

Yours, Faithfully

Sheila O'Flanagan

Published by Headline Review

Extract

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Chapter 1

Iona Brannock wasn't pregnant.

She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. It had been rather optimistic to assume that her first serious attempt at conceiving a baby would be an unqualified success. It wasn't as though women could simply get pregnant on demand, after all. But Iona was an optimistic person. And what did surprise her was the sense of bitter disappointment which now engulfed her and how unexpectedly let down she felt by her own body. She'd been so sure of herself. So sure of both of them.

The thing was, she told herself pensively, all of those other times over the past four years when they'd come together beneath the sheets and cried out in mutual passion had been about themselves and the pleasure that they were giving to each other. Now it was different. Making love this last month had been a unique experience because there had been a new purpose to it, and the thrill of their nights together had intensified as a result. Iona hadn't thought it possible that she could love Frank any more passionately than she already did. Or that their sex life could have been any more fulfilling. But she'd been wrong. Trying to make a baby with him was the most intense and passionate experience of her life.

They'd talked about it first, of course. There'd been a long and involved discussion about the whole idea of bringing another life into the world. Frank had been certain that it was the right thing to do. It was Iona who'd had the serious doubts. She simply wasn't certain that she was mature enough to be responsible for another life. The enormity of the task was terrifying, she whispered, as they lay side by side in the big bed together. And then Frank had kissed her and told her that it was precisely because she was scared that she would be a great mother and that he could think of nothing that would bind them together more closely than having a baby. It would make them a real family, he

said. And he wanted to be part of a family with her. There was no need for her to be scared. Besides, wasn't she already great at everything she did? Wasn't she fantastic at her job in the house rental agency, dealing with demented tenants and equally demented landlords? Wouldn't a baby be simple in comparison?

She'd smiled then. Anyhow, he added, he'd be with her every step of the way.

'Promise?' She'd been touched by the sincerity of his words.

'Promise,' he replied.

And so they'd made love with the hope of having a baby and it had been the most wonderful of all their nights together. But now, Iona had to admit, wonderful and all though that night and the other baby-making nights that followed might have been, they was still just more nights of great sex because she wasn't pregnant after all. The sudden pain in the small of her back and the crucifying cramping of her stomach confirmed it.

It seemed daft now that she'd consulted her feng shui book and set up a children area in their house, despite Frank's amused scepticism. But as she'd pointed out, there was no harm in harnessing whatever power there might be around the home (hadn't leaving the toilet lid down worked its magic as a way of stopping money leaking out of the house? He'd landed a major contract the day he'd moved in, which proved it really.) and so she'd placed a few photos of her niece, Charlotte, aged six, and nephew, Gavin, aged four, on the plain oak sideboard at the south end of the living room; then she'd added a home-enhancer crystal bowl on the wall shelf nearby. By the time she'd finished upgrading the energy of the home she'd felt certain that getting pregnant would be an enjoyable formality given all the effort she was making.

She debated for a moment or two about whether to phone Frank now and tell him the discouraging news about the baby but she decided against it. It wasn't the sort of conversation she wanted to have with him first thing in the morning and she was pretty sure it wasn't the kind of conversation he wanted at that hour either. But she was glad that he was coming home that night so that they could hold each other tight and reassure each other that maybe the next time they'd be successful.

Iona had never told Frank that it had taken her own mother five years to get pregnant. She didn't tell him of the many despairing visits that Flora Brannock had made to the doctor to find out whether

everything was all right and her mother's subsequent slavish adherence to a range of different diets, lifestyle regimes and goodness knows what else to help things along. Because in the end it hadn't mattered – Flora eventually succeeded with Iona's older sister, Lauren; then a couple of years later Iona; and finally Craig. There hadn't been a production problem really just a delay in getting started, as she'd told her daughters when giving them her practical facts-of-life discussion as soon as they'd asked the inevitable 'where did I come from?' question.

Iona twisted the thin gold wedding band on her finger. She wouldn't have the same problems as her mother, she knew she wouldn't. Charlotte and Gavin were Lauren's children and Lauren hadn't experienced any delay in conceiving. So there was no big issue here just because Iona hadn't got pregnant at the first attempt.

But still, she thought, as she broke the seal on a box of Tampax, it would have been nice to have the whole thing sorted. She wasn't good at waiting. She knew that. Flora had always called her the impatient daughter. Lauren was the serene one – nothing ever upset or perturbed her and she seemed to float through life without any stress whatsoever. Iona, on the other hand, was always anxious for things to happen, cut up with frustration when she was told that she was too young or too small or just plain not allowed to do something she desperately wanted. Iona had been the one to make the forbidden climb on to the roof of the garden shed, and the one to rip her leg on the thorns of the rose bush as she'd jumped off it. Iona had been the one, aged six, to try riding a two-wheeled bicycle on her own without any supervision whatsoever, and the one who'd managed to wobble a few yards down the road before crashing into the wall of the Delaneys' house, splitting open her lip, banging her nose and knocking out her two front teeth. As a teenager, she'd been the one who'd stayed out past the accepted coming-home time, sneaking in through the bathroom window for three nights in a row before getting caught because Flora had moved the cactus plant on the windowsill and Iona had sent it clattering on to the tiled floor with her foot. At twenty, she'd been the first to move out of the family home, wanting a place of her own while Lauren was still content to live with their parents.

Craig, the youngest, was simply 'the son'. He was tall and broad with deep soulful eyes which made him look particularly sensitive and meant that the impressionable girls on the estate where they lived fancied him

like crazy and hung around outside their house to get a glimpse of him. Iona grinned to herself as she thought of her younger brother, now working as a telephone engineer in China and probably still breaking hearts. Their father had been a new-man sort of bloke long before it became fashionable for men to do the washing-up and show their emotions in public and she had no doubt that David Brannock loved both his daughters dearly and expected great things of them; but when Craig had been born there was a whole thing about ‘the son’ that hadn’t been around for ‘the girls’.

Iona didn’t care. She knew that her parents loved them all equally. The son-and-heir thing – well, it might be old-fashioned, but a part of her understood it. Even though, as she’d pointed out to her father, she’d kept the family name after her marriage so that everyone still knew her as Iona Brannock. And the agreement with Frank was that their daughters would carry her surname, while their sons would carry his. It would all work out fine, she knew. All she had to do was get round to having the children.

She finished in the bathroom and walked into the tiny bedroom. This was something that would have to change when all the lovemaking finally paid off. Right now, she and Frank lived in a two-up two-down artisan house near the old Iveagh Markets building in the Liberties district of Dublin. It was a great house in a great location because it was so convenient for the city centre and meant that if she didn’t need the car during the day to drive to rental showings she could walk to work; but it wasn’t very big, especially since one of the bedrooms was used as an office. Frank had his own company, DynaLite. He arranged the installation of complex lighting systems in hotels and nightclubs and customised lighting shows for special occasions. It was extremely successful for a venture that operated from their back bedroom and from a serviced office on the south side of the city, although that was because Frank was totally committed to the company, travelling throughout the country every week to meet his clients and sometimes having to stay away for days on end to get a particular project completed on time.

Iona, whose job at the rental agency allowed her to work from home sometimes, also used the bedroom as an office, though not as much as Frank did. It was there that they stored all of their work-related stuff; there where they kept the computer and printer and fax; and there

where one or the other of them retired to when they absolutely didn't want to be disturbed. That didn't happen very often. With Frank spending so much time away from home, they liked to be together as much as possible when he returned.

But using the bedroom as an office meant that they essentially lived in a one-bedroomed house. Iona felt a bit guilty about her assertion that they'd have to move once they started a family, since she knew that years ago enormous families were reared in the two-up two-down houses, but times had changed since the 1930s and 40s. And besides, their house had been bought from some lunatic interior designer who had done a fantastic job on it but who had styled everything with a single male occupant in mind. Iona was perfectly certain that the trendy glass staircase and angular units would be a death-trap for a toddler even though they fitted perfectly with her personal Zen ideas.

She smoothed the skirt of her blue hound's-tooth Zara suit over her hips. Last night, when she'd been two days late and begun to allow the hope of pregnancy to grow in her mind despite herself, she'd thought about maternity clothes and wondered where she'd be able to buy stylish clothes that would take her through the nine months. She knew that there were plenty of maternity boutiques around the city because she remembered Lauren enthusing about them when she'd been expecting Gavin. But she couldn't remember the name of a single one. She'd stood in front of the mirror with a pillow stuffed beneath her pale pink T-shirt and contemplated her potential change in figure. It would be radical, she thought, because she was (as her father so often pointed out) a mere slip of a girl – exactly five feet and one inch tall (that inch was very important to her), with short ink-black hair which she sometimes wore in gelled spikes but more often allowed to settle into a gamine crop framing her heart-shaped face. Her eyes were blackberry-blue and her lips, even without lipstick, a pouting rosebud red. Her nose was small and neat, though a tiny bump (a legacy of the crash into the Delaneys' wall) robbed it of any cuteness it might otherwise have had. Iona's looks were exotic rather than beautiful, but then she'd never much cared for beautiful over interesting. Anyway, there was no point in her caring, since Lauren was the one who'd been handed the beauty genes, with her clear, smooth skin, violet eyes and burnished copper hair which fell in soft waves around her perfectly proportioned face. Lauren's nose was perfect too. Iona knew that her sister had obviously

been handed the leftover height genes as well, because Lauren was a willowy five-six with an enviable figure which had looked fantastic even when she was pregnant. Iona rather thought that she herself would just look dumpy when it finally happened for her.

It doesn't matter, she told herself now as she shoved her mobile into her bag, checked her appearance in the mirror once more and picked up her house keys. Nothing has changed yet. Everything is still exactly the same.

The rental agency had its offices in Dame Street, close to the imposing (though, thought Iona, incredibly ugly) Central Bank building with its smooth piazza, fountain and bronze sculpture facing on to the street. The office was also near Trinity College, a building which Iona much preferred and where she often went during sunny lunchtimes to eat a sandwich on the grassy lawns. Today, despite the promise of clear blue skies and a warm breeze from the south, there would be no lunching on the lawns of Trinity or anywhere else. Her agenda was full – administration in the office in the morning and then back home to collect her lime-green Volkswagen Beetle so that she could drive to the six different apartments she was showing that afternoon and evening.

Her stomach was cramping again as she sat at her white wood desk and logged on to her computer. She hated this time of the month. She hated the bloated feeling that always engulfed her, the nagging pain in the small of her back and those damn cramps which racked her for the first day or two. She opened her desk drawer and took out a couple of gel capsules. When you're in labour, she reminded herself as she swallowed them down, the pain will be worse. Much, much worse! She shivered a little. She was definitely ready to be pregnant now, but she was scared of the physical aspect as well as everything else. Although she was absolutely and utterly determined to do everything as naturally as possible, she worried that the intensity of the pain might stop her. It was extraordinary, she mused, that with all the evolutionary things that had gone on over the past few millennia, humans hadn't yet come up with a better way of having babies. Hens had it cushy, she thought. An egg was a much better shape for the birth process – no inconvenient arms and legs which might present themselves at the wrong moment.

‘Morning, Iona!’ Ruth Dawson, who looked after rentals on the north side of the city, greeted her. ‘How’s it going?’ She saw the packet of evening primrose oil and starflower capsules on Iona’s desk and grimaced sympathetically.

‘I’ll be fine,’ said Iona, ‘though I wish I hadn’t agreed to so many viewings this afternoon.’

‘Take some Feminax,’ suggested Ruth. ‘I have—’

‘Thanks but no thanks.’ Iona smiled at her. ‘These work fine for me.’ She winced.

The other girl opened a desk drawer and took out an assortment of aspirin, paracetamol and ibuprofen which she spread out on the desk in front of her.

‘Sure?’

Iona looked at the display and shook her head again. ‘You should have shares in Glaxo,’ she said disparagingly. ‘I’ll give you the name of my yoga guru; much, much better for you than all that.’

Ruth snorted and then picked up her ringing telephone.

‘Rental Remedies,’ she said. ‘Ruth speaking. How can I help you?’

It was after ten before Iona finally rang Frank. He’d been meeting clients in the south-west of the country all week but he was due back in Dublin later that evening. Iona wanted to check on his timetable. She knew, because they had an on-line calendar which each of them updated every evening, that he’d had a meeting at nine this morning but she reckoned he should be finished by now. Frank never needed much time to make a sale. He was born to it, homing in immediately on the issue that most affected his potential customer and managing to make that customer feel as though he personally cared very deeply about any problem they might have. As he truly did, he told Iona. After all, his customers were the ones who paid the bills! And besides, most of them were very nice people. Iona usually chuckled at that – Frank always saw the good in everyone. He insisted in giving them all the benefit of the doubt. It was one of the things she loved about him.

He answered her call almost immediately and she smiled involuntarily at the sound of his voice. Frank had a very, very sexy voice. It was Pierce Brosnan, Richard Burton and Sean Connery all rolled into one. As, indeed, was Frank himself. Iona had been somewhat stunned

at the fact that she'd managed to snare a man who was sexier than Colin Firth in a wet shirt.

'Hi, sweetheart,' he said.

'Morning, lover-boy.'

'How's things?'

'Oh, grand.'

'You're not pregnant.'

'How did you know that?' Iona thought she'd managed to keep her tone sufficiently neutral.

'I have my ways,' said Frank, who was adept at reading her voice. 'Don't worry, darling. It'll happen.'

'I'm not worried,' said Iona. 'I know it will. And we'll have a great time making it happen.'

'That's my girl,' said Frank. 'I do love you, you know.'

'You can say those things 'cos you're in the car on your own,' said Iona.

'And you can't because there are people listening in?'

'Exactly. But I do too.'

'You think they can't guess what we're talking about?'

Iona glanced at the desk opposite her. Ruth's dark head was bent over a printed spreadsheet and she appeared to be absorbed in her work, the tip of her pink tongue sticking out between her teeth while she ticked off numbers on the page in front of her. As Iona watched her in silence, Ruth glanced up and gave her a brief smile.

'Oh, you're right as always!'

Frank laughed. 'I know you girls, that's all.'

'What time will you be home?' asked Iona.

'I'll leave as early as I can but it's still a four-hour drive,' said Frank. 'So it'll be after six before I get in, seven if the traffic is bad. What about you?'

'I'm showing apartments until seven myself,' said Iona apologetically. 'I couldn't manage to schedule it better.'

'Don't worry,' Frank told her. 'Give me a call when you've done the last, and if I'm first home I'll order in some pizza.' He chuckled. 'And no saying that a green-leaf salad would be better for you. You need comfort food tonight, sweetheart.'

'You're a pet, you know that.'

'Of course I do. Weren't you lucky the day you met me?'

‘OK, OK, you’re pushing me to the limits here.’

‘And I was lucky the day I met you,’ added Frank.

‘Charmer,’ she said. But she was smiling as she replaced the receiver.

By two o’clock that afternoon Iona was in her car and heading for the first showing, a very luxurious apartment in the suburban town of Dun Laoghaire. The potential tenant had been seconded to a financial services company in the city from its head office in Barcelona, and Iona had already shown him apartments in the docklands area. But Enrique Martinez wanted somewhere further from his place of work and so she’d decided to wow him with an expensive sea-view apartment in the upmarket suburb. I’d rent it myself if I could afford it, thought Iona, as she took the lift to the top floor. It’s absolutely gorgeous. Though it’s a single person’s apartment despite the space, and I – well, I have to start thinking in terms of semi-detached houses with enclosed back gardens. She opened the door and looked in – the apartment was twice the size of her red-brick house and, thanks to its big windows and careful layout, twice as bright and airy too.

A tap at the door signalled that the client had arrived. As with the previous times she’d met him, he was dressed in a carefully tailored suit and the double cuffs on his shirt were held closed by gold cufflinks. His black hair was sprinkled sparingly with grey, his face was square and he wore small but fashionable glasses on his nose. He wasn’t as old as he looked, Iona reckoned. But he was choosy and proving to be a difficult client to satisfy.

Her mobile rang just as she was extolling the virtues of the decked balcony and the impressive sea view over the harbour where small boats bobbed merrily at their moorings in the blue-green water.

‘A bit delayed,’ Frank told her. ‘Sorry, sweetheart. I’m only leaving my last meeting now so I might get caught up in some evening traffic. But with luck I should still be home by seven thirty.’

‘It’ll probably be eight before I make it,’ she said. ‘My seven o’clock is on the Shelbourne Road. That’s my last, though, so you go ahead and order the pizza. Extra cheese for me, please.’

‘You got it. And I’ll text you when I get in,’ promised Frank. ‘Maybe later we’ll have another shot at the baby-making?’

‘Um . . .’

‘Ah. Of course.’ Frank’s voice softened. ‘Would you like me just to rub your shoulders instead?’

‘You promise the nicest things.’ She giggled. Then a noise made her glance up and she saw her businessman standing in the doorway between the lounge and the master bedroom. ‘Gotta go,’ she said quickly. ‘See you later.’ She smiled brightly at her client. ‘So, Señor Martinez,’ she said. ‘What do you think? Have we got it right this time?’

By the time she’d finished the Shelbourne Road viewing at seven thirty, she was tired and frazzled and her cramps were worse than ever. All she wanted to do was to get home and put her feet up on the comfortable leather sofa which took up far too much of their tiny living room and gorge herself on takeaway pizza with extra cheese. And garlic bread, if Frank thought about it. He could massage her aching feet afterwards, she thought hopefully.

She took her mobile out of her bag and frowned. He hadn’t called or sent a text. Which probably meant that he’d set out even later than he’d hoped and was now stuck in Dublin’s notorious rush-hour traffic. (The rush hour starting at about four o’clock in the afternoon these days and not really finishing until nearly eight!) She rang his number but was diverted to his voice-mail.

‘I’m on my way back now,’ she said as she got into her car. ‘If I get home before you I’ll order the pizza. But I hope you do. Get some garlicker too, will you? I want to come home to the heady aroma of takeaway cooking. Oh, and Frank – ’cos I couldn’t say it earlier I will now. I love you!’

She ended the call and slid her phone into its stand. Then she started the car and headed for home.