

Trust Me

By
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Dedicated to my children, Alan, and with special thanks to Tanya, Vanessa,
Frankie and Laura for their unerring support.

Chapter 1

Trust me. I am a psychologist. Millions, well hundreds, of people trust me. Just not anyone I live with. The teeming hordes at home are less impressed than my admittedly disturbed patients.

I have an insubordinate lot. I'm no authoritarian, that would be against good practice. And I firmly believe I should practise what I preach. But my lot make it hard. They push the boundaries of a sane woman. And I know I'm sane. Still. Well, barely. But hey, I'm the psychologist here, so I give myself a clean bill of health.

It's the household that needs to be brought into order. Every Sunday I gather our little brood around the table to review the week we just survived and the inevitable challenges of the week ahead. Did I say challenges? Let's call a spade a spade. The catastrophes that lie ahead. For thus has it always been with us. So I bang what passes for a gavel on the table with monotonous regularity. They attend to me because they see the steaming roast, and food is my only pulling power these days.

"Boys. I want your attention."

"Here you go. Let's hear it, Mum. How does it go again?"

"It goes like this. People pay good money to listen to my opinion, and you can have it for nothing!"

"We'll pay good money *not* to hear it."

This boy needs a good cuff around the ears, but this is no longer legal, politically correct, therapeutic, or perhaps even desirable. These days you can't leave any bruises. This is the era of negotiated peace settlements in families. Just look at the world at large, and you can see how well *that's* working!

Anyway, a prophet has no honour in her own home. Okay, so I'm not a prophet, just a psychologist. And as for the honour part, well, honour is a relatively new, nay unheard of, concept in my house. The term honour has shades of a nobility and dignity we can only aspire to.

Now things get a bit tricky here as my place of residence abuts my place of work and, frankly, I'm not sure which one is the real madhouse.

One afternoon, I was with a patient who was not doing too well, in any sense of the word. You may wonder how we got so quickly to the day in question, and so do I. It's the manner in which our lives proceed and it will be a test of your sanity, too, before I've told my tale. You will weep with sympathy, believe me.

Just try to stay focussed.

So I'm with this patient, Alf Dunne, who really *has* done very little for a long time. I like to attach a moniker to my patients. I don't want them to blend into one amorphous blob. They need to feel they matter and that they're unique. Alf has no doubt he matters a great deal. In fact, he's a bit delusional about a lot of things. In particular, he's blissfully unaware he's keeping dangerously poor health. Doctors have tried to alert him, but the state of his health is a situation to which he seems largely indifferent. *I* think the most pressing of his problems is his terminal illness, but he begs to differ. *He* thinks his wife's perceived infidelity is the most pertinent issue. On that particular day, he wondered what would happen with his callous shrew of a wife, who was dancing on his yet-to-be-prepared grave.

"She won't even miss me, the cow," he said bitterly. "I'm supposed to be on my death bed and she's already out there eyeing off Bert Foster, giving him a squeeze over the back fence. I'll write her out of the will. It's not too late. I've never felt healthier. I'm getting better every day. I'll see her out!"

I try not to look out the window at the two lorikeets tapping furiously against the glass for food. They, like my offspring, live under the misapprehension that my sole purpose is to provide them with sustenance. They fly in at their leisure and get very cranky with me if I'm tardy, not unlike the kids.

"Alf," I said, in my practised tone. I am the epitome of charm and restrained wisdom, it is oozing from every pore. "Ethel told me last week that Bert Foster was just handing her his home-grown vegetables over the fence and she was very worried about your behaviour. She thinks you're getting paranoid."

"Home-grown vegetables, my arse! He was handing her his equipment all right, right out of his trousers. Just because I can't get it up anymore." Alf sighed, eyeballing me at last.

"I'm bugged, aren't I? I won't need a shrink like you much longer, though you look pre-shrunk to me. You haven't got any meat on your bones, girl. I don't know what the quack thought he was doing sending me to see you. What would you know about anything?"

Ah, a vote of confidence from another satisfied customer.

"Well, Alf," I said, and proceeded undaunted. I'm used to this. I'm a battle-hardened psychologist if ever there was one. I have been blooded in the madhouse next door, my family home. I'm a "made woman", as the mafia would say. I've seen action, done time. Alf is mere child's play. "Your doctor feels it would be useful to discuss your illness. He feels you're in denial. And today is the first time you've alluded to the fact that

your health is less than perfect.”

“Alluded? Bloody alluded? Where the hell did you get that from? Pull it out of your arse, did you?”

Okay, so now it’s my arse as well as his featuring liberally in the conversation. Freud might have something useful to say about this. He’d have a field day with Alf. But, for myself, I decide it is indicative of his limited vocabulary rather than an oedipal obsession with his mother’s beautifully rounded, tantalising, and forbidden buttocks.

“Alf, can we talk about your health, and your denial of the seriousness of your condition? You need to start treatment,” I rebuke him with an encouraging smile as I try to redirect him to the issue.

“Denial, my arse.”

Alf has a lot to say about his arse, as well as mine and the postman’s and the doctor’s. He’s a pain in one himself, but I can’t tell him that. This is the bad side of the deal for us psychologists. We can be wise and all-knowing, repositories of understanding, action, and comfort. But we can’t tell our patients when they are a pain in the arse. See, it’s catching. Now I’m talking like Alf.

Psychological intervention is dangerous. A lot of things are catching. Take the lady I treated for lift phobia. Twenty floors a day she was climbing, several times a day, too. She had great legs, but they were docking her pay for time lost, so I had to cure her before she was out of work with the best legs in town. She was a bit old for dancing with the *Folies Bergere*. And I’m at the forefront of my profession, right there at the coalface. Well, in the lift with her, in point of fact. It’s a long and glorious tale, but suffice to say I cured her and now I’m not so keen on lifts. Still, it’s good for the legs. What you lose on the roundabouts you gain on the stairs.

So Alf finally stopped blocking me.

“Ah well, girlie, you want to talk about dying, do you? Force it down me throat. I know I’m buggered. I just don’t want to talk about it. It won’t keep me alive talking about dying. It just makes me scared, and I’m too bloody old to want to feel scared again. What do you reckon it’s all about, girl?”

The harshness is gone. He is appealing to me.

“It depends what you believe, what you expect, Alf.”

“I’m a believer. I’m no Bible basher, but I know *He’s* there on the other side. *He’ll* send me a sign when it’s time to hand in me ticket . . . there’s a lot of noise in this house . . . who’s doing all that tapping?”

The birds are fed up with me ignoring them. But it’s not the only noise attracting Alf’s attention.

A beatific smile creeps over his face and he looks heavenwards. There are heavenly sounds floating towards us. It was a long, slow crescendo of a harp. I guess to a person in Alf’s state of mind it could be seen as a signal of some sort from on high, given our current conversation. For me, it is usually a signal to go to the gym.

"See? He's calling me already. I hear the angels on their harps right now. It's a sign!" said Alf, transfixed.

"No, Alf. That's just a harp. It's . . ."

"Harp, my arse! There's no harps on Earth. Thanks anyway, doc."

He rose from his chair. "I think you've done about as much for me as you can. You might think about seeing someone yourself. If you're hearing what I'm hearing, you might be on the way out, too. God bless!"

And he exited to right of stage, quite rapidly and even a little more sprightly than he had arrived. Another success.

I wasn't sure whether I should thank my eldest son, or curse him, because that was Harry. Harry plays, of course, the harp. It's a long story. They all are. Most parents say, "Go and do your drum practice, Johnny," or "turn the volume down on that amplifier, Brad." Not me. I bawl out in the most dulcet tones imaginable. Though I may be taking a bit of creative licence with the term "dulcet", as dulcet doesn't capture the real mood or tenor of my abode. Agitated, frantic, or hysterical might more closely capture the quality and volume of discourse where I live. So, attempting to quell the rising panic in my voice as every dinner time approaches, I yell out in the most encouraging way I know, "Harry? Isn't it time for harp practice?"

Obviously, my reminder is not always necessary.

Some weeks later, Alf's wife, Ethel, came to see me, to get some of whatever I had given Alf. Very surreptitious she was, asking in hushed tones. "Alf's been very . . . ah . . . peaceful, since he left you. The sicker he gets, the more he smiles. I'm wondering if you can help me, too?" Ethel raised her arched eyebrows meaningfully.

Alf's doctor rang and was a little more direct.

"Shit, Beth, you've turned Alf into a stoner. What the fuck did you give him?"

"It was just my son, Harry . . ."

"Oh, Jesus! Don't tell me Alf's an unresolved homosexual? Where do you get this stuff from, Beth?"

Not out of my arse, I think, all credit to Alf.

"No, Harry's harp got Alf going. I'm sure you know Harry has this harp thing going at the moment. Alf thought he was communing directly with the Almighty and now he thinks he's the Chosen One."

"Well, I'll give it to you. You're one creative therapist. I've got the whole neighbourhood lining up for referrals to you. They think you're the Second Coming. I've never seen a dying man looking better, either. I might pop around for a chat myself."

Back to Harry and the harp. Harry is my first born, and I never picked him as a harpist. I had, in fact, never seen one and I'm certain he hadn't either. His early childhood pursuits involved the usual smelly boy quests—

nose picking, creating foul-smelling mud pies, urination contests, climbing up and falling out of as many trees as was humanly possible without a life-threatening event occurring and, almost the most important of all for him, being a daredevil mountain biker. But in truth, his most favoured pursuit and one at which he naturally excelled, was farting on his siblings' heads. At those times I could see he had real potential as a percussionist. But a harpist? Never.

However, as he grew up the crust fell away, revealing a sensitive New Age boy lingering in the mud. How could I not have imagined him strumming his harp? He was already strumming every other part of his own anatomy in preparation.

As he approached adolescence, inexplicably, he said he wanted to learn the harp.

"Certainly, darling," I'd said, mindlessly awaiting the punch line that would never come.

"No, Mum, I'm serious. Can I?"

"No worries, mate. I'll just get the Yellow Pages and look up harp teachers."

"Oh," he said, somewhat taken aback. "I thought it might be harder than that."

"No. Mum, the wonder woman of psychologists, will conjure one up in a flash." Hadn't this boy heard of irony? Or utter disbelief? "Look, Harry, what on earth have you been smoking? Is it time for a talk about drugs? A harp? A *harp*? Where would anyone get a harp, and more to the point, why would anyone want one?"

If I'd met Alf at that time I might have said, "Where did you pull that from? Out of your arse?"

Instead, I had still been wrestling with the expanding menagerie of pets. I couldn't see adding a harp to the already stretched resources I was presiding over. I'd felt like Mrs Noah, and Mr Noah had already fled the ark, like any sane person would. Rising floodwaters were nothing compared to the inhabitants within the ark. And Harry wanted to bring a harp into the mix? In the interest of posterity and imminent floods, Mr and Mrs Harp, perhaps?

"I knew you'd make a joke of it, Mum. You're trivialising this."

"Trivialising? Good God, I've never heard language like that coming out of your mouth. Where did you get this from? Who are you mixing with? Are you gay?"

"No, Mum, it's a considered decision."

Okay, so I was jumping ahead of myself. But seventeen-year-olds who still haven't become familiar with the fundamentals of hygiene, like a daily shower or an annual hair wash, don't start talking harps and randomly

throwing around terms like ‘trivialising’.

We went back to our corners to brood, and re-emerged for round two in the time-honoured tradition of the family. Calm down, regroup, respect, and start over.

“This is a bit of a surprise, Harry, but now I’m ready to listen.” I’d put my best psychologist face on, the one that hypnotises my patients and enrages my children.

“And cut out the dork look on your face for a start, Mum. I’m not a simpleton. And I’m not one of your patients. Jesus, how often do I have to say that? What’s with the head on the side, and the dumb smile? I can’t believe you make any money at all if you do that. All I want to do is learn a musical instrument and you’re going psycho. I’m not shooting heroin into my veins and I haven’t taken up BASE jumping.”

“Right.”

I nodded, duly put in my place. “Where do we start?”

Harry smiled at me. He is a wonder. He’s built like a whippet and moves like a cheetah. He has absorbed the family’s entire allocation of sporting prowess and when he moves anywhere he is lithe and graceful. He is also catastrophe prone. It is a truly terrible combination. Harry has deliciously intense brown eyes and he takes all aspects of life as a serious challenge, except schoolwork.

His bedroom is orderly in an anal but deceptive way. At first glance it looks tidy, but Harry never cleans or tidies as such. He moves things into the vast unexplored corners of his kingdom and forbids entry to everyone. Harry is, of course, germ phobic, and his bed sits regally and centrally, the doona as smooth as a baby’s bum. This is how he knows if the awful Magnus, his younger brother, has strayed into his territory and despoiled his bed.

Harry has recently become neat and shiny, a smart and snappy dresser. He is most particular that nothing of his mixes in the wash with that of his fetid younger brothers.

Harps and harp teachers are pretty scarce on the ground, but Harry has more front than you can imagine. He knocked on doors, found a teacher, borrowed a harp from the local symphony orchestra’s used harp supply, got a removalist who specialised in moving Steinway pianos, and cleaned his room to fit it in. It appeared that Harry wasn’t the first to develop this flight of fancy and the caretaker in the orchestra’s bowels dusted off the grotesque old harp, sighed fondly, patted it gently, and said, “Good-bye, old friend. See you soon.”

“Is this a short-term loan?” I was ever hopeful.

“No, but these sort of kids get over it pretty quickly . . .”

I felt a flood of relief.

“And then go back to guitar, like a normal kid?” I asked.

“No, not often. The harp seems to be a training ground for a certain sort of musician. Once they’ve got the taste, they’re back for more. I find they lean towards the bassoon, or the euphonium. I had one last year go for the French horn.”

This was starting to look like a whole new sales and marketing opportunity for my practice. Well, at least it was almost worth it to see Harry’s room clean for the first time.

Now, Harry was no harpist and no one had the heart to tell him, except the dogs, who howled whenever he practised. He read that as applause. Some critical source they were! We waited patiently for this phase to pass as quickly as we had been assured it would. It didn’t. Unlike a piano, where even a rank amateur can tell if the student can pick a tune, the harp requires more sophisticated expertise to detect whether there was any incipient talent in Harry. No one in my circle was considered competent to pass judgement on Harry’s emerging genius, or lack thereof. Some family, and what few friends I had left, asked me in hushed tones if I had thought about getting Harry some professional help. And they weren’t talking about his musical potential. His harp teacher was more circumspect, but left it in no doubt that Harry had the skills and potential of a wasp on a hot day, that is, the capacity to make a lot of irritating noise, accompanied by stinging pain.

But not a soul had the heart to tell Harry that his warm-up strumming was the highlight. Listen, he’s happy, and as far as I know he isn’t harming himself or anyone else. So that’s Harry.

And Alf.

I like to start my story with my most successful patient and my sanest family member.

It goes downhill from here.

Chapter 2

Alf took his time with the dying business and, in the interim, he capitalised on his newfound fame. When he was on a good thing he stuck to it—and he'd found his maker in no uncertain terms. But he wanted to maximise the connection with God, confer with him, rather than join him anytime soon. He found fame late in life, did Alf. Maybe the penny dropped and he realised that it was not the Archangel Gabriel summoning him northwards to his celestial resting place, but just Harry belabouring his harp practice. If Harry's harp practice didn't bring Alf back to earth with a vengeance, then maybe he really was heading heavenwards after all. But Alf was a cagey old devil and after his first, albeit questionably, genuine vision of heaven, I suspect he decided to milk it for all it was worth. The local ladies' guild visited him en masse, bent on being in the presence of the Blessed One. It became another self-fulfilling prophecy. Rumours of his calm demeanour and his glowing sanctity were met with scepticism throughout the neighbourhood until people beheld him firsthand. Alf grew holier by the moment and decided to return to therapy. Perhaps he had bought into his own publicity, because he seemed to levitate into the room.

"Welcome back, Alf." I beamed. "You look well."

Damn. Why do we always tell sick people how robust they look? The sicker they look, the more we frantically bluster and protest our surprise at their splendid appearance. They're dying and we tell them they've never looked better. Well, I guess it's kinder than saying, "Welcome back, Alf. You really look like shit. I'm surprised you made it here at all!" Surely, I could find some ground in the middle without joining him in his fixed delusion that there was nothing wrong at all.

Well, he did look pretty good, come to think of it.

He sat down and resumed his customary glare. Time to start talking about his arse again.

"Well, Alf, what brings you back today? What can I do for you?"

"Me? Me?" Alf was still prone to repeat himself, it seemed. "What can you do for *me*? I'm here to help *you*."

“Thank you, Alf,” I said, smiling. “But I don’t need any help.”

What a barefaced lie *that* was. Had he been peering through the windows into the chaos that I fondly called home? Did he discover that Harry and his harp were just the tip of the iceberg? I tried to keep my family under wraps, as it were. They wouldn’t be such a great advertisement for business.

“Since I got the big message from upstairs, I’ve got to tell you I’ve been feeling a bit frisky.” He nodded his head meaningfully in the direction of the ceiling.

Well, of course I knew this, as Ethel had come to see me to address the delicate matter of her husband’s rediscovered and re-invigorated libido.

“Beth,” she’d murmured confidentially. “I’m seventy-two years old, and that part of our lives ended years ago. Now Alf wants to recommence relations! I think he’s got some Viagra from the doctor, but I’m too embarrassed to ask him. I think I’d be even more worried about it if he hadn’t got Viagra from the doctor. How else could we explain it? What would the young doctor think if I asked him! I mean that boy is barely old enough himself to have relations, if you know what I mean.” She pursed her lips.

“How delightful for you, Ethel! Sexual health in the later years is to be highly commended. Congratulations. I’m sure it will bring you and Alf closer together in the autumn of his life.”

Good grief. I was giving her a sermon, rattling on like a maniac. Anything to fill my mind so I didn’t have to envision Alf and his infamous arse rolling Ethel around the marital bed.

“Beth, I have arthritis, a gammy hip, angina, and no interest whatsoever in this nonsense. I think Alf is possessed by a devil, not an angel. What am I going to do?” she’d said with a wail.

“Enjoy, Ethel. It’s never too late.” I was starting to sound like Alf’s publicist here.

“You don’t seem to understand. He wants to engage in perverted practices. He wants me to do it . . .” Ethel hesitated, her eyes widening in horror, “in . . . unusual ways. I find it hard enough getting into bed at all and lying flat on my back without damaging myself! We still have Mother’s old brass bed and it’s so far off the ground I’m lucky every night to even get up there without breaking my hip. And there’s Alf, lying there with this terrible smile. I liked him better when he was a mean old grump. Beth, I have to ask. What did you do to him at that last visit? He’s never been the same since. He used to call me a cow, and now he calls me cutie. It worked better the other way.”

So I knew all about Alf’s friskiness.

“Look, lassie,” Alf said, “I’ve noticed you’re a bit lonely, and now that I’ve got my second wind, I’d like to recommend it to you. You know, find a good man, a father for your brood.” Alf the sage.

Like any sane man would come on board the ark with my lot. It was hard enough for *me* to cross the demilitarised zone every night. The only way I’d

get a man onboard was if he was drugged and kidnapped.

"Alf, I'm delighted for you, but you're the patient here. Let's talk about you."

"Well, Ethel can't keep up with me anymore. She's acting like an old woman!"

"Well, that would be because she *is* an old woman."

"Old woman, my arse!"

Ah, he's back to form, no longer a saint. I point his blasphemy out to him.

"God and I have had words. He likes my style. Earthy, He calls it."

Was Alf beyond delusional? So I asked him. "Alf, are you hearing voices, seeing things? Do you think God is talking to you?"

"Only in a manner of speaking, you silly cow. Heck, sorry, Beth. I thought I was speaking to Ethel for a minute. Forget meself. Look, Ethel can't satisfy me, if you know what I mean. Since I came here last time, things have changed."

Oh, Harry! You and your harp have a lot to answer for.

I sent Alf on his way, chastened like a teenage boy, after a discussion about Ethel's frailty and the numerous benefits of restraint and self-service.

The day after Alf's transformation into a geriatric Fabio, I was attending to more earthly tasks, such as providing the loaves and fishes for the hordes. This single mother trip is challenging and, since Noah left the ark, there've been a lot of sleeps. Alone. I was casting my eye around the potential in the supermarket, because I find real men do supermarket shopping, when I overheard a disquieting conversation in the next aisle.

"Did you hear about Alf Dunne? What do you think that's all about? He was such a sour old codger."

"Marianne Blythe reckoned he's dying," said her companion. I strained forward to hear the conversation. "So I want to see what happens now he's not such a sour old cuss. He's become a bit of a sweetheart lately. He pinched my bottom at church last month."

"Poor you! Poor Ethel. He's cracking on to everyone at the bowling club and the RSL!"

"You're just jealous he hasn't given you the glad eye, too. He's very . . . vigorous . . . for a dying man. I'll give you that."

"It's that psychologist woman. I heard she bewitched him, or put a spell on him or something."

"Rubbish, Beryl! She just made him accept he's dying so he can let go and have some fun. I reckon this psychology business might be all right. I wouldn't mind dying the way Alf is. He's got a fountain of youth! I might go and see this woman myself and get some early runs on the board. No sense not planning for the inevitable."

"Well, I'm still suspicious. He looks like he's been in a trance for weeks. There's nothing normal about the way he's dying. He should be *much* sicker."

"Beryl, you're getting soft in the head. What is the normal way to die

anyway?"

"Not like that, I can tell you. Alf's turned nice and pleasant. He isn't worrying or grumbling, and even Ethel has stopped complaining about him. She even seems to quite *like* him. Although she has been looking a bit dazed and exhausted. Her hair is always a mess. She's letting herself go a bit. She actually seems sad to be seeing the end of him. I've never heard of *that* before! I wouldn't be surprised if she even likes him!"

"No, that's unlikely. After all, they *are* married."

She lowered her tones conspiratorially, but I was leaning in towards the cereal shelf and felt a chill as she said, "I've heard that woman's a witch, not a psychologist, though I'm darned if I know the difference."

Me either, love.

"I just wonder what goes on when you see a psychologist, Beryl."

Me too, I thought. I could see what these women were getting at. I ambled on, wondering if it was a plus for business if I were deemed a witch. Well, you need to branch out. Too much of the same sort of patient can do you in.

I haven't introduced anyone else in my family yet. Next comes Magnus, and no, I don't like the name either, though it grows on you over time. Noah and I shared the naming rights. I got Harry and he got Magnus. It's a good thing he deserted his post when he did. We were running out of names. I named Sammy, and then Baby arrived. Noah left before he bestowed a name on Baby, so while we were waiting around, Baby got to be three years old and only answered to Baby.

Magnus lives and sleeps in the room opposite Harry's. He finds Harry terribly loud. We all do, but he is less tolerant.

"How do you put up with him, Mum? I mean you act like you love him or something."

It is a mystery to all my children that I love any other but the one holding court at any given moment.

"He's such a dickhead, and he can't do *anything* quietly. What's with this harp thing? I mean, Jesus, what if someone finds out about it? I'll be dead. Like any chick would want to know me with a brother who plays the harp! It's hard enough pulling chicks when your mother's a shrink and there's a house full of your loonies."

"Magnus, enough." I only used his formal name sparingly, hoping it would have more impact. I was wrong. "I will not have you referring to my patients as loonies."

"I was referring to my *brothers*, Mum. At least your patients park outside and use the other entrance. That's the only way to tell the difference! What excuse have you got for the ones at the dinner table?"

"Darling, you spring from the same gene pool, and I grew you all. I love you all."

"Yes. I know the rest. You're getting very repetitive, you know, about your progeny and your loins. Do you think it's too early for a dementia

test? Isn't it getting time to hand over the reins to the younger generation? Us?"

"Sure, right. And how will you generate the income to keep this ship of fools afloat?"

"Funny you should bring this up, but I reckon I'm so hot I could support us all. The babes are just lining up."

Ah, delusions of grandeur in our midst. I've got my own fully blown narcissist. And he thinks Harry's a problem? I should refer *him* to a colleague.

When Magnus was born, he was perfect; as are they all. But having an older brother as he did, he graduated to Harry's grubby pursuits a lot sooner and with alacrity. He embraced the mud pie situation with such abandon I pondered his future as a professional mud wrestler, but that market seems to prefer lissom young women to lumpy teenage boys. I can see their point. It was very hard to get him clean, and in an instant he was back in it. We told ourselves he was a magnet for dirt, and he became universally and fondly known from thence forward as Magnet.

Throughout his primary education, he wore the title with pride, and it was greeted by his peers with awe. Some children thought he was magnetic, and various bits of metal were attached to him over the years. I was less than pleased, however, when he was in grade two and the grade five bully suggested that Magnet could gain much kudos if he could prove he was truly magnetic by sticking a clothes hanger in the power point. Fortunately, he only lit up a little bit and he was more singed than burned.

The principal of the school was starting to have concerns about the Carter family, as well he should.

"Mrs Carter, your boys seem to be somewhat accident prone, if you don't mind me saying."

"I don't mind you saying at all, Mr Brown. But let's not confuse assault and attempted electrocution with the three occasions my children have fallen off your faulty equipment and broken limbs."

"They just always seem to be on the front page here. Do you think this is the school for them?" he asked.

I wondered if this was the right planet for them, actually, but I wasn't going to tell him that. I stared him out and he changed the subject.

"Well, I guess that answers that. The boys stay. You like English history, Mrs Carter?"

That was such a swift change of subject I thought he must have forgotten his medication this morning. I mean, how did we segue to history so seamlessly? Had I been in a coma momentarily and missed something?

"I'm sorry, I think I've missed something here, Mr Brown."

We weren't on first name terms, yet, and with any amount of luck we never would be.

"Magnus Carter, Magna Carta? Get it?" He chuckled into the chilly silence that ensued.

Dear God, he was trying to engage me with humour.

"That's been done many times before, Mr Brown. Like you, my first husband is not known for his sense of humour . . ."

"Ah . . . I wasn't aware you'd remarried . . ."

He furiously tapped his finger on the desk. It was hypnotic.

"I haven't . . . and as a matter of fact, I have now lost any interest in history I ever had." He gulped. "I'm sure that you, like me, have a very busy day ahead of you. I look forward to the police report regarding this incident and full compensation for Magnus's burnt uniform, his singed hair, his now absent eyebrows, his damaged pride, and the psychological damage inflicted by this young tyrant. Shall we settle out of court?"

And I flounced out.

What was it about Magnus? He abandoned the title Magnet soon after. It had proved far too dangerous at primary school. It seemed every little boy thereafter wanted to test the concept and reality of electrocution on Magnet.

He passed into his secondary education and rediscovered the meaning of magnet, in a far more rewarding sense.

He was at the bus stop with the familiar and predictable gaggle of girls swarming around him when an old primary school mate from way back ambled over to be part of the action.

"So Magnet, you're still a magnet . . . for the *girls* now."

"Magnet! Magnet!" The girls were shrieking and a legend was born; in his own mind anyway.

Magnus sported sleek blond hair and already he had the look of the sensualist which presaged a grim future of self-gratification if I didn't take charge. He was tall and already bore the disreputable look of a bad boy. I hesitated to say 'bad boy' as he is my beloved son and I didn't want him to fulfil this destiny. *He* did. His blue eyes sparkled with pleasure at his own good luck and, when the dentist told him he looked like a young Brad Pitt, he came home and pronounced a great future for himself. Magnus was smarter than he wanted to be. Beneath the wanton exterior was a man of steel.

His bedroom was an archaeological dig site, strewn with adolescent treasures. All the boys had navy blue sheets on their beds so that the grime wouldn't show. Hey. Give me a break. I couldn't do everything. The arrival of young women in Magnus's life eventually proved a real positive as he began making tepid efforts to tidy the bomb site which constituted his territory. Harry was going to diminish Magnus's desirability with this harp caper.

And me? I had the patient from hell in the waiting room. I'd have to deal with Magnus and Harry later, at our next staff meeting.

After getting the troops off to their various schools and childcare institutions, I moseyed over the hall into the office, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for the new therapeutic day.

I had a new referral first off for the day. Excellent. She was a sullen,

pretty, teenage girl, legs crossed, school uniform riding obscenely high on her shapely thighs. This unknown girl was exuding major league attitude and we hadn't even met yet. My heart sank as I mustered a smile, and was greeted by a grimace and a professional roll of the eyes into the back of her head, which would make me fear she was having an epileptic seizure if my own kids didn't do the same every thirty seconds. So smiling was out.

"I won't be too long. Relax and make yourself at home," I said lightly.

"You shitting me?" she said. "Make myself at home? You don't even fucking *know* me! I don't want to be in my *own* fucking house. Why would I want to be in *yours*?"

Okay, so not the most promising start to the week, and I always start each week with this unwarranted optimism. When will I ever learn?

"Fine, then, don't make yourself at home and I'll still be with you shortly." I held her gaze, tournament level in its intensity. She was trying to stare me down, but she didn't live in my house. What would she know? *In these stakes, she's a D-grade tennis player and I'm Serena Williams.* Practice makes perfect in my job, and I had been on the battlefields of next door.

Our house was large, meandering, and old. By happenstance, the previous owner had been an architect who practised from home. He'd installed a side entrance for his clients and, as it turned out, my patients. There was a no-fly zone between my office and the rest of the ark. It was a golden rule that I never be interrupted at work. I lived and worked downstairs, and the children were relegated to the second storey. It worked for everyone. I tried not to go upstairs at all as it had always offended me and them equally when I'd done so. The fight for survival was an ongoing battle on the ark and I didn't sweat the small stuff. I've chosen my battles carefully, and keeping upstairs pristine was not one of them.

Every wall of my office had bookshelves that were not only full of books but were covered with the various detritus of our holidays. For some reason, my patients seemed quite puzzled by the victorious photos of my children's exploits which festooned the walls. Speaking as a mother, surviving every single day is in itself a victory so I've always told my patients not to get too excited about my children's achievements. They don't. In winter, the fire burned and crackled and was a great comfort to both me and my patients. Sometimes we would just stare at it, which was therapy in itself.

I insisted on a modicum of order in the communal spaces. The kitchen housed the world's biggest table and was known as Carter Central, because everything important happened there. Carter Central was also known for doubling as an operating theatre to perform minor surgery on our accident-prone family members. Chickens had been known to eat from the table without permission, too, not to mention dogs and sundry visitors. My office in order, I returned to the fray and my new patient.

"Good morning, Brittany, please come in." I ushered her through. "And

what can I do for you today?"

"Today? Is that all you're seeing me for, *today*? You gunna fix me in one fucking day?"

I wish.

"No. It's just a turn of phrase," I said pleasantly.

"A what? Fuck, I don't know what you're talking about, lady."

"Perhaps you'd like to tell me what brought you here today?"

"Mum's car. What did you reckon brought me here?"

Right. A spell in Brat Camp wouldn't go astray here. We're dealing with a literal one. I needed to up the ante, improve my ground strokes. I needed to be a little more direct with her.

"Perhaps you could tell me what's wrong?"

"You're the fucking psychologist! You tell *me*!"

I glanced at the clock. *Fifty-seven minutes to go*. It was three minutes past nine on a Monday morning and I was just trying to remember why I'd thought being a psychologist would be a good idea. What had I been drinking at the time? I wished Alf would visit later. He was a piece of cake compared to this one. That witch profession was starting to show real promise. I'd have to look into it. But instead I had to look into the simmering rage that was Brittany's soul.

"Well, Brittany . . ."

"I don't answer to that."

I raised my eyebrows, waiting for her to tell me what might be an acceptable title to address her by. No such luck. It was going to be a case of pulling teeth here, a titanic struggle.

"So what would you like me to call you?"

"Madonna."

Some Madonna!

"Sure. Well let's get started . . . Madonna. Your mum has sent you along to get help for a problem. Would you like to tell me a little about it?"

"My problem is sitting in the car, driving it. I don't have 'a problem'," she mimicked me, ominously building to fury. "I don't have any problem but my fucking parents. What's with the dumb fucking questions? You've got all these degrees and diplomas and shit on the wall and you can't even work that out? You have to *ask* me? You are dumb as dog shit."

Sometimes it takes time to establish rapport. This time, it could take a millennium. But Madonna had no intention of storming out. She thought she smelt blood, and another victory over a delusional adult was at hand. Well, she got the delusional bit right.

We jousting for another forty-five minutes and agreed to further appointments, all of which I made at the end of the day. It was no good being worn out before the day had barely started.

I ushered her out with a faint smile, but she bared her fangs at me. Eventually, I'd win her over. I usually did.

I turned to my next patient, a beaming eighty-year-old lady, a bunch of

hand-picked roses in her hand. *Now I remember why I do it all.*

“Beth dear, I’ve finished crocheting that linen hankie for you, too.”

Chapter 3

Now, lest you should think I *live* in hell and *work* in Afghanistan, I need to set the record straight. I love my four boys more than life itself. For all the dramas they provide me and all the catastrophes that will unfold before Christmas, they fill my life with such unbridled joy that I still need to pinch myself. Parenting is the hardest job I have done, and the very best. Whatever challenges they present, whatever they look like, however they smell, I feel unconditional love, just like it says in the text books. It is this primitive driving urge that keeps my nose above water. *Survivor* may have come to town, to be filmed in my own backyard, but we never vote each other off the ark. And it wasn't always chaos. Just often. And make no mistake, it's an ark on an ocean of love. If it weren't, we'd all have done serious harm to each other.

We may not vote each other off, but we do vote. Every Sunday. We have a family staff meeting to bring some order, and allow the weakest, the smallest, the loudest, the coolest, and the transiently all-powerful mother equal time around the dinner table. We had a few days left before the next meeting and for some reason smiling Sammy wanted an adjournment of standard operating procedures. There were no agenda items on the whiteboard on the fridge, just some friendly fraternal graffiti scrawled anonymously: "Harry your a dickhead." That had to be Sammy's work. He thought spelling and grammar irrelevant and overrated. He was a man on a mission and correct spelling wasn't part of his game plan, but as I kept pointing out to him every time he ignores it, it does him in.

"Sammy, this graffiti isn't an agenda item, I assume?"

"How did you know it was me?"

"I'm a psychologist, remember? I read your mind. I know your every intention. You may speak English masterfully but you write it woefully. You can hide nothing from me."

"You better hope that's not true, Mum. There's a lot going on in this house you don't want to know."

I had an inkling about some disreputable behaviours and activities going on upstairs but I put that on the backburner for later. There's only so much I can endure on any given day and Madonna had about sucked me dry on that count. I had no energy left for nasty new surprises. "We don't need a meeting. I've got things on anyway on Sunday."

"So the rest of us don't need to meet and discuss our issues because you have other priorities. Would that be right, mate?"

"You know how it is, Mum. I'm a busy man, in demand." He grinned impishly. And, as always, it's impossible to maintain the rage with this one.

"You need to remember you're a mere boy—a lad, not a man. You should be doing what boys do, and later put away boy things and then do manly things. Enjoy boyhood," I said.

"Mum, boyhood was remarkably boring and best put away behind me. Look at Magnet, for example. He was born a man. He was chasing girls in primary school. He bypassed his latent stage altogether for girls and I'm bypassing it altogether for politics."

"Yes, but the whole staff meeting thing was your idea. You can't just absent yourself." I eyeballed him.

"Why not? Every good politician avoids Parliament as often as possible, unless he's on stage performing, being seen, winning votes, trouncing the opposition."

"So we adjourn this Sunday staff meeting for those reasons? No one to trounce?" I smelt a rat. I'm not a psychologist for nothing. Sammy loved to hold court at our meetings, refining and honing his skills on us. He avoided a walkout or a warning from the chair because of his genuine and ineffable charm.

Everyone loved Sammy, even Alf, who had come to the private entrance on his first visit.

"Nice little bugger answered the door. Your secretary, is he?"

"No, Mr Dunne," I replied. We were still on formal terms at that stage. "That's my son, Sammy. I'm sorry you went to the wrong entrance."

"That's all right, love. He's a nice enough lad. But I hate the little arseholes." That was my first introduction to Alf's all time favourite descriptor and he was to prove admirably versatile in its application.

"You have a problem with young lads, do you?" I started my detective work.

"They're all little pricks, if you really want to know. They're always spitting and swearing and throwing shit in my garden. They stink and they're all rude little bastards. Present company excepted."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Mr Dunne."

I'm sorry I feel that way, too. I couldn't fault him. I was momentarily dumbfounded, searching for a suitable response, but it was such a precise and concise summation of the youth of my acquaintance that I was momentarily lost for words.

He took my silence as offence. Little did he know. He tried to rescue both

of us.

“Like I said, your lad seems all right. We had a bit of a nag. Reckons he’s going to be prime minister.”

That’s my Sammy. Cut to the chase, don’t waste a potential vote. Seize every opportunity.

At his next visit, Alf waxed lyrical about Sammy after another yarn out the front. I had to speak to Sammy about keeping away from patients. That very night.

“Mum, I was inside. He came to the wrong door again. I think he did it on purpose. He wanted to know what party I was going to represent and said he wouldn’t vote for me if I was one of those commie arseholes . . .”

“Language, Sammy . . .” I cried.

“Or greenie pricks . . .”

He grinned that tremendous grin, the one that will see him all the way to the United Nations.

“Enough already!” I’d really have to get Alf to come to the office door, before he corrupted Sammy any further. So Alf, like everyone else, loved our Sammy. And why not? But who loves a single mother with four boys?

Baby was the cause of my single mother status. When I announced his impending arrival to Noah, and yes that really is his name, I jokingly suggested we were turning into Noah’s Ark.

Not only did the humour elude him entirely, but his eyes widened in alarm and I watched with a little professional detachment as he experienced a full blown panic attack. Now this is my area of expertise, so when he started to shake, go pale, and gasp in terror, I continued with what I was doing. After all, he was a husband, not a patient and I certainly wasn’t working on Sunday morning for no pay.

“Beth, I’m ill. I think I’m having a heart attack,” he gasped in desperation.

“No, you’re having a panic attack. You’ll be fine.”

I returned to folding the clean clothes and putting the next load of washing on. The washing basket is like an in-tray that never empties. You just plough on stoically. So that’s what I did.

Noah did not appreciate this approach.

“I’m dying here, Beth, and you’re doing the fucking washing?”

Noah was usually given to swearing and my introduction of the swearing jar had resulted in the funding of a number of luxurious holidays off the ark. He stumbled into a pile of dirty washing. I thought this experience might prove akin to a stiff dose of smelling salts and sort him right out there and then.

He was apoplectic with panic and then rage.

“What sort of fucking psychologist are you anyway? Have you no heart?”

Help me! I can't breathe . . . get an ambulance."

"Noah, settle down, you're having an anxiety attack. I told you, you'll be fine."

"No wonder your business isn't making any money, if you treat your patients like this. You know, you're a cold, hard bitch!"

My business was doing very nicely, thank you, but now wasn't the time to start talking debits and credits.

"There you are, sweetheart," I said. "Now you're angry with me, aren't you?"

"Fucking right about *that*, Beth!"

"Good, I'll bet you're not anxious anymore. See? It's hard to have an anxiety attack and be angry at the same time, and anger won out. Am I right? See? I've fixed you up without even looking."

Noah sunk back into the pile of dank, fetid washing, sighed, felt his chest, and uttered in surprise, "It's true. I was getting so pissed off with you it passed. Well, isn't that something! I wonder what brought that on?"

Unfortunately, it was the prospect of yet another mouth to feed—and perhaps many more mouths to come—which precipitated Noah's panic disorder. There wasn't a contraceptive on the planet that could outsmart us. You name it and we'd had a baby by it. Harry was our pill baby. Magnus was our IUD one. Sammy was the broken condom. And Baby was the diaphragm child.

Every time we discussed Baby, Noah actually had a panic attack. Every time he held Baby, he had panic attacks. When we tried to name Baby, he had his worst one yet, so I referred him to a colleague. Many medications were tried. In fact, a whole drug trial was based around Noah's panic attacks. Nothing worked until his psychiatrist suggested Noah spend a week away from home, as he felt this might be the cause of Noah's anxiety. Well, he was no rocket scientist, was he? He must have been top of *his* grade in psychiatry! It was the cause of *my* panic, too, and I couldn't just go away for a week. But I liked Noah, so we sent him away for a week.

He enjoyed it so much he never came home. He rang quite often, though.

"Beth, I feel so great. I'm cured. The doctor was right. It's Baby and home in general doing it."

So when he came home to trial his newfound health, he collapsed in the driveway and hyperventilated himself into unconsciousness, necessitating a real ambulance this time. The final time. Noah moved out and the next staff meeting was a sombre affair indeed.

"Boys, your father has moved out."

"Right," said Harry. "I noticed. Why's that?"

He was unperturbed, perhaps indifferent.

"I'm afraid he's allergic to us." I could understand that. I was allergic to

us too.

"Can I have his office?" Ah, Harry. Ever the opportunist.

"Has he left you for a hot babe, Mum?" said salacious Magnus.

Harry paled. "You are so sick, Magnet. Adults don't do that shit, only kids do. Dad's far too old for that. You are so gross." So how did I get so old already that sex was a thing of the past? I'm sure I could still remember it. Baby couldn't say anything yet—being a baby as such, he said nothing, thank God. There were already too many opinionated people in this house.

No one seemed too surprised that Noah had gone. There may have been some residual envy that he had made the first dash, however. Well, in my case it was more than residual. And that left me without a man, sailing off into the sunset alone with my mutinous crew.

"Well, Mum. You've got us, so you won't be lonely," said Harry. "Can I have Dad's bike?"

Noah sort of dropped off the earth at that point. Perhaps he wasn't a very big part of our lives if we could consign him to history so easily. And the feeling seemed to be mutual. His therapist seemed to think ongoing contact was hampering any progress, and so did we. So it all ended very nicely. Things changed after that and if the boys saw me eye an attractive man in the supermarket, they would swarm around me in an alarming and systematic fashion and shepherd me away. They didn't mention Noah much. It was like he was just a nice idea.

"And he was such a nice man," I'd tell them.

"Mum, he was never here and when he was, you'd always end up pregnant. It was disgusting, and at your age, too!" said Magnus, who knew all about these things. Well, Noah wasn't here much, which was true. He was always overseas doing something important.

But Sammy was always there keeping any errant men at bay. He was reasonable, contained, composed, loveable, articulate, and insanely optimistic. He just wasn't principled. This was how he recognised his future potential as a politician. So while Harry was playing the harp, Sammy was playing the numbers, working out how to be sports captain, school captain, music captain, drama captain, senior prefect, and all round hero.

Sammy is another one of my sons who cuts a slender figure. He's inordinately tall with an unruly and indecently heavy mop of gleaming hair. Whilst Harry is something of a closed book, Sammy is open to the world and wherever we go in our travels, everyone greets Sammy like a long lost friend. I often wondered how he could have been old enough to have met, let alone befriended, half the populace of the planet. He tends to lounge around a lot, and if clothes maketh the man for Harry, they are an afterthought for Sammy. He does, however, own some interesting headwear and on any given day he could be seen in some spectacular millinery.

"Hats are my tag. I'm avant-garde. No one will ever forget me."

Magnus flopped down in the chair next to Sammy, rolling his eyes and muttering. *"Dickhead. I've forgotten you already. You're such a try-hard*

loser.”

“Watch this space, bro.” Like any true politician, it was hard to offend Sammy.

On the day of this conversation, Sammy was wearing a very natty Bolivian bowler hat. Harry stared intently, bemused, when he ambled in.

“After the Bolivian vote are you, little bro? Trouble is, only girls wear them in Bolivia.”

“Every vote counts,” said Sammy. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

I always worried about Sammy’s homework, or lack of it. He was too busy glad-handing, being smiling Sammy, winning teachers and students alike.

“Sammy, time to get to the books and catch up on schoolwork.”

“Mum, I’m at the toughest school of all, the school of hard knocks. Life is my greatest teacher.”

“Sweetheart, then why am I paying exorbitant school fees?”

“Mum, Mum,” he groaned. “It’s all about contacts, networking.”

“I thought you were going to be the next great Labor prime minister. Aren’t you networking on the wrong side of town?”

“Ah, Mother. You are so naive for an old fart.”

Old fart? Me? Patronising little shit.

“There’s no right side of town. That’s so old school.”

“Couldn’t we save on school fees, then, and use them for campaign funds later?” I suggested hopefully.

“Can we be more focussed on the present? Campaign funds won’t be a problem. I agree with Magnet, occasionally, but we have to do something about Harry.”

“Well, darling, Harry wants me to do something about you, too. And Magnus feels you’re all cramping his style. And Baby says no one listens to him, ever.”

And so the staff meeting was reinstated for the following Sunday. Slippery Sammy still hadn’t done any schoolwork. But there’s a deep and genuine soul in there and, despite his best efforts, Sammy may end up with more principles than he bargained for.

Although, Sammy hadn’t kept the men away after all. Out of nowhere, I had a man in sight. And what a man! I was winded just looking at him.

Chapter 4

Alf Dunne wasn't the only person who thought I needed a man. I did, too. But I still had enough respect left for the rest of humanity not to inflict my crew on anyone just yet. After all, we still hadn't settled on an enduring title for Baby. Preschool was looming and I couldn't enrol him as Baby Carter. He would never survive the first bout in the sandpit without being laughed out of kindergarten. I needed to make it an agenda item for Sunday's meeting. Baby was old enough for some sort of input, too.

My single status had grown on me over time, like fungus or lichen. The boys didn't need to steer me clear of anyone because when any sane male sees a woman who answers to "Mum!" from four different boys, he generally steers himself clear anyway. And if he doesn't, he must be a paedophile, I'd think.

But there was always the fan club at work, those patients who idolised me and adored me. We call it transference. They call it true love. Well, they were sick or they wouldn't be seeing me, that's true. But you take your comfort where you can find it. I tell my boys that some men find me very attractive.

"Mum, they're not men, they're *patients*! Get a life!" Sammy said amiably enough.

"Well, none of *you* seem to want me to get a life at all," I protested.

"No one in his right mind would want us. Let's be frank here. And if he's not in his right mind then we don't want him either. Get it? We call it a paradox, Mum."

Out of the mouths of babes!

Next morning, one of my fan club was first cab off the rank, beaming in the waiting room. I ushered him in, a tight straitlaced smile as a greeting. I needed to be very formal with Morrie.

"Good morning, Morrie, and how are you today?" I offered a prim, firm nod.

"All the better for seeing you, Beth." He grinned insanely. "Love that

shirt. It's my favourite."

I ticked that shirt off the list. I wouldn't be wearing that again. Since seeing Morrie, my wardrobe had diminished considerably. I was looking more like a suffragette every visit. Short skirts were suggestive, long ones more so. I tried smiling warmly, but that hadn't worked either.

"Oh, Beth, that smile! Could we talk about your smile today?"

However, I was the controlled clinician, determined to focus on him, not me.

"Let's start where we left off last time, Morrie, shall we?"

"I love it when you're mean. It's such a turn on. You can't trick me with that frown," he said. "Can we talk about transference again? When I'm better, you can be yourself again and we can go out on a date. I know you care about me deep down."

"Deep down, Morrie, you're just another car repayment." I try harsh and cold as a mode.

He chuckled.

"Ah, she's Madam Lash today! I love it!"

"Perhaps I need to refer you on to a colleague. Once again, we're having trouble getting down to business here."

"There's only one sort of business I want to get down to with you, Beth."

Why had I thought the day might go well? *Not good. Pathetic.*

And to add insult to injury, Madonna was back, earlier than expected.

"So, Madonna, it's good to see you again."

"What's good about it?" she said with a glare.

"What would you like to start with today?" I raised my eyebrows encouragingly.

"You're not going to say that every fucking time, are you? What are you, a machine?"

I rearranged myself in my chair, buying time while she settled. "You seem very angry again, Madonna. Perhaps we could talk about that?" Oh, it would be another long hour.

"I'm always angry. So what's new? I've already told you it's my parents. Do I have to tell you again? Fuck, are you dumb or something?"

"Madonna, let's settle one thing from the outset. You don't have to come here."

"The fuck I don't."

"I can't help you if you keep resisting me. In fact, we can't even get started."

"You don't know shit. And you don't give a shit."

"Well, you're certainly trying hard to make me feel that way. Why do you want me to dislike you so much?"

"Everyone else does. You're no fucking different. Just one more shrink. Let's cut to the chase. Call my parents in and tell them you can't help me and get it over with. Christ, you people are all the same."

It's easy to give up on the Madonnas of this world. That's what she

wanted, for me to prove once again what a bleak, nasty world she lived in.

“Sorry, Madonna, you’re stuck with me,” I said. We parried a little more and she stormed out twenty minutes early, so I went to a well-deserved lunch, with myself.