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Louise Walsh

NOT FUNNY – NOT CLEVER

*Also by Jo Verity and available from Honno*

Everything in the Garden  
Bells  
Sweets from Morocco

NOT FUNNY – NOT CLEVER

by

Jo Verity

HONNO MODERN FICTION

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For Lucy and Hannah



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## **Apology**

In writing *Not Funny – Not Clever* I may have tinkered with the topography of Llangennith and the Gower peninsula. I hope those of you who know and love the area will forgive me.





## **1** SATURDAY: 9.55AM

Elizabeth began piling things on the bed.

Trousers. Short-sleeved shirts. A thin sweater. Toiletries. A couple of novels. (She and Diane had plenty of catching up to do but Di could sometimes be demanding and she might be glad to tune out for an hour or two.)

Catching a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the wardrobe door, she paused to take stock. Whenever she looked in a mirror she was vaguely disappointed by what she saw. When she was six, she'd studied her reflection every morning, hoping that *today* was the day when Pippi Longstocking would be grinning back at her. But it was always the same gap-toothed girl with straight brown hair; the sort of girl who stood on the periphery of a group, tending to be overlooked when teams were chosen or hands went up to answer a question. As that girl grew up she'd continued peering into mirrors, on the off-chance that Scarlett O'Hara or Elizabeth Bennett or Annie Lennox might greet her. With her fiftieth birthday looming, she'd almost abandoned hope.

She was taller than average, big-boned but not overweight. Her mid-brown hair, cut in a geometric bob – she'd worn it like that since her college days – showed barely a trace of grey. Her face had a generic quality. She knew this to be the case because at least once a week she

was mistaken for someone else. Whenever she was on the Tube, she scrutinised the faces of her fellow travellers, wondering whether this might be the day when she encountered herself in the seat opposite. In repose, she looked solemn. (Laurence – probably to boost her morale – said that her face reminded him of an El Greco saint.) When she wasn't thinking about anything at all, people often asked what was troubling her. She wished she had a fiver for every time she'd heard, 'Cheer up. It might never happen'. Once, when she was seeking advice on a shade of lipstick, the girl on the Estée Lauder counter had announced cheerfully, 'I've worked out what's wrong with your face. Your eyes droop down at the corners. Your mouth does too. And actually – don't take this the wrong way – your nose is a bit ... masculine.' Making sure the girl was watching, she'd bought a preposterously expensive lipstick from the Christian Dior stand nearby.

During the course of the morning, the piles multiplied, spreading across the bedspread like molehills on a perfect lawn. In case Carl had organised tickets for a concert, she dug out a silk shirt, strappy sandals and the pretty beaded bag that Laurence bought her in Italy last year. In case she and Di spent a girlie evening at home, she added a large bar of dark chocolate and a couple of DVDs that she hadn't got around to watching. What about a swimming costume? She'd only increased one dress size in the twenty-eight years since she was a bride, nevertheless there were bits of her that she wasn't keen on exposing, even to her closest friends. She left her swimming costume in the drawer.

The phone rang. It was Diane.

'You are coming, aren't you?' she asked.

'Yes. I'm packing now. What do I need to bring? I'm sure to forget something vital.'

'Cross-country skis? A thing for getting stones out of horses hooves? A turkey baster?'

Elizabeth smiled, gazing at the bed. 'Yep. Got 'em all. And a fondue set.'

'I can't wait to see you. Carl has some teaching to do. And a few rehearsals. So we'll have plenty of time to have a *proper* chat. It's never the same on the phone.'

'Everything's okay, isn't it?' Elizabeth asked.

'Of course. But... you know. And, in honour of your visit, I've bought a piece of beef. I shall cook a pukka Sunday dinner. Gravy. Yorkshires. The works. You wouldn't be getting *that* if Laurence were coming with you.'

Elizabeth laughed. 'Why on earth not?'

'To begin with it would have to be 'Sunday *lunch*' – which isn't the same thing at all. Now he's come over all *cordon bleu*, I'd be scared to present him with anything as prosaic as meat and two veg.'

'I suspect that you're not alone. We rarely get invited to dinner parties these days. And when people come here for a meal, Laurence spends the whole evening in the kitchen reducing his *jus* or fiddling with his *flambé*.'

Diane adopted an American drawl. 'Whatever floats your boat.'

They said their farewells and Elizabeth embarked on the next phase of her packing.

She was a ‘roller’ not a ‘folder’ and, rolling the items of clothing into tight sausages, she placed them side by side on the bed. This reduced the volume dramatically. She’d remarked on this phenomenon to Laurence and he’d smiled indulgently before going on to explain, with great patience, that the laws of physics made this impossible. ‘Well it looks less to me,’ she’d countered, leaving the room before he could go in to incomprehensible detail.

When the boys were small, packing had been a real palaver. After days of washing and ironing, she would gather together enough T-shirts, sweaters and shorts to see them through the holiday, only to turn around two minutes later and catch her sons bouncing on the bed, screeching with excitement – two chubby yo-yos, clad in layer upon layer of clean clothes. At the time it had exasperated her but now she saw that it had been as much a part of the holiday as the first glimpse of the sea. And it certainly hadn’t done any harm to the clothes which were soon to be squashed into a trunk and carted off to Cornwall, or West Wales, to be drenched with sea spray and dribbled with ice cream.

Through the party wall the low moan of a vacuum cleaner was punctuated by sporadic *clunks*. She pictured Maggie singing as she blithely rammed the Dyson into the skirting board, and she sent up a grateful ‘thank you’ to the patron saint of cleaning ladies for Anja who came in twice a week and who had infinite respect for woodwork.

She took the spare set of keys from the dresser drawer and left the house. Sitting on the low red-brick wall that separated the front gardens she swung her legs

over, a manoeuvre that she'd performed so many times. It took several sharp raps on the Kaufmans' doorknocker before the cleaner stopped and Maggie, face glowing, dark hair dragged back in a pony-tail, opened the door. 'Hi. Come on in.'

'You're busy,' Elizabeth said. 'Don't let me hold you up. I've brought the keys.'

'I was just about to take a break. Time for a quick coffee?'

Maggie led the way down the narrow hall into the kitchen beyond. 'When are you off?'

'First thing in the morning. If I leave at seven, I'll be halfway down the M4 before London wakes up.'

'You've decided to drive?'

'Yes. All that stuff about cheap train tickets is a con. Apparently if I'd booked months ago it would have cost me eleven pounds to travel from Paddington to Cardiff, and nine pounds to come back again. That's as long as I was on my "nominated train".'

'It sounds more like an Oscar ceremony than a public transport system,' Maggie observed. '*And the nominations for the cheapest train from Paddington to Cardiff are...*'

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. 'It's academic anyway because, as I didn't make the final decision to go until yesterday, it would cost me nearer seventy pounds.'

'Spontaneity always comes at a price,' Maggie said.

'It's not the money. Or not *just* the money. When I phoned to double-check the ticket price, Mr Helpful was delighted to tell me that the Severn Tunnel is going to be closed for "essential maintenance" this weekend. Trains to

South Wales are being re-routed via Gloucester. What with that and the faff of hauling my bag to the station I thought stuff it, I'll drive. My carbon footprint will be enormous but I'll be free of the whims of First Great Western.'

'Being green's never straightforward,' Maggie said. 'Anything you want me to do, apart from watering and feeding the cat?'

'You might check that the postman doesn't leave anything sticking out of the letterbox. I can't think of anything else. I've taken the hanging baskets down. They're with the pots, next to the water butt. There are a couple of watering cans – the plastic one with the rose is best for the...'

Elizabeth shook her head. 'Sorry. I've spent too long micro-managing teachers and teenagers.'

Maggie wasn't much younger than Elizabeth yet her three children were still at primary school, the youngest only five years old. On the whole, Elizabeth was glad that she'd been a young mother. (*Too* young, her own mother had insisted when, at twenty-three she'd given birth to Ben.) She'd stayed at home to look after him, (and Alex when he came along two years later) because it was what women did in the early eighties, unless they were very rich or very poor. On difficult days, feeling isolated, exhausted and bored, she'd dreamed of a future when, motherly duties discharged, she would embark on the thrilling career that *must* lie ahead. Seeing Maggie now, surrounded by Lego and Barbies and half-eaten rounds of toast and Marmite, Elizabeth wondered how her neighbour, who had by all accounts been a big cheese in

the publishing world, remained so sanguine about what she had sacrificed.

‘Heard from Laurence?’ Maggie asked, placing two mugs of instant coffee and a packet of HobNobs on the grungy kitchen table.

‘Yes. Twice actually. On Wednesday to let me know he’d arrived safely, and yesterday to tell me he’d cooked something unpronounceable involving offal.’

Maggie grimaced. ‘Nice.’

‘Then, when I told him I’d decided to drive down to visit Di and Carl, he spent five minutes giving me instructions. Set the security alarm, check the tyre pressures on the car, lock the shed—’

‘Well, you *are* only a woman.’ Maggie held out the packet of biscuits. ‘I can’t remember when I last spent a few days with my best friend. I envy you. Steph and I phone and email and all that stuff but it’s not the same as spending time with her. Revisiting old triumphs and disasters. Slagging off everyone we used to know.’

‘Checking for wrinkles.’

‘And Botox.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Your friend’s a painter, isn’t she? She sounds interesting. You’re in for a fun time.’

‘Maybe. Diane’s certainly not one to let convention stand in her way. She can be a bit ... frenetic at times. Still, if it gets too gruelling I can beat a retreat. I’ve done that before now.’

Then, registering how quiet the house was, she asked ‘Where is everyone?’



‘Simon’s taken them swimming. I’m supposed to be having a sort out here.’ Maggie waved her arms about as if Elizabeth might have failed to notice the chaos surrounding them.

They’d been neighbours for ten years and the women got on well. They discussed the new people who had moved in over the road and chatted about the Kaufmans’ forthcoming camping trip to France.

Elizabeth finished her coffee and rinsed her mug. ‘I’ll let you get on. Ring me if there’s a problem. At least these days there aren’t goldfish to go belly up or hamsters to make their great escape.’

‘No worries. Have a great time and see you ... when?’

‘Laurence won’t be home until next Sunday, so I’m a free agent for the whole week.’

‘Don’t come dashing back. The longer you’re away the less guilty I’ll feel when I ask you to do the same for us.’

By mid afternoon Elizabeth had crossed almost everything off her ‘to do’ list. She’d been to the hole in the wall, sent her brother-in-law a birthday card and taken Laurence’s books back to the library. Anja wasn’t coming in this week – she’d gone home to visit her family in Krakow – so she’d cleared the ironing pile, emptied the bins and checked that nothing was festering in the fridge. Oh, and she mustn’t forget to charge her phone. Now she stood in the sitting room, reluctant to sit down and un-plump the plumped cushions. In the end she picked up one of the paperbacks that she was planning to take to

Cardiff, poured herself a glass of white wine, and went into the garden.

When the family had outgrown the flat and were looking for a house, this garden had been what had clinched it. It was small by conventional standards but this was London and they were lucky to find an affordable property with anything more than a dank back yard. Laurence was just establishing himself with the firm and she wasn't working. (They'd done the sums and her modest earnings would have been more than gobbled up in childcare fees.) But due to the timely (if sad) death of her grandfather, they had, thanks to his generous bequest to her, been able to scrape together a reasonable deposit and buy the house.

When the boys reached their mid-teens and their electric guitars, gormless friends and man-sized feet had crowded the place out, they'd looked for somewhere more spacious. After an unsettling summer of house-hunting, they agreed that none of the properties they'd viewed felt like home and calculating that, before too long, she and Laurence would have the house to themselves, they'd added a loft extension and stayed put. The area had gone up in the world at about the same rate as their aspirations and there was no reason to move.

Elizabeth dragged her chair into the shade of the garden shed and picked up her book. The story began with some sort of family gathering. Everyone's name started with 'M' – Martha, Mark, Murdo, Melanie – and by the time she reached the bottom of the second page she'd lost track of the whole lot.

She put the book down on the grass and closed her eyes.

The afternoon heat built, trapped within the garden's crumbly red-brick walls. Children's voices merged with humming lawnmowers and grumbling aeroplanes. Her thoughts drifted idly to her own family and she pictured the earth, spinning its way through space, red-tipped map pins marking their scattered whereabouts.

Laurence, in a *manoir* somewhere between Aix and Arles. He'd have spent the morning shopping at the local market, squeezing and sniffing the produce, charming everyone with his schoolboy French. Now, whilst the rest of the group took a nap, he would be swatting, poring over cook books, planning embellishments and extras to make his dishes *that bit different*. Laurence liked to be top of the class.

The earth turned.

Houston. Ben on his way to work. No, it was Saturday, wasn't it? He'd still be asleep, sprawled diagonally across the vast bed that she'd seen in the video clip he'd sent. Ben had never managed to explain to her exactly what it was he did 'in IT', or why he had to go to all the way to Houston to do it. The main thing was that he sounded happy (and a little smug) which probably meant that her mental picture should include a woman at his naked side.

An ice-cream van jangled *Greensleeves* over towards the park and the chemical smell of whatever it was people used to start their barbecues, tainted the air.

Where did Alex say they would be playing this week? A folk festival in Northumbria? Then on to

Scotland for some kind of a tour? Transit vans and tents; tie-dyed T-shirts and dream catchers. Alex sitting on the grass, tuning his fiddle, Vashti Fry at his side, plaiting beads into his hair and singing. They'd had minor successes at a few off-off-off-Glastonbury events and Alex had been keen to tell her that some sort of 'talent scout' had recently contacted him. He seemed convinced that they were going to make it – whatever that amounted to in the world of folk music.

Alex was twenty-five now and it was high time he got over all this 'finding himself' nonsense. His 'gap year' had extended to eighteen months and the university had only held his place because silver-tongued Laurence had charmed them. After all that, he'd dropped out after his second year – 'deferring' he'd called it, but that implied resumption and there was no sign of that happening especially now he'd become obsessed with this weird woman. (Why would a woman in her mid-thirties bother with someone ten years her junior who was neither rich nor particularly good-looking? 'Perhaps he's good in bed,' Laurence had suggested – rather coarsely, she thought.) Her hope was that Vashti would tire of him and that, after a suitable period of misery, he would pull himself together and move on to someone more ... conventional. It seemed harsh for a mother to wish such a thing for her son but, in the long run, it would be best for everyone.

When she opened her eyes, the sun had moved around and her chair was no longer in the shade. Her tongue seemed too big inside her mouth and, if she wrinkled her nose, it felt stiff, a sure sign that it had

caught the sun. She glanced at her watch. Gone five. She must have slept for the best part of an hour. A cup of tea, that's what she needed, then she would finish packing.

Whilst the kettle boiled, she went in search of more promising reading matter and was debating whether it was time to re-read *Pride and Prejudice* when the door bell rang. As she walked down the hall, she could make out the wavering forms of two people through the dimpled pane at the top of the door. Placing her right foot squarely behind the door (a tip picked up from the Neighbourhood Watch Newsletter), she opened it a few inches and peered out. A youngish man and a teenage boy stood in the porch. Neither looked particularly threatening.

'Yes?' she said.

The man smiled. 'Hi. You must be Elizabeth. I'm Toby.'

'Toby?'

'Toby Broadbent?' He hesitated. 'Alex *did* phone, didn't he?'

She glanced behind her to the hall table where an illuminated '1' was blinking on the telephone cradle. Patting her pocket, she remembered that her mobile was on the worktop, out of battery and waiting to be charged.

'If he did, I missed it. He's alright, is he?'

'He was fine when I spoke to him at lunchtime. He was somewhere near Newcastle, heading north.' He grimaced. 'Actually this is a bit awkward. Maybe you should ...' He nodded towards the winking light.

She opened the door and beckoned them into the

hall, noticing for the first time the bulging rucksack at the boy's feet.

'I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a rush.' Toby nodded towards the phone again, his restlessness making her apprehensive.

'Of course,' she said as if it were the most natural thing in the world for a stranger to arrive on her doorstep and tell her to listen to her messages.

She pressed 'play' and her son's voice, pinched and echoey, came from the miniature speaker.

'Hi, Mum. It's a lovely day so I guess you must be in the garden. Ummm. There's been a bit of a hitch. Jordan's supposed to be staying with his mate, Charlie, this week. But they've got to go to Spain. Family crisis. Damn. My battery's nearly out. I'll leave it to him to fill in the details. Anyway, I know that Dad's away and you're on your own so I told Toby, Charlie's dad, it would be okay to drop him off with you. He won't be any trouble. That's it really. Keep a tally of anything we owe you. Thanks Ma, you're a star.'

Elizabeth turned around and looked closely at the boy.

He stared back at her, his face expressionless. Thin wires snaked up from the neck of his black T-shirt towards his ears which were concealed by a multicoloured, woolly hat with earflaps and dangling ties. Dirty-blond hair protruded from the lower edges of the hat and, from somewhere beneath the whole lot, came a faint but urgent beat.

'Jordan? I'm sorry, I didn't recognise you. It must be the hat,' she said, feeling the need to explain why she had failed to recognise Vashti Fry's son.

Toby fingered his watch. ‘Look, I’m really sorry to spring this on you. Alex was sure that you’d be okay to have Jordan until they get back. We’d take him with us but ... it wouldn’t be much fun for him.’ He frowned. ‘I assumed Alex had cleared it with you.’

‘Never assume anything where Alex is concerned,’ she said, trying not to look flustered.

A mobile phone chirped from one of Toby’s pockets. ‘Excuse me a sec,’ he said.

Not wanting to eavesdrop, Elizabeth turned her attention to Jordan, asking him if he’d like a cold drink.

He tugged the earpiece out of his right ear, dangling the sponge blob from its slender wire, leaving the other one in place. ‘What?’

She pointed to the kitchen door. ‘Go on through and I’ll get you a drink.’

He heaved his rucksack onto one shoulder and, leaning forward to counterbalance the weight, plodded down the hall, his grubby trainers squeaking on the polished tiles. She followed him, trying not to notice how the clips on his bag scraped the white wall.

She gestured to a chair. ‘Juice? Water?’

He shrugged.

She poured a tumbler of orange juice and set it on the table in front of him, watching as he gulped it straight down, recalling how her sons, at that age, had been incapable of ingesting anything slowly or quietly.

When Alex had told her that he and Vashti were off on tour, she hadn’t given a thought to Vashti’s son. Why should she? She hardly knew the boy. The few times that

she and Laurence had ventured to Stoke Newington to visit Alex and his partner, Jordan had been out or she'd glimpsed his back as he loped off to his room. Alex had brought him to the house once, when he'd needed help carrying a chest of drawers that they'd given him, but it hadn't seemed necessary to get to know the boy. Jordan Fry was nothing to do with her. Just because Alex had taken up with an older woman who *happened to have* a teenage son didn't make her some kind of surrogate grandmother. Heaven forbid. She was only forty-nine. One day – in perhaps seven or eight years' time – she might be thrilled if Alex or Ben made her a grandmother. But grandmother of a *brand new baby*, not a pre-owned teenager.

Toby popped his head around the door. 'That was my wife. She's in a bit of a state. I'd best be getting back if that's okay with you.'

'Of course,' she said. 'I hope everything ... good luck with ... safe journey...' She had no idea what they were talking about but she hoped that covered it.

'Thanks.' He raised a hand towards Jordan. 'Charlie'll keep in touch. And we'll see you when we get back, mate. Okay?'

Jordan gave a curt nod. 'Yeah.'



## 2 SATURDAY: 5.50PM

As she watched Toby Broadbent drive away, Elizabeth had a few seconds to consider what had just taken place. It appeared that, whilst she was preparing for her holiday in Wales, her son had volunteered her as ‘carer’ of a teenager whom she scarcely knew. How had Alex put it? *I told Toby to drop him off with you.* She wanted to shake her son, to yell, ‘What if they’d turned up and I’d already set off for Cardiff? Apart from anything else, it wasn’t fair to Toby Broadbent, was it?’ But she knew exactly what he would reply – ‘But you hadn’t gone, had you, Ma?’ And what was the boy’s mother thinking? For all Vashti knew Jordan was wandering the streets of London, prey to ... God only knew what.

Jordan Fry was where she’d left him, earphones in place again beneath the hat, rucksack on the floor next to him. His one hand was clasping the straps of the rucksack as if ready, at any second, to be up and off.

Sitting down opposite him at the table, she smiled brightly and touched her ears, indicating that he should remove both earpieces. ‘Well. This is a ... surprise.’

‘They tried everyone else,’ he mumbled, ‘but they’re all busy.’

*Everyone else?* They must indeed have been desperate to opt for her – unless Alex had been trying to impress Vashti with his Mr Fixit skills.

‘It’s not particularly convenient for me,’ she said. ‘Believe it or not, I have plans for the coming week.’

‘So phone Alex.’

‘And tell him what?’

‘Tell him the truth. You don’t want me here.’

‘I only said that it was a surprise. I didn’t mean—’

‘Then tell him *I* don’t want to be here.’

She tried again. ‘What we want isn’t always possible. Sometimes things happen, events take over.’ She thought for a second. ‘What *has* happened, exactly? I know it’s something to do with Charlie’s grandfather but I didn’t like to ask.’

Jordan was looking down at his hands, industriously winding the earphone cable around his thumb. ‘He ... died. This morning. They got a phone call from the police. That’s why they’ve got to go to Spain.’

‘Oh, dear. How sad,’ she said, unable to feel the slightest sorrow for Charlie’s grandfather, who, although dead, was still capable of wrecking her plans. ‘Was he very old?’

‘No.’ The boy raised his head and, for the first time, made eye contact. ‘He was shot.’

This announcement was all the more shocking for its matter-of-fact delivery. She felt rotten that, a few seconds earlier, she had been cursing a murdered man. ‘Shot? That’s dreadful,’ she said, trying to remember if she had said anything inappropriate to Toby.

It seemed insensitive to demand the ins and outs of the crime, so after a few respectful seconds she asked, ‘Are you hungry? I was thinking of having supper at about seven. But I could make you a sandwich now if you like.’

He shrugged.

‘Why don’t I make you a cheese sandwich?’ she said.

As she buttered the bread and grated the cheddar cheese, she ran through her options. Charlie’s family had been overtaken by appalling tragedy and it was out of the question to bother them with the trivialities of her life. Spoiled holiday plans couldn’t compete with murder. She must get hold of Alex and tell him that it was impossible for her to have the boy. *That’s it*. Dump the problem squarely back on him. If they really had ‘tried everyone else’, Vashti would have to come back. Jordan was her son, after all.

The thermometer in the kitchen was up in the high seventies but Jordan seemed determined to keep his hat on.

‘Aren’t you hot?’ she said. ‘Why don’t you take your hat off?’

‘I’m okay.’

‘Take it off, Jordan,’ she instructed, sensing that it was vital, right from the start, to establish her authority.

He sighed and pulled off the grubby hat (knitted, probably, by some poor peasant who lived halfway up the Andes and who had no idea that such an item was *de rigueur* for the skateboarders who kept her awake on summer nights, *kerdunk-kerdunk-kerdunking* along bumpy pavements).

His hair was clamped against his skull, damp with perspiration, making his head look small and his face narrow and girlish. Rising off him came the musky scent of teenage boy. In that instant she was back in her sons’

stuffy bedrooms, strewn with T-shirts and underpants, the curtains permanently closed. In the end, unable to stomach the thought of her own clothes coming into contact with the fusty socks and dubious jeans, she'd provided the boys with a separate laundry basket. Not that she'd succeeded in getting them to use it.

'I need to make a couple of phone calls,' she said.

The slightest of smiles played across his lips. 'Am I a problem?'

Yes. He *was* a problem. She didn't want him there, messing up her arrangements, infusing her house with his fusty smell.

'Don't be silly, Jordan. As I said, I was planning to go away for a few days. It was a spur-of-the-moment idea. I only decided to go yesterday. Alex knew nothing about it.' (Why was she excusing herself – and her son – to this boy?) 'I just need to speak to the people I was going to visit.'

He pulled a set of keys from one of the many pockets in his baggy jeans and rattled them threateningly. 'You can go. Don't worry about me. I've got the keys to the flat. I'll manage fine.'

There was no question that he meant and believed what he said.

It might be better if Jordan didn't hear what she had to say to Alex and she hurried upstairs to Laurence's study. But her son's mobile was off or out of range because voicemail cut in immediately. She tried a second time, with the same result. This time she left a message. 'Alex, it's Mum. Phone me as soon as you get

this. It's important. Jordan's here – not that you two seem at all concerned for the boy's well-being.' It sounded pompous and petty but they must be made to understand how she felt.

Next she phoned Diane and explained what had happened in the few hours since they'd spoken. 'So it looks like I shan't be coming after all. Unless Alex sorts something out. I could strangle him.'

'Poor Lizzie. It is rather inconsiderate of him. But it's not his fault that Granddad took a bullet and, to be fair, he did think you were going to be at home on your own this week.'

'Fair? What's fair about it? Are you suggesting he's doing me a favour? "My poor mother's all alone. The old dear could do with a bit of company. I know – I'll send Jordan".' The sight of her clothes, rolled and ready to pack, aggravated her frustration. 'What does he think I'm going to do with a teenager for a week?'

'Get stoned? Take a few tabs?'

'It's not funny,' Elizabeth moaned.

'Sorry. Maybe you're being pessimistic. Maybe what's-her-name—'

'Vashti. The name says it all.'

'Maybe Vashti's got friends or family – she must have a mother or a sister – who'd have him.'

'In that case, why dump him on me? D'you know what really gets me? If I'd set out this afternoon, instead of napping in the garden, I'd be in Cardiff by now, sipping a glass of wine. And Charlie's wretched father would be the one worrying what to do with Jordan *bloody* Fry.'

‘As well as a worrying about a dead father-in-law? You don’t really mean that. Look, why don’t you ring me later, after you’ve spoken to Alex?’

‘That’s another thing. His phone’s off – surprise, surprise.’

‘Landline?’

‘I’ve no idea where they’re staying. Or where they’re playing.’

‘Maybe Jordan knows.’

‘Jordan doesn’t know whether he wants water or juice. I can’t imagine he’d know something useful like where his mother is.’

When she returned to the kitchen Jordan Fry, his hat and his rucksack had disappeared. All that remained to prove that he’d been there was a dirty glass and a sandwich crust.

The door to the garden was open. Despite the sapping heat, Maggie’s two younger children were bouncing on their trampoline.

‘Have you ... seen a ... big boy ... in my garden?’ Elizabeth synchronised her question with the appearance of their flushed faces above the garden wall.

They shook their dark heads and carried on bouncing.

Hurrying back through the house and out of the front door, she stood on the pavement, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the low sun, scanning up and down the street. There was no sign of him. In fact there was no one to be seen – not a mum pushing a buggy, or an old lady tottering along with a mangy dog in tow, or a

bloke washing the family car – not a single soul who might have noticed a boy with a rucksack.

*Shit.* Where would he go? Where *could* he go? She closed her eyes taking several deep breaths of tepid air. *Think.* Keys jingled in her memory. He would go home.

Assuming that he knew where he was – the only time he'd come here he'd been brought by car so it was possible he didn't – and assuming that he would use public transport, it would take him at least forty-five minutes to get home. She looked at the kitchen clock. Twenty past six. She would leave it until seven then start phoning Alex's flat.

Feeling less panicky now that she was pretty sure where he was heading, she looked for a way to pass the next forty minutes. Her plan, formulated in the unruffled hours of that Saturday afternoon, had been to have supper (a mushroom omelette and salad to use up the odds and ends in the fridge) then finish packing, take a relaxing bath and be in bed by ten.

She had no appetite but it would be sensible to eat something while she had the chance. First she made a simple vinaigrette dressing, something that was out of the question if Laurence was around, hovering at her shoulder, suggesting that she add a pinch of chilli or a dash of Tabasco. Eggs next, beaten lightly with a dash of milk then seasoned. She was slicing mushrooms, failing to deter grim-faced policemen and wailing sirens from invading her thoughts, when she heard a clatter.

She put down the knife and listened. There it was again, faint but distinct, coming from the sitting room.

Jordan was sitting on the floor, leaning against the sofa, well out of sight of anyone passing the open door. He'd sneaked in here knowing full well that she was looking for him, playing out the next skirmish in their War of the Hat. The contents of his rucksack – mainly items of black clothing and chocolate bar wrappers – formed a sea around his outstretched legs. He was riffling through a stack of DVDs, inspecting each one for several seconds before passing on to the next.

He looked up. 'This isn't the lot. I've got loads more at home.'

'Films?' she asked, determined not to give him the satisfaction of having rattled her.

'Games.' He looked around hopefully. 'Have you got a PS3?'

'No, I'm afraid we haven't.'

'Grim.'

He pointed to the alcove and Laurence's cherished sound system and (alphabeticised) collection of CDs. 'Cool kit.'

'It's my husband's.'

'What's he into?'

'Mainly classical. Well, wholly classical. Mainly Bartok. And Mahler. What ... are you into? Your mum's stuff?' she asked.

'Jesus, no. I can't stand that crap.'

The disdainful blasphemy was meant to shock. And it did, addressed, as it was, directly to her, unlike the foul language she overheard on every street and which she could choose to ignore.



Struggling to maintain a neutral expression, she asked, 'So what *do* you like?'

'Indie punk, mainly.' He held up his iPod. 'CookieWhys. The Weakerthans. Stuff the Goldfish. Going Going.'

'They all sound ... intriguing. Especially *Stuffing Goldfish*.'

'Stuff the Goldfish,' he corrected her, patiently. 'D'you want to hear them? They'll sound great on that.' He nodded towards the hi-fi and held up a tangle of wires. 'Jack or USB? I've got both.'

'Not at the moment, thanks. I was getting myself ... us some supper. It'll be ready in five minutes. The bathroom's upstairs on the right. And you can put your rucksack in the room next to it. Alex's old room.'

The desire to deflect his attention from Laurence's Bang & Olufsen and a surge of relief that he hadn't been recruited into the sex trade combined to settle the matter. For the time being, Jordan Fry had better stay.