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# LIES

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Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned . . .

—William Congreve, *The Mourning Bride*

A liar should have a good memory.

—Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*

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## PROLOGUE

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I often wonder what would have happened if I hadn't seen her car that day.

If the light had been green instead of red.

If my son had been dozing, or daydreaming, or looking the other way.

If I'd been five seconds faster in the stodgy London traffic, or five seconds slower.

If, if, if.

But I did see her car.

And everything else flowed from that one moment, pulled on by gravity faster and faster until it was irresistible, unstoppable. Inevitable.

Would things have turned out differently if I'd just driven on home?

Maybe. Maybe not.

Maybe it was fate.

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THURSDAY

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My son's first word wasn't *Daddy* or *Mummy*. His first word was *Audi*. Which was strange because I'd never owned an Audi, and on my salary probably never would. But William had played with toy cars before he could walk and recognized the badges long before he could actually read the names. At the age of four (and a bit), he was already something of an expert, playing his car game as we inched along in the sluggish North London traffic, spotting badges and calling them out from his car seat in the back.

"Audi . . . Renault . . . Bimmer."

We were almost home. The traffic lights up ahead began to change, and I pulled up third in line as they turned red. In the mirror, I could see him clutching his first School Superstar certificate in both hands, as if it might blow away in the wind. A CD of kids' songs was playing low on my car stereo. *I am the music man, I come from down your way . . .*

William continued calling out cars. "Ford . . . 'nother one Ford . . . Mummy car."

I smiled. My wife—William's mum—drove a VW Golf. Every time he spotted one, he'd call it out. Not a Volkswagen. A Mummy car.

“It’s a Mummy car. Look, Daddy.”

My phone buzzed in the hands-free cradle: a Facebook notification.

“What was that, Wills?”

“Over there, look.”

Across the divided highway, on the other side of the junction, a line of cars in the far lane filtered left onto an exit ramp. Rush hour traffic streaming through the junction, everyone on their way home. The low sun was in my eyes, but I caught a glimpse of a VW Golf. It *did* look like her car. Powder blue, five-door, same SpongeBob SquarePants sunshade suckered to the rear passenger window.

“Good spot, matey. It does look like Mummy’s car.”

I buzzed my window down and felt the cool city air on my face. A gap in the traffic opened up behind the Golf as it accelerated away down the exit ramp. It was a 59 registration license plate. My wife’s car had a 59 plate. I squinted, trying to make out the letters.

*KK59 DWD.*

The number plate was hers—it wasn’t *like* her car; it *was* her car. There was the familiar buzz, the little glow in my chest I still got whenever she was nearby. The VW indicated left off the exit ramp and turned into a Premier Inn. It headed into the dark entrance of an underground parking lot and disappeared from sight.

*She’ll be meeting a client, a work thing. Should probably leave her to it.* She had been working late a lot recently.

“Can we see Mummy?” William said, excitement in his voice. “Can we can we can we?”

“She’ll be busy, Wills. Doing work things.”

“I can show her my certificate.” William couldn’t quite pronounce the word, and it came out as *cerstiff-a-kit*.

Honking from the car behind me as the traffic lights turned green.

“Well . . .”

“Please, Daddy?” He was jiggling up and down on his booster seat. “We could do a surprise on her!”

I smiled again. It was almost Friday, after all. “Yes, we could, couldn’t we?”

I put the car in gear. Made a spur-of-the-moment decision that would change my life.

“Let’s go and surprise Mummy.”

I was in the wrong lane to turn right and had to get across two lanes of traffic. By the time someone had let me in—cue more furious hooting—the lights had gone red again.

“Where’s Mummy whizzing off to?” William said.

“We’ll catch her, don’t worry.”

My cell phone, in its hands-free cradle, blinked blue with the Facebook notification. I pressed the screen, and it brought up my picture of William in the school playground, clutching his first Superstar award from the reception class teacher. The post had four likes and a new comment from William’s godmother, Lisa: Awww he looks so cute! ☺ What a good boy! Give him a kiss from me xx.

I hit Like below her comment.

The traffic light went green, and I turned the wheel to follow the route my wife’s car had taken, down the exit ramp and left into the forecourt of the Premier Inn. Down the ramp into the underground parking lot, low concrete roof and deep shadows where the fluorescent lights didn’t reach, driving slowly along the lines of parked cars.

And there it was: her VW Golf, parked next to the elevator. Mel was nowhere to be seen. A sign on a concrete pillar read:

*Parking lot for use by patrons of Premier Inn only.*

There were no spaces next to her car, so I carried on around the



circle and found a space in the row behind, backing in opposite an oversized white SUV that was clearly too big for the space it occupied.

“Can we go and see Mummy now?” William said. He was still clutching his “I’m a Superstar!” certificate in both hands like he was getting ready to present it to the Queen.

“Come on, then. Let’s go upstairs and find her. There’s an elevator.”

His eyes lit up. “Can I press the button?”

The hotel lobby had dark shiny floors and anonymous décor, a single waistcoated teenager on reception. William’s hot little hand gripped mine tightly as we stood looking for Mel. There was a rumpled man with a suit bag and briefcase, wearily checking out, a woman and a teenage girl behind him. An elderly Japanese couple sat in the reception area, poring over a map. But no sign of my wife.

“Where’s Mummy gone?” William said in a loud stage whisper. “Come on. Let’s find her.”

Reception was L-shaped, with elevators and the restaurant signposted around the corner. We followed the signs, away from reception. The restaurant was mostly empty. Recessed off to the left were the elevators and a raised seating area with large black armchairs facing each other across a handful of low tables.

Mel was there. She had her back to us, but I would have recognized her anywhere, the slender curve of her neck, honey-blond hair.

*Hey, there. Surprise! Wait.*

She was with someone. A man, talking in animated fashion. Something made me stop. I knew the guy she was talking to.

Ben Delaney, married to one of Mel’s closest friends. And he wasn’t just animated—he was downright angry, his face dark with frustration. He interrupted her, pointing his finger, his voice a barely controlled growl. Mel leaned forward and put a hand on his arm. He sat back, shaking his head.

Something was wrong with this situation.

Instinctively, I moved in front of William to block his view. My first thought was to go over and check Mel was OK, but not with

our son in tow. Mel was gesturing with her hands now, Ben staring at her, frowning, shaking his head.

*This is not something William should see.*

“Come on, Wills,” I said. “Mummy’s busy. Let’s go back downstairs.”

“Has she gone?”

“Let’s wait for her in the car, matey. We’ll be close by.”

“Then I can show her my certificate?”

“Yup.”

We got the elevator back down to the parking lot level and returned to my car. Mel’s number was at the top of the favorites list on my cell phone. It went straight to voice mail.

“Hi, you’ve reached Mel’s cell phone. Please do leave a message, and I promise I’ll get back to you as soon as poss.” *Beep.*

I hung up, redialed. Voice mail again. This time I left a message.

“Hi, love, it’s me. Give me a call when you get this? Just wanted to make sure you’re OK . . . that everything’s OK. Call me.”

I sat five minutes more, starting to feel slightly foolish. I was supposed to be at home by now, running my son’s bath. Drinking a nice glass of red. Thinking about making a start on tonight’s marking. But instead I was here, in an underground parking lot just off the North Circular, trying to work out what the hell was going on upstairs. I wanted to check on her but didn’t want to leave William. My suit shirt felt grimy and claustrophobic, a bead of sweat tracing a path down my rib cage.

*So what’s the plan, Stan? What if Mel isn’t OK? What’s up with Ben? How long are you going to sit here with one bar of cell phone reception, waiting and wondering?*

There wasn’t a plan. I wasn’t going to do anything, just sit there and wait. Surprise my wife.

I didn’t have a plan. It just happened.

I opened up the Angry Birds app on my iPad and passed it back to William, flicked on the radio for my own distraction. Five Live was running a piece about dating websites, featuring a series of quick interviews with women describing what they were looking for in their perfect mate. Expectations seemed to be pretty high. Their ideal man had to be at least six feet tall, in possession of a good sense of humor, a nice smile, and a six-pack. He had to be strong but not macho. Sensitive but good at DIY. Confident but not full of himself. Make decent money at work but still be around to do his share at home.

Blimey. It was exhausting just keeping track of it all.

Mel's cell phone went straight to voice mail again. I buzzed the window down and rested my elbow on the sill, absently turning the black leather bracelet on my right wrist as the radio presenter chattered on. Mel had given me the bracelet as an anniversary present: leather for three years. Now a big one was approaching—ten years—and there were already a few ideas on my list for that one. Ten was supposed to be tin, but someone had said you could substitute diamond jewelry for tin. That was good. My plan had always been to give her a bigger diamond than I could afford as an early-career teacher when we first got—

“Daddy?”

“What’s up, big man?”

“Can I get a hamster?”

“Uh, don’t know, William. We’ll see.”

*We’ll see.* Parents’ code for *I won’t mention it again, wait for you to forget.*

“Jacob P. has a hamster.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He’s called Mr. Chocolate.”

“That’s a good name.”

I smiled at my son in the rearview mirror as he played on the iPad. My son, the image of his mother. He was going to be a heartbreaker when he was older, that was for sure. His mother’s face, her coloring, her big brown eyes.

And then there she was across the parking lot, walking quickly to her car: my pretty wife, dressed for tennis in her pink Adidas hoodie, blond ponytail tied up high.

She had her head down, a frown on her face.

*Looks like she’s about to cry.*

I was suddenly glad we’d made this detour.

“William, I’m just going to talk to someone for a minute, OK? You stay here like a good boy, and I’ll be right back.”

He looked up at me with those big brown eyes. “Is it Mummy?”

“You stay here just for a minute, and don’t get out, OK? Then after a minute, you can see Mummy.”

“What if bad men come?”

“Bad men aren’t going to come, big man. You’ll be able to see me, and I’ll be able to see you.” I held up a finger. “One minute.”

He nodded slowly but didn’t look convinced.

Cell phone still in my hand, I got out and locked the car with the remote. The underground air was flat and sour in my nostrils.

Mel’s VW was reversing out fast. Two lines of parked cars between me and her.

I waved. “Mel!”

The VW pulled off sharply, Mel pulling her seat belt across her

chest with one hand as she accelerated hard toward the exit ramp. She hadn't seen me. Threading my way between the parked cars, I almost tripped on a low concrete divider between the rows, stumbled, shouted again, my voice flat against the low concrete ceiling.

“Mel!”

Her car disappeared up the exit ramp, and then she was gone, out into the Thursday night traffic.

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There was a soft chime from the elevator at the far end of the parking lot. The doors slid open, and Ben emerged, briefcase in hand, cigarette between his lips. He lit up and lifted his head to exhale, seeming to spot me out of the corner of his eye as he took his cell phone out of a jeans pocket.

He had seen me, I was sure of it.

He carried on walking as if he hadn't.

"Ben!" I said, waving.

He slowed, stared at me for a second, raised a hand half-heartedly as I walked over to him. He stood by his car, a pearl-white Porsche Cayenne with the number plate W1NNR, dressed in that casual-but-not-casual way you get when you spend a lot of money—designer jeans and tailored jacket. He looked at me like I was the last person he wanted to see, taking another drag on his cigarette.

There was a moment of silence, the smoke coiling lazily between us.

"Joe," he said finally, putting his briefcase down. "What are you . . . ? How's it going, big fella?"

"All good. Really good. How about you?"

"Yeah, sound. Business is booming, you know. You still setting the teaching world on fire?"

I had never been good at Awkward Guy Conversations. And Ben

had never looked on me as an equal—more a bit of a runner-up, just another public-sector softie who wouldn't last five minutes in the dog-eat-dog world he inhabited.

"Something like that," I said, forcing a grin. "You just had a meeting up in the hotel?"

He opened his mouth to reply, closed it again. Tried to look past me.

"Yeah." He took another drag of his cigarette, blowing smoke from the side of his mouth. "A meeting."

"A work thing?"

"Potential client. A lead I've been warming up for a while."

"You didn't see Mel?"

"What?"

"My Mel. She was just here."

He almost flinched at the mention of her name, but caught himself. Instead, he just shook his head, dark eyes shifting toward his car.

"No, mate. Not seen her."

It was weird seeing him like this—evasive, reluctant, almost shifty—compared to his usual alpha-male demeanor. At the one and only poker game I had played at his house, he had regaled the table with a story about a former employee of his company who had quit to set up on his own, in competition with him. Ben had felt betrayed—so he had made it his personal mission to trash the guy's reputation in the industry, warning potential customers off, until the former employee's new company went bankrupt and he lost his house in the process. Ben had related the story with a trace of pride in a rival destroyed, an air of *screw with the bull and you get the horns*. It was the kind of guy he was. You didn't want to get on the wrong side of him.

"You sure you didn't see her?" I said. "I thought you were talking to her upstairs. It looked like serious stuff."

"Nope." He flicked his cigarette away. "Look, Joe, I've really got to go."

My tie suddenly felt too tight in my collar. He made to move past me, and I instinctively put a hand on his arm.

“Don’t want to make a big deal out of it, Ben, I was just worried about—”

He whirled on me and grabbed two handfuls of my shirt, slamming me against the side of his SUV. He was surprisingly strong for his size, and his anger caught me off guard.

“Just leave it!” he shouted, northern inflection rising to the surface. Cigarette breath close in my face. “Just leave it alone, you big daft bastard! You have no idea! Bloody classic underachiever, that’s all you are, all you’ve ever been.”

He had anger, but I had size. At six foot two, I was six inches taller than he was. And at least forty pounds heavier.

“Leave *what* alone?” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re so fucking dense that you haven’t seen it, have you?”

“Seen what?”

He shook his head in disbelief.

“None so blind as those that refuse to see, eh, Joe?”

With that, he pulled me forward so he could slam me back against the big Porsche again, and pain surged at the base of my skull. My hands bunched into fists, but some long-lost playground code said I couldn’t hit someone smaller, shorter, lighter than I was. There was no way it could be a fair fight. Instead, I grabbed his hands and prized them away from my shirt, giving him a little shove to put some space between us.

He stumbled backward, tripped over his briefcase, and fell.

Hemmed in between two parked cars, he couldn’t get his arms out to break his fall. There was a heavy wet *smack* as his head hit the concrete.

I stood over him for a moment.

He lay on his back, eyes closed, mouth open. One leg crossed under the other.

“Ben?”

He didn’t move.

*Get up. I need to know what you meant. And why you’re so pissed off.*

“Ben?”



I prodded his shoe with the toe of my mine. Maybe he was faking.

“Ben, are you all right?” The world’s stupidest question.

Always asked when we already know the answer.

No reaction.

Was he even breathing? I crouched down to look at him more closely.

*Just move, Ben. Do something. Anything.*

“Ben, can you hear me? Wake up, mate.”

The first stab of panic in my stomach. There was a trickle of blood coming out of his ear.

*Oh, God. Oh no.*

“What’s wrong with Alice’s daddy?” I started at the small voice behind me and turned to see William standing there, his white school shirt untucked and sticking out from under his jumper. He peered at Ben’s motionless body.

I stood up and moved to block William’s view. “He, uh, he fell down, matey.”

“Is he going to be all right?”

“He’s fine. He’s just getting his breath back.”

The blood leaking from Ben’s ear was dripping onto the ground, making a small pool on the gray concrete.

*Oh, Jesus. What have you done?*

“Blood, Daddy.”

There was a little catch in his voice, a tightness that I knew all too well. My son tried to say something else, but the breath caught in his throat with an asthmatic rattle.

I said, “He’s going to be fine, Wills. Are you OK?”

His chest heaved again. “Can’t bre—”

I squatted down in front of my son, blocking his view. The color was draining from his face. His first asthma attack, right out of the blue when he was barely a year old, had been the most terrifying experience of my life. A panicked emergency call, running paramedics, and raw, helpless terror. The memory of that fear always returned when he had another episode.

Just like now.

He took a thin, jagged breath, like air whistling through dry reeds. Eyes wide and frightened.

*Protect the boy. Get the inhaler.*

“Where’s your puff-puff, Wills?” I said urgently.

He shook his head, another halting, gasping breath forcing its way down his constricted windpipe as it closed to a pinhole. I scooped him up and ran to the car, diving into the glove compartment for the spare inhaler I always kept there.

It wasn’t there. *Shit.*

Turning William’s schoolbag upside down, I emptied the contents onto the passenger seat. Books, coloring pens, a pencil case, conkers, candy wrappers, a key ring, three toy cars, and an unwrapped lollipop stuck to a crumpled letter.

No inhaler.

Another jolt of panic.

*Got to get him breathing again. Upstairs at hotel reception? No.*

*Time wasted. Home is the nearest, surest place.*

*But what about Ben?*

All the details of the moment came into sharp and brilliant focus. The dark leather soles of Ben’s shoes. A black Range Rover at the top of the ramp. Off in the distance, above ground, a siren. My son taking another half-strangled breath, thinner than the last. He swayed slightly on his feet, his movements slowing.

*Make a choice. Make it now.*

Ben still lay there, unmoving, on his back.

*Protect the boy.*

I should have stayed with Ben, gone upstairs to get the hotel staff, called an ambulance. Maybe driven him to hospital myself. I should have done *something*. But all I could hear was my son starting to suffocate. So I didn’t. I didn’t do any of those things.

Instead, I panicked.

I strapped William in and jumped into the driver’s seat.

I ran the first two red lights as I desperately tried to remember whether there was a pharmacy, a supermarket, or a doctor's office on my route home, William heaving and wheezing beside me in the passenger seat. *Just be OK, son. Be OK. Home soon. We will make you better. Hold on.* There was a pharmacy—but it was closed. We flew past and blew through another amber traffic light as it was turning red, weaving through traffic with the honks of other drivers behind us.

“You’re going to be OK, Wills. We’ll be home in a minute, and we’ll get you your puff-puff, OK?”

He nodded weakly but said nothing. His face was deathly pale now, eyelids drooping.

We hit a clear stretch of the North Circular, and I pushed the car harder, overtaking a van and switching lanes to pass a white SUV on the right.

*Ben.*

I should call the hotel. Get him some help.

Except my cell phone was nowhere to be found. It wasn't in its usual place in my jacket pocket or in my jeans. The hands-free cradle on my dashboard was empty; the glove compartment too.

I reached under the car seat as I drove. Nothing there. It would have to wait until I could use the landline at home.

It felt like the longest drive of my life.

Finally, I pulled the car into my driveway with a screech of tires, grabbed William, and ran into the house, to the kitchen drawer where we kept a spare inhaler—*Please be there, please be there*—and sat the boy down on a kitchen chair while he took a lungful of Ventolin. Then breathed deeply, and took another. I knelt in front of him, holding him steady, hearing his breathing slowly deepen, lengthen, as it returned to normal.

“It’s OK, Will. You’re OK. Does it feel better?”

He nodded solemnly. “Bit better.”

A little color was returning to his cheeks, my terror receding with it. Relief flooding through me in its place.

“Just sit quiet for a minute, matey. Take it easy.”

Our little-used landline phone was on the kitchen counter. Directory inquiries connected me to the hotel, and I listened as it rang six times, then put me through to an automated list of options.

The last option was to speak to a human.

“Listen,” I said. “There’s a man in your underground parking lot. He may be hurt. You need to send someone down there right away to help him.”

“Sorry, sir, this is the Premier Inn, Redfield Way,” said the voice, a young man in his late teens or early twenties. “Are you sure you have the right number?”

“Yes! There’s a man down there, he fell and banged his head. His name is Ben Delaney. Can you check he’s OK?”

“Is he a guest of the hotel?”

“No, but he’s on your property. Can you check on him or not?”

“I’m afraid I’m not allowed to leave the front desk, sir, but my supervisor should be back in a bit. If you think an ambulance should be called for a member of the public in the meantime, you should hang up and do so immediately.”

“Can’t you just run down and see if he’s all right? Lock the front door for two minutes and do a quick circuit of the parking lot?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Is this a prank call?”

“Never mind,” I said and hung up.

I grabbed a bottle of water for William, gave him a quick hug, and listened to him breathing again. His airway was getting back to normal. I put the inhaler in my jacket and picked him up.

“Where are we going, Daddy?”

“Just a quick trip out in the car before bath time.”

“Are we going to go fast again?”

“Quite fast, but not as fast as before.”

My imagination ran laps as I drove, new thoughts unspooling now that William’s asthma emergency had passed. Going over everything I’d seen in the last hour. Trying to make some sense of it.

*What did you see?*

*What did you actually see?*

I had seen him angry, her upset. *What did he say to upset her?*

Him lying on the ground, eyes closed. Blood.

*What if he’s still lying there? Of course he’s not.*

*He might be.*

*What if he is?*

And, rising above it all, that horrible wet *smack* as Ben’s head hit the concrete.

*Maybe he’s fractured his skull. Can you die from that? Of course you can. If you’re left there and no one helps you.*

Maybe there would already be police on the scene by the time I got there. Unspooling crime scene tape, putting numbered evidence markers on the ground. Floodlights. Maybe getting ready to put up one of those white tents you see on the news when the police are hiding a body from prying eyes.

My mouth was dry, and I felt off balance, like something in my life had been dislodged from its proper place, pushing everything else out of sync. Nothing was where it should be.

*I left him there. Bleeding.*

But going back to the hotel was still the right thing to do. It was on me to put this right; that was all there was to it. My routine Thursday evening had taken a turn for the surreal, the confusing, the downright terrifying—but there was still time to get it back on track. It was just a case of doing the right thing.

*He'll be all right. Just a bump on the head. Mel will know what to do. We'll figure it out together.*

More than anything, I wanted to speak to my wife, make sure she was all right after her heated encounter with Ben this afternoon. *Just let Mel be OK. Everything else we can deal with. Together.*

I wound down the window and breathed in gray city air. Turned on the radio, trying to find something to take my mind off things. Turned up the music. By the time I'd turned off the North Circular, I had half convinced myself that Ben would be OK. He'd already be home now, drinking an expensive single malt at the living room bar of his big Hampstead house. *People don't die from falling over and banging their head. They just don't. Otherwise there would be thirty murders every Saturday night in every market square, in every town in Britain.* I pulled onto the forecourt. Through the glass frontage of the hotel I could see the same waistcoated teenager as earlier behind the reception desk, talking on the phone.

The entrance to the underground parking lot gaped like an open mouth.

The barrier rose as I approached, and I drove slowly down the ramp into the dull fluorescent light below ground. Deep shadows against the concrete. I parked, leaving William in the car again, and got out. Walked up and down the four rows of cars. Went to the spot Ben's car had occupied less than an hour ago.

There was no crime scene tape. No white tent. No police.

There was nothing.

Ben and his car were gone.

My cell phone was gone too.

As far as I could remember, this was the last place I'd had it in my hand. Right here in this parking lot, when I'd gone to talk to Ben. Maybe I'd dropped it when things turned ugly. So where was it? I looked around, patted my jacket pockets again. Dropped to my knees and checked under the parked cars. Nothing. I walked a circle around the row of vehicles, squatted down again, squinting into the shadows. But it wasn't there. *Damn*. A twinge in my stomach. One more thing to worry about. Or maybe it was somewhere at home? I made a mental note to check later.

I called Mel three times from the landline phone when I got home. Three times it went straight to voice mail. Finally, I left a message.

"Hi, it's me. Give me a call when you get this? Just want to make sure you're OK. Thought you might be . . ." I hesitated. *Might be what?* "Call me back. Love you."

*Be OK. Please be OK. Everything else I can handle, one thing at a time.*

The thing with Ben was ridiculous, I decided—I should just call him. Get to the bottom of whatever was going on—if there even *was* anything going on.

Except I couldn't call him, because all my contacts were in my cell phone, and that was lost. The address book was backed up to Mel's

iPad, but she had that with her at work. The landline was useless—we hardly ever used it, and there were only about a dozen numbers stored in its memory.

And so, perched on the bathroom stool, a bottle of beer cooling my hand, there was nothing else to do except go through the usual evening routine. William was in the bath, swirling the water around with both hands, his plastic boats and animals circling him like a tiny flotilla around and around. He was talking to me about school things and how his little buddy Jonah had wet himself during assembly, and I was fending him off with lots of *Really?* and *Oh, dear* and *Uh-huh*. The long-neglected landline phone sat dark and silent on the windowsill next to me.

“When’s Mummy coming back?” he said, putting bubble bath on his chin to make a white beard.

“What’s that?”

“Mummy.”

“She’ll be home soon.”

“Look at my beard, Daddy. I’m Santa.”

“Good one, matey. Got a present for me?”

“It’s not a proper beard. It’s only bubbles really.”

The sound of keys in the front door made me jump. Mel called up in her usual way.

“Mummy!” William shouted back.

“We’re up here,” I added.

She appeared in the bathroom doorway, and I hugged her, relief washing through me like a tide. I kissed her cheek, tasting the familiar salty sweat mingled with perfume.

“Hey, you,” I breathed into her ear.

“Hey yourself.” She disentangled herself from the embrace. “Nice welcome. What’s that for?”

“Thought you might need a hug.”

She smiled and kissed me, her lips soft against mine.

“No more than usual.” She studied me for a second, taking a drink from her water bottle. “Are *you* OK?”



"It's been a hell of an evening, but I'm all right."

"Why? What's happened?"

"It's nothing," I said, trying to summon a smile. "Tell you later. I was actually worried about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, are you OK?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I saw you earlier and you seemed—"

"Mummy! Mummy!"

"What is it?" she said.

"Look, Mummy, I've got a beard!"

"Nice, William." She drank the last of her water and began refilling the bottle from the tap.

"And I had ants-ma, and me and Daddy had to come home to get my puff-puff."

"Oh, dear," she said, kneeling by the bath to stroke his cheek. "Are you OK now, darling? Was it a bad one?"

"Yes. And Daddy drove *really* fast."

She looked at me, raising an eyebrow. "Did he now?"

"He was fine once I got him on his inhaler. Thought I had one in the car, but I think I used it last time and didn't replace it. My fault, really."

Mel turned back to our son. "And how was school, William?"

"I was really *very* good, Mummy," he said slowly, pronouncing each word. "I got the Superstar award from Mrs. Green."

Mel gave him a big surprised smile. "Well, that's fantastic, William."

"For sitting nicely in assembly."

"Aren't you a good boy?"

"Yes. But Daddy isn't."

Mel raised an eyebrow at me. "Is that so?"

I shook my head, forced a smile.

*Should have thought of this, talked to him about what happened.*

"It *is* so," William said.

"Why has Daddy not been good?"

“William—” I started.

“This sounds interesting,” my wife said.

“It was nothing, really,” I said quickly, scrabbling to think up a way of deflecting what my son was about to say.

“*Not* nothing,” William said.

Mel took another drink of water from the bottle, looking at me.

“So why was Daddy bad, William?”

“Because he said I can’t have a hamster.”

I exhaled, slowly. “I didn’t say that, big man, just that we’d see.”

Abruptly, William stood up out of the bath, his arms outstretched.

“Towel, Daddy! Towel, towel, towel!”

I plucked him from the bath and wrapped him up in a towel that was bigger than he was.

Mel crossed her arms. “A hamster, eh?”

I shrugged. “I said we’d think about it.”

She nodded, turned in the doorway. “I’m going to get a quick shower.”

“Listen, Mel?”

She turned back to me. “What’s up?”

“You sure you’re OK?”

“Course. Why?”

“I saw you earlier and you seemed upset. Left you some messages.”

She frowned, cocked her head to one side.

“My phone’s out of charge. When did you see me earlier?”

“About five, at this hotel on the North Circular.”

She took a sip of water from her bottle, swallowed slowly.

Then another.

And that was when everything I knew started to fall apart.

“A hotel?” she said.

“Near Brent Cross. I was worried about you.”

She shook her head. “I wasn’t at a hotel, Joe; I was at tennis. Thursday night social, same as always.”

“But I saw you.”

“You can’t have, Joe. I wasn’t anywhere near Brent Cross.”

I tried to make sense of what she was saying. “You weren’t?”

She laughed quickly. “Couldn’t very well have lost 6–1 6–0 to Hilary Paine if I was, could I?”

“But we saw you. Your car.”

“That beer’s gone to your head, darling. I’m going to grab a quick shower before tea.”

She turned and left.

I stared at the empty doorway for a long moment, then started to dry William’s fine brown hair with the towel. The sound of the shower starting up in the master bathroom reached me from across the landing.

*A lie.*

I felt dizzy, disoriented, like I’d suddenly started walking up a down escalator.

*A lie. Why did she lie? Why do people usually lie?*

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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