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The Language
of Others



SCEPTRE

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For Alex and Heather

Chapter I

Jessica stood alone in the silent space, contemplating the Long Gallery in front of her – a beguiling, empty corridor of oak floorboards. She started to move, her roller-skates stiff and uneasy as they rumbled across the uneven wood. The growl of creaking ball-bearings drifted upwards, dissipating on its way to the arched ceiling until it was absorbed into the crumbling plasterwork.

Patches of sunlight illuminated her progress as she swept past the tall windows, her fat black plaits flying out behind her. Doric columns framed the windows, their white marble grubby and chipped, while busts of assorted Caesars stood guard at regular intervals, looking down their imperial noses with disapproval. The walls were powder blue. Gold-edged rectangles framed large areas of blankness where there had once been pictures.

Jessica Fontaine was seven years old, a sturdy, grounded-looking girl. Fat, according to her two boy cousins, bonny according to her distracted, unobservant mother. Her brown eyes, flickering with feverish excitement, were focused ahead of her for a change, shaken out of their normal downwards slant. Today she had to look where she was going.

She almost laughed out loud. This was joy. Air rushed past her, a wind in her ears that banished the outside world. She was exhilarated by the freedom of her solitude. Her feet were setting a rhythm, arms and body moving in harmony, as she sped past fireplaces, ornate silver-edged mirrors, a plaster frieze depicting the siege of Troy, everything as it had always been, but now fleeting, tenuous, inconsequential.

A few yards from the end, she realised that she didn't know how to stop. The vast panelled door loomed ahead, approaching faster than she had expected. She put her feet together, hoping this might slow her down, then stretched her arms out as a collision became inevitable.

Her hands slammed into the door but failed to stop the progress of the skates. Her feet kept moving until they could go no further, and she fell in a small heap, her bottom thumping heavily on to the floor and her hands stinging with pain.

She sat there for some time, coming to terms with the abrupt cessation of speed and her aching body. But none of it cancelled out the experience of flying, the weightlessness, the liberation. Inside, she was still moving.

'Jess!'

It was her sister, Harriet, from somewhere inside the house, searching for her, as always.

Jessica wished she could curl into an invisible hole, and remain separated. She wrapped her arms round her legs, dropped her head and rolled over on to one side. I'm tiny, she thought, non-existent. She pressed her eyes tightly together and saw kaleidoscope patterns in the darkness. Brilliant flecks of gold and red, swirling and throbbing inside her head.

She was disturbed by shrieks of laughter outside the window.

'It's by the fountain,' called a boy. "'Ding dong bell, Pussy's in the well . . .'" She recognised the voice of Philip, her cousin.

'No, it's in the clock tower,' shouted Colin, who always automatically argued with his brother.

There were three cousins, the two boys and Judy, racing through the garden with children from the village, following a treasure hunt organised by Jessica's mother.

Jessica uncurled herself and crept over to the nearest window seat to peer out. She rubbed with her sleeve at a small, grimy pane of glass until it came clear, and then she could see

them all, bounding across the courtyard, heading for the distant clock tower. Jessica knew they were going the wrong way because she'd seen the clues earlier, but they were enjoying themselves so much that accuracy was irrelevant.

Her mother was with them, her miniskirt sliding up her legs, leading the crowd, laughing more than anyone else, not prepared to give anything away. She arranged a treasure hunt every Wednesday at two o'clock during the summer holidays for Harriet and Jessica, the cousins, their friends and anyone else who wanted to join in. They congregated by the lions on either side of the big wrought-iron gates. Jessica's mother was always there, on time whatever the weather, dividing them into groups, handing out the first clue on little strips of paper. Each clue had been copied out several times the day before. Harriet usually helped, forming slow but accurate letters. Jessica dashed off a few if compelled to, but her mother complained that she wrote them too fast and they were unreadable. The standard of the clues varied from simple to impossibly obscure – to give everyone a chance, her mother said.

The previous afternoon, they had prepared for today's treasure hunt, sitting round the kitchen table with orange squash and flapjacks. Afternoon tea, their mother called it.

'What does this say?' said five-year-old Harriet, studying a list of clues.

'Hoop-la,' said Jessica.

'Oh yes,' said Harriet, as if she understood. She copied it on to a piece of paper in large wavering letters. 'But what does the "la" bit mean?'

'Nothing,' said Jessica. 'It's to do with fairs. Where you throw the hoop over the prize you want.'

'Oh,' said Harriet. 'So what does the clue mean? Where do you go?'

'Somewhere on the croquet lawn. Obviously.'

'Jess,' said their mother. 'Don't be patronising. You don't want Harriet to think she's stupid.'

‘That’s right,’ said Harriet, and licked her pencil as she started on the next one.

Their mother leafed through the book of quotations in front of her and wrinkled her nose, shutting her eyes as if she was smelling something delicious. ‘I love treasure hunts,’ she said.

She had long, straight, honey-coloured hair down to her waist, which she tied into a single plait for most of the day. In the evening, after supper, when she and Jessica’s father settled down in the drawing room to watch television, she let it out and it swayed sleekly, dense and shiny, enveloping her shoulders in a silken shawl.

Jessica watched her outside with the other children. Her mother liked to laugh a lot and wanted other people to laugh with her. The treasure was always a great disappointment to Jessica. It was usually only a few lollipops that had to be shared by everyone, but no one else seemed to mind. It was as if the real treasure was the hunt, the running, the fun.

Jessica heard a noise behind her and turned round to see Harriet’s shiny black shoes placed neatly in front of the window seat.

‘There you are,’ said Harriet, her delicate, elfin features lit up with satisfaction.

Chapter 2

'Hi, Jess,' the email message reads, 'I really need to see you. Can we meet in Birmingham City Centre? By the bull? Friday. 12.30. Andrew.'

Why have I agreed to this?

I suppose I just want to reassure myself that he's still all right. Like checking up on a delinquent teenager who doesn't have the skills to look after himself properly.

His first email popped into my inbox a fortnight ago and caught me unawares. All casual and airy, like an old friend who'd lost touch.

'How's things? What are you doing with yourself now? Still driving the Mini, or have you advanced to more sophisticated levels? A Peugeot, perhaps? Or a Citroën? I saw in the *Evening Mail* that you and Mary are tickling the old ivories together. I hope they're paying you.'

It's been seven years since I last saw or spoke to Andrew. I used to deliver Joel to his flat on alternate Sundays, passing him over with a sigh of relief, my mind already ahead of myself as I anticipated a glorious day of silence. But once he reached sixteen, I told Joel he had to make his own arrangements. So there's been a good long recovery time. I've even taught myself not to think about him.

Where did he get my email address? I can't believe Mary would give it to him and I have the impression that he and Joel haven't been in contact with each other for some time. But he's devious. He can be very clever when he makes an effort.

Apparently, he has a new job. He gets up very early in the morning, takes the bus to Northfield and sweeps up rubbish.

He has a cart and large broom and he likes it. I suspect it appeals to his sense of importance. ‘Satisfying work,’ he told me in one email. ‘I’m a man of the people. None of your brain work needed. Just me and my broom.’

The really surprising thing is that he’s been doing it for more than a month. There must have been hundreds of jobs since the last time I had contact with him, but I’m not tempted to ask for details. I prefer not to know.

I should have ignored him. I can’t explain to myself why I replied, why we progressed into a light-hearted, witty repartee. It would be embarrassing to admit to anyone that I have any contact with him at all. My mother’s voice is in my head. ‘Are you mad?’

‘What does he want?’ my father would say. ‘Is he offering you some belated maintenance?’

And Mary, even Mary would give me a look, although she wouldn’t be prepared to put anything into words.

I recognise him immediately as I approach the Bull Ring. He’s more seedy than he used to be. He looks like an expensive suit that’s never been pressed, gradually losing its sharpness, the pockets dropping, a button missing, the shape of his knees imprinted in the trousers. He has one of those baby faces that won’t age until he’s at least sixty. Paul McCartney looks. He could be going on tour with a rock band and still pulling in the crowds if he put his mind to it. But he would never do that. Putting his mind to it was something he abandoned when he was twenty.

He’s shifting impatiently from foot to foot because there are too many people round him and he doesn’t want anyone to step on him. He doesn’t know how to weave and blend, how to move with the flow, how to let things go.

He’s always cultivated a neglected look. I can imagine him standing in front of a large mirror in the flat I’ve never been

inside – he will have plenty of mirrors – and admiring his dishevelment. ‘Yes,’ he’d say. ‘This would please my mother.’ Which, of course, it wouldn’t.

It’s puzzling to me that I was ever drawn to Andrew. Those creases in his cheeks when he smiled played a significant part, I suppose, and his hair, which seemed so glamorous when I first met him. I don’t believe in blond men now. I always imagine an arrogance lurking beneath those shining curls, a cold ruthlessness concealed behind the gold veneer. I’m not impressed by aging rock singers.

We don’t kiss, embrace, or give any sign that we know each other except a nod of recognition. All is as it should be. We head directly for the BHS cafeteria because not wasting money on unnecessary luxury is an ingrained habit for both of us. Not that it really matters to Andrew, since I’m sure I will be the one who ends up paying.

Andrew argues with the lady dishing out. ‘No liver with my bacon,’ he says.

‘It’s liver and bacon, love. If you don’t want liver, wouldn’t it be better to have something else?’

He eyes her contemptuously. ‘Why should I have liver if I don’t like it? Why shouldn’t I have bacon? Where’s the logic in that?’

‘You can have bacon and eggs, you know. We serve breakfast all day.’

He remains stationary in front of her, a look of steely determination on his face.

‘Come on, Andrew,’ I say. ‘There’s a queue behind us.’

This is a mistake. If you ask Andrew to be brief or understanding or polite, he will do the exact opposite on principle. He points at his mouth. ‘Read my lips. No more liver.’

She purses her lips and a line of little wrinkles forms the shape of a temporary moustache. ‘Bacon it is, then,’ she says.

‘Although don’t hold me responsible if you meet the odd bit of liver.’

‘Odd’s the word,’ he says and his face twists into an unexpected smile. ‘That’s what I’ve got against liver.’

The woman looks at the next customer. She will not be won over, which is good for Andrew. He has always believed he can charm people. He needs to be outmanoeuvred by reality more often.

We shuffle along the rest of the counter, while Andrew debates the crispness of the lemon meringue, the freshness of the Danish pastries, the consistency of the cream on the fruit trifle. I don’t argue. I take the same as him, not considering if I like it or not, ready to go for any option rather than spark an argument. How easy it is to fall back into our old roles.

We find a table and sit down, but not before Andrew has spotted some crumbs left by a previous customer and gone to find a waitress to wipe the table.

Life with Andrew. Exhausting, conciliatory, hard. It always was.

For fifteen years I’ve struggled to earn a living without him, bring up our son, who has not always cooperated in the experiment, and learnt to do all the things Andrew failed to do as a husband. I haven’t exactly glided downhill with the wind behind me, but at least I haven’t been doing it at the same time as fighting the Force Ten gale that was Andrew. I’ve made it. I’ve survived. And here he comes again. Like some giant black hole, manipulating events around him, feeding off his surroundings, sucking everything into his way of thinking.

I can walk away at any time. I’m free. So why do I feel sympathy for him? Why should I care about his state of mind? When I see him, I’m reminded of his endless frustration, his thwarted ambitions, and I know I’m looking at the unhappiest man in the world. There’s no way for him to break away from himself.

‘So how’s Joel?’ he says at last, sorting through the gravy on his plate and pushing to one side all the bits of liver and onion he can find. The reject pile mounts up on the side. He eats by enclosing the fork with his teeth, but not his lips, then picking off the food. He doesn’t close his mouth properly until he has removed the fork.

‘You could ask him yourself,’ I say.

‘I would, but as I’m sure you know, he won’t speak to me.’

So I was right. I wonder whose fault it was. Who made the decision to cut off communication? Which one took the first step and which one jumped in enthusiastically to take up the challenge? I can’t ask Joel, who rarely answers personal questions. He either stares past me as if I’m not there, or changes the subject, or leaves the room.

‘He’s looking for a flat,’ I say.

‘He’s not still living at home?’

I sigh. ‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Tell him to go. The boy shouldn’t be sponging off you after all this time. He’s twenty-four, for goodness sake.’

‘Twenty-three.’ You’d think he would know the age of his only son.

‘Whatever.’

‘He’s fine,’ I say. ‘His business is going really well.’

And as far as I can tell, it is. He goes off every day to his office, where he employs five people, and comes home at night looking pleased with himself. He has the intelligence and he has the application. He just doesn’t want to leave home. He enjoys having his meals cooked, his laundry done, his bills paid without having to think about it. I worry about him. Could he manage on his own, or is he another version of his father? Shinier on the outside, but just as incapable underneath.

Andrew and I eat in silence for a while. It’s difficult to make conversation, and I wonder how we ever managed when we lived in the same house.

‘Did you get a letter from the university?’ I ask.

‘Why would they write to me?’

‘They want to compile an accurate record of all their ex-music students. Where they are, what they’re doing. They call them alumni now, you know.’

He snorts. ‘Alumni? Pretentious nonsense! What’s wrong with graduates? They probably think that giving everyone a Latin title makes them more generous. They’re after your money, Jess, that’s what it’s all about. Anyway, they’re only interested in people who actually graduated.’

I should have thought of that. Not a good line of conversation.

‘My mother turned up the other day.’

I stop eating and stare at him, convinced I’ve misheard. ‘Your mother?’

He grins and he’s that charming student all over again, a mischievous glint in his eye. ‘You must learn to keep your mouth shut. It doesn’t suit you to be gaping like that. Hold on – is that a gold crown I can see on the second molar, bottom right?’

I shut my mouth. ‘Your mother?’ I say again.

He nods and puts down his fork. ‘My father’s ill.’

I should know this, but I haven’t spoken to them for ages. It’s years since Joel and I were invited over for occasional visits. ‘Is it serious?’

He nods. ‘Apparently he’s dying.’

‘Oh.’ I think about how to react. Shock? Pity? Sadness? I’m not sure which one to go for, so I keep my face neutral.

‘Cancer of the liver.’

No wonder Andrew didn’t want liver with his bacon. Should I feel sorry for him? After all, it is his father, even if they don’t communicate. ‘How’s your mother coping?’

‘I think she’s enjoying the status. Nearly a widow.’

‘You mean she actually came to your flat?’

He sighs. 'Yes. To tell me about my father, she said. To see how I live, she meant but didn't say, and to give me my violin.'

'She brought your violin?'

'Yes. All twenty thousand pounds of it. Although it must be worth a lot more now.'

'Did she leave it with you?'

'Yes.'

I can't believe this. 'Why?'

He pushes his plate to one side with a grand gesture. He's eaten all he intends to. 'She's been thinking.'

'Oh dear.'

'Quite. Anyway, she says it's mine, so I should have it. Apparently, once you're over forty, you're old enough to make your own decisions.'

Then she's six years late. 'It doesn't sound much like your mother.'

He frowns. 'I'm not sure what she's up to.'

'Did you invite her in?'

'No. Returning someone else's property doesn't give you the right to invade their privacy.'

I try to make sense of this violin business. Why would his mother give it to him? Isn't she worried he'll destroy it, or sell it? 'Do you think she's expecting you to play it?'

His face sags. 'If she is, she can go on expecting,' he mutters into his coffee. 'She knows how I feel about that.'

'When was the last time you discussed it?'

'When was the last time she spoke to me?'

'So she knows what you thought about it when you were twenty, but she may not know if you still feel the same way.'

'Do I care?'

'Will you go and see your father?'

He hesitates. 'No.'

'But he might die without you ever seeing him again.'

'He should have thought of that. He knows where I am.'

'Andrew - he's your father.'

‘Hmm.’

We don’t discuss it any more. There have always been so many subjects that are best avoided with Andrew. Few things change.

We leave the cafeteria and emerge into the crowds of New Street. ‘I must get back,’ I say as we head towards the car park. ‘I’ve arranged a last-minute practice with Mary.’ I don’t want to walk through the crowds with Andrew. It’s difficult to stay side by side and he will get annoyed if I surge ahead without him or struggle along in his wake. I put my bag on my shoulder, trying to look businesslike. ‘Lovely to see you. Let me know how your dad gets on.’

‘Jess—’ he says.

‘Although I suppose with liver cancer it’s all fairly inevitable, isn’t it? Could he have a transplant?’

‘Jess—’

I look at him standing beside me, struggling to stay upright against the crowds that are rocking him backwards and forwards, a broken branch bobbing in a stream, buffeted by the force of the water, incapable of intelligent action to save himself. He looks crumpled, folding in on himself, lacking the strength to resist.

‘What?’ I say.

‘I wanted to ask you – I’ve been meaning to ask you—’

‘What?’ I’m fighting my natural inclinations. I can feel myself being drawn along to save him, ready to dive in, even though I know I can’t swim and I’ll get caught up in the current—

‘Couldn’t we—?’

‘What?’

‘Couldn’t we have another go? Try again?’

‘Try what?’ He can’t mean what I think he means. Panic makes me talk faster. ‘Another meal? Go to see your father?’

‘Jess—’ His eyes are urgent. A small child willing me to do

what he wants. ‘Couldn’t we – you know – get back together again?’

I take deep breaths. I need to slow down and be logical. I won’t allow him to switch on the pathos and expect us both to return to our student days. I know things now. He’s not as he seems. He’s a full-sized, authentic leopard. I’ve seen his spots and the colour can’t possibly have faded.

‘Jess?’ he says.

‘No!’ I turn away from him fiercely and walk in the opposite direction, even though it’s not where I want to go. I have to do this physically. It’s the only way. If I look at him too long, see past his bravado and glimpse the desperation beneath, I will start to waver.

‘Jess!’

With relief, I realise that his voice is fading and he’s not following me. I start to run. Up New Street, back towards the Bull Ring. When I reach the bull, I pause in the safety of its solid, shiny bulk and look back. I can’t see him. The bull’s tail arches above me, curled into a perpetual flick. I turn away and head for Next, up the escalators to Homeware where I can relax. He won’t follow me here. He has no interest in curtains or coffee tables or sofas.

Joel is in the living room when I get home, sprawled over the sofa with his shoes off, watching *Bugs Bunny*. I love my son, but right now it seems as if there are too many people in my life, all pressing up against me, denying me the opportunity to breathe properly.

‘Hi, Mum,’ he calls as I disappear to the kitchen.

‘Hello, Joel. You’re back early.’

‘Yes. We made a huge breakthrough, so I gave everyone the afternoon off.’

He formed his own company – ScarlattiSkills – at seventeen, and designs computer games. His ability must be an offshoot

of his father's neglected talent. Patterns, new ideas, fast thinking, alternative ways of seeing things. He tells me he's making money. 'The world adores me,' he says every now and again, which I take to be an indicator of a successful business deal. He doesn't lack confidence.

It saddens me that all those brains are employed in the pursuit of fun, rather than something more lasting and worthwhile, but I realise this is a narrow viewpoint. If people can't enjoy themselves, be happy, there's not a lot of point in anything. Happiness is only irrelevant if you don't have enough to eat.

'I'm not cooking tonight,' I call as I slip off my shoes and throw them to the side of the kitchen where I might or might not pick them up later. 'You'll have to fix something for yourself.'

'Oh . . .'

He has to learn. 'I told you this morning. I've got a last-minute practice with Mary before the concert tomorrow, and I'm staying for supper.'

He appears at the open door of the kitchen and I can feel his presence by the movement of air as it bounces towards me. The unrelenting whoosh of a real person, the suffocating sense of people where I want emptiness. 'You don't need to practise, Mum. You're already brilliant.'

I smile across the room at him. I'm grateful for the fact that he's not unemployed, an alcoholic, a drug addict, but I wish I didn't have to see him every day of my life. No breaks, no holidays, no time off for good conduct. He never goes away. He doesn't have any friends, only work colleagues. Something's not quite right. He couldn't get on with other children when he was younger, but why can't he do it now? Twenty-three years is a long time to have no social life.

He's tall like his father, careless with his body in the same casual, masculine way, but he dresses better. He buys his clothes on the internet and his entire wardrobe arrives through the post, so I see each item before he decides to keep it.

‘What do you think, Mum?’ he will say, coming downstairs with the labels hanging out, creases still in the shirts, buttons only half done up.

‘Lovely,’ I say. ‘Do you think perhaps the green is a little unsubtle?’ Get a girlfriend, I think. Please get a girlfriend. Then you could ask her, and I would be saved this decision-making.

‘But I like the green.’

‘Have it then.’

‘Not if you don’t like it.’

The responsibility. It’s flattering that my opinions matter to him, but what if I’m wrong? Why won’t he go and ask his father? Why can’t he consult someone at work?

I pick up some plates from the drainer and put them away in a cupboard. ‘You could buy an *Evening Mail* and see if there are any flats available, since you’ve got some spare time this evening.’

He frowns. ‘But I can’t, can I? I have to cook my tea.’

‘It doesn’t take that long to prepare a meal. Most people can manage to produce something in half an hour.’

‘What time are you going out?’

‘In about an hour.’

‘Then you could cook something. You’d still have plenty of time to get ready to go out.’ He looks at me, his eyes soft and appealing. Small crinkles hover at the outer edges of his eyelids, almost an extension of his abundant lashes. They were there when he was a child, lurking innocently, uncertain of their purpose. Now he’s worked out how to use them, to charm me. I have a great desire to reach out and touch his cheek.

‘You’ve got all evening.’

‘But you’re so much better at it than me.’

‘That’s because you don’t get enough practice.’

I shouldn’t give in. It doesn’t help him and it doesn’t help me. But it’s tiring to fall out with people, easier to cook than engage in complicated debates. I’ve already used up today’s spare supplies of energy.

‘All right,’ I sigh. ‘But you’ll have to eat it straightaway. It won’t keep.’

‘Brilliant,’ he says, and flashes me a friendly, grateful grin before going back to *Bugs Bunny*.

‘And you’ll have to wash up.’

‘No problem.’

I look out at the back garden. My large, comfortable white knickers are flapping on the clothes line in the sun, next to Joel’s shirts, which I’ll have to iron later.