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No Place for a Woman

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CHAPTER ONE

'What do you call this?' Joe Delaney looked down at his breakfast in disgust.

'Muesli. It's good for you.'

'Looks like budgie food to me. Hardly a proper breakfast for a working man, is it?'

'You know what the doctor said. No more fry-ups.'

'Flaming doctors! What do they know?' Joe picked up his spoon and prodded at the cereal.

'They know you've got angina. And they also know you'll have a heart attack before you're sixty if you don't start looking after yourself."

'Rubbish, I'm as fit as I ever was.'

Finn looked at her father's solid, broad shouldered bulk across the table. His face was lined and his hair had turned to grey a long time ago but he was still the same big, dependable man she'd known for twenty six years. And he refused to admit he couldn't go on forever.

'All the same, it wouldn't hurt you to listen to someone's advice for once in your life.'

'That's good, coming from you. You're as pig-headed as anyone.'

'And we all know where I get it from, don't we?' Finn half-heartedly tackled her own cereal. Her dad was right, it was budgie food. Her stomach rumbled for bacon, eggs and a greasy helping of fried bread but she didn't want to set a bad example. 'So what have you got planned for today?'

'Not a lot. Just a kitchen to finish off, and a garden wall to do. Ciaran can take care of that. I've asked him to stop off at the builders' merchants and pick up the bricks.'

You'll be lucky, Finn thought. 'What about the Stephensons' extension?'

'They've been having another think.' He rolled his eyes. Finn knew the Stephenson job was becoming the bane of his life. Marcus Stephenson was an extremely picky customer who kept changing his mind about what he wanted, depending on which architectural magazine he picked up. If the job hadn't been worth a lot of money, she had a feeling her father would have downed tools a long time ago.

'What is it now?'

'Oh, not much. They're only talking about making it two storeys now. They thought they might as well, while they're at it.' His tone was heavily ironic, and Finn understood why.

'You've already put the foundations in, haven't you?'

'Twice. And I spent nearly two days moving a drain to the other end of the garden, before they decided they wanted to turn the whole thing round, "so it catches the evening sun."' He shook his head.

'You're going to have to make them deeper,' Finn said. 'And that's not going to be so easy in that soil – '

'Yes, well, it's got to go back to the planners first,' Joe cut her off. 'That'll take a few weeks. I daresay they'll have changed their minds again by then.' He looked at his watch. 'Where's Ciaran? He should be here with the van by now.'

Finn understood the unspoken message. Joe Delaney hated discussing work with her. 'Since when did Ciaran ever turn up on time for anything, unless there's something in it for him?'

'Now, Finnuala, don't talk about your brother like that.'

'But he's always letting you down. How often does he turn up late for work?'

'He can't help it. He's got a family, responsibilities – '

'That's a joke. You know as well as I do he spends more time with his mates than with Mel and the baby. God knows what they get up to.'

She knew, but she didn't want to tell her father. That really would send Joe Delaney into an early grave.

'What do you want me to do, sack him?'

'That's what most people would do.'

'I can't run the business on my own, can I?'

'So take someone else on.'

'This is a family business. And since Ciaran's the only son I've got, it looks like I'm stuck with him, doesn't it?'

'He might be your only son but he isn't your only family,' Finn said quietly.

Joe sighed. 'Not again! We've already been through this a million times, Finnuala.'

'But it makes sense, doesn't it? You've always said you want the business to stay in the family. And I'm willing to do it, not like Ciaran – '

'The building trade is no place for a woman, Finnuala. You don't know what it's like. It's dirty, heavy work. You're out in all weathers. And the lads on site use the kind of language I wouldn't want you to hear.'

'Don't you think I know all that? I practically grew up on a building site, remember?' Right until she'd started school, and all through every holiday she'd followed her father around as he worked. She'd play in the sand, or build with off-cut bricks. Sometimes Joe would push her around in the wheelbarrow, her legs swinging over the side, wearing a hard hat stuffed with newspapers to stop it slipping down over her ears.

At other times she would just watch him, fascinated by his skill and speed as he made a wall grow, every brick neat and level, or smoothed plaster on to bare brickwork like pink icing, leaving it smooth and flat. As she got older he would occasionally allow her to help him mix mortar or check levels. By the time she was eleven she could accurately calculate how many bricks it would take to finish a wall, and knew what kind of timber should be used for different jobs.

And what was her big brother doing all this time? Out with his friends, getting drunk and stealing cigarettes from shops.

'You're better off where you are,' Joe said firmly. 'What's the matter, don't you like being a hairdresser?'

Finn looked down at her untouched bowl of cereal. 'I love it,' she muttered.

'There you are, then.' Seeing his daughter's sulky face he relented and added, 'Look, if you really want to help me you can always type up some invoices?'

'I'm not a typist!'

'You're not a builder, either.'

Finn glared at him. That's what you think.

There was no point arguing. Her father was right, they'd been through it a million times. And he always refused to budge.

She picked up her mug and slurped her tea defiantly. Joe frowned. 'Finnuala! Do you have to do that? When are you going to start acting like a lady?'

'Never,' Finn said. 'Sorry to disappoint you.'

She said it sarcastically, but deep down she meant it. Her father wanted nothing more than to see her wearing make-up and girly clothes. But instead he'd ended up with a stroppy twenty six year old who wore her dark hair short and lived in jeans. Sometimes when he looked at her she could almost see him wondering where he'd gone wrong.

She hadn't even realised she was a girl until she was six years old. She'd badly wanted a Tonka truck for her birthday but her father had bought her a baby doll that wet itself and cried. It had lasted two days before Finn swopped it for Action Man belonging to her friend's brother.

Joe finally gave up waiting for Ciaran and set off for work. Finn followed him to the door. 'What about your breakfast? You've hardly touched your muesli.'

'I'll get something on the way.' She knew he'd be stopping off at the café on the corner for a bacon sandwich. She couldn't blame him. She fancied one herself.

She was rinsing their breakfast dishes under the tap when her mobile phone rang. It was her brother Ciaran.

'Has he gone?' he asked.

'You've just missed him.'

'Thank God for that.'

'He was expecting you to pick him up. With that load of bricks you were supposed to get from the builders' merchants last night.' There was an ominous silence. 'You did remember, didn't you?'

'Damn. I knew there was something.'

'Ciaran!'

'Look, I had a lot on my mind, okay? I had some business to sort out.'

No prizes for guessing what kind of business it was. 'You're so unreliable. You know Dad depends on you. Why do you keep letting him down?'

'I told you, I had some business to deal with. Which is why I'm ringing. I don't suppose - '

Finn recognised the wheedling tone in his voice and her hand tightened on the phone. 'What is it now?'

'The thing is, I had to pay this bloke back some money I owed him and it's left me a bit short – '

'How did I know that was coming?' Finn sighed.

'I just wondered if you could – you know.' In the background she could hear a radio playing, drowning out the sound of a wailing baby.

'Why should I keep bailing you out? You still owe me twenty from last week.'

'I know, and I wouldn't ask but it's for the baby. We've run out of nappies and Mel doesn't get her child benefit until Monday.'

'You should have thought of that before you went off gambling with your mates, shouldn't you?'

'Who said anything about gambling?'

'Ciaran, it's always gambling with you.' He lost every penny to poker or the horses. He'd bet on anything. 'The trouble is, you're always losing.'

'I don't know why you're acting so high and mighty.' Ciaran's tone changed. 'You're not exactly whiter than white yourself, remember?'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I mean maybe you'd better be a bit nicer to me if you don't want Dad to find out your little secret.'

Finn felt herself grow hot. 'Are you blackmailing me?'

'I need the money, Sis.'

'So go ahead. Tell him. I don't care.'

'Are you sure about that? I don't suppose he's be too pleased if he found out what his little girl was up to behind his back?'

There was a moment's silence. 'How much do you want?'

'Fifty quid should do it.'

'Fifty! You're joking, aren't you?' She heard the baby screaming louder and Ciaran's girlfriend Mel trying to shush him. 'I've only got thirty in my purse. You'll have to make do with that. I expect you can buy a packet of nappies with that, can't you?'

He sighed. 'I suppose it'll have to do. I'll come round and pick it up.'

'No, I'm going to work. I'll leave it under the stone by the front door. And I want it back the minute you get paid. I'm not made of money.'

'No,' Ciaran agreed seriously. 'I expect you need all your cash for all those beauty college courses you keep doing. What is it now?'

'Advanced nail techniques.'

'Nail techniques, eh?' Ciaran chuckled. 'I don't know how you think them up.'

'Lying must run in the family,' she snapped, and put the phone down on him.

It wasn't fair. Ciaran had all the chances she would have loved and he squandered them. He wasn't interested in following in their father's footsteps or taking on the family business. All he wanted was to make a fast buck from gambling or petty crime.

Sometimes she was tempted to tell her father exactly what his precious son got up to. But he'd only worry and his health couldn't take any more stress.

Besides, Joe Delaney was no fool. He must know how little interest

Ciaran had in the building trade. And yet he carried on, dragging him along behind him.

Because anything was better than taking her on in his place.

She glanced at the photo of her mother on the mantelpiece, one of the few her father put on show. Ciaran was a grinning toddler, sitting between his smiling parents on a family picnic. There were no pictures of Finn and her mother; Finnuala Delaney died of a haemorrhage hours after giving birth to her. She was twenty six, the same age Finn was now. Finn couldn't look at that pretty, laughing face without feeling guilty.

She tugged at her short hair, so different from her mother's tumbling dark locks. Would she have turned out differently if her mother had lived? Maybe she wouldn't have ended up such a tomboy. But growing up in a house full of men, she didn't have much choice.

She drove to work. As she passed her father's yard she looked up at the painted sign over the gate. 'Delaney and Son.' No sign of the son, though. Finn caught a glimpse of her father loading timber on to their battered old pick-up and felt a stab of anger. Joe was in his late fifties now, he should be thinking about taking it easy, not doing all the donkey work. Especially with his angina. He'd tried to play down the last attack, but Finn still worried for him.

Perhaps it wouldn't be for much longer, she thought. Her father had recently bought a small plot of land from a local farmer. Once his planning permission came through, he was going to build a few houses and sell them on. He wouldn't make a fortune, but it would be enough for him to retire comfortably. Then Ciaran would take over the business.

Not that there would be much business left after her brother got hold of it. He'd probably gamble it all away in six months.

She drove out of the city, stopping off at a supermarket car park on the way. She grabbed her bag from the boot and headed for the toilets. Ten minutes later she emerged, transformed. She'd changed out of her neat skirt and blouse into jeans, fleece, hi-vis jacket and workboots. In one hand she held her bag of tools, in the other her hard hat.

She was ready for work.

She smiled to herself, wondering what her father would make of it

if he could see her now. He probably wouldn't believe she'd kept up this double life for so long, pretending to go to a salon when really she spent her days grafting on a building site. Just as he probably wouldn't believe that she'd actually managed to qualify in the trade as a bricklayer and joiner.

Sometimes she was tempted to tell him, when he was sounding off about how the building trade was no place for a woman. But she was worried he'd be more furious than proud. Furious that she'd lied to him and gone behind his back. And furious that she hadn't turned into the lady he wanted her to be.

She'd tried, she really had. But after a couple of dead end jobs she realised she wasn't cut out for being cooped up in an office. Building was in her blood and she could never settle for anything else, whether her father approved or not.

She'd gone to college to learn construction, although from her first day she already knew more than all the lads on her course, and almost as much as some of the tutors. She was keen to learn, and far more motivated than her fellow students, most of whom had drifted into the course after flunking their GCSEs. So it infuriated her when they were snapped up by local firms and she was left behind.

In the end one of the tutors on the course, George Dunn, gave her the chance she needed. He managed sites all over the county, and always took Finn with him in his regular gang of brickies and joiners. For the past two months they'd been working for a company called Tates, building a development of smart executive houses on the site of a former mill in the hills of West Yorkshire.

Just before she reached the site, she stopped at some traffic lights and glanced in the rear view mirror, then reached into her pocket for a tissue and scrubbed off her lipstick. The others would have a field day if they caught her wearing it. It had taken her long enough to be accepted as one of the lads, the last thing she wanted to do was draw attention to the fact that she wasn't.

She passed through the metal gates, past the Portakabin site office. There was no one around. Her car bumped over the deeply rutted ground,

grooved with the tracks from the JCBs and lorries that ran in and out of the site.

She pulled up in the patch of ground that served as a car park, alongside a gleaming black Saab she'd never seen before. It was a cold November day, and the biting wind carried the smell of bonfires from last night's Guy Fawkes celebrations.

She zipped up her fleece and headed to where a bunch of the lads were gathered around one of the half built houses, surrounded by ramparts of scaffolding. They stood in a grim-faced circle, grumbling into their steaming mugs of tea.

'What's this? A mother's meeting?' she grinned.

'Just checking out the new arrivals.' Rob, one of the other brickies, nodded towards the other side of the site, where another group of men stood huddled in the shelter of the Portakabin.

'Has George taken on some new lads?'

'George has gone. He got his marching orders this morning.'

'Why?' Finn stared at Rob, shocked. George Dunn was a great site manager, very conscientious and good at his job. He knew what he was doing, and made sure everyone else did too. There was never anyone standing idle on the site. And she had reason to be grateful to him personally, since he'd stuck his neck out and given her a job.

'We're not working fast enough, apparently. They want this place finished so they've ditched him and brought in a new manager. And he's brought his A-team.' Rob nodded over at the men, who were loitering around the site office, smoking and looking shifty. 'They look like a right bunch of cowboys to me.'

'C-cowboys,' Ivan agreed. He was a small, wiry man, with dark eyes that filled with tears whenever he talked about his wife and children back home in Rumania. George had taken him on when he'd first arrived in England to find work, and now he laboured for Finn and Rob, mixing mortar and hefting around wheelbarrows of bricks. He was a little slow at understanding the others' broad Yorkshire accents, and embarrassed about his stammer and poor English, but he was a very hard worker. He'd also become very attached to Finn, once he'd got over his shock at seeing

a woman on a building site.

'What about us?' Finn asked. George had taken them all on, so if he went, they might go too. And with Christmas just a few weeks away, the last thing she needed was to be out of a job.

'They should keep us on. I reckon that lot will need all the help they can get.' Rob eyed them grimly.

They were interrupted by a stranger striding towards them. He was short and sandy-haired with a weightlifter's body and scowling eyes that looked for trouble from under lowered brows.

'When you lot have finished your tea break, the new boss would like a meeting.' His eyes skimmed around the circle and landed on Finn. 'Who the hell are you?'

'My name's Finn Delaney. I work here.'

His brows lifted a fraction. 'You're having a laugh, aren't you?'

The others shuffled their feet and examined the mud on their boots. But Finn remained calm. 'Do I look as if I'm laughing?'

'Christ. No wonder the site's in such a fucking mess.' The man walked off, shaking his head. Finn glanced around at the others, who all looked embarrassed. They knew as well as she did that she'd had exactly the same reaction from them when she first started. It had taken her a long time to win them round and prove she could do the job, and now it looked as if she would have to start all over again.

'Who was that?'

'His name's Jason. He's the new ganger.' No wonder Rob looked put out. He'd been unofficial head man of their team. Now Jason had been brought in above him.

Their new boss was waiting for them outside the site office. Rob sucked in his breath through gritted teeth when he saw him. 'Bloody hell, now we're in trouble.'

'Do you know him?' Finn asked.

'Neil Tate. The gaffer's son, no less.'

Finn studied Neil from the back of the crowd. His sleek dark looks and immaculate suit stood out among the mud-spattered fleeces and woolly hats surrounding him. He seemed restless with energy, his sharp

gaze sweeping the group.

'I won't waste time,' he rapped out. 'This site is a shambles. The work is going too slowly and costing far too much.' There was a murmur of disagreement. 'I'm not here to argue with you, I'm here to tell you how it's going to be. The sales team will be here next month, and I want some fucking houses for them to sell, okay?' His gaze slid past Finn, did a double take and then moved on again. 'From now on, I want four houses finished a week.' Finn and Rob looked at each other. They were working flat out to build two a week. 'Don't worry, I'm not asking you lot to put yourselves out,' Neil went on. 'As you can see, I've brought in some extra help.'

'Where did he dig that lot up? Wakefield jail?' Rob muttered. Finn looked at the assembled crew of men. With their motley collection of tattoos, baseball caps and body piercings, they didn't look too promising. Worse still, they looked like her brother Ciaran's friends.

'How can we d-do this?' Ivan looked perplexed as the meeting ended five minutes later.

'We can't,' Finn said. 'Not unless we start cutting corners.'

'I reckon that's what he wants,' Rob said. 'Just throw the houses up as cheap and quick as we can and sell them off. And never mind if they all start leaking in three months.'

Ivan shook his head. 'B-but they cost so much?'

'Just because Tates charge top whack for them, doesn't mean they're worth it,' Rob said.

Finn was about to follow them back to work but Jason stopped her.

'Not you, Princess. I want you to work with some of the new lads. Show them the ropes, like.' His smile had a nasty edge to it.

Rob stepped in. 'She's on my team,' he said, but Jason shook his head.

'Not any more. Unless you want to take it up with Mr Tate?'

As the two men squared up to each other, Finn put her hand on Rob's arm. 'It's okay, I don't mind.' She smiled sweetly at Jason. 'I'm sure I can handle it.'