

A Mother's Guide to Cheating

Kate Long

Published by Simon & Schuster

Extract

All text is copyright © of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

A MOTHER'S GUIDE TO CHEATING

Kate Long



London · New York · Sydney · Toronto

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2010
A CBS COMPANY

Copyright © Kate Long, 2010

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.

No reproduction without permission.

® and © 1997 Simon & Schuster Inc. All rights reserved.

The right of Kate Long to be identified as author of this work
has been asserted by her in accordance with sections 77 and 78
of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

1st Floor

222 Gray's Inn Road

London WC1X 8HB

www.simonsays.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia

Sydney

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978-1-84737-750-0

Trade Paperback ISBN 978-1-84737-751-7

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places
and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or are
used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead,
events or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Typeset by M Rules

Printed and bound in Great Britain by xxx

For Alexandra WILLOW Lister
9 May 2005 – 15 June 2008

CHAPTER 1

Photograph 46

Location: the back garden at Pincroft, Bolton

Taken by: Dad

Subject: The rear of the house, flat and rendered, looks over a straight-sided lawn bordered by bare black earth. Can a garden look packed-away? This one does. The beds remain unfilled, and will stay that way till spring. Round the front, though, it's a whole different story: Carol's mother Frieda has planted blocks of purple and white pansies, there is an Alpine rockery and even a little sundial. But the front of the 1930s semi boasts a gable with a tile pattern, and a bay window, and a proper porch, and is on view to passers-by. This is 1963. Appearances matter.

At the top edge of the picture is Carol White, aged eight. She is raking up fallen beech leaves, as a punishment. She has on her black wellies, brown crimplene trews, a yellow jumper, and a face like thunder.

Asked, the day before, to go round and pick snails off the hedge, Carol instead attempted a rescue. She should have drowned the snails in her bucket, but when it came to turning on the outside tap, she couldn't bring herself to do it. They

were, when she examined them, unexpectedly beautiful, the radiating flecks on their shells reminding her of the patterns in her own irises. Then there were the little jelly feelers, so friendly and sad. Nothing else to do but line an Oxo tin with leaves, and tumble the snails on top, with the lid open a crack for air.

For such slow creatures, snails (it turns out) can cover a lot of ground in six hours. The square of bedroom carpet has had to be scrubbed, the wallpaper wiped down and the candlewick bedspread put on a hot wash. There it hangs at the opposite edge of the picture, a soggy curtain in tufted salmon.

'What did you think you were doing?' cries Frieda, her voice shrill with martyrdom. 'As if I haven't enough on, trying to keep this place decent.'

No good trying to explain. In her mother's book, cleanliness will always trump invertebrate welfare. If it wasn't for Dad, Carol thinks, she'd pack her satchel and go live in the forest like the Babes in the Wood.

2007

Sometimes I think I had a premonition. That the moment I picked up the phone, I had this sense something was wrong. But more likely, it being a Wednesday evening, I'd have been rushing round trying to get washed up and cleared away before going to the gym, and not thinking about anything other than where I'd put my water bottle and whether it was too late to walk – in which case I needed to shift the wheelie-bin and get the car out of the garage.

I do remember I couldn't tell who was speaking at first, because Jaz was in such a state. Then I managed to make out 'Mum', and that's when I started to get frightened. I said, 'Jaz, love, what's the matter?' She just cried harder. I said, 'Jaz, are you all right?' which was a daft question because of course she

wasn't all right, she was absolutely beside herself, incoherent. And she's normally so cool, so laid-back; that or in a temper about something. Not tears, though, she's never been one for tears.

So I said, 'What's happened? Whatever's the matter?'

She said, 'He told me, Mum, he told me straight out.' Which I couldn't make sense of. All I knew was that something was dreadfully wrong.

It's amazing how you can go from calm to terrified in a few seconds, like revving up a car. I made myself ask, 'Is it Matty?' Because that was the very worst scenario I could imagine; the call every grandparent dreads. I remember looking down at my hand where it was holding the edge of the chair, and the knuckles were white, and at the back of my mind I was making all these mad bargains with heaven and fate – anything.

'It's not Matty,' I heard her say.

My legs nearly gave out with relief. Thank You, God, thank You, God, I was saying in my head. At least if Matty was all right, if my Matty was safe and sound, I could cope with whatever was coming.

'Tell me, love,' I said. 'Whatever is it? Surely we can sort it out?'

'No, Mum,' she said. 'It's all shattered, all of it.'

They say families follow certain patterns. Like, if you're knocked about as a kid, you might end up marrying someone who knocks you about, and if your mother's a cold fish, you're going to find it hard to bond with your own children. I'd have said that was phooey: thinking of my own mum Frieda, and how she was with me, and how I've been with Jaz, there's no comparison. But then, you don't know what children take in when they're young. You can run yourself ragged for them, and

they'll still seize on the one thing you did wrong. Which in my case was to marry a cheat.

Which, it turned out, was what Jaz had done.

Normally it takes me fifteen minutes to get to the other side of Nantwich: I did it in eight. I don't know what I was expecting when I pulled up outside the house. Smashed windows, a pile of Ian's belongings on the front steps, maybe. Instead everything looked normal: planters full of dead lobelia, plastic cart of Matty's in the middle of the drive, gate off its hinges. One day, I thought, Ian might actually get round to fixing the place up. Or not.

Jaz had left the door on the latch for me, so I went straight in. There's always a lot of clutter in Jaz and Ian's hall and it's narrow to begin with, so I had to go carefully, stepping over shoes and squeezing round the pushbikes and pausing to pick up clothes I'd dislodged from the radiator. Piles of stuff on the stairs, as usual; it would drive me round the bend if I lived here. I don't ever criticise, though. That would be asking for trouble.

As soon as I called her name she appeared in the kitchen doorway.

'Oh, love,' I said.

She's always been a beautiful girl. I've tried never to make a big deal of it, but other people would comment, especially when she was little. 'Child model,' Mrs Wynne next door used to say. 'You should send her photo off.' Even when she started with her piercings and her long clothes, my daughter still turned heads.

Now, though, standing in front of me in this gloomy hall, she just looked a mess. Her eyes were red and swollen, marked with tracks of mascara, and her long, thick hair was all over the place. The baggy black jumper made her seem much younger than her twenty-seven years.

I moved forward to give her a hug, but she started to talk in a way that kept me back.

'Complete fucking *bastard*,' she said. 'I can't believe what he's done. Just goes, "Yeah, I've slept with someone". Like it was nothing. Like it was *fucking nothing*.'

Even though there was no questioning her distress, I had some trouble taking in the image. Ian – casually announcing his infidelity? Surely not. One of us must have it wrong.

'Are you saying – he's admitted he's having an affair?'

'Of course he's *fucking* admitted it! That's what I've been *telling you!*' She struck the doorframe with the flat of her hand, and I saw tears drop off her chin.

So that was it. There didn't seem to be any doubt. Ian, the boy everyone liked: shyly spoken, posh, gawky. Decent, we'd thought. Straightforward. Good for Jaz. That big wedding four years ago, all for nothing. Marquee, open-topped car, special bamboo holders for the flowers. Dress that she wanted altering right at the last minute. I still had the pillars off the cake sitting on my kitchen shelf.

'Oh, love,' I said again.

'I hate him, Mum. I *hate him*. If he was here now, I swear I'd fucking kill him. I would, I swear. I'm not joking. I'd *fucking* kill him.'

'Where's Matty?' I asked cautiously.

Jaz looked at me as though I was mad. 'He's up-fucking-stairs. In his cot. Where did you think he was? On the *fucking moon?*'

I didn't dare ask if he was OK in case she took it the wrong way, but suddenly I was desperate to see. 'I thought I heard him calling,' I fibbed, and scooted back down the hall.

By the time I got to the top of the stairs, my blood was pounding. Matty's door was a few inches ajar and the night light showing. With extreme care I pushed the door open

further, wincing at the shush-scrape of the carpet, and stuck my head round.

The sight of him asleep always makes me catch my breath. He was lying on his back with his fists balled, the way he used to when he was a tiny baby, and his lips were slightly parted. Dawg was underneath him, grey cloth tail poking out. ‘You’re going to have to get him one of those toddler beds soon,’ I’d said to Jaz only the week before. ‘And you reckon he’ll stay there, do you?’ had been her reply. ‘You think he’ll lie down, stick his thumb in his mouth, and that’ll be it till the morning?’ She said she wanted to wait till he could climb out of the cot unaided before letting him loose with a bed. So I went along with it. He’s her child, after all.

I stood there in the calm dim glow of his moon-shaped lamp and watched his little chest move up and down, up and down, till I felt ready to go back downstairs. To be honest, I could have stayed there all night.

She was sitting at the kitchen table, head in hands, her coloured scarves draping down over plates and mugs and papers and books. When she heard me, she sat upright and I thought, At least she’s stopped crying.

‘Where’s Ian?’ I asked, drawing back a chair.

‘Fuck knows.’

I waited for her to go on.

‘It was a text.’ Jaz looked as though she was about to spit. ‘We were in here, talking about his day, everything normal. A bog-standard tea-time. Next thing his phone bleeps, but he doesn’t open it, he takes it off into the lounge, really shiftfy. And you know that way he has of pushing his glasses up when he’s nervous about something? It was such a weird reaction he might as well have waved a fucking flag, though I don’t think he realised. Too much on his mind. When he

went up to run Matty's bath, I got out the phone and checked.'

The lights on the baby monitor flickered briefly, settled.

'What did it say? Can you tell me?'

She shrugged as if she was past caring. 'It said: *What did you dream last night?*'

I was seeing it with her, imagining the letters on the screen.

'Well, perhaps it wasn't necessarily—'

'Then some kisses.'

'Oh.'

'Then a name.'

Without warning she got up, grabbed a mug off the table and slammed it onto the quarry tiles at her feet. It shattered like a bomb.

'Her fucking *name*. Now I'll always know it!'

'Good God, Jaz. You'll wake Matty.'

Her eyes, when she looked at me, were wild and stary, and for a moment I didn't know what to do. What *do* you do when everything you thought was safe is just falling apart?

Then I thought, Sod it, someone's got to get a grip.

I began to stack the dirty plates on the table, because I can't think straight when everywhere's untidy. While my daughter stood in the middle of the room grasping her own hair, I ferried crockery to the sink, ran the hot tap, and set to gathering pieces of broken cup. 'You can't leave it like this,' I said. 'If Matty walks in here with no slippers tomorrow morning—'

She bent and took a single sliver of white china between her finger and thumb.

'Come on, love,' I said. 'Let's clear away and then I'll make us a hot drink and we can go sit in the lounge. It'll be better there.'

I guided her to the bin, then handed her a damp cloth so she

could wipe up all the very tiny fragments. As I washed and stacked, I kept an eye on her.

‘Don’t touch my papers,’ she said at one point, when I reached across the table for a dirty spoon.

As if. Even when she lived under my roof I never dared interfere with her stuff.

Once I’d finished the dishes it was tempting to go through the whole kitchen, collect up all the books and toys and carry them next door, put away the pans and bowls that had been left out, stick the pot plants in for a good soak and wipe the soil off the windowsill. Some of her leaflets and postcards had fallen off the cork board; there was a pile of assorted boots on the doormat. I longed to put these small things right.

Instead I brewed two teas, picked up the baby monitor, and led Jaz through to the sofa. We sat for a while watching the television play mutely, pictures of a bossy-looking woman preparing vegetables in a low-beamed kitchen.

‘Don’t,’ she said, when she saw me eyeing the hearth, and the tumbler containing six wax crayons in an inch of orange squash.

‘It might tip over.’

‘And you think I care?’

The woman on TV yanked a chicken open and paused, smugly. I wondered where Ian was and what he was doing right at this moment.

Jaz said: ‘When I asked him about the text he looked – frozen. Like he had no idea what to say. I mean, he obviously wasn’t expecting the question. So I asked him again and he came right out with it. I suppose he didn’t have time to think up a story. No time to prepare a defence.’ She laughed bitterly. ‘He could have said it was a mistake. People get phone numbers wrong, don’t they? Why didn’t he go for straight denial? I might have bought it.’

'You wouldn't.'

'No, you're right, I wouldn't. *Fuck* him. Why didn't he *delete* it?'

I said, 'Did he tell you much else?'

'Only that he'd seen her twice. He met her in the pub near where he works. The first time they did anything, they only kissed. Apparently. The next time, he went back to hers. It was a lunchtime. So much more *convenient*.' She flopped back against the Indian throw. 'What I don't get, Mum, what I don't get is – you know, actually I don't get *fucking any* of it. It's so, it's out of the blue, I wasn't expecting it, I didn't think there was anything wrong. There's nothing wrong with me, is there?'

That made me want to cry. Really I needed to hold her, but she was still too spiky; she'd have pushed me away and I couldn't have stood that on top of everything else. I said, 'Jaz, there's nothing wrong with you. Ian must be having some kind of, I don't know, crisis.'

'I'll give him a *fucking* crisis,' she said.

By now the woman chef was sharing her chicken with some laughing friends at a pristine table. 'See my glorious world,' she was saying. I'd have turned the bloody TV off if I'd stood a chance of finding the remote.

'Did he say he was sorry?'

'Yeah. And that he'll never see her again, it meant nothing, one-off, blah blah. Like they do.'

'It's not always talk,' I said. 'Sometimes they mean it.'

Jaz gave me a withering look.

'I'm sure he'll come back.'

'He'd better not.'

'I don't mean straight away, obviously. When things have calmed down. Then you can talk, and try to get to the root of—'

She sat up and leaned towards me. 'You're not getting it, Mum. Ian's gone because I've thrown him out.'

'Well, yes, I see. And I know that just at this moment you'll be feeling—'

'Mum, read my lips,' she said. 'This marriage is over. Over. Ian's made his position clear. *I'm* not good enough – *this* isn't enough for him.' She swung her arm round to take in the room with all its evidence of family life: the stack of toddler vests balanced on the chair arm, the tumbled Duplo, Ian's computer magazines mixed with her foreign language dictionaries, and cardboard wallets dumped all along the top of the sideboard and the coffee-table and the windowseat.

'Oh, I'm sure it is enough, love, it's—'

'The one thing I won't do,' she cut in, 'let's be totally clear on this, is live with a man who doesn't put his marriage first. A man who lies and cheats. A man who thinks he can get away with treating me like a fool because I'll always turn a blind eye, I'll always forgive him. Make like I'm a *fucking* doormat. 'Cause that's not me and I won't have it; I've never taken shit from anyone and I'm not about to start now.' The baby monitor crackled and she nodded at it angrily. 'Plus, I'm not bringing Matty up in that kind of a household. No way. I'm not putting either of us through that pantomime. Damaging him. He doesn't need a childhood like *that*.'

And I thought, So here we go. I might have known it would come down to this. Somehow it turns out to be my fault, again.