

One of the questions I was asked about "The Love She Forgot" was: What happened with Matt's dad, why didn't he turn up for their meeting?

There's a short answer I could give, but not here as I'm trying my ever best to keep my website swear free (unlike my books :D)

Here's a longer answer...

Matt

April first. April Fool's Day, a day for fun and practical jokes, to laugh at lunch time and gleefully shout, 'fooled you'.

I wonder if today somebody is going to tap me on the shoulder and say everything that I've been going through has been a long, elaborate joke, that Beatrice remembers everything and hey, wasn't it funny?

I don't think I'd even be mad if somebody told me it was a joke. I think I'd be *relieved*. I think I'd be so grateful that she's back, grateful that I could pull her into a big hug and let my arms wrap around her, hold her tightly and murmur 'my God, I thought I'd lost you', without it scaring the life out of her.

But, let's face it, there's no way anybody is going to tell me what is going on is just a joke.

This is my grim reality, the same grim reality that I've had for sixty days. Sixty days since the accident. Sixty days of people at work asking me where Beatrice is, when is she coming back. Sixty days of Ben fretting and fussing over her, telling me to back off because only he could possibly understand what Beatrice is thinking, what she needs. Sixty days of me lying in bed at night, unable to sleep, wondering what the hell I'm supposed to do for the best, feeling like my life is unravelling and I'm going to lose the grip on my sanity.

Sixty days of the woman that I love with every piece of my heart and soul not knowing a damn thing about me.

At least today there is a distraction. Something else to do instead of torturing myself about Beatrice and her missing memory. Instead, I'm going to torture myself about my father.

Beatrice was supposed to come with me to see Max. She'd promised, she'd held my hand and said she'd be there, but that was before. Back in the days when she knew what we meant to one another. Back in the days when she'd lie in my arms and sigh against my chest as we vowed to always be there for one another.

It isn't like I can remind her of her promise. How would that start as a conversation? *'Hey, Beatrice, I know you've lost months of your memory, but you said you'd come with me this evening to meet my estranged father, how are you fixed for that now? I really don't want to meet Max on my own. Oh, and just so you know, you and I fell head over heels in love after you moved in. Why didn't I tell you sooner? Oh, yeah, because I'm trying to protect you from something that happened to you. You once said I'd hurt myself before I hurt you, and that's what I've been doing these last sixty days. Hurting myself daily if it is something that helps keep you safe from things that hurt you.'*

She's been out today, with Ben and Lily. They'd asked me to go with them, but I'd declined, fobbed them off in that alleged grumpy manner that Beatrice seems to find so amusing, the one she likes to call me out on. I'm kind of glad they're out together, so there is nobody to watch me fret and pace around the living room before it's time for me to leave.

My mobile rings so I reach for it, seeing Toby's name on the screen. For a second, I'm tempted not to answer, but I know he'll just keep trying if I don't. He's been incredibly talkative since I went back to Mum's house, feeling like the world was caving in on me.

"Hey, Toby," I say as I answer the call.

"Oh, I'm honoured you remember how to answer the phone," he teases. He's not wrong. I've dodged a couple of calls from him. Mostly because I know they'd be peppered with questions that I don't want to answer. *Are you staying out of trouble? What made you step into that casino? Why do you sound so miserable?*

"What do you want?" I ask, my tone half a growl. I'm already feeling agitated with everything happening with Beatrice and stressed about the plans to meet up with Max. I don't need a dollop of brotherly sarcasm to go on top of the crap sundae that is my life right now.

"I wanted to wish you luck for tonight, I guess."

"I know it wouldn't be the choice you make, but I thought it would give me an opportunity to get somethings off my chest."

"You're right, it wouldn't be my choice. Polly's half-way through the pregnancy, this baby isn't even here yet, but I couldn't imagine walking away from them, abandoning the baby or Polly the way he did us and Mum. You know I've always had my misgivings about Max, but being on the cusp of being a father myself, it's made me see things differently, and it's taken away any idea of reconciliation for me. He's never going to right the wrongs in my book, but if you want to see him, I'm not going to stop you and I'm not going to judge you for it."

"I told you after he wrote to us, I'm not interested in rekindling a father/son relationship with him. It isn't about that. You don't think I don't have questions for him, too? You don't think I hate the way he treated us all?" I snap.

I know I shouldn't snap at him. I know most of my short temper with Toby is fuelled by my situation with Beatrice. If things were different, if she was holding my hand right now, ready to go with me to this meeting, I'd feel better. I'd feel grounded, because no matter what was going on before her accident, she's got this amazing ability to make me feel like there's something holding me in place. I used to think, if we were together, I could get through anything. What a joke that was, maybe I should have been more specific to think if we were together and she *remembered us*, we'd get through anything.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Toby asks.

"You live miles away," I point out, laughing slightly.

"It's a couple of hours on the train. I can't promise I won't want to punch him when I see him, but if you need me there, I can do that."

"I don't need my big brother holding my hand, thank you very much," I mutter, though his offer does mean a lot. "Besides, I'm meeting him in an hour, so you're out of time."

"Call me later and let me know how you got on."

"Hey, do you know what Sam decided to do in the end?" I ask. Sam's the classic middle sibling. Laid back, malleable to both my opinion and Toby's, depending on who he's talking to at the time, and such a people pleaser it's unreal.

"Undecided. Last time we spoke, he was waiting to see how things went with you and Max before he decides what he wants to do."

"Well, I'll let you both know later."

"Good luck, Matt," Toby replies, and all I hear is the worry in his tone. I know it's one of those situations where he wishes I'd just listen to him, cut those ties. At Christmas, he'd pushed me to read the letter Max wrote to me, but it's like with every week of Polly's pregnancy, he's more resolute in his decision never to let Max in.

I end the call with Toby and shove my phone back into my pocket. I grab my car keys from the dish and head out towards my car before I can change my mind. We've arranged to meet in a neutral location, in a bar in town. Not my bar, I don't want to open that space to him. It's bad enough being there right now with everything going on with Beatrice, missing her when I'm in the

office or behind the bar. There isn't anywhere that doesn't feel tainted by the fact I've lost her, both at the bar and at home. I refuse to further complicate the space at the bar by letting Max into it.

There's only so much I can take, and I feel like at the edge of it all. I should cancel this meeting. I'm not in the right frame of mind, but I'm in the car now. I've come this far. I might as well see what he wants to say.

MAX

I sit in the corner booth of the bar where I'd agreed to meet Matt, my youngest, looking out to where he sits at the bar, seemingly oblivious that I'm here. I know it's him, I spotted him as soon as I walked in. Except, instead of walking up to him, I'd passed right behind him and took a seat in the corner. I've been planning this meeting since Christmas, when I'd reached out to all my kids, but now I'm not sure what I want to say, or even why I started this in the first place.

The past few months, their mother, Alice, who *never* likes to reach out to me and only seems to reply under duress, she has done nothing but keep up a steady stream of messages to me.

The first message from her had come after I'd written to each of them, a letter for each son, posting to Alice and asking her to pass on.

'If you're serious about being in their lives, if they agree to see you, you need to prove yourself to them. Be consistent. Show up. Mean it. Be a better father than you were when they were young.'

I don't know why she keeps up the pretence that I was a bad father. She was the one who always threw obstacles in the way. When she'd decided everything was over between us, she was the one who tried to twist everything so she could take the kids away from me. I wasn't a bad father, she just wanted to raise them differently, let them be sensitive weaklings. A bit of physical discipline never hurt anybody.

When I'd replied to remind her that I wasn't a bad father, that my relationship with them was nothing to do with her, she'd sent two messages in quick succession.

'I'm begging you, please don't let the boys down, they don't deserve it.'

'They're my babies, Max, no matter how old they are. If you hurt them again, I swear, I'll make you pay for it.'

Boys? They're men. Her babies? I always laugh at the way she wants to write me out of their history. I'm their father. There wouldn't be any '*babies*' or '*boys*' without me.

The message that had really made me laugh was the one she'd sent after I'd asked her to talk some sense into Toby, the eldest. He'd responded to my letter with a choice response of his own, clearly lashing out when he only knows the story his mother has told him, poisoned him with all these years. All I wanted was for her to tell him to give me a fair chance, except Alice hadn't seen it the same way.

'No, I will not talk to Toby for you. He's a grown man, Max. If he doesn't want to see you, that's his choice. Respect it. I do.'

There had been an equally annoying response when I'd asked her about Sam, given he appears to be ignoring me.

'Stop making me your middleman. This has to be their choice. Sam takes time to make his mind up. Respect that.'

Respect them? Respect that? She sure likes to throw that word around when she doesn't know the meaning of it. She never respected me. If she had, she'd have listened to me instead of getting distant and cold to me once the kids arrived, pushing me away.

Then tonight, an unsolicited message from her.

'I know you're seeing Matt tonight. Please don't hurt him. He has enough going on in his life right now, he doesn't need the added complication of you letting him down.'

I know everything that Matt has had going on in his life. I keep an eye on things as I have done all the years, piecing together bits from social media, reluctant updates from Alice, updates from other family members. Years ago, finding out that Matt was a gambling addict, it had caused arguments between me and Alice. Vicious messages exchanged between us,

her trying to defend what had happened. All I know is that it wouldn't have happened on my watch. If I'd had full custody, I'd have raised them strong and resilient, not how Alice raised them.

From the moment they arrived, she mollicoddled the kids, especially Toby. As the eldest, he should have toughened up much sooner. She never understood I was raising them tough so they could deal with the pressures of the world, the battles they'd have to fight as men. I'd tell her that this life would beat them to the ground if given half a chance. Once, she'd snapped at me, asking why I felt the need to beat them to the ground first.

She never understood me. Not once the kids arrived, anyway.

By the time Matt arrived, I knew I wouldn't get her to change her ways. She babied Matt in the same way as the others, maybe even more given he was the baby, and I'd told her we wouldn't have any more. She'd over soothe him when he got hurt and like she had with his brothers, constantly running to pick him up when he cried. It drove me mad.

They'd be entirely different men if I'd had my way raising them. Maybe there's still time for me to shape them better, toughen them up. If not, I can at least help shape the next generation. Toby's wife is always on her social media account, showing off her pregnancy with my grandchild.

It irks me that Toby has been the one to say no to me. He'll see when he's a father, once that baby arrives. He'll realise the world is a tough place and the best you can do for your kids is make them tough enough to survive it. Toby may have said no, but I know I can get Matt and Sam on side, then Toby will fall into line.

I just have to start with Matt.

I look back at him, watching as he sits rigid on his bar stool. He's oblivious to everything going on around him, doesn't look like he's waiting for somebody, but I know it's Matt. He looks so much like Alice. He has her features and her colouring. When he was born, looking so much like her even then, I'd asked whether she was sure he was mine. I'd been joking, of course, she was never out my sight long enough for another guy to have opportunity. She hadn't found it funny, but even when he got a little older, I never saw myself in Matt's features, nor in his mannerisms.

I still see nothing of myself in the man who sits on the opposite side of the bar. Even sitting, I can tell he's taller than me, much taller than the last time I saw him. How long has it been? Five years? Six? Longer? Broader too, though it looks like he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders.

I knew Alice babied them too much. If she hadn't, I'm sure our youngest wouldn't be sitting at the bar looking like he's about to cry into his cup of coffee. I'm sure he'd be sitting with a pint in front of him instead and a smile on his face. Maybe we'd be sitting in a sports bar, watching a match and cheering along as our team won.

I know from relatives, those who don't mind updating me about the kids, that Matt doesn't watch sports. Doesn't bet on games. Doesn't play the lottery. Doesn't play cards. Doesn't even have a flutter on the races. I blame Alice. Once she'd left, he had no male role model, nobody to show him how to be a man.

I stand up from the booth. I step across the bar. Matt doesn't look up, but as I get closer, I see the scowl on his face, and I know this wouldn't have gone the way I'd planned.

Suddenly, I'm sure it'll be too much effort, and I'm wondering why I even want to put myself through it. Right now, Matt looks like he's one sad sentence away from giving up on everything, he doesn't look like he's going to listen to anything I have to say. I'm beginning

to think he's got stuff he wants to say to me instead, stuff that would stem from the lies Alice has told him about me.

Why am I bothering to make the effort? They've never reached out to me, not once in all the years. Alice is wrong when she says I need to show them I want to be in their lives. If they want to build their relationships with me, they should be the ones to show me they mean it, they should be the ones making the effort.

They've never shown me they want me around. Even when I saw them as teenagers, they were sullen and silent, grunting responses to my questions, barely making eye contact and looking like they were counting down the time until Alice picked them up. Alice would tell me it was because I'd been cold and inconsistent in their lives before. She'd even call my discipline methods abusive.

No doubt, Matt's waiting to give me a piece of his mind, and I don't have the patience for that.

I give one last glance at my son, and then I walk out of the bar, not for the first time, leaving him behind.

Matt

I should have known he'd blow me off.

Despite that, I still give him much longer than he deserves from me to wait. I make excuses after every five minutes that passes from the time we'd agreed.

It's only five minutes, probably got stuck in traffic.

It's only ten minutes, he's probably rushing after getting parked up.

It's only thirty minutes. Maybe he got the time wrong.

It's an hour and ten minutes. You're an idiot.

It's two hours. Move, Matt. No point waiting. Shouldn't have come in the first place.

I get up from my seat and storm out of the bar. I fire off a text to Toby and Sam, on the group chat we have. *'Sam – don't bother.'*

Like he's been waiting for my message, the response from Toby is quick. I'm expecting a 'told you so', the type that only siblings can send. Instead, it's a longer message. I wonder if he'd typed it up before, expecting that this would be the outcome, left it ready on his phone to send as soon as I'd confirmed Max is an awful human being who doesn't know how to put anybody else in front of his own selfish needs.

'We're ten times the man Max would ever be, and we got there without his help, without his input. We do not need him. We never did, we never will. Call me if you want to talk. Love you.'

Toby usually isn't the type to be sending messages of love. I'm not usually one to send them either, but I message to say I love them both, tell them I'll call them in the week.

I don't want to talk to Toby or Sam about Max. There's only one person I'd want to talk to about what just happened, but it wouldn't make any sense to Beatrice. The fact that I can't tell the woman I love about my awful night, seek solace in the warmth of her embrace, it hits me again and for the millionth time, I wonder how long I can carry on without breaking.

I can't go home. She'll probably be still up, maybe sitting in the living room and watching a horror film, looking at the gory scenes from behind her hands. Maybe she'll be lying on the sofa, listening to music or reading a poetry book.

All I know is that she'll be alone. I'll walk in with a face like thunder, and she'll either tease me or ask me a million probing questions to find out what is wrong with me. If I told her, she'd offer sympathy, but it wouldn't be the solace I needed because there would be no true depth behind her words. I want desperately for things to be different, so I can sit and hold her hand and tell her everything, tell her how angry I am. Angry that I let myself get carried away and that I'd agreed to see him in the first place. Angry that he didn't turn up and didn't even message to tell me. Angry that I don't have the opportunity to say to him everything I'd wanted to say, face to face, man to man.

Angry, and absolutely devastated that I know it wouldn't mean anything to her.

I can't go home. Not yet. Not until I'm sure she'll be in bed, and I won't have to talk. So, instead of going home, I'll go to my bar, kill some time there, and maybe pray again for a miracle that all of this will be over soon, as I'm not sure how much more I can take.