

Mother Knows Best

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Netta Newbound/ Junction Publishing
Waihi 3610
New Zealand
nettanebound@hotmail.com
www.nettanebound.com

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Acknowledgements

*To my wonderful mother, Lynda whose intuition
and perception never fail to astound me.*

'My mother had a great deal of trouble with
me, but I think she enjoyed it..'

Mark Twain

Chapter 1

The cold dank air hit her nostrils like a sledgehammer. Ruby recoiled. Froze. Held her breath. After a few minutes, she tried to turn her head. Immense pain shot through her temples, settling to a dull throb at the base of her skull. She fought to keep her eyes open—needing to remember where the hell she was. She couldn't. She gave in to the heavy, drifting sensation.

Ruby opened her eyes not sure how much time had passed. She reached up to touch the tender spot on the back of her head. A cry escaped her as a thick stickiness came away on her fingertips. The metallic scent of blood now mingled with the earthy, wet stench surrounding her.

She shivered as blood gushed through her veins in unison with the thudding inside her head.

She could see nothing. Not a thing.

Were her eyes even open?

She knew they were when she felt them close.

The only sound was the continuous drip-drip-drip that came from all around her.

She managed to roll onto her back. Icy rock touched her on either side. She reached up and yelped as the tips of her fingers hit more hard rock not six inches above her face.

She was in a tunnel—a cold, dark tunnel.

Thirty hours earlier...

Baxter, the scruffy eight-month-old Border Terrier, spun on the spot when Ruby arrived home. It didn't matter if she'd been gone for five minutes or five hours, the welcome was always the same.

"Hello, my favourite four legged friend. I missed you too." Ruby dropped to her haunches to pet him.

Baxter launched himself into her arms, sending her crashing backwards onto the kitchen tiles.

"You dozy sausage." She tried to bat the dog away.

Taking advantage of his owner's accessible position on the floor, Baxter pounced and licked her face.

She squealed as dog tongue slipped between her lips and lapped at her mouth and teeth. She gagged in between hysterical laughter.

Ruby got to her feet and poured some kibble into Baxter's dish. While he was occupied, she ran upstairs to fill the bath. After rummaging through her wardrobe, in search of an outfit for her date, she settled on a floral cotton dress. She held the dress in front of her and checked herself out in the mirror. It was perfect for the balmy summer evening. She smiled at her reflection. The cornflower blue petals set off her eyes.

After getting undressed, she grabbed her phone from the bedside cabinet and headed to the bathroom. Once submerged in the deep bubbly water—one arm held aloft—she pressed redial.

Her sister, Scarlett, picked up on the second ring. "Hi Rubes, I wondered if you would call before your big date—are you all set?"

"No, but he's not picking me up until eight. I'm nervous though. This is my first date since David. What if I can't think of anything to say?"

Scarlett's throaty giggle sounded at the other end of the phone.

"What's so funny?"

"You! Lost for words—there's more danger of you chewing his ears off."

"Cheeky bitch!" Ruby laughed too.

“Besides, I thought you had loads in common with what’s-his-name?”

“Cody. Well, he’s into walking, like me. He has one pain in the neck younger sister, also like me.”

“Hey!”

Ruby laughed. “Other than that, he could be a mass murderer for all I know.”

“Don’t let Mum hear you say that, whatever you do. She wouldn’t let me out the door last night without interrogating Mathew first. She’s still going on about the Felicity girl who vanished months ago. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s gone off to Spain or somewhere. I bet she’s shacked up with her boyfriend, having a wonderful time. No school—no nagging.”

“I don’t think so, sis. Don’t you watch the news?” In her mind’s eye, Ruby saw the image of a delicate, blonde haired, sixteen-year-old girl who had been all over the TV and newspapers for the past three months. In the photograph, Felicity wore the same multi-coloured woollen jersey she had gone missing in.

“Of course I do. Mum makes me—she’s obsessed.”

“She worries, that’s all. She’s right to.”

“Says you. You’re off out tonight with a stranger—I don’t see you getting the third degree.”

“I’ve left home. It’s a bit different.”

“Not really. Like you said, he could be a mass murderer. I might just tell Mum for the hell of it—get the heat off me for a change.”

“Don’t you dare, Scarlett. I was kidding. He’s a normal fella I met at the gym—I’ve seen him loads of times.”

“Text me once you’re home so I know you’re safe, then.”

“Will do, sis. Speak later.”

Legs and underarms shaved, Ruby pulled the bath plug out just as the phone rang. She checked the caller ID—her mother. “Bloody Scarlett,” Ruby muttered.

She considered not answering, but knew her mother would continue ringing all night until she got to speak to her eldest daughter. No—the easiest thing would be to get it over and done with.

“Hang on a sec, Mum,” Ruby said as she stepped from the bath. She placed the phone on the sink, reached for a towel and dried herself, wrapping her hair in a towel. She picked up the phone once more. “I’m back.”

“Scarlett tells me you’re going out on a date.” In an irate voice, her mother confirmed her treacherous sister was the reason for the call.

Ruby rolled her eyes and gave a loud sigh.

“Don’t be like that, dear. I worry is all.”

“There’s no need to worry, Mum. He’s a nice young man I met at the gym.”

“Does he work?”

“Yes ...”

“Well?”

“He’s self-employed—something to do with computers.”

“Where does he live?”

“I’m not sure. Around here somewhere. It didn’t cross my mind to ask for his address to give to my mother.” Ruby laughed.

“How about a name? Anything will do.”

“I told Scarlett his name and said I’d text her once I get home. I’m twenty-two years old. I’m not a baby any more.”

“I never said you were. Anyway, what difference does your age make? I’ll still worry about you when you’re sixty. My mother still worries about me.”

“I know she does, Mum. Listen, I’ve got to go. I’ll be fine—I promise. I’ll see you tomorrow. It’s market day, remember?” Her mother’s protests rang out until Ruby ended the call.

She felt bad for cutting her mother off, but this had been the same since Ruby was a young girl.

Her mother was convinced that either she or Scarlett would end up dead in a ditch. The thought of this had freaked them out for a long time. After all, they’d had it drummed into their heads that Mother knows best, so if she believed they would come to a sticky end, it must be true.

So Ruby resisted putting herself into a position where she could become a victim, never meeting new people or staying away from home. She even dated the boy next door, David, who seemed to have her mother's approval. But eventually, her mother's paranoia became too much even for him.

The final straw had been when her mother stopped them from going to his cousin's wedding. He said he loved Ruby but couldn't live with her mother's continual interference. And so, in the nicest possible way, he dumped her.

Heartbroken, Ruby accused her mother of breaking them up and soon after, she left home. The best thing she ever did.

Wait until she got her hands on that trouble-causing sister of hers. She would throttle her.

She rushed through to the bedroom. After one last rub down with the towel, she sprayed copious amounts of deodorant under her arms before slipping into the dress.

Leaving her shoulder-length brown hair to air dry, Ruby ran a mascara wand over her lashes and a dab of gloss to her red lips—the reason for her name. Her dad said her ruby red lips were the first things he noticed when she was less than a minute old and the name was chosen.

Scarlett's name came about to fit in with the trend—no real reason behind it. It had been a standing joke within the family that if they'd gone on to have a boy they'd have named him something ridiculous like Burnt-Orange or Lime-Green—or even plain old Red.

Baxter whimpered when he realised Ruby was going out again. She still had over half-an-hour so she made herself a cup of coffee and sat on the sofa with the little dog.

“Hey, sweetie, it's okay—I won't be late.” She rubbed his side and giggled when his back leg scratched mid-air, his eyes rolling in ecstasy. She hated leaving him alone when she'd already been gone all day. She needed a social life, otherwise her life would be nothing but work-work-work. And although she loved her job, she needed a balance, or what was the point?

Her job at the local council wasn't anything exciting. As receptionist, she was the first target for any abuse or negativity, either by phone or in person, as happens in any government department

worldwide. Nevertheless, she tried to make a difference—always going the extra mile for members of the public whenever she could.

Ruby swilled her empty coffee cup under the tap. She no longer fancied a night out, would much prefer an evening snuggled in front of the TV with Baxter. But her date was due in a few minutes so she'd best get ready sharp-ish.

After one last swish of the dress in front of the mirror, she slipped her feet into high-heeled, cream coloured sandals, folded a cotton cardigan over her arm and waited by the window.

When a small white car pulled up outside, Ruby's stomach clenched. She gave Baxter a final scratch under the chin before she headed from the small terraced house and tottered across the pavement to the car.

Cody jumped out, ran around the car and opened the passenger door for her.

Ruby noticed how different he looked in his smart dress trousers and short-sleeved lemon cotton shirt. She'd only ever seen him in his gym gear before.

As she climbed into the passenger seat, Ruby's bag vibrated and played a tune alerting her to a text message. She retrieved her mobile from her small bag and read it—Mum.

Scarlett doesn't have the boy's details. Send them through to me please—it's important. Sorry to be a pest, but Mother knows best.

Ruby rolled her eyes at her mother's attempt at humour.

Chapter 2

Cody's cock twitched when Ruby emerged from her front door. She looked gorgeous in the floaty summer dress she wore. He'd chosen well this time. His father thought she might be too old, but he'd soon eat his words when he set eyes on her. Cody was certain.

Ever the gentleman, Cody raced around the car and held the door open while his date slid into the passenger seat. She was looking at her phone when he got in beside her.

"Anything important?" he asked, nodding at her phone as she put it back into her bag.

"What? Oh no—just my mum—she's such a stress-head. She refuses to accept I'm an adult." She laughed.

As Cody drove away, he noticed a woman peeking from the window opposite.

"You're lucky she cares. I barely remember my mum—she died when I was a kid."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean..."

"You didn't, don't worry." He smiled.

"I lost my dad, so I know the pain of losing a parent. You do still have your dad, don't you?" She braced herself, her hand in the centre of her chest, praying she hadn't made a double booboo.

"Yes." He grinned. "He's still with us. In fact, he brought up my brother Kyle and me single-handed."

“Your brother? I thought you only had a sister?” Ruby’s brow furrowed as she glanced at him.

Cody’s stomach clenched. Annoyed with himself for being so stupid—he normally stuck as close to the truth as possible.

“No, a younger brother, Kyle, but we call him Kylie. You see he intends to have a sex change operation as soon as he’s old enough.”

“Really?” Ruby said with a wide-eyed stare.

“Yup. So I often say he’s my sister, to avoid confusion when the time comes.”

“What does your dad think?”

Cody shrugged. “He’s fine. To be honest, it’s always been obvious to us since he was little.” He marvelled at how easy the lies flew off his tongue.

“Poor thing. That sounds horrendous—and without a mother to help him through it, too.”

“He’s okay—made of tough stuff. Just like anybody who’s a bit different in this day and age needs to be.”

“I guess.” Ruby turned to gaze through the side window.

After a few minutes of silence, they both began talking at the same time.

“I’m sorry, you go,” Ruby said.

“It’s okay—you first.”

“I was going to ask where we’re going?”

“There’s a quaint little pub towards the coast, if you don’t mind the drive, that is? It shouldn’t take too long.”

“No—not at all. It makes a change to get out of town. I rarely do,” she said, a faraway look in her eye.

Delicious bubbles of excitement filled his stomach. She was perfect.

They made small talk as they drove. Her phone buzzed several more times and he realised this could cause him a problem. He needed to think this through.

“How long have you lived in Penderton?” he asked.

“All my life. Dad’s family owned the house Mum still lives in. She did consider selling up after Dad died but couldn’t go through with it in the end.”

“How did he die?”

She shrugged. “An accident. It would be funny if not so tragic.”

“Why, what happened?”

“He choked on a chicken bone.” She half-smiled. “No-one was home at the time and he’d raided the fridge. Mum and I found him on the kitchen floor when I was nine years old. He’d been dead for hours.”

“That’s shocking.” Cody glanced at her, his eyebrows drawn together.

They pulled into a pub car park.

“It was—anyway, let’s change the subject.” She sat forward in her seat.

Her phone buzzed again.

“Somebody’s keen.”

“My mum again. I’ll text her back once we get inside otherwise she’ll be at it all night.”

The place was pumping as Cody had predicted it would be—less chance of anybody noticing them this way. He spotted a middle-aged couple preparing to leave and so he hovered by their table and quickly guided Ruby to the booth as they left. He piled their empty plates and glasses and shoved them into the far corner.

A steady hum of chatter surrounded them. Cody couldn’t even tell if any music played in the background. He gestured to Ruby to ask if she wanted a drink.

She nodded and mouthed *cider*.

From his position at the bar, he watched as she sent a text message. “Bugger,” he muttered under his breath.

Once he had the drinks, he made his way back to the table. A large blond-haired man, who could have just stepped off a rugby pitch, blocked his way and made a production of not allowing him to pass. Cody managed to dart around him, but clocked the fierce expression in the big man’s eyes.

He slid behind the table next to Ruby. “Is your mum happy again?” he asked.

“She’ll never be happy, but now she knows where I am, we should get a bit of peace,” she laughed.

Cody tipped his head back in acknowledgement, still smiling—at least on the outside. His dad would have a fit when he found

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