You, Me and Him

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

My legs and feet shiver in the draught. The noise sounds distant to begin with and then I realise it's right in my ear. 'GET UP!'

It can't be the morning?

Finn and I were bickering again last night. He hadn't bothered to refill the filter jug and, on top of that, he'd left a teabag in the sink. 'You only have to stretch an arm out to put it into the bin,' I had demonstrated, holding the little stained and wrinkled bag in my hand. 'Look! Pop! In it goes.' I am becoming an old fishwife and I'm only thirty-one.

'Are teabags the only topic of our conversation now?'

'Only if you don't put them in the bin.'

'Why are you so crotchety? Is it that time of month?'

'Shut up.' I didn't tell Finn I am three days late. 'Anyway, what's for supper? I'm starving.' Finn and I have made a decision that he cooks once a week, on a Saturday.

'I'll cook us some steaks, won't take long,' he'd said, voice as light as a breeze.

'And chips?' I have been craving potatoes recently. Maybe I *am* pregnant?

Finn would love to have another baby. He is close to his twin brother, Ed, and would love George, our six-year-old son, to have a playmate. I would be happy to stop with one. I'm an only child and have a close bond to my parents. It is true to say that Clarky, my oldest friend from home, was my surrogate brother. Without him, I would have been lonely.

A small hand tugs at my cotton nightshirt again. 'My brain won't let me sleep anymore,' George says.

Finn gets out of bed boasting that he can survive on the same amount of sleep as Margaret Thatcher. 'Wake up!' George bellows in my ear again.

'Don't shout.'

'We might be getting old but we're not deaf,' Finn adds.

I yawn. 'That's something to look forward to.'

Finn is stretching out his arms, circling his shoulders and cracking his knuckles into place like he does every morning. He then starts to sing the familiar lyrics to Matt Bianco's song 'Get Out Of Your Lazy Bed'.

George joins in flatly.

I sit up and rub my eyes. I have a weird feeling in my stomach. I was having the strangest dream that I was marrying Clarky in a hot air balloon. I am terrified of heights and Finn of all people was officiating, dressed in a long dark robe and white collar, and finding the whole event inappropriately funny. He was roaring

with laughter in between the vows. I smile to myself, remembering that when Finn and I announced our engagement Clarky wrote all the lovely things that everyone else writes in a congratulations card, but then, in tiny, almost illegible writing at the bottom, he wrote, 'Remember, there are three of us in this marriage'.

I pick up the clock, trying to shake the dream out of my head. 7.19.

Finn ties the cord of his dressing gown into a clumsy loop around his waist and then briefly kisses me on the cheek.

'Stop sexing her, Dad.' George crosses his arms and waits impatiently.

Finn and I look at each other in disbelief before both laughing. Where did he get that one from? School is like the lucky dip. You don't know what expressions they'll come home with.

'Mum's cross because I said the word sex,' George says.

'Well, I reckon we should go make her one of our finest cooked Sunday breakfasts,' Finn suggests and they leave the bedroom like two happy children, George clinging on to Finn's dressing-gown cord and pretending his father's a horse. 'Giddy up, Dad!'

Sunday morning is officially my lie-in morning. Finn and George like to spend Sundays together doing their 'boy' things. This is another resolution Finn and I made six months ago. He needs to spend more time with his son. They cook breakfast and then Finn takes him to the car-boot sale. They love George at the

car-boot because he spends all his pocket money within minutes, 'bargain hunting', as he calls it. He's called the Whizz Kid by all the car owners. Last time George came home with a mustard yellow-coloured teapot in the shape of a house. 'Look, Mum, look!' I'd opened the lid and it was full of cobwebs, with a few squashed flies lying on the bottom. 'It was only ten pence,' George informed me as he shoved it back into its flimsy white plastic bag and then placed it on his bedroom floor, alongside all the other junk he'd bought from weeks before.

I would like more time to paint at the weekends. Mum tells me that when I was a child I was easy to look after because all I wanted to do was sit at my little white table with its glossy tablecloth and paint pictures of stars, people, our dogs, thatched cottages, the horses in the field, anything I set my eyes on.

I have turned George's old nursery, that used to be divided from our bathroom by white sliding doors, into my art studio. I have a narrow glass desk with my silver laptop on it for graphic design work. Above it is a small shelf with art and design books, a photograph of Tatiana – Tiana for short, my oldest school friend – in a leather frame, and beside the frame is a large green frog which holds a ten-pence coin in its mouth. Mr Frog promises good fortune in business apparently. I have to kiss him each morning and take the coin out of his mouth at night to allow him to rest. It's a ritual Tiana taught me and which she practises religiously. I often forget.

On the wall is a year planner that I designed, decorated with pretty silver shells. Each day is plotted out

with neat boxes representing the meetings I have to go to. But the thing I love most is the old wooden case filled with tubes of oil paints. My studio is like a therapy box. If I had to sum up our home in one word it would be 'clutter', but this room is my own private ordered world where I don't allow even Finn and George to enter. When I sit down in front of my easel I escape into my picture.

I lie back and open my paperback. '**Unputdownable**' and '**Compelling**' is written in bold type on the back of the jacket, which makes me smile. It's been by my bedside for three weeks and I have reached page fifteen.

'Morning, Rocky,' I hear George say. Rocky is our wire-haired sausage dog. 'Can't reach, Dad.' Our kitchen is designed for tall people with high cupboards that George needs to climb onto a chair and then stand on tiptoe to reach. Pots and pans hang on a rail above the cooker. A few minutes later . . . 'Dad, what do I do now?'

'Stand back – careful!' We don't let him anywhere near the hot stove. 'They need more stirring. Remember, not too runny.'

'They're ready, Dad.'

'No, they're not.' I can envisage Finn showing George the sloppy egg mixture as it drips off the wooden spoon.

'Can I put the eggs on the plates now?'

'They aren't READY.' Finn's sunny tone is already beginning to lose its edge. 'Listen.'

A split second later: 'Are they ready now?'

'George! Don't let Rocky lick the butter, get him off the table.' I don't feel so hungry now. Rocky yaps.

'Butter the toast, that's your job.' Finn pops four pieces in the slots and pushes the lever down. The timer starts to tick.

Twenty seconds later. 'Don't force the thingy . . .'

'It's done. Look!'

'Only on one side. Put it . . .'

'Done!'

'. . . back in.'

'Mum won't notice.' I can hear George dropping the knife on to the floor and picking it up again.

'That's enough butter. Remember what I told you about cholesterol?'

'Boring.'

'Too much fat clogs up our heart.' Finn is a cardiologist.

'Boring.' George starts to hum loudly.

'You've only buttered one . . . oh, it doesn't matter.' I can picture Finn's frustrated expression. 'Careful,' he says. 'Whoops! Rocky can have that bit.' Rocky is as fat as a pork pie because his diet consists of all the food that misses George's plate or mouth.

'I'm a good cook, aren't I, Dad?'

'Gordon Ramsay would be proud. OK, Mum likes marmalade on her toast.'

'She likes Marmite and marmalade. I love Mum.'

'So do I. George, it's all over your fingers!' Finn is now laughing wearily. 'What are we going to do with you, Mrs Bourbon?' George is called Mrs Bourbon because those are his favourite biscuits; Finn is Mrs Jammie Dodger.

'I want a brother, Dad. Mrs Jammie D, how many spoons of coffee?'