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# **The Black Sheep**

Written by Sophie McKenzie

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# THE BLACK SHEEP

SOPHIE MCKENZIE



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*For Philly*

## PROLOGUE

*Alone with the memory of your lies, it took three murders to show me who you really are.*

*You must see who you are too: the brutality and the cruelty, the suffering caused.*

*Right here, right now, I promise you this: whatever else happens, I will bring light from your darkness. I will turn you to face the consequences of your crimes.*

*I will find grace in your weakness. And mercy in your sins.*

# OUR FATHER

*Friday 8 January 2016–  
Friday 15 January 2016*

# FRAN

## 1

I drew Ruby closer as the music faded away. Oasis. ‘Don’t Look Back In Anger’. One of Caspian’s favourites from years ago, before we met. Ruby wiped away her tears and looked up at me with trembling lips.

‘Okay?’ I whispered.

She nodded. On my other side Rufus sat rigid in his chair. A stranger might have thought he wasn’t feeling anything, but I could see the strain behind that blank expression in every muscle of his face. He was thirteen. Ruby just nine. And this was their father’s memorial service. For the thousandth time I wondered if, despite what everyone said about ‘structure’ and ‘ritual’ and the chance to ‘say a proper goodbye’, they were too young to be here. I put my hand on Rufus’s and, for the first time in months, he didn’t shake it off.

‘Are you all right?’

He nodded.

‘That’s it, we can go now.’

The relief on his face was unmistakable. A wave of guilt washed over me. He said so little these days it was impossible to know how he really felt about being here – but I strongly suspected he was putting up with it all because he thought he ought to look after me, not as a helpful part of remembering, or mourning, his dad.

My own father appeared in front of us, solid and grave.

‘Francesca?’ He offered me his arm. A typically formal yet thoughtful gesture. I glanced at Rufus again. ‘Lucy’ll take him,’ Dad said.

Sure enough, my sister was already steering Rufus out of his seat.

I stood up, Ruby clinging to my side, and linked my arm through Dad’s. The touch of his silk suit was soft, yet the material strong. A new song began – some classical piece I didn’t recognise, chosen by Caspian’s parents. My thoughts drifted momentarily from Rufus to my husband. My late husband. At the way he would have demurred over that descriptor – ‘*you’re* the one who tends to be late, darling’ – at the way he would have meekly submitted to his mother’s snobbery in insisting on a string quartet for his funeral ‘even though the only music she ever listens to is Cliff Richard’, at the way it was his dependable arms I wanted around me right now.

Grief, raw and fierce, clutched at my throat, twisting it tight. A sob rose through me and I stumbled. Dad caught me, pulling me close.



‘I know,’ he breathed in my ear. ‘I know, sweetheart.’

He meant Mum of course. Lost suddenly, like Caspian, though in an accident brought on by her diabetes nearly five years ago: prosaic compared to the horror of Caspian’s murder – a knife attack on a sunny September morning the year before last, as he walked from his car to the hospital to begin an early shift.

With a jolt I realised we were outside, the low winter sun in my stinging eyes. I turned from Dad and wiped my face. As I turned back my sister and Rufus joined us, then Dad’s wife, Jacqueline. After the stillness of the hall the outside world seemed harsh and brash. Cars zoomed past. People milled by. Across the tarmac I spotted Dad’s older brother, my Uncle Perry, deep in conversation with Caspian’s parents. I couldn’t see anyone else I knew. Ruby’s arms were still around my waist. I stroked her hair, wishing I’d never agreed to the service. It was true that Caspian’s funeral had been a blur – the shock of his passing too great and too recent to make any sense. But this, today, was just raking all the pain up.

‘It’s a milestone, sweetheart,’ Dad said softly, clearly reading my mind. ‘Something for you and the kids to hold on to.’

‘Though I’m never sure how helpful these things are without a religious structure.’ Jacqueline sighed. ‘I’m sorry, Francesca, that came out wrong. I know Caspian’s parents were just trying to honour his ... his ...’ Her voice faded away.

I focused on the top of Rufus’s head. He was growing

fast. Four inches since the start of the school year. Already up to my shoulders.

‘That’s right,’ Lucy said softly, squeezing my arm. ‘Mr and Mrs Hoffman were just trying to do what Caspian would have wanted.’

I shot my sister a grateful look. These days Lucy carried her Catholicism with a gentle touch. She was devout, no doubt about it, her entire life revolved around daily mass, regular prayer groups and the endless work she did for the church, but she never overtly pushed her faith on anyone else. As usual she was dressed in white, with a long cream jacket over her trademark floaty dress. Jacqueline, in contrast, wore a snappy dark-blue suit and swung a Prada tote from her arm. *Her* religious credentials were a bit like that handbag: something for occasional public display that was stored out of sight at home.

No, that wasn’t fair. Jacqueline was trying to live according to her faith, just as Lucy did. My stepmother might have had a tendency to be prudish and controlling but she was fundamentally kind and certainly brilliant at coping with Dad’s intense personality.

Dad and Jacqueline wandered across the tarmac to join Uncle Perry while Lucy turned to speak to one of the other guests.

‘Can we go soon, Mum?’ I had to bend down to hear Ruby’s whisper. Next to her Rufus leaned in. He wasn’t looking at either of us but I could sense he was as eager as his sister to get away.

They weren’t the only ones. I couldn’t wait to leave

myself. I'd never wanted this service. The whole thing had been Caspian's parents' idea and the hall was full of their friends. Well, several of Caspian's colleagues were here too, thanks to a notice his mum had displayed in the hospital, but I had deliberately kept my invitations to family and a few close friends. And not just because it was hard on the kids. I'd had enough of dealing with strangers who didn't know what to say to me. At the thought a lump lodged in my throat. Once Caspian and I saved each other at parties. But Caspian had been dead for a year and four months and I couldn't remember the last party I'd been to.

Across the gravel a tall man with a long narrow face wearing a dark overcoat was leaning against the wall, not talking to anyone. He was watching me closely; too closely. I looked away. Another reason for not doing this – being the focus of attention was something I loathed.

'Mum?' Ruby repeated.

I glanced down at both children. They gazed back at me with miserable faces. Not for the first time I felt a throb of rage that I'd been left a single parent. It wasn't fair. Not on me.

And certainly not on either of them.

'We can leave soon,' I said. 'Though—'

'Hey, guys.' My cousin Dex materialised in front of us. 'I was wondering where you'd got to, I don't know *anyone* here.' He gave the kids a broad grin then hugged me. Lucy, he simply nodded at. He wasn't being mean, Lucy just wasn't in the slightest bit tactile,

especially not when there was an audience. Even the kids sensed it. In a setting like this it would have felt like an invasion of her privacy to touch her. The last time she and I had held each other in public had been at Mum's funeral five years ago.

'Uncle Dex,' Ruby said, hurling herself into his arms. She adored him; both the kids did. Frankly, Dex was hard to dislike: he emanated warmth and was as charming as he was good-looking.

'Are Rubes and Rufus staying on for the food in the hall?' Dex asked.

'I said we'd play it by ear,' I said, grimacing to indicate that I'd far rather we could all leave straight away.

'Well, if you guys want you can come home with me.' He smiled at Ruby and Rufus. 'I've got the boys this weekend. I'm picking them up in half an hour.'

'Yay!' Ruby clapped her hands together. 'I'm gonna beat last time's keepy-uppy score.' Dex saw his children every other weekend – his marriage had ended years ago, buried under the weight of his many affairs – and we often spent the day together when they were around. Ruby was just a few months older than Dex's eldest, who shared her love of football. While at seven and a half, Dex's younger son was already an expert enough gamer to give Rufus a run for his money.

'That okay with you, Dumpy?' Dex asked, using his old pet name for me from childhood. He'd bestowed it on me when we were just eleven. Dex was already taller than me then and came up with Dumpy mostly as a way to wind me up. To get my own back I started calling him

Scab Face – after a nasty injury he'd sustained in some fight at his boys' school. We both went to single-sex, private Catholic schools. But of course Dex's scab fell off after a few weeks and the name no longer fitted, whereas I was still – and forever – short.

'Please, Mum?' Ruby added. 'Can we go to Uncle Dex's?'

'Sure.' I shot Dex a grateful smile. 'Thanks. I'll join you as soon as I can.'

We had always understood each other, Dex and I, like siblings from the start and especially close after his dad – my Uncle Graham – left his mum just after Dex's twelfth birthday.

Dex walked away across the gravel, holding Ruby's hand. Rufus hurried after them. As usual, every woman present turned to watch Dex as he strolled along. The effect he had never ceased to amaze me. To me he would always be the boy with the gappy teeth and the cowlick, though I had to concede that he looked cool today in his sharp grey suit: all chiselled jaw and bright-green eyes, oozing charisma.

My sister tapped my shoulder. Though several years younger than me, Lucy had been taller since she was thirteen. Like our mother she was heavy-breasted with long, slim legs while I was more evenly proportioned and, of course, far shorter.

'How are you doing?' Lucy asked.

She had buttoned up her jacket and the formality of the stiff wool above the flowing crepe of her dress underneath made her look older than usual. She turned

thirty just a couple of months ago, but regularly got taken for a teenager. It was partly the lack of make-up and jewellery and partly the innocent, almost angelic, fragility that radiated off her in waves.

‘I’m fine,’ I said.

It wasn’t true of course, but since Mum died, there had been a distance between Lucy and me that I didn’t understand and was at a loss to know how to deal with. We talked, but only about superficial things. Or, rather, only about things superficially, as if our outlooks on the world prevented us from really understanding each other. I guessed it had something to do with the things we didn’t share, like her having a faith and my having children. Whatever it was, Caspian’s death hadn’t brought us closer together. Don’t get me wrong. Lucy was brilliant – always on the phone asking if she could help out with the kids or if we wanted to come over for supper. Just that I never really felt we connected. I certainly didn’t understand the choices she’d made – she was smart but had dropped out of uni and still lived in our childhood home with Dad and Jacqueline. She didn’t work – she didn’t need to, thanks to the trust fund she received from Dad – unless you counted her voluntary efforts for the Legion of Mary and her various prayer groups. Most strange of all, despite being staggeringly pretty in a simple, natural way, she had never had a proper boyfriend.

Still, perhaps there were good reasons for that: she’d been seduced when she was fifteen – raped, basically, though typically she refused to see the encounter that

way – and fallen pregnant. She'd had an abortion, which I'd helped arrange without our parents' consent. They'd found out years later and Lucy's shame and humiliation over both the original 'episode' as she referred to it and the subsequent exposure had reinforced her introvert tendencies.

Shy as ever, Lucy slipped away as a paunchy, middle-aged man with thinning sandy hair strode over and planted himself in front of me.

'Francesca, it's so good to see you.'

I blinked, startled. The man was vaguely familiar, but . . .

'Simon Pinner.' He held out his hand and we shook. 'Colleague of your husband's. Good man, Caspian.'

'Hi,' I said, still struggling to place him. 'Are you a gynaecologist too?'

'Another gynae surgeon, yes. For my sins.' He smirked, as if he'd said something funny. 'We actually met briefly at a dinner party two or three years ago. It's good to see you again, though I'm sorry it has to be under such circumstances.' Simon's thin lips stretched into a wet, pink line.

'Oh,' I said. 'Thank you.' Had Caspian liked him? Respected him? I couldn't remember.

'What a lovely service,' Simon went on. 'Well, not a service really, I suppose.'

'It was what Caspian would have wanted, what his parents wanted,' I said, wondering if Simon caught the slight note of resentment in my voice.

'Quite,' he said.

There was a short pause. Dex and the children had vanished. My sister was across the tarmac talking to Dad and Jacqueline. Auntie Sheila – Dex’s mum – had just joined them. As she planted a brief kiss on Jacqueline’s carefully powdered cheek I caught sight of the tall, dark stranger with the narrow face. He was on the edge of the crowd, still watching me. It was too much. I badly wanted to leave.

‘I’d love to take you out to dinner,’ Simon said.

*What?* I stared at him, taking in his face properly. He was in his fifties, I guessed, with weather-beaten skin and watery-blue eyes. Not remotely attractive, but not hideous. Recently I had started guiltily to fantasise about dating again. Nothing serious, not with the kids, just to hang out with someone new, someone who didn’t see me solely as Caspian’s widow or the mother of bereaved children. I missed the conversation. The being held. The sex.

Still, there was no way I was going anywhere with someone who thought it was okay to ask me out at my husband’s memorial service.

‘Thank you,’ I said, floundering for the right way to say no. ‘But I have the kids ...’

Simon waved his hand dismissively. ‘I’m rather a simple sort ... simple Simon, you might say ...’ He chuckled to himself. ‘But I know a thing or two about fine French wines and I’ve got a definite sixth sense for a decent menu.’

Though not much of a sixth sense for a brush-off, I thought to myself.



‘I’m afraid I can’t,’ I said, more firmly.

‘Can’t or won’t?’ Simon smirked. ‘Ah, well. I’m sure we can work it out.’

What did that mean?

Simon waved his fingers at me and walked away. I was alone. I felt cold, though the winter sun was still shining brightly. Simon Pinner was definitely not a potential date, but maybe I should go for dinner with *someone*.

The idea of it scared me, but it also felt exciting.

Not that I wasn’t still mourning Caspian. Every day I missed him, while every week brought a new aspect of living without him, from dealing with the car – which had always been his province – to the suspicions constantly rearing that when Rufus grunted at me or Ruby persisted in wanting to play football ‘like boys do, Mummy’, it wasn’t just hormones but unprocessed grief that was being acted out.

‘Francesca?’ Dad materialised in front of me. ‘They’ve laid out some food in the memorial hall. Shall we go back inside?’

Eating was the last thing I felt like doing, but I let Dad take my arm, bracing myself as we returned to the hall. Two large tables had been set up at the end of the room, each one covered with a white cloth and a selection of silver platters containing meats and salads. A waiter offered me a glass of white wine. I took a sip. It was warm.

A moment later I was hugging Caspian’s parents, who were keen for me to meet various guests. I spent the next

fifteen minutes shaking hands and accepting condolences from people who clearly had only known Caspian as a child or very briefly and superficially as an adult.

It was exhausting and I was grateful when Lucy whispered in Dad's ear that I was tired and he, in turn, drew Caspian's mother to one side and said in his usual forceful manner that he was going to take me home in a few minutes. Such protective actions were typical of them both – indeed Dad's overprotectiveness had driven me mad when I was younger and rebelling against his Catholic strictures – and though there had been many times over the past year when I'd felt overwhelmed, even suffocated, by their attempts to look after me, right now I was grateful.

I caught sight of Simon Pinner again, edging towards me past a table laden with bread rolls, and I hurried off to the ladies. I took my time, emerging a few minutes later with a fresh layer of make-up. Simon, thankfully, was nowhere to be seen. I headed over to the long coat rail to the right of the exit, intending to get my coat and make my goodbyes. As I ran my hand over the rough wool jackets hanging from the rail a male voice said my name.

Heart sinking, thinking it was Simon again, I turned.

The tall man with the narrow face I'd noticed earlier was standing in front of me.

'Hello,' I said, bracing myself. Was this another colleague of Caspian's?

'Harry Dunbar,' the man said, holding out his hand. He had a flat-vowelled Manchester accent. 'I'm so sorry for your loss.'

I smiled as I shook. There was an endearing intensity about the man. He was better looking than I'd realised too: not in Dex's league, but his eyes were a deep chocolate brown and there was a masculine elegance to the slope of his nose and the curve of his cheekbones.

'Did you know Caspian?' I asked.

'No, not really.' Harry hesitated. 'Well . . . we met at a conference just over a year ago, just before he . . . that conference in Paris.'

I nodded, remembering. 'It was the last trip Caspian did,' I said.

'I know.' Harry hesitated again. 'Look, I'm sorry turning up like this but I've been abroad for work and I didn't know Caspian had died until I read about the memorial service in the hospital newsletter a couple of weeks ago.'

'Oh.' I gazed at him. 'Are you another gynaecologist?'

'No.' Harry smiled and the effect transformed his face, making him seem almost mischievous. 'I'm a sales rep for a small company . . . Devora Pharmaceuticals. Look, that doesn't matter.' His face grew solemn again. 'Truth is that I hardly knew your husband, but I had to come here today to let you know what he told me.'

'Sorry?' Most of the room was hidden from view by the coat rail. I could see Dad out of the corner of my eye. He was looking around, presumably for me. 'Sorry, I'm not sure what—'

'Caspian and I met in the bar of the conference hotel,' Harry interrupted. He looked awkward now, his forehead creased with a frown. 'We were in a group,

drinking, then the two of us got talking, then ... then Caspian said something. He was tired, a bit drunk. His guard was down. I guessed from what everyone said that you had – have – no idea ...’

My heart lurched into my mouth. ‘What are you saying?’

‘I’m saying that my understanding is that everyone including the police think your husband got caught up in a random knife attack, a mugging gone wrong or something.’

‘Yes, but—’

‘It wasn’t random. At least, I don’t think it was.’

The chatter in the room whirled around us. I kept my gaze on Harry’s soft brown eyes. ‘Why ... why would you say that?’

‘No one was ever caught, were they?’

‘No.’ The police’s investigation had stalled early on thanks to the lack of witnesses and DNA evidence. A hooded man had been seen on CCTV getting into a stolen Vauxhall Astra on the next street shortly after the stabbing but he’d never been identified and the car had never been found, though a burnt-out Astra – number plates removed – was discovered in an Essex wood two weeks later. ‘Why are you saying it wasn’t a random attack? Whoever it was stole all the cash from Caspian’s wallet.’

‘Yeah, I read that when I looked up the story. *Murdered for £150*. That was the headline, wasn’t it?’

I nodded, wincing at the memory. ‘Why do you think different?’

‘Because your husband told me in that bar he was being threatened.’

*‘Threatened?’*

‘He hadn’t said anything to you because he didn’t want to worry you, but sometimes we tell strangers things and he told me he thought his life was in danger.’ Harry paused.

‘What else?’ I asked, sensing he was holding something back.

‘He said that the threats were coming from someone specific.’ Harry held my gaze. ‘From someone close to you both.’