ten* of course. But gameshows or comedy programmes were beneath her radar. She saw those as common, and common was what really sent her off her head.

It wasn't easy being married to her and, even though he told himself that he was lucky a girl like her chose him, it was getting harder and harder to keep up that pretence. They were over-stretched in every way – every half-penny was accounted for and, as much as he appreciated her housewifely acumen, he knew they were way over their heads in debt. Not that she wasn't good with money – she was – but, all the same, he felt they could have lived much better if she didn't feel this almighty urge to be something she wasn't. She had such exacting standards and, though he knew she wanted a better life for them all, he felt at times they'd be much better off if she spent the money in

other ways, like on a night out or a day at the seaside, not just on *things* she felt were needed for the home. They had the best house in the street, but still that wasn't enough for her. She would never be content, he understood that now. The kitchen alone had cost a bloody fortune, and the carpets and curtains, all paid for on the weekly, were another drain on their resources.

Now she had the Christmas bug, had talked about having a goose and all other manner of expensive frippery. He knew she wanted the best for them, but it had to be stopped. She had to understand they couldn't go on like this.

Cynthia came into the room, slipping in quietly, as if she had materialised out of thin air. Her quietness had been what had attracted him; she had seemed so self-contained, yet so vulnerable. Not that he really believed *that* any more. It was getting harder and harder to convince himself that she was anything other than what she really was. A bully. His mother had warned him, but he had not been inclined to listen to her. Now he wished he had. But, as his old mum also said, hindsight was a wonderful thing.

Cynthia stood before him, her head slightly at an angle, and that tight little smile on her face. 'I'm dishing up.'

He sighed heavily, and barely nodded in reply.

'Are you all right?'

He sighed once more. 'Not really. Brewster got it.'

He saw her face freeze, and could see in her eyes, not pity for him – he could have coped with that – but disgust. Veiled disgust, but he saw it all the same. He knew what was going on inside her head. He tried to talk himself out of those kind of thoughts, but it was no good.

'And you just let him, I suppose.'

She was still standing there, only now her back was rigid, she was looking at him as if he had done it deliberately. He felt the air leave his body as if it had been punctured. He had been dreading this.

‘I can’t make my boss give me the position, Cynth. Be fair, love.’

She sighed heavily, her face set in a rigid mask of acceptance. ‘Course not, I mean why would he give it to you, eh? Hardly setting the fucking place alight, are you? You know your trouble, don’t you? You’re weak. Weak as a bloody kitten.’

She left the room then, and her animosity went with her. The quiet was like a balm to his tortured spirit.

Willy Brewster was five years younger than him, and he was a dynamo. Jimmy liked him, you couldn’t not. He was fun, clever and popular; he *did* set the place alight all right, with his energy and wit. Jimmy wasn’t like that, and he didn’t begrudge Willy for being something he wasn’t.

He walked out to the kitchen, feeling better now he had actually said the words out loud. Had told her.

She was standing at the sink. Her shoulders were slumped and her hands were gripping the stainless-steel draining board so hard her knuckles were white. Her head was hanging, and he knew she was biting her lip. He could almost feel the hate coming off her in waves. Looking at her now, he felt a great sorrow for her, because he knew that there was a terrible kink in her nature. It was a mixture of loathing for her start in life, and a covetousness that made her envy everyone in her orbit. She would never be satisfied, because it wasn’t in her nature. He hated that part of her, but he also pitied her for it. He understood that she had never known one happy day because she was always convinced that everyone else knew the secret of happiness, and it would always elude her. Yet if she could just once let herself be content with what she had, he knew she could find the thing she craved. If she could only understand that happiness had nothing to do with an expensive kitchen, and designer clothes, or being better off than the neighbours.

He placed his hand gently on her shoulder, willing her to turn to him, to just once let down her guard. He could feel the

heat of her body through the thin material of her dress, and then when she turned towards him he felt his heart soar. He placed his arm around her slim waist, wanting to pull her towards him, comfort her, but she threw him off her with a strength that belied her slim frame.

‘You fucking useless ponce.’

She was spitting out the words with fury, and the vitriol in them stunned him, as it always did when she exposed this side of herself. She never swore in front of the neighbours of course, she felt she was above that. But in private it was as if the swearing was a vent for her pent-up aggression. When she was angry with him or little Gabby her repertoire was never far away.

‘You do realise what this means, don’t you?’

She was looking into his eyes now, and he could see the first glimmer of fear amidst the anger and the disgust.

‘Look, Cynthia, we won’t starve.’

She pushed him away from her and, sighing, she shook her head sadly. ‘No. No, you’re right, we won’t starve, but then again we won’t be living the high life either, will we? It’s make do and mend, it’s thinking through every purchase. It’s making ends fucking meet, and robbing Peter to pay fucking Paul. It’s the life I grew up with, never being able to do anything . . . Never being able to just have what you want, when you want it. It’s like admitting I’ve failed . . .’ She turned from him, and her whole body seemed to have shrunk, as if the enormity of what she was saying had broken her somehow. ‘It’s being no one, no one and nothing for ever, that’s what this all means to me.’

Jimmy looked at his wife, his heart in pieces. He couldn’t understand why she was so upset. He looked out for her, he looked out for his family. ‘You’re wrong, Cynthia. We have a good life. The trouble with you is, it’s never enough, is it? You always want more than you can have. You should never have married me; I can’t give you what you want.’ He had finally said it to her. Had finally said what was on his mind.

She laughed, a derisive little laugh. Then, facing him once more, she said quietly, 'Well, you got that much right anyway.'

For a split second she thought he was actually going to strike her and, in her heart, she knew no one would blame him if he did just that. Instead, though, he placed his hands by his sides, clenching his fists as if to stop himself.

'Maybe you're right, but do you know something, Cynthia? No one in the world could ever give you what you want, because it would never be enough. You want, want, want, and then when you get it you lose all interest in it, and you start wanting something else. Well, now you know the score, I'll have me dinner.'

He had never spoken to her like that, not once since she had set her cap at him, and she knew then and there that she would make sure he never spoke to her like it again. But she was trapped, trapped in this house, with his kid, and with his name. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, she had a terrible feeling she was pregnant again.