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Opening Extract from...

The Dress

Written by Kate Kerrigan

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For Niall, Leo and Tommo

It is amazing how complete is the delusion that beauty is goodness.

Leo Tolstoy.

Prologue

Ireland, 1935

The schoolmaster found the boy collapsed against a stone wall at the side of the road. His nose was smashed and bloody and his right eye so swollen that he could barely see out of it.

'Dear God, Francis, what happened to you?'

The boy looked at him and shrugged. His eyes were defiant, angry.

'Your father?'

John Conlon held out his hand to help the child up, but Francis waved him away and forced himself to stand alone. His legs were shaking. He had taken some battering that morning. His father had caught him unawares and dragged him from the bed. To stop himself from crying Francis reminded himself that he had fought back and given his father as good as he got. It was the first time he had stood up to his father, and that was how Francis knew it was time for him to leave.

The last thing Francis wanted was his teacher's pity. He was a man of fifteen, he could look after himself now. John held out a handkerchief and he took it.

'I'm leaving anyway,' he said, wincing slightly as he put the cotton square up to his nose to stem the flow of fresh blood. 'I'm going to America.'

John Conlon leaned against the wall with his pupil. He had taught the Fitzpatrick boy from when he was five, until last year. His mother had died and his younger brother, Joe, had been put in with the nuns, so Francis was left alone in the house, with his brutal pig of a father. The area they belonged to was broad and remote, a vast hinterland of bog and mountain. It was a place where a man could hide his wife and children away from the eyes of the world, but not those of a prying Irish schoolmaster. John Conlon made it his business to know every child in the area and managed to persuade most of the parents to leave them in school, until they could read and write. Francis had been with him until he was thirteen, but had left then to stay at home to nurse his sick mother. Now she was dead and the baby had been taken away, so there was nothing left at home for him. He was a bright young man and John believed he could have had a future. However, with a father like that, he never stood a chance.

'America? That's a long way off,' said John.

Francis glowered at him; he could feel himself starting to crack. He had no idea how he was going to get there, but his mother had a brother in New York and before she died she gave him a letter, saying he would secure Francis a job if he could get himself to America. The only thing Francis knew for certain was that he was never going back home. Not ever.

'Will you come back to the house and have a bite to eat with us, before you head away?'

Francis knew he could not walk another step that day; it would be dark soon and he did not want to sleep on the side of the road, so he followed the teacher to his horse and cart. He hated to take charity from anyone, but John Conlon was different, and Francis felt the teacher genuinely liked him. Maybe John would lend him enough money to get him as far

as Dublin, where he could pick up a job and start earning for his passage to America.

They drove to Bangor town in silence. John could see the boy was exhausted, scrawny and weak; he hadn't eaten for days. Francis was five miles from his home when the teacher picked him up. He might have died there and would anyone have cared? Would anyone have even noticed?

When they arrived at the Conlons' terraced townhouse, John's wife Clare made a huge fuss of him at the door.

'Would you look at the state of the child? Mother of God, he should be in a hospital!'

She sat Francis down on the settle, fetched a blanket, draped it over his shoulders, then set about cleaning his face.

'This might hurt a bit,' she said and, before he could object, she twisted his broken nose back into place with a loud crunch, then wiped away the blood with a warm cloth.

Francis leaned his cheek into her hand. Her touch put him in mind of his own mother. When he was very small, he remembered her tending to him like that, but not for a long time now. Clare Conlon was assured and matronly: a strong loving woman. His own mother had been too weak, too afraid to love her sons, for fear of upsetting her husband.

Francis closed his eyes and, as his face reached for the touch of maternal love, he felt tears starting to pour down his cheeks. Clare wiped them away softly, pretending not to have seen, until he opened his eyes and said, 'May I use the toilet?'

'Of course,' she said, laying down the cloth. 'You go out back and I'll fetch you some clean clothes. Then we'll have tea. There's no better medicine than a cup of hot, sweet tea.'

As he left the kitchen to go out into the yard, Francis paused in the scullery and overheard the couple talking about him.

'Surely to God, John, something can be done about that man.'

'I'll go and have a word with him.'

'You'll do no such thing – your interfering will only make things worse. Francis can stay here with us.'

'Clare, be practical. We have the baby now.'

'Well, we can't send him back to that brute, and I'll not see him in one of those industrial schools…'

The boy had heard enough. He had intended to ask John for a loan, but he could tell, now, from the way they were talking, that they thought he was still a child. They could send him to the reform school, which was no better than a prison, and he might never get out of it. No. He had to get away. He knew Clare kept cash in a tin on the second shelf of the dresser, next to where he was standing. He had seen her take it out to pay a turf man, once, when he was studying there, after school. Francis would eat with them, stay overnight on the settle bed in their kitchen and then leave at first light. Clare would not notice the money gone for days, weeks maybe. He wasn't a thief. He would write from America and explain. He would send her a gift – jewellery perhaps, a pair of gloves – he just needed a start.

His heart was thumping as he reached up for the tin. His hands shook. He reached in and took out a handful of notes, but as he was stuffing them in his pocket he heard a noise behind him. He started slightly, then saw that it was the Conlons' baby, who was in a pram just outside the open back door. She was sitting up and looking straight at him, her head, in a frilly bonnet, cocked to one side. She was frowning, as if she knew what he was doing. If she started crying, John and Clare might wonder why he wasn't already outside in the lavatory, in the yard, and guess what he was at. He went over

to placate her, but as he moved forward, something in the child's gaze stopped him in his tracks. Her eyes were locked on his. She was not a pretty child. She had a big round face and an almost comical scowl, but her eyes radiated the kind of deep knowing you would expect from a wise old woman. It was as if the baby could see inside his soul. In that moment Francis felt so ashamed that he turned to put the money back in the tin, but, as he was reaching to take it out of his pocket, Clare walked in, so he kept it where it was.

'Ah,' she said, 'you're back. I'll just feed the baby, then I'll put the dinner on. You go and sit by the fire with John and rest yourself.'

As Clare picked up the baby and laid her across her shoulder Francis looked across at the strange child and, as he did, she smiled, a huge toothless grin. All is forgiven, he thought. He pulled a face at her, and the baby giggled.

'She likes you,' Clare said, laughing.

Francis looked at the plainly dressed master's wife and her peculiar looking baby. As they smiled at him, he suddenly had an overwhelming sense of their beauty and a feeling of deep happiness opened up inside him. Francis Fitzpatrick had never felt anything like it before. He did not know that this unfamiliar emotion was simply his birth right, the thing that every child should have: the knowledge that, above all else, they are safe and loved.

Chapter One

London, 2014

There it was, exactly what Lily had been looking for: a large 1940s sideboard radio with the original Roberts tag on the front, perfect for the vintage accessories shoot she had booked for the following day. The window of Old Times was the usual messy jumble, but Lily liked it that way. The squinting old mannequin was wearing a wretched fake-fur coat, and the beautiful old radio was almost hidden, tucked behind a stack of 1980s albums and a coffee table piled with mismatched crockery. Gareth, the owner of this place, had a talent for picking up interesting bric-a-brac but a useless one for marketing. Lily smiled. She could tell from where he had placed the radio that he didn't want to sell it. Lily did that all the time, splashed out on an exquisite vintage piece for her online store then hid it in some distant corner of her website in case somebody actually wanted to buy it. While the world was rushing around consuming the next new thing, people like Gareth and Lily stood firmly at the centre of the fray, hanging on to the old stuff, guardians of the cool and the beautiful.

Lily worked from home and had needed to get out of the house today. The shoot tomorrow was kind of a big deal. She'd been invited to style a vintage set for a Sunday

supplement but she had hardly given it any thought. Instead she had stayed up half the night researching a blog about the influence of Dior's 'New Look' on the current designer collections.

The door opened with a satisfying 'ping' and Lily got the frisson of excitement she always experienced when she stepped foot inside a second-hand shop. Old Times was one of her favourites. Most of the shop was taken up with huge boxes of records and comics from the 60s to 80s, but there was always some well-chosen bric-a-brac scattered randomly on the shelves, and a few baskets of old clothes just crying out for a rummage. Gareth had a good eye but at the same time he wasn't that interested in anything much apart from his old records, so you could nearly always knock him down in price.

Gareth stuck his head up from behind the counter where he was continuously cataloguing his vast vinyl collection.

Lily ambushed him.

'I'm after the radio,' she said.

'It's not for sale.' He came straight back at her.

'Good, because I can't afford it. I just want the loan of it for a shoot.'

Lily was pure glamour, always done up to the nines with full retro hair and make-up. She was pretty but not full of herself. Gareth had assumed she was just a regular rockabilly-girl until one weekend he had opened his Sunday paper and found she was number forty-three in the Top Fifty Most Influential Fashion Voices 2014. Lily Fitzpatrick had a quarter of a million Twitter followers and even more blog subscribers. You'd never think it to talk to her though. She was really down to earth. Sharp too. Funny. Lily was always haggling with him but the truth was he fancied her so much he'd give her most of the old tat she picked up for free.

'Oh, I don't know. It's really valuable…'

'BS. It's worth about half of my Kelly handbag.'

'It'll ruin my window display.'

Lily raised her eyebrows at him.

'OK, my window-dressing skills aren't great.'

She raised them higher.

'All right. They are atrocious.'

'Tell you what,' she said, 'you loan me the radio for the shoot, and I'll come in later this week and transform your window for you.'

'I don't know…'

'Old Joe won't like you upsetting his little girl.' Lily's ninety-year-old grandfather was a regular customer. 'I know you've got your eye on his Jim Reeves collection…I have pull; I can help you get a good price off him.'

Gareth smiled, then put his head back and groaned. He wasn't bad looking, Lily thought, but he had one those horrid unkempt hipster beards and he rarely wore anything but geek-logo T-shirts. Lily preferred it when men went to a bit of trouble with themselves.

'Argh, you got me,' he said. 'Actually, I'm half expecting Joe in this morning…'

'…and think how happy he'll be if he knows you've helped out his darling granddaughter?' Lily batted her eyelids theatrically at him.

Gareth registered the curve of her hips in the tight grey day-dress, the high heels, the perfect red lips, the coiffed auburn curls and the eyes that lit up with sunshine every time she smiled. For a moment he allowed himself to dream something might be possible…

'Go on, Gareth, help me out here, be a mate.'

…then it was gone.

'And in return, I am just running out for coffee, would you keep an eye on this place for a minute?'

'Sure,' she said, although she was already on the other side of the shop with her arms elbow deep in a basket of scarves.

'Oh, and get me a chai latte, would you please?'

'For you, Lily? Anything.' He said it quietly so she didn't hear him, not that it would have made any difference if she had.

Lily rooted, digging for treasures in the basket like a child in a lucky dip before pulling out a square of silk with a scene of Rome on it. It wasn't that old but it was stunning, with its muted, dusty shades of pink and blue, depicting the Trevi Fountain in delicate line drawings. She was sorely tempted, even wrapping it briefly over her head and under her chin, in 'The Queen Style' before telling herself she already had dozens of scarves just like it at the flat. She passed over the shelves of familiar bric-a-brac that had been there for months; the brass deer figurine which she still might get as a Christmas decoration for her mum and the cute, 1930s ceramic serving dish with gold and white daisies. Folded on a table was a 1960s candlewick bedspread. With rows of soft scallop-shaped tufts in old chenille and crisp white cotton, Lily could barely leave it behind. However, she sensibly reminded herself she had nowhere to put it. Then she saw her find of the day. Over on a shelf under the till counter, lying on her back in a neat blue minidress was Midge, Barbie's best friend in the 1960s. She had the same body as Barbie but she wasn't as pretty. Midge was in good shape, eyeliner intact, with a full head of hair, and sitting next to her was Alan, her boyfriend. He was topless and had been attacked with a biro, but Lily didn't mind. She had been hunting down an Alan doll to complete her Barbie set

for years. Lily could not believe her luck, but as she picked up the boy doll and started to rub the pen marks off his chest, she was distracted by an urgent shout from outside that could have been her name. She turned towards the door, then again she heard, 'Lily!'

It was Gareth shouting for her.

On the pavement outside, he was crouching over something. A body on the ground.

'He just collapsed,' Gareth said. 'I was coming back with the coffee and he was waving at me when…'

Lily knelt down, numb and disbelieving.

'You stay with him,' Gareth said. 'I'll call an ambulance.'

Lily gently lifted her grandfather's head and put her arm under it. One of the old man's arms was splayed to the side where he had fallen, his hand still wrapped around a supermarket bag filled with Jim Reeves records. Lily leaned in and put her face right up close to his. She kissed his familiar papery skin saying, 'Hey, Grandad, you'll be all right, come on now, the ambulance is coming, you've just had a fall, you'll be grand…'

His body felt limp and lifeless in her arms. Panic rose up through her chest and she screamed, 'He's not breathing! He's not breathing!'

Then Gareth was there again, trying to resuscitate the old man, pumping his chest, and breathing into his mouth, while Lily looked helplessly on. She put her shaking hands up to her face to disguise her fear. Where was the ambulance? He couldn't be dead, he just couldn't be. Gareth's foot knocked the coffee holder and the liquid spilled across the pavement in a creamy puddle, flowing along the gutter. Lily leaned across and grabbed the bag of records so they wouldn't get spoiled. Grandad Joe would want them when he came around.

But he did not come around, and the paramedics shook their heads as soon as they saw him. One of them put his arm around Lily and she collapsed against the heavy plastic of his jacket, sobbing. Gareth picked up the bag of Jim Reeves records and said, 'Do you want me to come with you?'

She wanted to say yes, but she didn't know how, so she shook her head.

The paramedic closed her grandad's eyes and kept him uncovered in the ambulance so that Lily could sit beside him and say goodbye. Lily rubbed his hands and talked to him. Even though he was gone, she wanted to let him know that he wasn't alone.

'You've had a shock,' said the paramedic, and seeing Lily was shivering, he put a blanket around her shoulders.

'How will I tell my parents?' Lily said. 'I don't think . . . I don't know how . . .'

'Give me their number and I'll do it for you, if you like.'

'Can you do that?'

'Of course,' he said, 'it's my job.'

Lily wrapped the blanket tightly around herself and put her hand on her grandfather's cheek. He felt cold now and Lily knew there was no point in talking to him. His spirit was elsewhere. He was truly gone.

Lily's mum, dad and grandmother picked her up from the hospital and took her home with them. It was the first time Lily had experienced grief and she was surprised at how overwhelming it was. Her grandfather had been very old, and she knew he couldn't live forever (although sometimes, with the twinkly eyed old imp, it seemed as if he just might), but even so, the next forty-eight hours passed in a haze of shock. Lily felt as if somebody had scooped her insides out. She kept bursting into involuntary sobs. 'It has to be gone

through,' her mother said. 'Cry yourself out, there's a good girl.' Yet Lily could not believe how many tears she had inside her.

Sally Thomas was art directing a catalogue shoot across town when she got the call. She was Lily's best friend and had been getting texts from her all day asking advice about the shoot. The last one was a picture of an old radio and it said, *Urgent opinion! Found this in Old Times. Wotcha think?*

Sally sent one back saying *Perfect!* and when Lily didn't reply straight away she assumed her disorganized friend had just let her battery run low. Now she picked up her iPhone and, as soon as she heard the voice of Lily's mum, she knew something was wrong.

'Holy shite!' was her first reaction to the news of Old Joe's passing. 'Jesus, I mean, sorry, Mary.'

Subtlety was not her strong point, but Mary Fitzpatrick had known her only daughter's best friend since they were children. Sally had a bit of a mouth on her but she also had a good heart.

Sally was there within half an hour. Mary opened the door and brought her into the sitting room, where Lily was curled up on her parents' sofa, with her feet up under her chest. She looked about ten years old. Sally put her arms around her, and said, 'Right, what needs to be done?'

'There's the shoot tomorrow, I can't cancel . . .'

'You won't have to. I'll take care of it.'

Sally got straight on the phone to *Style* magazine and arranged to take over the shoot for Lily. Then she drove up Kilburn High Road and pulled her car up onto the pavement outside Old Times. She had never met Gareth before, but Lily

had mentioned him often enough. Once she had introduced herself, Gareth said, 'How is she?'

His face was creased with worry. A crush? Of course. Everyone fell in love with Lily.

'Fine. Awful. Oh God, I don't know! Her grandad's dead, how do you think she is? Can I take the radio with me now for the shoot tomorrow?'

Gareth looked at her aghast.

'I'm doing it for her,' Sally said, 'and I'm double parked so can we hurry this along, please?'

Reluctantly Gareth carried the radio out and put it in the boot of her two-seater MG while Sally got in and started the engine.

'Send Lily my…' He paused. '…best, um…'

Sally raised her eyes to heaven then nodded goodbye and said, 'Sure, will do,' before speeding off.

That afternoon, Sally moved into Lily's cramped apartment. She slept on a pull-out bed behind a rack of vintage evening wear in the living room and, for the next forty-eight hours, kept Lily sane.

Chapter Two

Lily usually blogged daily, and posted her outfit on Instagram each morning, but now she could not face going online.

'You really need to put something up on your blog,' Sally said, with her head full of rollers, on the morning of Joe's funeral, 'just to let people know that you're not dead yourself!'

Lily went to her computer desk and clicked the mouse. Her stomach tightened as she saw it was still open on the page she'd been researching on that terrible day. It showed an old *Vogue* article about a 1950s evening gown. Lily bookmarked the link, then opened her own blog and posted, *I'll be offline for a few more days. Back when my heart heals. #LilyLovesHerGrandad*, before shutting down her computer and walking over to the enormous gold-framed antique mirror that dominated her tiny apartment, to put the finishing touches to her funeral ensemble.

Lily adjusted the flat feather fascinator to the left of her parting and placed her long, auburn hair, styled into broad Lana Turner waves, neatly across the shoulder of her 1940s fur cape. Then she searched through her collection of red lipsticks for the perfect shade: Dior Dolce Vita. She never left the house without her trademark matte red lipstick. Red hair, red lips – it was against all the rules but when it came to fashion, Lily never followed the rules.