

The Love of My Life

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Published by Macmillan

Extract

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prologue

I shall never go back to Watersford.

It is where my husband Luca lies buried, but I won't go there again.

Luca's family has won. Angela and Nathalie have found a way to keep us apart. It is what they have wanted for years and I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive them for that.

There is no way to atone for what I've done, either. There is no way back to how we were before, no way to make things better. We shall all just have to learn to live with ourselves and the our consequences of our actions.

After the truth about the Felicone family came out on that stormy summer evening, I never wanted to see any of them again. So I left the restaurant and got into my car which was parked outside and drove through the night to my sister Lynnette's house in London. Lynnette loves me. She didn't ask why I had arrived on her doorstep at three o'clock in the morning with mascara all over my face. She didn't ask why I had turned up without a suitcase or even a toothbrush. She gave me a mug of milky hot chocolate to drink while she made up the bed in the spare room, found

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a pair of pyjamas for me to wear, tucked me between the clean sheets like a child, and left me to sleep.

If I had been born five hundred years ago, I would have been sent to see out my days in a convent. Today, the convent isn't an option but Lynnette still believes in the principle of redemption. Now I am feeling stronger, she has brought Sean's old laptop up to the bedroom and told me to write down everything that happened. She believes that once I've done that, I will be able to put the whole affair behind me. I don't know if she's right, but I have nothing else to do.

I am sitting cross-legged on the yellow bedspread. Beside me is a photograph Luca, taken outside a restaurant in Sorrento last summer. He is squinting at the camera. The sun is in his eyes, and he has a cigarette between his lips and a bottle of Peroni in his hand. I miss him with every breath and heartbeat. He should have been my happy ending. Instead, he is the sad beginning to this story.

This is what happened after Luca died.

one

It started on the day of Luca's funeral. It was the third week in January and it was one of those cold, bright days when the sun makes the winter appear beautiful and when your heart wants to soar like a seagull above the city.

Instead, we were grounded like cannonballs in Luca's parents' house in Watersford by the obligatory rituals. The family and their guests hovered in the living room, fussing over one another. Under the direction of my mother-in-law, Angela, my sisters-in-law were making themselves useful, pressing cups of coffee and bite-sized sugared pastries on people who didn't really want them.

Everyone was gentle with me, except Nathalie, who simply avoided me. I was aware of her watching me across the room and wondered if she was still angry with me and if she still hated me. I thought, perhaps, that she was glad things had turned out the way they did, and that I was the one who was suffering most. Maybe she thought I deserved to be a widow. Maybe she thought it was my fault that Luca was dead.

Gracefully, if grudgingly, the family treated me as guest

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of honour at my husband's funeral. I had never been welcomed into his family, and nobody pretended that I had been, but they were generous enough to show me a modicum of respect and kindness. They asked me simple questions about my journey and my hotel, which I answered, but I found elaboration difficult. It was the first time in more than fifteen years that I had been with the Felicone family *en masse*, without Luca acting as my defence counsel, public-relations consultant and sponsor.

In truth, I was terrified of what lay ahead – not just the funeral, but the rest of my life. I felt as if I were moving in exaggerated slow motion, shackled by fear. My senses weren't working properly. Sometimes I heard things too clearly – a voice would be like a bell clanging – sometimes every word and noise dissolved into an aural soup. My mouth was dry. My fingertips tingled. I had to remember to breathe.

Two of the four surviving brothers, Stefano and Luca's twin Marc, were brotherly to me. They hugged me and kissed my cheeks and were solicitous. I was aware of them but only vaguely. They were like breaths of wind around me. The other two behaved true to form. Carlo was his usual distant, disapproving self. Fabio, the youngest brother, was upstairs, playing computer games. I had tried to talk to him earlier, but either he was too engrossed in the game to speak, or else he chose to ignore me.

Downstairs, the older brothers went outside to smoke, and through the low-voiced, churchy buzzing of conversation in the living room I heard anxious laughter coming

from the garden. It must have been Marc. It sounded like Luca. I picked up a couple of empty cups and saucers and took them into the kitchen. Angela was packing the uneaten food back into plastic containers. With her was an elderly, frail-looking woman wearing an old-fashioned, long-sleeved cleaning overall with buttons down the front over a faded brown skirt. Her narrow face was framed by salt-and-pepper hair curled painfully tightly. She was wearing yellow rubber gloves.

'You don't need to do that, Olivia,' said Angela without looking at me. 'Mrs McGuire's going to clean up later. She knows where everything goes.'

I smiled tentatively at the woman as I passed her the soiled crockery. Her expression was stern but she looked up at me and gave me the briefest nod of thanks. I could see in her eyes that she was trying to work out who I was. Of course, it never occurred to Angela to introduce us.

'Can't I do anything to help?' I asked.

'No thank you. We can cope,' said Angela.

I wandered back into the living room. Luca's father Maurizio was staring out of the front window, fingering his newly shaved chin and gazing into the street where people were going about their business as if this were just another ordinary day. I went to stand beside him with my back to the room. Maurizio and I had always been comfortable together, and this way I didn't have to talk to anyone.

Luca's nieces and nephews, who were all beautifully turned out, had been given the job of standing in the front porch on the look-out for the funeral cars. Eventually one

of them came running inside, pulled on Maurizio's hand and said, 'Nonno, they're coming.'

There was a communal intake of breath and a flurry of activity.

People put down their sherry glasses, their coffee cups and sandwich plates, and wiped their fingers on Angela's starched linen napkins. Maurizio went upstairs to fetch Fabio. With elaborate consideration, people helped one another into their coats, and then they headed down the polished wooden hallway to the front door, pausing at the tall mirror in the curlicued gilt frame to smooth a wisp of hair or dust their shoulders. Mrs McGuire emerged from the kitchen to tidy the living room.

I turned the other way, into the cloakroom, and sat on the lavatory with my head in my hands, trying to compose myself. My heart was racing, my hands trembling. I thought I might faint. The cloakroom was dark and cool and smelled of lilac air freshener. I held the hand towel to my face. It was damp.

There was a rap on the door.

'Liv, are you all right?' It was Marc. 'Is it OK if I come in?'

'Yes.'

The door opened. The anxiety on Marc's face mirrored my own.

He touched my cheek with his fingertips. 'Oh, Liv.'

'I can't go to the cemetery,' I whispered, hunching down into myself. 'I won't be able to bear it.'

'You have to.'

'I can't. I'm really scared.'

'I know. So am I.'

I was wringing my hands. I looked up at Marc. He was pale and gaunt.

'Drink?' he asked.

I nodded.

Marc took a hip flask from his pocket, unscrewed the lid and passed it to me.

'Drink as much as you can then use the mouthwash in the cupboard under the basin.'

I did as I was told. It was whisky. It was good. Marc drank after me, then we both rinsed our mouths and spat out together, like children preparing for bed.

'Did you hide the mouthwash there on purpose?' I asked.

'I thought it best to be prepared. Don't breathe a word.'

I smiled.

Marc topped up the hip flask from a whisky bottle concealed with the mouthwash amongst Angela's clean towels, spare toilet rolls and air freshener.

'We'll get through this, you know,' he said, helping me to my feet. 'Today and afterwards. I'll help you and you can help me, OK?'

I wiped my mouth and nodded.

two

When I stepped out of the house into the cold morning light, I could not look towards the hearse. Instead I watched my feet, unsteady in their high-heeled black boots, as they followed one another down the stone steps, on to the pavement and into the back seat of the first limousine, where Luca's immediate family was waiting. I sat down beside Angela. She moved aside to make space, and turned her body away from mine. She was an icy presence beside me, exuding a miasma of deep, black grief, yet completely composed. I put my gloved hands between my knees, and held them together tight.

I couldn't look at the coffin.

I stared at my knees throughout the journey to the cemetery, which seemed to last for ever, and the next thing I remember was the terrible sound of stifled male sobbing in the chapel, icy despite the electric bar heaters. Music chimed from the coloured glass dome high above us; there was a smell of cough sweets, must and decaying flowers. Although I could not look at it, I knew the coffin was lying on the catafalque in the middle of the aisle, covered in white

lilies, carnations and roses, and I knew, although it was difficult to believe, that Luca was inside the coffin, on his own, shut away from the rest of us. I wondered if it was completely dark inside the coffin, or if there were slivers of light at the rim of the lid. I hoped his head was rested on a silk cushion, I hoped he was arranged comfortably.

The prayers, the testimonials and affectionate anecdotes were delivered in halting voices while I, afraid to listen, drifted off instead to the memory of last summer's holiday and Luca sleeping on a sunbed by the pool, his face turned towards mine, and how I put down my paperback for the pleasure of simply watching him breathe.

It was a conventional service. I don't remember the prayers or the hymns – I wasn't concentrating – but they would have been beautiful. Angela, perfectly coiffed, hatted, veiled and turned out in a suit which looked like Chanel, would have seen to that. I sat next to Luca's eldest brother, Stefano. His thigh was warm against mine throughout the service. He shared his hymnbook although I couldn't read the words and didn't make any attempt to sing.

When it was over, Stefano squeezed past my knees to join the other brothers to lift the coffin and carry it up the hill to the grave. I walked on my own, behind the coffin, up the hill. My breath shrouded my face but I kept my eyes on the ground.

I can't recall any of the words the minister said at the graveside, but when the coffin came to be lowered, he gave me the gentlest word of encouragement to throw the rose I

was holding into the hole. I had to look at it then, and that's when the grief came over me like a wave. I don't think I made a sound as I stood there in my high heels and my new coat and my silver earrings but inside, every hope and wish and dream I'd ever nurtured tore itself up by the roots and miscarried into bloody little disasters inside me. Stefano's wife Bridget was holding their youngest daughter, Emilia, in her arms but she must have seen the crisis in my face because she nudged Stefano, who came to me and put his arms around me and I closed my eyes as he pulled me to him, holding my head as if it were something precious and fragile against his shoulder. I could feel the shudder of his sobs through the rough masculine fabric of his coat.

When it was over, the lesser mourners drifted away from the grave, back down the hillside towards the area outside the chapel where the cars were parked. The sisters-in-law, the nephews and nieces and uncles and aunts, the long-standing family friends and employees of the business peeled off one by one, leaving the immediate family, the four brothers, the parents and me, to pay our last respects. And for a while we stood there around the grave, casting long shadows in the late-morning winter sunlight. Nobody said anything, but eventually Carlo wandered away on his own, and Stefano put his arm round Fabio's shoulders and turned him away from the grave, and Marc whispered in my ear: 'They deserve a moment to themselves,' and I nodded and allowed him to guide me away from the grave, leaving just Angela and Maurizio standing together but slightly

apart, like statues in the cemetery beside the grave of their prodigal son.

We were halfway down the hill when Marc started to cry, loudly and fiercely like a child, and that set me off, and it seemed natural to take our gulping sobs and blinded eyes and dissolving mascara and snot and hide them from the others, so we left the main footpath and followed a horizontal one which was smaller and wound in between the trees that framed the chapel below. And there on the path we cried together long and noisy and cathartic, holding hands; and then, without any words being spoken, we kissed. It was a sweet kiss, like a glass of water after a week in a sandstorm or a lungful of oxygen when you thought you had drowned or a kiss from the only person on earth who had loved Luca as I did. Marc's tongue, salty with tears, was like a gift in my mouth, his hands gentle on my wet cheeks, our teeth getting in each other's way. Marc kissed me sweetly but deeply, as if he were drinking Luca's essence out of me and I, feeling his weight against me, his thigh between my thighs, knew that I was the lucky one: I still had Marc to remind me of Luca, Marc only had me.