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Written by Patrick Redmond

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THE REPLACEMENT

Patrick Redmond

sphere

SPHERE

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PROLOGUE

Oxfordshire, December 2013

The house was silent. All the noise came from outside. They waited at the end of the drive with their cameras, their microphones and their endless questions, like vampires ready to suck out her last drop of life.

Caroline stood in the living room, watching them through a crack in the curtains that she never opened any more. The weather was dry and mild for the time of year. It was the sort of morning she would once have spent in her garden, planting and weeding, making her home as beautiful without as it was within. Keeping up appearances, only there was no longer any point. Not now everyone knew.

She told herself to stay strong. That it would soon be over. That her story was just one in an endless procession of nine-day wonders for the media to chew over then spit out, leaving her to try and rebuild her life from the scraps that remained.

The morning post lay on a side table, as substantial as the previous day's had been. She flicked through the envelopes. Most were handwritten. She knew what they would say. The

same messages of hate she had received yesterday and would receive tomorrow too.

She focused on one that had been typed. It looked official; a circular or notice of some sort. She tore it open, grateful for anything that reminded her of normality.

But it wasn't a circular. Just a single sheet of paper, covered in angry scrawl:

This is all your fault. You make me sick. How can you call yourself a mother after what you've done? You're an insult to all the millions of women out there who can't have children of their own. I don't know how you can look at yourself in the mirror. I really don't.

How could you not know? That's what I don't understand. You MUST have known. They were your children. You were closer to them than anyone. What sort of woman are you? How could you possibly not know . . .

She didn't read any more. Just threw it and all the others into the bin.

A grand piano stood in the centre of the room. Once her sons had sat together on its stool performing duets for their grandparents. She remembered them laughing as they made mistake after mistake while their grandparents pretended not to notice; she had tried not to laugh herself and her husband had muttered about the fortune he was wasting on music lessons. It had been a happy time. There had been so many happy times watching them grow up.

The piano was covered in framed photographs. In one she and her husband looked young and in love on their wedding day. In another she sat in a hospital bed, proudly holding twin babies in her arms. But most were of the boys themselves; as

toddlers opening Christmas presents, playing cricket in the back garden, posing on the slopes during a skiing holiday, looking serious in their new school uniforms and later in their graduation robes. The entire history of her family captured in a series of simple images.

One in particular held her gaze, taken at a charity lunch back in August. She and her husband stood together outside the village hall, bathed in sunshine and with their sons on either side. It hurt to look at it now. To remember the last time they had all been together.

Before the sky collapsed on top of them.

PART 1

ONE

Oxfordshire: August 2013

'Smug bitch,' muttered Doug Cooper.

'Shush,' hissed his wife, Moira.

'Why? You think it too.'

It was Sunday. Another sunny day in what was proving a glorious summer. In the Fleckney Village Hall, the Ladies Charity Committee was holding its annual lunch. Chairwoman Caroline Randall stood at a podium, making a speech about how much money they'd raised and how many worthy causes they'd sponsored.

'Bloody farce,' continued Doug. 'The bill for this meal has got to be at least as much as you Do-gooding Dolittles have made.'

'We're not Dolittles. We make a difference. Besides, we're not using charity money to pay for it.'

'Tell me about it. Eighty quid a head. Charity really does begin at home.'

Caroline was drawing to a close. 'I don't want to keep you from your desserts any longer but I'd like to end by sharing one

final piece of good news. My husband, Robert, has promised to donate a thousand pounds to the famine relief fund . . . '

People began to applaud. Caroline held up her hand for silence.

'And, better still, both my sons have agreed to match that sum.'

The applause resumed, now even louder. 'Big deal,' said Doug. 'A whole week's interest on their trust funds.'

'Be quiet!'

'So, in summing up, I'd like to thank my fellow committee members for their hard work.' Caroline raised her glass. 'And here's to an even better next year.'

The applause reached its peak. As the caterers served the next course Caroline moved between the tables, exchanging greetings with the guests. 'Here comes Her Majesty,' Doug whispered. 'Don't forget to curtsy.'

'Shut up.'

Caroline reached their table and bestowed dazzling smiles on each of them. She was a tall, elegant woman in her early fifties, beautiful in a cool, refined way and so perfectly groomed she could have stepped straight out of a fashion magazine. 'Moira! Doug! I'm so glad you could both come.'

'We wouldn't have missed it for anything,' Moira told her.

'Absolutely,' agreed Doug. 'And congratulations on such a successful year.'

'Thank you. It's been hard work but I think it was worth it.'

'Undoubtedly so,' said Moira. 'The committee is lucky to have you.'

'Well, I do my best. Are you enjoying the meal?'

'Very much.' Doug patted his stomach. 'Worth every penny.'

Moira nodded. 'It's lovely that both your sons are here.'

'Isn't it. I told them there was no need but they insisted.'

Caroline noticed the empty seat next to Doug and frowned. 'I thought Ryan was coming.'

'Um …' Moira struggled to think of an excuse. Their son Ryan had returned from a party early that morning, only to retire to bed and scream 'Sod off!' whenever they knocked on his door and suggested it was time to change. 'He's got a stomach bug.'

'Poor thing. He's at college now, isn't he?'

'Yes. Downton College. Art and crafts. It's in Oxford.'

'Oxford? How nice. James was there too. Of course he was at the university.'

'Of course. And how is Robert finding retirement?'

'Loving it. We both are. It's wonderful to have time to enjoy life while we're still young enough to do so. Well, I'll leave you to your desserts. Thanks again for coming. It wouldn't have been the same without you.'

Caroline returned to her own table. Her husband rose as she approached, pulling out her chair in readiness. He was in his late fifties and tall and handsome like his wife. Her sons also rose; both were in their late twenties and as good-looking as their parents. James was fair like his mother, Thomas dark like his father. James said something and they all began to laugh. They looked like the perfect family, radiating health, wealth and happiness. But that was only to be expected. When it came to Caroline, only perfection would do.

'Smug bitch,' muttered Moira.

Doug began to chuckle, almost choking on his dessert as a result.

A visit to her sister Caroline always left Helen Jones feeling inadequate.

She was standing in the kitchen, listening to Caroline describe the charity lunch she had just hosted while they

waited for the kettle to boil. The kitchen was immaculate: every surface spotless and the utensils colour-coordinated with the decor. It was like standing in a showroom. Helen kept expecting people with brochures to appear and ask if the washing machine was included in the purchase price.

'Sounds like it was a big success,' she said.

'No thanks to the caterers. Any slower and they'd have been dead.' Caroline loaded a tray with coffee and biscuits and carried it through the French windows out into the garden.

'Isn't Bob joining us?' asked Helen as she followed behind.

'He'd love to but he has to work. He's a freelance consultant now.'

'So much for retirement being the easy option.' Helen glanced up at Robert's study. He was standing at the window. She waved to him. He waved back.

The garden was immaculate too. One acre of perfectly mown grass, decorated with flowerbeds, leading down to the river and the small rowboat moored there. Helen's daughter Vanessa sat at a table, laughing with James and Thomas. 'What are you three plotting?' Helen asked.

'We're giving Jimmy grief about his new girlfriend,' explained Vanessa. She was a year younger than the twins: a plump girl whose homely features were made attractive by a very lively expression.

'Is this Kate?'

Thomas nodded. 'Miss Uberbitch herself.' He and Vanessa continued to laugh while James tried, unsuccessfully, to look annoyed. Helen had a sudden memory of sitting at the same table, watching the three of them playing pirates on the river. It had been fifteen years ago but seemed like yesterday. The realisation made her feel sad, as if half her life had passed without her even noticing.

'So what's Kate like?' she asked.

'A very nice girl,' said Caroline.

'That's not what you said when you met her, Mum,' said Thomas.

James turned to Caroline. 'Why? What did you say?'

'Exactly what I've just said. She's a very nice girl. Your brother's trying to be funny; though, as we all know, comedy has never been his forte.'

Thomas looked sheepish. 'Well, I like her,' said James defiantly.

'And that's good enough for us,' Caroline told him.

'Exactly,' agreed Vanessa. 'If the bitch makes you happy then we're happy too.'

Caroline glared at Vanessa who smiled sweetly at her. Helen decided to change the subject. 'How are things at work?' she asked James.

'He's doing extremely well,' answered Caroline. 'He's being seconded to one of his firm's biggest clients. They asked for him specifically.'

'It's not definite, Mum. It may not happen.'

'Of course it'll happen. You're the best lawyer in your department.'

'Which is a polite way of saying he's the biggest crook there,' said Vanessa.

Both boys laughed. 'Tom's doing well too,' said James. 'He's just been given a major client account.'

'And what about you, Nessa?' asked Caroline. 'Your mother tells me you're starting a new job tomorrow.'

'Yeah. I'm receptionist for a local newspaper in Barnet.'

'Barnet? That's a nice area. Is it permanent?'

'No. I'm just covering maternity leave.'

'Oh.'

'*Oh?*'

'You're twenty-six. You can't temp for ever.'

'Why not? I enjoy it.'

'But it's not a career.'

'Who says I want a career? You never had one. You stopped working the second Tweedledum and Tweedledee were born.'

It was Helen's turn to glare at her daughter, who responded by lighting a cigarette. 'Which one am I?' asked James.

'I dunno. The one who pretended he'd given up smoking whenever he went home, only to light up as soon as he was out of the door.'

'They've both given up,' said Caroline firmly. A pause. 'Haven't you?'

'Absolutely,' said James.

'Absolutely,' echoed Thomas.

Vanessa mimed a growing nose. 'You should give up too,' Caroline told her.

'I know. I'm a disgrace. I'm surprised you let me through the door.'

'We did think about barricading it,' said James, 'but you'd only force a window.'

Vanessa and the boys began to plan their next get-together in London while Caroline told Helen about a recent trip she and Robert had made to Barcelona. As she listened, Helen watched a narrowboat glide down the river, sending ripples to make the rowboat rock. Turning, she gazed up at the house: four storeys of beautiful white Georgian stone. Caroline was always complaining that maintaining it was a full-time job. Perhaps it was, but when Helen compared it to her own two-bedroom semi and her civil service job she couldn't help but feel envious.

Robert was back at his study window. Again she waved. Again he waved back.

*

'You shouldn't tease your aunt like that,' she told Vanessa as they drove away.

'Why not? She asks for it.'

Helen guided the car through Fleckney. Its streets were lined with houses that were more like mansions, all with ornate gates and long, well-tended drives. A place that oozed wealth and privilege and stood in stark contrast to her own home town of Skipworth ten miles away.

'Anyway,' continued Vanessa, 'the twins thought it was funny.'

'That's not the point. You're a guest in her house.'

'I notice Uncle Bob didn't grace us with his presence. Aren't you supposed to make guests feel welcome?'

'He was busy.'

'Was he hell. He just couldn't be bothered making small talk with a pair of nobodies.'

'Nessa!'

'Get real, Mum. He's a total snob. They both are.'

'I think you're being very unfair. They were very good to us when your father lost his job.'

'*Good?* Uncle Bob lent us less money than he'd spend on champagne in a fortnight and kept rubbing Dad's nose in it long after he'd paid it back. Arsehole.'

'Vanessa, that's enough.'

Silence. Helen focused on the traffic. A car braked sharply in front of her. Muttering, she steered around it.

'Sorry, Mum. You know me and my big gob.'

They stopped at a set of lights. Helen sighed. 'I know Caroline can be trying but it's not been easy for her, having to bring up the boys on her own with Robert being away so much. And Robert's not the easiest of men . . . '

'Amen to that.'

The traffic began to move. Helen shook her head. 'He does have his good points but . . . well . . . he's not . . . '

'Dad?'

'No. Nobody could ever have as many good points as your dad.'

Another silence. Companionable this time. Vanessa touched her mother's arm. Helen took her hand and squeezed it. 'Are you driving back to town tonight?' she asked.

'No. I'll go early tomorrow.'

'Won't you be tired? New job and all.'

'I'll be fine. Let's go to the pub tonight. Get totally pissed like us working-class spongers do.'

'Nessa!'

'Love you, Mum.'

'Love you too, baby. Love you too.'

An hour later Caroline stood in the drive with Robert, watching James's new Porsche race towards the gate. Thomas waved from the passenger window. She waved back, while feeling anxiety consume her. James loved fast cars and she lived in constant dread of a phone call telling her he'd been involved in an accident.

'I wish he'd bought something less powerful,' she told her husband.

'Why? He's a good driver.'

'But it's dangerous.'

'You worry too much.'

'I'm his mother. That's my job.'

'And he's a grown man with a job of his own. They're not your babies any more, no matter how hard you pretend they are.'

'I don't pretend that.'

He rolled his eyes.

'You might have made an effort.'

'I was busy.'

'She's my sister. I'm very fond of her.'

'No, you're not. She's just someone you use to feel better about yourself.'

He entered the house. She followed him in. 'Why did you say that?'

'Because it's true.'

'It isn't.'

He didn't answer. Just took his car keys from the hall table. 'Where are you going?' she asked.

'For a drive.'

'What about supper?'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Where will you go?'

'I don't know.'

'I could come with you. We could drive to Findal. The scenery is beautiful.'

He shook his head.

'Or we could go for a walk by the river. It's lovely this time of day . . . '

'For Christ's sake! If I wanted company I'd ask for it.' He made as if to leave then turned back. 'Don't take any notice of me. My head's aching and driving always helps it clear. You put your feet up. You deserve it after all your hard work.'

'Very well. Enjoy yourself.'

'I won't be long.'

'Be as long as you want. I don't mind.'

He headed outside. She remained where she was. The house, so full of voices an hour ago, now seemed eerily silent.

She went to the kitchen, switched on the radio and began to

wash the coffee cups, using noise and action as shields to keep the feelings of emptiness at bay.

'Thank God that's over,' said Thomas.

'I enjoyed it,' James told him.

'Liar. You were as bored as I was.'

'But not as bored as Dad. I had to keep nudging him during Mum's speech. Otherwise he'd have nodded off.'

The car inched its way over the Hammersmith flyover. James revved the engine in frustration. 'Nessa's a liar too, implying we're still smoking.'

'I know. Shame on her.' Thomas produced a packet of cigarettes, lit two and gave one to his brother. James took a drag, sighed contentedly and blew smoke out of the window. 'We must give up,' he said.

'We'll make it our New Year's resolution.'

'But that's months away.'

'Exactly.'

The car came to a complete standstill. Thomas groaned. 'Told you we should have left earlier.'

'How? We couldn't just leave after lunch.' James shook his head. 'It's weird having Dad around all the time. I'm so used to his flying visits. Like that summer when we were seventeen. Back from one business trip only to jet off on the next.'

'That was the summer he promised to teach us to drive. No wonder we both failed our tests.' Thomas flicked through a pile of CDs and frowned. 'Celine Dion?'

'It's Kate's.'

'That figures.'

'Don't start.'

'I'm not. I think she's great.'

'Who's the liar now?'

'You are. Pretending it's a big romance when anyone can see it's pure rebound.'

'Rubbish.'

'So you don't think about Becky any more?'

'No. Not much.'

'Told you.'

'Oh shut up.'

'You could call her.'

'Why?'

'Because you had something special. Everyone could see it.'

'She couldn't. She was the one who ended it, remember.'

'Maybe she regrets it.'

'And maybe she doesn't. Just drop it, will you. Some things aren't meant to be.' James sat back in his seat and took another drag on his cigarette. The traffic remained at a standstill. Thomas resumed his examination of the CDs, eventually putting on Nirvana. 'Good album,' observed James.

'The best. Nothing can top it except *Celine Dion's Greatest Hits*.'

'I'm warning you . . . '

'What? It's a masterpiece. All deaf people agree.'

James felt his lips start to twitch. Thomas began to hum the tune of 'My Heart Will Go On' while nudging his brother's arm. James nudged him back and they began to jostle, both dissolving into laughter, failing to notice the traffic was moving again and having to be hooted by the driver of the car behind.

After dropping Thomas at his Chelsea flat, James returned to his own in Notting Hill.

It was on the top floor of a portered block with three good-sized bedrooms, two bathrooms, a modern kitchen and a large living room with views of the street below. The decor was simple: