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Ties That Bind

Written by Catherine Deveney

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Ties That Bind

CATHERINE DEVENEY



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Printed and bound in Great Britain.

With love for my dear mum Mollie, and my dad, Peter Black Rafferty, whose passing changed everything.

Also for Colin, for everything we have shared, and for my beautiful children Conall, Niall and Caitlin.

CHAPTER ONE

Carol Ann

Most people do their running away when they are fourteen, but I waited till I was forty-two. Maybe my mother was right after all. Lily always said I was a late developer.

I left Scotland in the late spring, when the rape fields and the cherry blossom were in full bloom. I love those few weeks each year when the two overlap: marshmallow pink at the side of the house and, out front, the bright, puff-candy yellow of the rape. I watched it through the picture window at the front of the house for days before I left, the yellow turning up gradually like a light on a dimmer switch, until it glowed as strong and vibrant as the midday sun. Then, when it was at its peak, I got a terrible pang knowing it was dying already, that the colour would fade slowly now into sunset. After that, the spring breezes came, and the cherry blossom rained down pink and white on the path, the colour of coconut ice, soft and gentle as a baby's kiss.

I guess everything starts dying when it's at its height. You think it's the beginning, but it's really only the beginning of the end. Like the day I married Alex.

In the weeks before I disappeared, the swallows were constantly fluttering round the eaves of the house. I watched them, their wings quivering as they hovered under the roof with mouthfuls of straw and mud, building houses while mine was being dismantled. Mother said

they weren't swallows at all. They were too small to be swallows. They were house martins. I didn't argue. Lily always knows best.

We sat in the garden together the day before my disappearance. Neither of us knew I was going. That was the best bit. The unexpectedness. The way a long-harboured dream that had drifted into fantasy suddenly became reality. People say you hug a secret to you, and I did, but at the same time, I can't say my secret felt entirely like that. It wasn't small and insular. It was vast and expansive. It was like riding surf waves in your head. Like hearing the air whistle past you when you skydive. Not that I've ever skydived, obviously. Carol Ann Matthews would never do anything that daring.

It felt like the first day of summer. Lily had her tights off and there was a watery sunshine hitting her white, old-lady legs, the bulge of varicose veins running like blue mountain ranges in white snow. She was wearing a striped blouse, strips of coral pink and lemon, so that it was hard to know where she ended and the deckchair began. Her lipstick had gone ever so slightly over the edges of her lips, I suppose because her hand shook when she applied it. There were deep little lines, needle-thin trenches, running from her mouth, and the lipstick colour had seeped in, spreading like tiny rivers from a burst bank.

'What's your nail-polish colour?' she asked, looking at my fingers as they dangled over the wooden arm of my sun lounger.

'Parisian Rose, I think it's called.'

'That's silly, that,' she said. 'What's a Parisian rose?'

I didn't answer.

'Eh?' she prodded. 'What's the difference between a French rose and any other kind of rose?' She was a bit querulous that day. She'd had a few already when I picked her up at her house for lunch, though it was only quarter-past eleven. I could smell it from her. It hung around her like the smell of damp in an old house.

'I don't know,' I said, eyes closed.

'No … well … you wouldn't, would you?' she said crossly. 'That's because there isn't any difference.'

'Maybe not.'

'*Definitely* not, Carol Ann. Some silly marketing man's come up with that.'

'Or woman.'

'A woman would know there's no such thing as a Parisian rose.'

'Maybe.'

The sun intensified suddenly, briefly, on my closed eyelids, a blast of warmth like the rays from a grill.

'Carol Ann, will you please stop saying maybe,' Lily snapped.

'Sorry.'

I think it was annoying her that I wouldn't open my eyes, but they felt stuck together with warm glue from the sun. I could hear her fidgeting in her chair.

'It's chipped,' Lily said.

'What?'

'And I don't like the colour anyway. Too strong. Neutral, I like.'

I opened one eye and raised my fingers to examine the nails. There were small chips out of the tips of the rose-pink shells.

'Yes,' I said. 'It's chipped.'

'Very common-looking,' she muttered.

I let my thoughts roam free then, where she couldn't reach me, fantasising about the going, the walking away. I had imagined it so many times that it was like a favourite novel, reread so often I almost knew it by heart. Except it was only the first chapter I kept reading and rereading. The going. I never thought about what came after because I simply couldn't imagine it. I just imagined the walking, up past the bridge at the end of the house, past the pond where I like to walk, heels clumping rhythmically on the road, the smell of mown grass on the wind. And each time I imagined it, the hundreds and hundreds of times I

imagined it, there was always something new and undiscovered, a tiny detail I hadn't imagined before that would give me pleasure.

'Carol Ann,' said Lily. 'Be a darling and get my handkerchiefs from the house. I think I left them in the kitchen.' She sniffed theatrically, and I looked at her with the cynical, insider knowledge of a lifetime's game-playing.

'They're in there,' I said, 'in the side pocket of your bag,' and I nodded down to the sprawl at her feet: a light canvas bag that she had brought some chocolates for me in, and a square black vinyl handbag. Lily doesn't invest in expensive leather goods. She has contributions to Gordon's gin to maintain.

'Oh yes.' She had slumped down into the deckchair and now she wriggled her bottom up to sit straighter. But she reached for her glass rather than the tissues.

'Any ice?' she said.

'In the house.'

'Any chance?' A light ripple of aggression marbled her voice.

I held my hand up over my eyes and squinted at her against the light.

'Mother,' I said, with uncharacteristic firmness, 'you want me to go into the house so that you can take the quarter bottle of gin out of your handbag without me seeing and pour it into your lemonade. So I tell you what. Why don't I just close my eyes. Like this, see? And that will save me getting up. Then you can fill your glass and pretend it's lemonade, and I can sit here and pretend I haven't seen. Hmm? Why don't we just do that, the two of us?'

There was silence for a second. Lily's lipstick-stained trenches were quivering with indignation. She smoothed her skirt down over her knees. 'Sometimes, Carol Ann,' she said, refusing to look me in the eye, 'you can be terribly vulgar.'

* * *

Sometimes, if I close my eyes, I can feel him. The way he was. I can feel him so clearly that his breath is warm on my neck. 'Carol Ann,' he whispers, and my name sounds sung, like a hymn. His voice is an echo in my head. *'Carol Ann.'*

Our shoes are kicked off at the side of the bed, but we are fully dressed. My hair is spread out on the cool white cotton of the pillow and he coils it lightly round his finger before letting it drop. Later, I will find strands of my blonde hair side by side with his dark.

His lips taste of red wine. He brushes them softly over my mouth, fluttering down over my throat. In my memory, I remember the desire, not the sex. He pours it over me, his longing, till I am drunk with it, my eyes closed lightly, like a cat in the sun.

I am lying on my back. Alex is on his side, leaning on his elbow. He rests his hand on my waist, slips it under my shirt so that I feel his fingers run lightly over the taut skin. Skin on skin. His fingers slide to my back, and he exerts pressure on my spine to pull me towards him. His lips find my mouth. When he pulls away, he leaves his face just inches from mine. I can see the pupils of his eyes dilating as he looks at me. You can't hide attraction.

'You're gorgeous,' he says provocatively, and I smile lazily at him, run my index finger over the outline of his lips.

'Do you know where I want to be right now, right this very minute?' he says. His voice is low, playful.

I like fantasy games.

'Paris?'

'Nope.'

'Venice?'

He shakes his head.

'Where could be more romantic than Venice?' I ask, brow furrowed, because I am only eighteen and my ideas of romance are still textbook.

I even think it lasts for ever.

He smiles.

'Where?' I repeat.

His hand pushes slowly upwards from the soft curve of my stomach to my breast, and he leans forward, burrowing into my hair to reach my ear.

'In. Side. You,' he whispers.

I take Lily back early. She's had her lunch. Scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. Thin slices of wholemeal toast. Fresh raspberries and drizzled honey. I always buy little delicacies when Lily comes. Maybe it's guilt. I pretend everything is normal when I shop for her in the supermarket. I walk round the aisles telling myself that my mother is coming for a nice lunch and what does a good daughter buy for a beloved mother who is coming to lunch? She buys small, pearly, queenie scallops, and ripe vine tomatoes blushed with the sun. She buys fresh-ground Italian coffee and dark chocolate florentines, fat with cherries and plump sultanas and green angelica.

Lily always eats like a bird. She never has anything lining her stomach to soak up the alcohol. Her appetite is shot to pieces and so is her co-ordination. Her hand trembles as she lifts her fork to her mouth, nuggets of scrambled egg spilling onto her skirt. Tiny particles cling to her lipstick.

'Very nice, Carol Ann,' she says, laying down her fork after only a couple of mouthfuls. 'I taught you well.'

Everything in the world is seen through her own reflection. She is very egocentric. It is part of her illness.

I feel guilty when I take her back. When I picked her up this morning I promised myself I would keep her all afternoon. Till four at least. Then I'd run her home to her small flat before Alex returned from work. Best to keep them apart. But at two o'clock, I lie and tell her I

am filling in for a couple of hours at the charity shop this afternoon. She doesn't complain. It would have been a long afternoon for her without free access to the bottle. She picks up her canvas bag and it clunks against the chair leg. Her shirt is stained dark down the front with scrambled egg and raspberry juice.

I insist on taking her upstairs to the flat. Must be attentive. Less guilt. I guess if I could actually carry it through, if I could only be as attentive as I mean to be, there *would* be less guilt. The windows are all shut in the flat and when the door swings open the air smells stale, of trapped heat and dead flies and booze. Toby, her cat, streaks by us as the door opens. Who can blame him? A whiff of oxygen would go to anyone's head after being locked in here. Lily goes over on the side of her shoe as he shoots past, reaches out a hand to steady herself against the wall of the hall.

'I'll be fine now, Carol Ann,' she says. 'You'd better get to the shop.'

'I've got time to make you a cup of tea, Mum,' I say brightly.

When I feel at my most guilty, I call her Mum. Inside – and sometimes, when I forget, to her face – I call her Lily.

'Off you go,' she says. 'I don't want any tea.'

'Are you sure?'

She flaps her hands at me with a shooing motion but says nothing. I am frightened she knows how much I want to leave, so I go into the sitting room and open a window.

'This place needs airing,' I say.

Lily stands by the window.

'I'll wave,' she says. 'Off you go.'

'I'll phone tomorrow.'

Downstairs I open the car door and look up, wave exaggeratedly. In the frame of the window Lily looks tiny. Her hair is wild, manic, always backcombed into dishevelment like a crazy lady's. Lily *is* a crazy lady. She is stuck in old beauty habits that she can no longer carry out or

carry off. Even from the street I can see her bright-red lipstick, applied so liberally it looks like a little girl's first attempt. She lifts her arm to wave as I turn the key in the ignition, her hand moving solemnly, concentratedly, like waving is the most important thing in the world. The indicator clicks rhythmically, beating in time with the pendulum of guilt inside me, and I open the window to wave up to Lily as I drive off. I feel a sharp pain in my gut, like I have left my child behind instead of my mother.

The sunshine is streaming through the picture window onto the television, a shaft of dancing dust forming a vortex between windowpane and screen. I draw the curtain slightly to block the light, listening to the monotonous voice of the commentator.

'And it's Paris Rose on the inside coming through fast now ... Paris Rose looking like she'll cause a major upset this afternoon. Terry's Girl is way, way behind, the odds-on favourite fading spectacularly here at Haydock this afternoon. Paris Rose thunders by ...'

'Come on,' I whisper through clenched teeth. 'Come on, Paris Rose.'

The commentator's voice rises to a squeal.

'Paris Rose is finishing strongly now, followed by Red Demon in second place and Flapjack making up ground in third. But what a SURGE from Flapjack … Flapjack neck and neck now with Red Demon …

'COME ON!'

'… Flapjack in second place and pushing Paris Rose all the way. But jockey Jimmy Cochrane is keeping Paris Rose steady, holding on bravely in the dying seconds of this race ... and Paris Rose has DONE it. The thirty-three-to-one outsider crosses the finishing line from Flapjack in second place, followed by Red Demon, Olive Branch and Terry's Girl ...'

The voice becomes a drone. I look stupidly at the betting slip in my hand. Of course, I couldn't resist Paris Rose when I saw the name. After

Lily and everything. And roses always make me think of pink, which is a very special colour for me. I always bet by name, which is why I don't usually win.

I'll tell you how it is. Nobody knows I have a flutter. It's my small rebellion. It started two years ago, when the dream first started, the dream of walking away. I chose a hiding place. An old biscuit tin with a picture of Monet's 'Poppy Field' inside a plastic bag, inside a big old handbag, hidden at the back of my wardrobe. I wanted to walk away with only cash. See, that way there would be no trace. I couldn't just go and make withdrawals from an ordinary bank account. There's no point walking away if you leave a trail. The secret is to disappear into nothing.

And maybe I knew five-thousand pounds was an impossible dream. I'd always be reaching the target, always dreaming but never quite going. Safe dreams. I don't earn much. Two mornings in the village tearoom, just to get me out. Six pounds an hour. Alex earns plenty, of course, which is why he goes through life like he's worth something, and I tag along like behind him like the buy one, get one free offer.

For a new life, there must be new rules. The most important one is that I pay. My dream, my funding. It would be easy to take money from the joint account – in other words, Alex's account – but I can't. He's not mean with money, but it wouldn't be right. So for two years I have put fifteen quid away almost every week, barring the month before Christmas and birthday weeks. It has grown slowly. Each week I gave myself small targets of how much I needed to raise. It pleased me somehow, when I got away with little economies without anyone noticing. A tin of tomatoes in the bolognese instead of fresh. Alex hates tinned tomatoes, detests the smell of them. But I purée them and he never notices. Saving: £1. Rustic casserole instead of sirloin. Saving: £3. Walking from the tearoom instead of taking the bus. Saving: 60p. Five days a week I have a target, with Saturdays and Sundays off.

The trick is that you make the saving and put the money in the tin *instantly*. You don't wait a week, round it up, round it down. That's not how it works. It's an abstract saving until you put the money in the tin, so you have to do it right away to make it real. There is just over a thousand pounds in there now. Not enough to leave for at least another couple of years.

Once a month or so, I have a small bet. I set up a telephone account with Bob Smith Bookmakers in town, so I don't have to go in. I don't use the house phone, obviously. I can't have the number appearing on bills. Not that Alex deals with that stuff, but still. You can't take chances. I have never won more than a tenner before and I have lost more than I have won – the punter always does. But today a surge of madness made me put on twenty quid. I don't know why. In fact, I felt sick at my own stupidity when I put the phone down. I'd never get away at this rate. But now, I stare at the betting slip in disbelief. One treble: Dream Time 11-1; Forbidden Fruit 5-2; Paris Rose 33-1. Oh, beautiful Paris Rose! I get out my son Stevie's calculator. £28,560.

There is only a pulse beat between victory and the ring of the telephone, between triumph and disaster. The shrill insistence barely registers in the enormity of the moment. Maybe it's a sixth sense that makes me pick it up automatically, something being transmitted to me from Lily. I believe in that: a way of communicating that is not about words. Though when it comes to me and Alex, a few words would do just fine. I'm just not sure we know the same ones any more. As far as he's concerned, I might as well speak Punjabi.

'Hello? Yes. Yes, I'm Lily Matheson's daughter.'

The words that follow are a jumble, senseless but shocking, the chaos clearing to leave specific words that cut like shards of ice, sharpened to a dagger point of precision. Lily. Hospital. And then, in the middle of the confusion, a single word slices the dagger straight through my heart and nails my life to the floor: stroke.