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Written by Jane Fallon

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Skeletons

JANE FALLON



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I

All Jen Masterson had ever wanted was an ordinary life. It wasn't a very glamorous ambition, admittedly. Not one she would have mentioned to her school careers adviser. But she'd worked hard to achieve it. She had made the right choices, finessed the rough edges, manipulated her little corner of the world so that it suited her perfectly. For the most part, anyway.

Married to the same man, Jason, for twenty years. Two children, Simone and Emily. A job in a hotel with a modicum of status and responsibility – not so much that it kept her awake at night, but just enough for her to feel that she hadn't completely wasted her adult life and university education. A small house in a part of London where it was still possible to walk to the shops without fearing for your life. So long as it was daylight, that was. And you made sure not to make eye contact with anyone. Her in-laws a manageable three miles away. Her own mother, thankfully, further. She was happy. And she was prepared to fight to keep it that way, if she had to.

She often looked around at her friends' lives – her best mate and sister-in-law, Poppy, in particular – and counted her blessings. It wasn't that she thought her lot was better than anybody else's. It was just that it was right for her. There were definitely areas that could have been improved

on. But no one could have it all, Jen believed. You just had to decide what really mattered.

She knew she was average-looking for a start. Five foot three, fiery red locks, a smattering of freckles. On a good hair day, she was Julianne Moore. On a bad, Little Orphan Annie. She had inherited skinny from her mother. This she had always thought was a good thing, until, one day, the magazines were full of curvy burlesque girls with breasts and hips and all sorts of things Jen simply didn't have in her repertoire, and her ironing-board-straight-up-and-down flatness had suddenly struck her as cold and uninviting.

But she just told herself that everything was cyclical. That, if she was patient, soon enough the curvy girls would be back on the Atkins Diet and trying to flatten out their oversized cleavages so they could wear shift dresses. Meanwhile, her underwear drawer concealed an array of chicken fillets of varying shapes and sizes for when a bust was absolutely essential. She lived in fear of one of them falling out of her top, or being burst by a random fork.

In actuality, Jen was far more attractive than she gave herself credit for. Not to mention smart, funny, loyal. A good mother, a loving wife, a supportive friend, a conscientious colleague. A model daughter-in-law. (Only a so-so daughter, but more of that later.) She had a lot going for her.

She had no reason to suspect that it was all about to change.

But it was.

And, if truth be told, even if she had, it was out of her

hands. There was simply nothing she could have done to prevent it.

Later, she would think how funny it was – the way people could be so deluded. By ‘people’ she meant herself, of course. How she could have thought she’d created the perfect life when, in fact, it was one gust of wind away from toppling over and crashing to the ground.

Pull out the wrong card, nudge the wrong Jenga block, and the whole thing could collapse around your ears, however sturdy you thought you had made the foundations.

When she saw what she saw, Jen knew that it was a chink in the armour. A scratch on the glossy finish. What she didn’t understand – and why would she? – was that that first tiny fissure would allow in the drip that became a flood. That that first flap of a butterfly’s wings would eventually cause the tsunami. Of course she didn’t. If she had, then maybe she would have handled things differently.

She might have looked away, pretended she hadn’t noticed. She might have decided that, really, it was none of her business. Better still, she might have turned on her mid-height uniform heels and run in the other direction.

Jen looked at her watch. There were still three and a half hours to go until her shift ended. She was only a little over halfway through the day. Despite the fact that she liked her job, she didn't like it *that* much. She would still rather be almost anywhere other than here.

She had worked her way up – over the fifteen years since her youngest, Emily, had started nursery – to become the reception manager at a smart boutique hotel in an area of London that had happily been called Fitzrovia for years, but which was now trying to rebrand itself (somewhat desperately, it seemed to Jen) as Noho.

Becoming a manager meant that she earned slightly more money, while still seeming to do exactly the same job she had always done, except for being allowed to boss a couple of people around. Truthfully, she didn't really enjoy that side of things as much as she had thought she might. She would blush when she had to reprimand a junior colleague for arriving late, stutter when she was forced to correct their desk-side manner. She wasn't entirely comfortable becoming one of 'them' after years of being one of 'us'.

The Fitzrovia Hotel cultivated a chichi image. Flock wallpaper and dark wood. Large works of modern art by exciting up-and-coming (read: cheap) artists. At least, they may have been up and coming when the hotel had

opened in the mid-eighties. Now they were all up and gone, as far as Jen could tell. None of them on to greater things.

A spiky iron sculpture took pride of place in reception, occasionally threatening to spear one of the guests who walked too close, the embodiment of the phrase ‘a lawsuit waiting to happen’. The desk behind which Jen spent her days was fashioned from battered copper-coloured metal. Occasionally, when one of the front-of-house staff was having a bad day, they would hit it with whatever implement they could lay their hands on. No one ever seemed to notice a few new dents.

The hotel bar and restaurant attracted the beautiful and not quite so beautiful people who worked in the nearby media companies and art galleries that had gravitated to the area from Soho, drawn to its lower rents and more bohemian atmosphere. (Faux bohemian, Jen always thought – bohemian with a trust fund.) While the occasional visiting TV or movie star who hadn’t been able to get a room at The Charlotte Street, but didn’t want to suffer the more establishment formality of The Dorchester or Claridge’s, would sometimes show up to stay the night.

Jen rarely mixed with them. She generally spent a lot of time dealing with personal assistants, managers, managers’ assistants – and even assistants’ assistants. One time, there had been a third assistant. The assistant to the assistant of the assistant. That was how important she was considered in the world. She got to deal with the help’s help’s help.

Apart from the odd celebrity, the hotel’s guests were

mainly made up of well-to-do tourists and a loyal handful of regulars who made The Fitzrovia their home whenever they were in London on business. It was a friendly place. Only thirty-two rooms. Small enough that they could cater to people's individual needs. Big enough to get noticed.

'Any plans for the weekend?' Her colleague, the imaginatively named Neil McNeil, who was on the desk with her, asked his usual Friday afternoon question.

'Family,' Jen answered, as she always did.

'My wife says the family that plays together stays together . . .'

Jen liked Neil well enough, had been working next to him for years, but every other sentence he uttered began with, 'My wife says . . .' It was almost as if, all the time you were speaking, he was only listening just long enough to get a clue as to which wifely piece of wisdom he could quote back at you. Jen had sometimes worried that if she ever met Neil's wife, the first thing she might say would be, 'Will you stop being such a know-all?'

Most of the full-time staff at the hotel had been there so long they were like family. The dysfunctional kind. The kind you know you have to see, but you hope aren't going to invite themselves for Christmas. Jen, Neil and fellow receptionist Judy Sampson had been working together for nearly twelve years. The general manager, David, had been telling them all what to do for eight. It was rumoured that Margaret in housekeeping had been at The Fitzrovia since the first day it opened, in 1985. No one actually knew if the rumour was true, because Margaret was the hotel bitch and engaging her in conversation meant listening to

hours on end of mean-spirited diatribe about your co-workers. Few people had the stomach for it.

Back in those days, so rumour had it, the hotel had employed twice the staff it boasted now: a guest liaison manager, an events organizer, a dedicated concierge sitting at a desk opposite reception. That had been in the days when The Fitzrovia had been hoping to compete with the big boys. The big boys had clearly won. The Fitzrovia had cut back and accepted its chic boutique status. Jen was glad. She liked the intimacy, the chance to pay attention to the details.

As jobs went, it suited Jen perfectly. She had always been able to fit her shifts around the needs of her family. Now she mentally tried to plan what to get for dinner. She often did this when Neil was talking to her. She could plot through the whole of a recipe followed by a shopping list, in her head, while he told her an anecdote. She had the art of smiling and nodding in all the right places down to a T, while all that was going through her head was: salmon or chicken? Mash or rice?

‘. . . and the thing is, that it doesn’t. I mean, not necessarily.’

She caught the tail end of Neil’s train of thought, had no idea what he was referring to. ‘Um . . . no, I suppose not.’

‘That’s what I said. Unbelievable, isn’t it?’

‘Unbelievable,’ Jen agreed, clueless, surreptitiously checking her watch again.

Waking up early on Saturday morning, Jen allowed herself to indulge in the fantasy that she was going to have to

drag herself out of bed and to the freezing bus stop, before rolling over and settling back down for a couple of blissful hours more. Jason was oblivious, lying on his side. She snuggled up to his warm back, draped her arm round his stomach. This was her favourite time of the week. Actually, she couldn't imagine anyone for whom that wasn't true. Was there anyone in the world who, if asked, would say 'I'm happiest at nine o'clock on a Monday morning when I have the whole week at work to look forward to'? Maybe – if your job was testing mattresses, or helping Ben and Jerry decide which flavour combinations would make the best ice cream.

Five minutes later, she realized there was no chance of her going back to sleep. It felt strange, knowing that neither of the girls was home. Of course, this had happened many times before – they had often stayed over at friends' houses at the weekends – but it was the thought that neither of them was going to be coming back in the foreseeable future that made everything different. Emily had left for Leeds University a week ago, excited but teary, two years after Simone had departed for Durham, and Jen knew it was going to take a bit of getting used to. She was trying to look at it as an opportunity, an adventure, a new chapter. Trying to suppress her fears that life was never going to be the same again. That she wasn't entirely sure if she knew who she and Jason were any more now they were back to being two halves of a couple rather than Mum and Dad. Time would tell if she was right.

It wasn't as if they had still done things together very often, the three of them, since Simone had left home.

Emily had usually had plans that didn't involve her parents. But somehow, knowing that she was just a Tube ride away, that she would sweep in at some point – even if it was just to get changed and sweep out again – had given their lives a framework. They were parents. That was what they did. They hovered about on the periphery of their growing children's lives, waiting to step in and do parenty things. Waiting to be needed.

Jen said a silent thank you that they had the rest of the family around them. Jason's parents, his two sisters, Poppy and Jessie. Poppy's daughter, Jessie's husband. They were a unit, a clan, as close-knit as a family could be without it all tipping over into movie-of-the-week creepiness. They loved to spend time together, gathered in one place as often as they could. Now her girls would come and go less often. That would be the only difference.

For this first weekend, though, distraction was the only solution. No point hanging about at home wondering what their next move should be, sitting by the house phone in case Simone or Emily called, like faithful old Greyfriars Bobby pining on his master's grave. They needed a plan, a distraction, a configuration of smoke and mirrors that would allow them to pretend that nothing had really changed. We're just having a day out without our daughters. No big deal. It's not as if they've both left home and the house feels empty and soulless. It's not as if I'm scared I don't know who we are without them.

Jen's first thought was Poppy, Jason's middle sibling and her closest friend. They could have lunch, do a bit of early Christmas shopping in Richmond (very early, even for

her, a woman who liked to have purchased all her presents by the time anyone else had started), go for a walk along the river if the weather was nice. By the time Jason woke up, half an hour later, she had his whole day mapped out like an overachieving hothouse parent.