Loving Him

Kate O'Riordan

CHAPTER ONE

Connie dragged her wheelie weekender case through the Arrivals concourse at Heathrow. She headed straight for the taxi exit. It might have been an idea to phone her friend Mary to ask for a lift; the prospect of the queue, the taxi itself, was daunting, given what had happened. But then she would have to say it and the words weren't in yet. Her sons she had to think about too. What would she say? Should she overplay or underplay, there really was no way of knowing what the best approach might be. After all, she wasn't entirely sure herself where to place the events of last night and this morning on the Richter scale.

Outside, it was unseasonably humid for June. What sky could be seen above the multistorey car park sagged miserably. Air felt thick and powdery like packet mush¬room soup. A step into the monochromes of a black-and-white photograph after the high blue-yellow skies and ochre chalkiness of Rome. A twisting tendril of smoke from a woman's cigarette drifted into her nostrils. She joined the long queue for a taxi.

Two torpid, evilly bored children jostled just ahead. One kicked her shin by accident and their sweating father apologized, shunting them on. Connie waved a hand to show it was nothing but he'd turned already. With their hot, gleaming faces and glowering expressions, the children looked back at her like a pair of hot cross buns.

Smoke peppered her nostrils again; she longed for a cigarette though it was fifteen years since she'd had one. Perhaps she'd take it up again once she got home. The thought of home made her gulp. At airports you were neither here nor there. You could be anyone, living someone else's life. For a brief while you could even manage to lose your own. But of course it was waiting for you – at home.

Her mobile trilled deep within her shoulder bag. The eldest, Fred, no doubt, checking their plane had landed on time. He was orderly that way. She cleared her throat to get rid of any telltale quavers but in any case the phone stopped by the time she'd rooted it from the pit of the bag. R u home? He'd left a text instead. Yes, she thought, yes yes. She smiled at one of the hot cross buns, practising her cheery face, the one she would attempt shortly with her sons before she would tell them the news. The boy turned away disdainfully.

The second she clapped eyes on her round smiley taxi driver, she knew he was a serial talker. Ordinarily, she would have been quite pleased to while away the half hour or so to Twickenham. More often than not, they were grumpy and monosyllabic once she'd given the address, it being too close a fare for the wait they'd already put in. But his smile didn't fade and he closed her door with a flourish. A sense of panic welled up in Connie. Inside the cab she fiddled

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ostenta¬tiously with the zip of the weekend wheelie but that distraction was exhausted in no time. His mouth was opening. Connie narrowed her eyes and stared out of the back window in deep meditation. She added a little frown for better effect. Here was a troubled woman, late thirties, no make-up, unbrushed copper curls, thinking deeply troubled thoughts. A deep sigh blew from her mouth, eyelids batted up and down rapidly. Surely that would do it – she darted him a glance from the corner of her eye. No, he was going to be maliciously boring.

'Someplace nice?'

'Sorry? Oh yes. Rome.'

'Rome was it? Lovely city. Lovely. I went with the wife five years back. Or was it six? No, five I think it was. Lovely. All them steps.'

'What? Yeah, lots.'

'Nearly done her knee in going up that Vatican. "Linda," I goes, "you ain't going up them steps not with your knee. Remember the Eiffel Tower what happened?" Halfway up her knee goes, mind you, she was in trouble before that what with the weight she was packing in them days. There we was, stuck in the middle of the city of light, not up, not down, until I reckon the only way this lady's coming down is on her backside if you'll pardon. That's how we done it. Plonk plonk, stop for a breather, plonk plonk, the whole way down. Hours it took. So no way was she going up that Vatican I'm telling you. Would that lady listen?'

'No?'

'My love you are correct. Round and round, up and up. I'm going, they'll have to helicopter us out of this one. No way would you get a stretcher in this joint. You never seen a more determined woman. Halfway up there's a chance to change your mind and go back down again. You been?'

'Sorry?'

'Up the Vatican? No? You should, view's worth it. We made it all the way to the top. Could've filled buckets with the sweat pouring off of our faces. Her knee lasted the whole weekend though. I mean, that was the morning and in the afternoon we was up them Spanish Steps. Steps again. Eh?'

Connie raised her eyebrows and gave a slight shake to her head. She'd long ago realized that there was something about her face that invited confidences from strangers, especially in shops. She could talk with her face, Matt once said. He thought it amusing the way people continually spoke to his wife. Not being a man of surplus words himself.

This particular day, though, Connie would have given anything, a limb no less, certainly a kidney, to be driven silently home. Matt, she thought, what have you done?

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'Been another hammer attack near Twickenham,' he cut across her thoughts.

'Not another girl dead, I hope?'

'Badly injured. Badly. But they think she'll live. What a world eh? You'd think somebody could figure they was living next to a loony with a hammer. Just like the other five – came up from behind and whacked her. Left her for dead, poor child. Daylight hours. Same route as my own daughter – No way would I let her walk on her own until they've got this bastard, if you'll pardon.'

The girls tended to be youthful and blonde. The attacks went back over a couple of years. There didn't appear to be any motivation other than sheer brutal insanity. Two girls had died. The randomness of that. Parents who had weathered childhood illnesses, the school tour worries, dreads of muggings and rapes, cancer scares. The same panoply of terrorized anticipation that coursed through Connie's head from day to day about her own sons. They couldn't possibly have factored in the odds of their beloved child standing in the wrong place at the wrong time in close proximity to a creature bearing a simple weapon, intent on death. She was uneasy feeling relieved that she only had sons. But there was no guarantee that the attacker wouldn't change his choice of target. She wanted to give her thoughts over to the parents of this most recent victim but the taxi driver was blathering on about his wife again.

He had moved on to the Forum. Linda had been hugely taken with that. He liked going places with her because she put her own slant on things. Brought them to life so to speak. For instance, when they stood in the orchard or whatever it was at the Forum, Linda had gazed across at the Colosseum and he knew from the way her mouth was open that she was thinking something. What is it gel? he asked her. Imagine if we was gardeners, she said, imagine if there was a big brouhaha going on over there at the Colosseum. We'd be leaning on our shovels saying I wonder who's on now. Who's got the crowd giving it large? We'd be familiar with all them household names, same ways we'd know all about Chelsea today.

'Brought it fresh to life in that second, she did. Funny knack some people got. You packed the Forum in, yeah?'

'Yes. The first day we went there.'

She could see that he was mulling over the 'we' but thankfully as they inched through Feltham, he was back to Linda in Rome again. This time in a restaurant, nothing special, eating the best pizza she'd ever had in her life. Why couldn't they get pizza like that back in London? That Pizza Hut stuff was no way the same.

'Our anniversary today.'

'Sorry? Oh you and Linda. Congratulations. Shame you have to work.'

'Always work the anniversaries.'

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Linda didn't think the leather goods in Rome were as cheap as she'd expected. Things like coffees and meals out were good value though. She loved the mopeds but didn't think they'd work back home. The weather. She cooked Italian for weeks after they came home, same as she'd cooked French for weeks after Paris but that time she did all the chopping and preparing at the kitchen table with her leg out on another chair because of the dodgy knee. She'd have a go at anything, his Linda, cooking-wise. But never could get a handle on perfect pastry. It was, she said, a mystery.

By the time they got to the last big roundabout, Connie was just managing to drown him out. He was talking directly to her by then, insisting on eye contact through the rear-view mirror. She watched his eyebrows shoot up and down. Once he threw his head back and bellowed a laugh at some foible or other of Linda's. She sounded pretty ordinary to Connie's ears.

A rush of spiteful glee coloured her cheeks for a second. But when he deliberately slowed down on the approach to the first turn off so that he could get to the end of Linda in New York (the sky was like long narrow ribbons cut up by the tall buildings and the pretzels were too big even for her mouth) Connie thought there was nothing for it – he would have to die.

Just as she was contemplating which method, the gush of talk came to an abrupt stop. They actually drove in silence for maybe a whole minute. He seemed lost in some private reverie and Connie closed her eyes with relief.

'Left here!' She managed to call just before he overshot the turning.

'Sorry love. Million miles away.' He smiled to himself. 'I was just remembering . . . driving, you know, your mind goes over . . .' His voice trailed off.

Connie scrabbled about in her bag for pound coins. A twenty pound note folded and balanced on her knee in readiness. She hardly dared look at the house, somehow expecting to see a momentous change there, too. Curtains were still drawn on the first floor windows. No one but her ever bothered to pull them back to let daylight in. Her three sons seemed to like gloomy corridors, lights on in their bedrooms in the middle of the day. It gave her an uneasy feeling, reminding her of dressing in the murky igloo of her room for school. The long trudge with the streetlamps still on, red dust from the Consett Iron Works giving what light there was, an eerie orange glow. Only a bleary wash in the sky by the time she'd lined up her pencil case and exercise books.

'Well, I'm glad you enjoyed your visit to the Eternal City,' the taxi driver said, though Connie hadn't really indicated one way or another what she'd thought of Rome. 'Never been back myself. Maybe next year eh?'

'You'll keep Linda away from the Vatican though, won't you?' Now that she was leaving him, Connie felt she should say something just in case he thought he'd bored her, which he had, but she wouldn't like him to think so.

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'Passed on, my Linda. Three years now. You're all right, these things happen. Love of my life she was. That'll be twenty-two pounds my love.'

He drove away before Connie could think of anything to say.

'I'm very sorry,' she called after the cab. She managed to get the weekend wheelie up the narrow tessellated tile path to the front door. On the step, she parked the wheelie upright and slumped on to it leaning forward with her head in her hands. 'So sorry,' she repeated until tears burbled up and suddenly her shoulders were heaving.

The door opened and Fred stepped out, eyes widening. He looked around then put a hand on his mother's bobbing head.

'Mum?'

'Fred pet. You'll have to help me inside. I've come undone a bit.'

'What's going on? Where's Dad?'

Connie took a deep gulp, clasping her hands on her lap tightly.

'He's still in Rome.'

'Is he all right? Mum – was there an accident?'

She shook her head, still concentrating on the hands, drawing her feet together now too, anything to help do herself up again. She was a pair of scissors that had fallen open and could not be forced to close.

'When's he coming back then?'

'I don't know.'

'What d'you—'

'Truth is, I don't know if he's ever coming back.'

No no. That was all wrong. Far too dramatic, she was just being indiscriminate with her misery. The black pupils swelled in Fred's eyes taking in almost all the brown iris. It wasn't fair to lunge a blow like that at him. She put several fingers to her forehead, rubbing.

'Sorry. I'm just . . . Well, I don't know what I'm just. Let's go inside. Don't say anything to your brothers. I'll talk to you properly later.'

She tried a reassuring smile, felt her lower lip wobble and thought better of it. A hand on his shoulder was about as much as she could manage for now. He flinched and that made her want to cry all over again.

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'Later, okay?' She nodded, waiting for a reciprocal nod; he seemed dazed but inclined his head slightly. Her whole body yearned for the click of the door shut behind them. And when they were in, the door clicked, she let out a gush of pent-up breath. This is you – the house sang to her – it's still waiting for you that intricate cobweb at the top of the stairs, so perfect she couldn't bring herself to swipe with a brush. Waiting for you dead slugs in a beer trap in the first flower bed in the garden, waiting, too, rubber scuffs on the wooden kitchen floor and a tiny triangle of peeling wallpaper on the first-floor landing. Small imperfections she allowed to make the house more homely, these things existed within her knowledge so that even the not quite perfect was within her control.

There was a lot of scuffling and thumping about going on upstairs. Joe and Benny attempting a last minute clear up. If she didn't keep on top of their room for more than a day it turned into a pigsty, four days and three nights meant a sewer. The hall was covered in muddy football boots, slung hoodies, trainers with the odour eaters hanging out, kitbags, heaped school rucksacks, chewing gum wrappers. There was the fusty sweaty smell of young male underpinned by the scent of something sweet. Usually the pile up sent her into a frenzy of barked orders and stiff index finger pointing – 'You you and you, that that and that, upstairs, in the wash basket. Nowww.' But today there was something immensely comforting in the detritus of normal home life. She picked her way over the mounds which made Fred's pupils swell again. She should be marshalling.

He pushed open the living-room door. The carpet showed fresh drag marks from the Hoover. She could smell polish. Three orange gerberas hung limply from a much too big vase. Her favourite flowers.

'Thank you Fred,' she said. 'You've done a great job. And the flowers . . .'

He shrugged and pulled his mouth down. But she could see that his eyes were eating her face.

'Boys!' she called upstairs. 'You're out of time. The mess will have to wait.'

There was a last furious scuffle, Joe tumbled down first, jumping two steps at a time. He nudged against her by way of greeting and went straight to the kitchen. Benny, the youngest at nine, came down slowly, almost shyly. He was slightly built with copper hair like hers and green eyes that belonged to neither family. He shuffled across to her until the tips of his socks touched the top of her shoes. If she reached for him too suddenly he would withdraw. It had taken her all of his nine years to figure out just which way to play him but she was getting better at it.

'Hello Bunny boy. Have you been good?' She kissed the top of his head breathing his hair in but remembering not to linger.

'Excellent,' Fred said proudly.

'And him?' She nodded towards the kitchen.

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Fred made a so so gesture with his hand.

'Not bad. Mary gave him a right bollocking the second night and he settled down after that.'

Connie smiled. It was a genuine smile which stayed on her lips for a while without a trace of wobble. A surge of relief washed through her. Things would work out fine. She'd make some soup though the day was ridiculously sultry; Joe could skateboard down to the corner shop for some crusty bread. While the soup was simmering, she'd tackle the hall, then the kitchen, leaving upstairs for later that night. The various tasks would be apportioned equally and fairly though her sons would moan and quibble anyway until she would have to raise her voice, not hugely, just enough to find their motivation for them. She was the only woman in a house of four males after all, which meant that she was rarely less than three loud shouts away from anarchy.

She hoped that in the future three deserving wives would give her merit for the part she played in the domestication of their husbands. But it was unlikely. Doubtless, they would find their own flaws in her sons, petty things that Connie had overlooked in the grander scheme of things, and often she would find herself staring out of the kitchen window, playing out imaginary arguments with imaginary daughters-in-law in defence of their husbands. In defence of their upbringing. She was going to make a hopeless mother-in-law. The best she could wish for was that at least one of these women would have a sense of humour, that alone Connie considered the greatest virtue in a would-be daughter-in-law. A sense of humour got you through anything.

These thoughts flickered across her brain like background noise. A remote persistent version of them was always there once she'd stepped through her front door. They were soothing, something to run with or drop as her fancy dictated, much like the constant drone of Radio 4 in the kitchen. She was ordinary like the taxi driver's wife, Linda, really – it took someone else's perspective to make you extraordinary. She wished she'd been kinder, he'd lost the love of his life after all.

Warming to her renewed sense of direction she plotted the rest of the evening out in chunks. She'd call Mary after the soup and thank her for watching the boys for the weekend; she would yawn ostentatiously in a bid to dissuade her friend from the almost nightly visit. Tomorrow once she'd got a handle on things, she'd ring her mother. Hopefully by then in any case, Matt would have called to say that he was on the first available flight home, he'd temporarily lost his mind, found it again and let's never mention this episode, ever, if it was all the same to her and if she might find it in her heart to forgive and forget. She would, indeed, find it in her heart to forgive and forget but not until maximum pulp had been extracted from his bone marrow, which she reckoned might take say, a month, maybe slightly longer depending on how well and how arduously he grovelled. It would all be something to laugh about in years to come while meanwhile they could sink back into the steady, reassuring level of mild unhappiness or was it happiness – they'd come to depend upon. Yes. Soup.

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'Everything's going to be all right,' she said to Fred to get his pupils back to normal. They obliged beautifully because her 15-year-old eldest trusted her in a way she never felt she deserved.

'Joe!' she hollered. 'We need crusty bread and check the fridge for milk.'

'Where's Dad?' Benny asked.

'He'll be along later,' Connie said, parking the weekend wheelie by the bottom step.

'He went straight to work?'

'Something like that. Benny, have you been wearing those socks since I left?'

It was no easy feat avoiding Fred's watchful stare throughout the evening. Every time the phone rang she jumped and started cleaning something. The calls were for Joe everytime. Girls with wheedling, pleading voices as if they could mentally exhort her to put in a good word for them just by taking the call. The voomping music from the bedroom he shared with Benny meant that someone had to trudge up each time to tell him Tasha or Sophie or Emma wanted him on the phone. Their names always seemed to end in vowels.

Down he would jump, landing with a slap of bare feet on the tiled hall floor. A casual riffle through thick sandy hair with one hand while the other reached for the phone, reminding her with a charge of his father. She didn't ever mean to listen but it was difficult to ignore the series of grunts which would ensue. 'Uh-huh. Uh. No way. You serious? Uh. Uh. Yeah bye.'

Joe's mobile had been taken off him when she discovered he'd been using her credit card for porn lines. Then when he appropriated one of the house hand sets for his exclusive use, she cut back the phones to just one in the hall with a cord attached. Still, he used her mobile if she forgot for a moment to take it out of her bag to hide in her room somewhere. He couldn't use his father's because Matt loathed all phones, especially mobiles, because they forced him to speak. He used Fred's if only to piss Fred off. Sometimes she disliked her middle son with an intensity that made her head swell.

She constantly bickered with Joe in a way she would have found deeply distressing with the other two. There was never cause to doubt for a second that when he was emitting shards of charm with the glittering ease of light refracting from a diamond that he was after something. He was the son she felt she had the least hand in and the one she worried about the least.

Fred got to the phone before her for the fifth call. This would be the one, she felt certain. It was impossible to hear what Fred was mumbling but there was nothing to

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indicate that it wasn't the usual mumbling tone he used with his father. Matt would be wondering how much his son knew, how much she'd told. She felt a spear of self-satisfaction that she'd managed to hold tough. She began to hum while scooping crumbs of crusty bread into the waiting cup of her other hand. What would she say? How many degrees of Arctic drift could she possibly inveigle into her everyday queries. Tomorrow you say? Yes, I'll come and collect you. Yes, the boys are fine, wondering where you are is all. Well, of course they noticed. Pardon? I haven't said anything, what would I say? I think it's up to you to find your own explanations, don't you? I am perfectly calm thank you. Don't I? How do you expect me to sound, Matt?

By the time Fred came back into the kitchen she was already in mid-argument, her face working silently doing his expressions, then hers. In fact, she was feeling quite elated. It was pleasant to be so gloriously and incontrovertibly in the right. Her eyebrows gave a cool lift in Fred's direction.

'Mary,' he said in a flat voice. 'She's on her way.'

'Now?'

'I didn't think there was any reason to say not to.'

'Well, no.'

'So what are you going to tell her?'

'Shh Fred, Benny might hear.'

'He's in the living room. The door is closed.'

'Even so.'

'Even so what? What?' He was growing exasperated now and she couldn't blame him.

'Sit down pet,' she moved to the kettle. 'D'you want a cuppa?'

'Not right now.'

'No, me neither.' She took an opened bottle of wine from the fridge and poured the contents into a glass.

Fred followed her movements, keeping his spotty face impassive, chin resting on the bridge of his hands. Only the pulsing tobacco-coloured eyes gave any hint of his con¬sternation. Even as she was commanding herself to tell him the truth, as much as she knew at any rate, she was also seeing the lawyer in him.

'I don't really know what to say to you,' she began, pulling up a chair to face him across the table. Her voice sounded like it was being aerated through a sieve, there

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was too much oxygen; what she needed was a poisonous draught of carbon dioxide. She cleared her throat and pressed down hard on the wooden surface. She was depending on his unflappable nature, if he flapped she was done for.

'Right. Well, we went to Rome. Mary told me about this little place she stays, close to everything with a roof terrace from where you could see—'

'Yeah yeah?'

'We were having a nice time. No arguing, I swear. The first day we just walked and walked. We spent hours in the Forum and Dad was in his element. He said he didn't need to see anything else that was enough for him. You know what he's like about history and stuff. He followed a book with all the names of the buildings and who was who and what was what. Very interesting if you like that kind of thing. Then we spent the rest of the evening at the Colosseum. Fascinating. You should see all the under¬ground passages where the wild animals and gladiators were kept. I was more than ready for an ice cream myself but I plugged on because your father looked like he'd died and gone to heaven.'

Fred's eyes had pinged at the ice cream; she knew exactly how to rope him into a story.

'That night we ate at a small family-run trattoria. Wonderful food but I won't go into that now.' She used food to relate a story to Fred as she would use clothes, fashion, to relate the same story to Joe later, if necessary. 'We were like two stuffed pigs laughing and joking our way back to the hotel. The next day we couldn't decide where to go next, Dad wanted to start at the Vatican and work our way back across the river and I wanted the Spanish Steps because I could see from the guide book that there was good shopping around that area and I was a bit afraid that I wouldn't get to – Anyway, we tossed a coin in the end. Very democratic, don't you think? There was the teensiest argument after that and your father went to the Vatican and I went shopping.'

'Did he come back? How teensy was the argument?'

'Don't be ridiculous, of course he came back. We had a splendid evening walking the Villa Borghese gardens, watching the sun go down over Rome. I can't tell you how lovely that city is.'

'If everything was so lovely and wonderful, where's Dad?'

Connie splayed her fingers on the table, studying them with deep intent. She wanted to convey that what would follow would be painful for her. Not least because she was going to have to extemporize somewhat from now on and she would have to remember it word for word later in the unlikely event that Matt didn't turn up tomorrow. She let out a gusty sigh.

Benny strolled in and she made to change the subject to buy some time but Fred was having none of it.

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'Out Benny.'

Without a word Benny withdrew like a reel of film played backwards. The kitchen door was shut again.

'Go on.'

She could see Rome now as it appeared that evening. The flesh tones accentuated by golden grainy light dipping in and out between the swollen breasts of innumerable domes and cupolas. She had to clear her throat again.

'Well, it's hard to say but I think it really started as we were looking at that sunset. Yes yes, it's coming to me now. We were standing on this lookout area with all of Rome spread out beneath us looking as if the sun had just melted over it. I felt very happy. I reached out to squeeze Matt's hand, maybe even give it a kiss, to mark the moment. But he'd moved a little and he'd turned his head away. And I think he was crying.'

'Crying? Dad?'

'I think he was.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. He wouldn't say. Said I was imagining it. But for the rest of the evening and all through the night he was very, very quiet and withdrawn. I woke several times and he was standing by the hotel room window just looking out. In the morning he'd left a note saying he'd gone for a long walk and for me to have breakfast as usual and he'd catch up later. I waited all day around the hotel and he didn't turn up until early evening.'

'So there was a blazing row in the lobby and he walked off?'

It niggled her that he looked so relieved. Yes, she had embarrassed her husband and sons from time to time by raising her voice in public but, really, that wasn't to blame for everything. They didn't seem to understand that women were different. They couldn't sit on a pending argument like Matt, brooding over his egg like a jealous hen. There were four males bumping into one another in their efforts at skulking. Dropping suitcases, passports, boarding cards, tumbling each over the other domino-style in public places just so that no one might notice them. The odd well-appointed bark from her was essential if they were ever to actually get anywhere.

'As it happens there wasn't a row. I thought he looked ill. He said – He said that he didn't feel he could go home just yet. He needed time to think.'

'About what?'

'I don't know. He wouldn't say.'

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'So you just said, "yeah okay, take your time, see you when you get home." I don't think so.'

There it was again, that cross-examining lawyerish streak. He was good, thinking ahead of her while she was having to think on the trot. It was quite reassuring in its way that she was still drafting her customary bar charts of her sons' careers. That's what your four walls, solidity, gave to you – perhaps travelling was a bad idea. Her voice settled on a more even keel.

'I stayed very calm, Fred. Very very calm. You can imagine the panic I felt. I thought he was off his chump. I said, "Right, let's just think about this. Let's just calmly go and have a bite to eat and talk through what you're feeling. I'll give you some of my herbal rescue remedy, we'll get through this evening then we'll get you home in the morning and straight to a psychiatrist."'

A smile danced on the corners of Fred's lips.

'You didn't.'

'I did. Well, something like that. Wouldn't you?'

'This is crazy. I mean Dad. No way. What else happened? What's the thing you're not telling me?'

'Fred, I'm as bewildered as you. All night we talked. I should say I talked. I said all the things you'd expect me to say. What'll the boys think? What kind of behaviour is this? You're their role model for God's sake. And what about the dental surgery? What am I supposed to say to everybody?'

'What did he answer?'

'He just looked blank.'

Fred's eyes were pulsing again as he assimilated the information, such as it was. He looked at her quickly then looked away when she didn't add anything. It was important that she didn't add extra little embellishments now that she might forget later. It was also important that she manage to keep up the vacant, confused look so that he couldn't see the flashes of terror that had nearly over¬come her when she was describing Matt's face. This whole ridiculous incident would be over by this time tomorrow evening if she could just keep a steady rein on things.

'What d'you think?' Fred said at length.

'No idea. What do you think?'

'He just let you go to the airport? Where did he go?'

'Stayed on at the hotel, I suppose.'

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Fred scraped back his chair. Twin livid spots spread across his cheeks.

'Fine then. Let's call him straight away and tell him to get his arse back here.'

'Leave it for tonight, pet.'

'We can't leave him wandering around Rome off his chump.'

There never was a less likely person commended to the universe to go wandering around Rome off his chump than Matt. The prospect made her chuckle. At first she thought it was a hiccup but that was quickly followed by another gurgle and another. Fred scratched his head.

'What? Is this a wind-up then?'

'I'm afraid not. It's just the idea of your father—'

'Am I hearing all this right? I mean, I mean – Dad?'

He sat again. She felt a pang of pity for him. Fifteen going on eighty-three. No girlfriend. He wasn't just being let down by his father, he was being let down by his best friend for Christ's sake. A purple spot throbbed on his chin.

'Okay, we'll leave him for tonight but we're calling tomorrow if we don't hear anything.'

'Okay.'

'It's going to be fine, Mum. Just a temporary midlife crisis or some shit like that.'

That made them both smile.

'What should we tell your brothers?'

'We'll tell them Dad decided to stay on for what – a conference or something. Yeah, a big dentists' conference. You don't know how long he's going to be.'

'What a good idea. I wish I'd thought of that.'

He was raiding the top shelf of a cupboard for her secret stash of chocolate which evidently wasn't all that secret.

'You knew you'd have to tell me the truth, didn't you?'

He was pleased that she'd treated him as an adult, which she'd pretty much been doing since his legal career was decided when he was five, maybe six at a push. People said that kids came with their own clear-set personalities, treat them all the same and still they'd all turn out differently. Then there were genetic factors, position in the family factors, state of play of the marriage during infancy and a

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whole slew of factors you couldn't even begin to regret in hindsight, all contriving to assemble the future person into someone other than you might wish.

Secretly, however, she had a sneaky suspicion that you played the touch of a hand in the mixing bowl yourself. With the lawyer in the bank, hadn't she given Joe an easier run? Just to see what he might do with the freedom? He could be the rock star – the movies maybe, he had the looks. Something creative at any rate, though any signals had yet to emerge. He'd be fine once he'd gotten over the drink and drugs stage. And Benny – well, Benny she would just have to mind for ever.

'Mary's on her way.' Fred looked worried. 'What're you going to tell her?'

It occurred to Connie that already she and Fred were in cahoots to redeem Matt's honour. She remembered a play she'd seen once, Six Characters in Search of an Author; for how long was she going to have to be the author of Matt, making up a version of him that would tally with whoever was listening? She could simply say to Joe – 'Your dad wanted a longer holiday – without me', and Joe would shrug. 'Dad's still working', to Benny – a shrug. There could be a thousand Matts out there; if he stayed away long enough she might have to cover for every one of them. She thought if he walked through the door right this minute, she could easily stab him if only to get the numbers down. One Matt, one version – dead.

'I might tell Mary about the conference.' She considered again, Mary was so astute. 'Or I might tell her the truth, same as you.'

And mostly she had told the truth. She was certain that Matt had been quietly crying when they were looking at the melting sunset. He had looked ill and strangely gaunt when he'd told her he couldn't come home. She had remained unfeasibly calm.

She'd just neglected to mention Greta.

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