

The Number One Bestseller

JOSEPHINE COX

Lonely Girl



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HarperCollins *Publishers*

HarperCollinsPublishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

Published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2015

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

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ISBN: 978-0-00-747671-8

Set in ITC New Baskerville Std 12.75/16.75 pt by
Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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PROLOGUE

CROUCHING LOW BENEATH the bedroom window, young Rosie peered through the murky darkness of a cold November evening.

Anxiously training her gaze along the pathway that ran by the big barn, she wondered if her mother might show at any moment. Rosie would not mind if her mother stayed away for ever, but she knew her father would be sad because he loved her, even though they were always arguing.

So, for his sake, Rosie hoped her mother might somehow manage to find her way home from the village pub where she worked as a barmaid. Often her shift would slip into her social life. She liked a drink and a laugh. She also liked the admiration of men, who were drawn to her dark looks and enticing smile.

Whenever her mother was late coming home, Rosie had good cause to fear the worst. Keeping her vigil at the window, she wondered what kind of mood her

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mother would be in if she did come home. Would she be in one of her dark rages? Would she be feeling spiteful and ready to fight with Rosie's father? Or would she be laughing and playful, or impossible to talk with and so drunk she could hardly stand?

Rosie could never decide which was worse, because whichever way it was, it always ended badly.

Neither Rosie nor her father ever knew what to expect when Molly Tanner returned from a night out. She never spoke about exactly where she had been, or who she had been with, and if John Tanner dared to pursue the truth, a fierce row would inevitably ensue, and Rosie would run upstairs in fear, to hide under her bedclothes.

Looking back, Rosie realised that nothing much had changed over the years except that they all had grown older and a little wiser. Her mother was forever complaining that she was 'coming up to her dreaded fifties'. She was still proud of her sultry looks, and rumour had it that she was still cheating on her loving and hard-working husband. Her dislike for her only child had reached the point where she could hardly bear to be near her.

Molly Tanner had never possessed the strong maternal instinct that bonds a mother with her child. She had neither the instinct nor the wish to be a mother, and made that clear to all who would listen. Consequently, she played precious little part in Rosie's life.

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After a while, young Rosie had stopped caring. Her daddy had been, and still was, her whole life. If she was ever worried or hurting, it was her father's help she sought; she had learned long ago that there was no point in seeking comfort or advice from her disinterested mother. The little girl had grown and flourished without her help.



Growing irritable, Rosie brought her thoughts back to the present, while she continued watching out of the window.

'Don't get upset because your mother never loved you,' she told herself. 'You're not a baby any more. You're turned fifteen and very soon, you'll be leaving school.'

Rosie was greatly excited at the prospect of leaving school. At long last she would be able to get a job, although she was adamant on one point. When I do start earning a wage, I'll give it to Daddy . . . not to *her*, because she'll only spend it down the pub, or on fancy clothes and make-up to impress the men she flirts with, Rosie resolved.

Glancing at the bedside clock, she realised that she had been keeping her vigil for her wayward mother for over an hour.

I expect Daddy's worried sick, but what does she care, so long as she's having a good time? she thought.

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She clambered up and closed the curtains. Then she crossed the floor to switch on the light, and for a while continued to pace back and forth, occasionally peering through the gap between the curtains and growing increasingly agitated.

The minutes ticked by and, with still no sign of her mother, Rosie went to sit at the dressing table. Absent-mindedly studying her reflection in the mirror, she was greatly relieved that she had not inherited her mother's striking looks – or her bad temper either.

Although her own hair was waist-length like her mother's, that was where the resemblance ended because Rosie's hair was the same light chestnut colour as her father's, while Molly's was dark and fell in luscious waves. Rosie's strong blue eyes were also inherited from her father's side of the family, although her father's eyes were tinged with a hint of green, which deepened when he was angry, which was not very often.

Anxiously, Rosie studied herself in the mirror, thinking of her mother and the unkind things she would say.

Molly often complained that she found it hard to believe that she had such a plain-looking daughter. 'You remind me of my sister, Kathleen,' she would tease spitefully. 'She was always the plain, shy girl at school. At playtime, she would stand in the corner while everyone else was having fun. When we were

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younger, the boys always came after me. They never went for her. Hmm! She would probably have been left on the shelf if it hadn't been for your uncle Paddy. Like her, he's a plain-looking sort with not much about him. They're two of a kind,' she'd smirk. 'I always knew they would get together, but only after lover-boy had enjoyed playing the field.'

Rosie knew this was unjust. Uncle Patrick and Auntie Kathleen were funny, kind, and a devoted couple. Rosie loved them dearly, as she did Harry, Patrick's son from his first marriage.

Over the years, Rosie had often been shocked at her mother's cruel remarks about her family. There had been one particular occasion that she would never forget, when she was just five years of age.

As the memories of that awful episode crowded her mind, she forced herself to concentrate on the path alongside the big barn, but the darkness had thickened, and all was quiet, save for the occasional howl of a lonely dog.

Rosie moved closer to the window, peering into the darkness and listening for the familiar click-clack of high-heeled shoes against the concrete path.

'Where are you?' Rosie muttered angrily. 'Why do you never come home when you should? And who are you with when you're not with us?' She realised that she was mimicking the questions her father might ask of his wayward wife.

Troubled, she moved away from the window. 'All

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right, stay away then,' she grumbled. 'If you don't come home, we'll be happier without you.'

Close to tears, she recalled that many times over the years her mother had said to her, 'I don't love you . . . and I never will!' Her cruel words had cut Rosie to the heart, but it was the events of her fifth birthday that played through her head so strongly this evening.

Surprisingly, for the first time ever her mother had organised a wonderful party for her only child. She had also made a cake, with candles and pretty icing, and Rosie was especially thrilled when the children from neighbouring farms were invited to celebrate her birthday with her.

Normally, her mother did not like Rosie mixing with what she called 'the rabble', but that day, for whatever reason, she decided to break the habit and be nice to everyone.

John teasingly told his wife it was because Rosie was going to start school the following morning, and she would not have the child under her feet every day.

It was such a happy day for Rosie. All the children stood in a little group to sing 'Happy Birthday', before cheering five times – one cheer for each of her years. She was thrilled, and afterwards she thanked her mother for making her birthday so wonderful.

The joy of her party, however, was short-lived, because after everyone had gone home, Molly threw a tantrum. She complained about the noise and the

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mess, about the washing up, and about one of the children weeing on the bathroom floor, which she forced Rosie to clean up. Afterwards, she ordered Rosie to bed. Being afraid of her mother's swift and dangerous change of mood, Rosie ran up the stairs and quickly climbed into bed where, tired out from her wonderful party, she quickly fell asleep.

Some time later, she was woken by the loud noise of things being thrown about, and the angry voices of both her parents, yelling and arguing. Rosie felt very frightened, most especially that her mother might come upstairs to hurt her. Hiding deep under the bedclothes, she wondered how the woman who was screeching and throwing things could be the same kind person who had made her birthday party so very special.

The next day, however, Molly was remarkably jovial and attentive to her young daughter, leaving Rosie to wonder again whether this person and the crazy woman of last night were actually one and the same.

Nervous and excited about starting school, Rosie had just washed herself and cleaned her teeth when her mother appeared with her new school uniform.

Rosie had been sitting on the stool in front of the dressing-table mirror, brushing her long hair. When her mother ordered her to hurry up or they would be late for her first day, Rosie got into a panic and accidentally dropped the brush onto the floor.

Before she could retrieve it, her mother rushed

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across the room, snatched up the brush and flung it across the dressing table. 'You've wasted enough time brushing your hair,' she grumbled. 'You're a selfish, vain child! Now come on, move yourself! Your father has already brought the horse and cart round, and here you are . . . looking in the mirror . . . brushing your hair like we've got all the time in the world.'

She hurried Rosie out and down the stairs, then through the front door. John was waiting for them in the lane.

'What took you so long?' he laughed, hugging Rosie and wishing her well on her first day at school. Then he held the horse while his wife and daughter climbed onto the cart.

Molly Tanner surprised the horse with a sharp flick of the whip and he shot forward at speed.

Rosie looked back to see her father waving her off and she happily waved back.

Molly, however, was all het up. 'We'll be late now, and all because you thought it more important to spend half an hour fussing yourself in the mirror.'

Casting her mind back now, Rosie remembered the incident so vividly it seemed as though the frightening journey to school was only yesterday.

Her mother, using the whip and yelling at the top of her voice, had forced the poor old horse to career along the winding lanes.

'This is your fault,' she screamed at her daughter,

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‘spending precious time pampering your hair, like you were a film star or something.’

Terrified for the horse, who was soon foaming at the mouth, Rosie begged her mother to slow down. ‘You’re frightening the horse . . . you’re hurting him, and it’s not his fault. I promise I’ll get up earlier tomorrow, Mummy . . . only please don’t whip him.’

‘Don’t tell me what to do, child – not if you know what’s good for you.’

By now concerned herself that the horse was beginning to panic and might well bolt, Molly drew in the reins and eventually calmed the nervous animal.

Her daughter, however, was shown no such kindness.

‘Too damned right you’ll get up earlier tomorrow,’ Molly continued, ‘because I’ll make sure of it. I’ll have you out of that bed as soon as the cock crows, you see if I don’t!’ Her dark eyes flashed in anger. ‘What’s more, you can go to bed an hour earlier tonight, and no arguing.’

Hanging on to the wooden rail at her side, Rosie was made to endure a harrowing chase down the lanes. Once she dared to glance up at her mother. Molly’s dark eyes were angry, and her thick dark hair hung in deep waves across her shoulders, and Rosie couldn’t help but wonder how her mother could be so wicked when she looked so beautiful.

Throughout the remainder of the short journey not another word passed between them.

On arriving at school, with the cart and sweating

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horse safely secured, Molly rushed her daughter across the playground to the school doors. All the other children must have gone in already, though there was a young woman standing as if waiting on the other side of the road.

‘You’d better be on your best behaviour, my girl,’ Molly warned. ‘Make sure there are no bad reports from your teacher when I come to pick you up, or you’ll have me to answer to, and no mistake. All right?’

Rosie nodded, but her mother’s warning and the prospect of another nerve-racking journey had made her afraid. ‘Please . . . I don’t want to go to school.’ The tears began to fall. ‘I want to go home.’

‘Don’t be such a softy! If you let the other children see you crying, they’ll just laugh at you. I’m sure you wouldn’t want that, would you?’

Rosie shook her head. ‘No.’

‘Then you’d best do as you’re told.’

Without further ado, Molly grabbed Rosie by the arm and marched her into the entrance hall. ‘I mean what I say,’ she hissed. ‘Behave yourself.’

She then hurried Rosie into the main hall and handed her over to the headmistress. After saying her goodbyes she hurriedly departed, leaving behind a strong hint of the exotic scent she used, while the sharp tapping sound of her dainty high heels receded into the distance.



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That afternoon, when Molly came to collect Rosie after school, the headteacher called her into the office while another teacher took Rosie to wait in the library.

‘I’ve been rather concerned about Rosie.’ The headmistress was most formal. ‘She’s hardly spoken a word all day, and she’s made no effort to play with the other children. In fact, I found her hiding in the playground after the other children were brought inside. She was crying, but when I questioned her, she refused to confide in me. It is obvious that something or someone has upset her, but she would not be persuaded to tell me.’

Molly was angry. ‘I’m not surprised. It sounds to me like you’ve blown this out of all proportion. Of course I understand you might want to know why she was crying, but what you really should know is that my daughter has a bit of a temper. Moreover, she does not take kindly to being questioned by strangers. I’m fully aware that she can be a little madam when she puts her mind to it. But if you don’t mind me saying, it is not your place to sort her out. My daughter is my business, and I shall talk to her about this, you may depend on it.’

The headmistress remained adamant. ‘I thought the two of us might discuss the situation quietly so we might get to the bottom of it. Indeed, that’s why I asked our Miss Harrison to take charge of Rosie for a few minutes.’

‘Really?’ Molly had taken an immediate dislike to

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this figure of authority. 'Look, we've had our little talk, and now you can safely leave the matter of my daughter's behaviour in my hands. I am used to dealing with Rosie's tantrums.' She stood up to leave, though she was not done yet. 'I sincerely hope for your sake that my daughter has not been too upset by all this ridiculous fuss, and if I do find that to be the case, I shall have no choice but to refer you to a higher authority.'

'I'm sure that will not be necessary.' The headmistress was taken aback. 'But if you really think me to be inadequate, then of course you must do what you will.'

Having taken stock of Rosie's angry mother, however, the headmistress had her suspicions. 'Meantime, Mrs Tanner, as we have no idea what might have upset Rosie, I have a suggestion. It's just a thought, but I was wondering . . .' in the wake of Molly Tanner's hostility, she took a deep breath, '. . . is it at all possible that something, or someone, at home might have upset her *before* she came to school this morning?'

'What the devil are you implying?' Incensed by the teacher's probing questions, Molly instantly dismissed them with a sharp rebuke. 'I resent that implication, and I think you and your staff should be a little more sympathetic. My daughter is a very nervous child and, as I have explained, she can be prone to tears and tantrums. And might I remind you that this is her first day at school. Did it not occur to you that she may have been overwhelmed by everything and everyone?'

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When the headmistress made an effort to reply, Molly cut her off viciously. ‘If you ask me, the reason my daughter is so upset must be something to do with you and your staff. In fact, I am beginning to wonder if you’re capable of doing your job responsibly.’

Surprised by Molly Tanner’s verbal attack, the headmistress asked an older, responsible child to return Rosie to her mother, who then marched Rosie out of the school, and onto the cart. Again, Rosie thought she glimpsed a young woman standing a distance away, but by the time Rosie was seated, there was not a sign of anyone about.

On the way home, Molly complained incessantly. ‘You cause me nothing but aggravation. I should never have had you in the first place. I never wanted kids, but it didn’t matter what I wanted – oh, no! Because your father wanted to play daddy! But who is it that has to take care of you, eh? Me! That’s who. From the day you were born, you’ve been like a real thorn in my side!’

She gave Rosie a stark warning. ‘If I get called in again by your teacher, I’ll take the cane to you myself, and I promise you I will not be lenient with it.’

When suddenly the horse stumbled into a shallow pothole, she angrily flicked the whip over his back, causing him to throw his head up and lose his footing momentarily.

When she prepared to raise the whip again, Rosie cried out, ‘Please, Mummy, don’t hurt him.’

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‘What have I told you, girl?’ Molly glared at Rosie. ‘Who are you to tell me what to do and what not to do?’ She viciously flicked the whip in the air again. ‘Think yourself fortunate . . . after what you did at school, you’re lucky I haven’t taken the whip to you!’

All the way home, the volley of abuse continued: ‘I have never been so humiliated. I warn you, my girl, you’d best tell me what lies you’ve been spreading.’

Rosie assured her mother that she had not said anything to anyone, but as always her words fell on deaf ears.

When they arrived back at the farmhouse, Rosie was snatched off the cart and given a sound thrashing, but even as the frightened girl was sobbing, Molly Tanner showed no remorse.



At eight years of age, Rosie’s cousin Harry was a well-built and handsome boy. The son of her uncle Patrick, Harry loved nothing better than doing odd jobs at Tanner’s Farm after school.

Now, on hearing the commotion, he went at the run across the yard, yelling, ‘Uncle John!’

He found John in the far barn, chopping firewood.

‘You’d best come quick.’ Harry was in a panic. ‘It sounds like there’s trouble over by the house.’

Swinging the heavy axe into the log of wood, Rosie’s

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father wiped the sweat from his face, and threw off his thick gloves. 'What d'you mean, boy? What kind o' trouble?'

'I'm not sure, but there was a lot of shouting and yelling. I think I heard Rosie cry out, so I thought I'd best find you, and quick.'

'You did right, Harry.' John hurried towards the house with the boy following close behind.

Turning the corner, and with the house now in his view, John was shocked at what he saw. It was painfully obvious that his wife was in one of her vicious moods, with Rosie at her mercy.

'Molly!' Surging forward, he screamed out, 'Leave the child alone!'

He quickly realised that Rosie had her arms folded across her face so as to protect herself, but she was no match for the woman who was viciously thrashing her with the belt from her coat.

John threw himself between his wife and the child. 'For God's sake, woman! What the hell is wrong with you?'

Taking her by the arms, he thrust Molly away and grabbed Rosie to him. Then, giving her into Harry's safekeeping, he shot forward to pin his wife against the cart. 'What kind of bully are you, eh? Just look at her – whatever she might have done, she did not deserve a beating like that. What kind of a mother are you, for pity's sake?'

Without a backward glance, and filling the air with

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obscurities, Molly fled into the house and slammed the door behind her.

‘Ssh . . . it’s all right, sweetheart, you’re safe now.’ John went to collect Rosie from his nephew, who was still visibly shaken by what he had witnessed.

‘Don’t worry, son,’ John assured him, ‘Rosie will be all right. Just leave the stables for now – I’ll finish them later – but please see to the horse. He looks badly shaken.’

The horse was foaming at the mouth and anxiously treading the ground with his front hoofs, as though at any minute he might take flight.

John stroked a tender hand over the horse’s neck. ‘Easy, boy,’ he quietly reassured him, ‘you’re in safe hands now.’

Mindful of Rosie, and eager to get her inside, he said to Harry, ‘I’ll check him thoroughly the minute I can, but could you gently unshackle him and make him comfortable in the stable? Make sure he’s got water and hay in the rack.’

Though desperate to get Rosie indoors, John swiftly examined the horse to reassure himself that this gentle animal was not badly injured, and when he saw the shadowy stripes of the whip, he had to hold back his temper. ‘Rushed through the lanes, and whipped for your trouble, eh, boy?’ He ran a firm but gentle hand over the horse’s velvety neck and back. ‘No lasting damage, though, thank goodness.’

Scooping Rosie into his arms, he then began to

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make his way to the house, calling to Harry as he went, 'Just run the cart into the barn and leave it. When the old fella is calm and fed, you should go home. Your mother will be watching for you.'

Harry was still shocked at the way Molly had vented her anger on the lovely Rosie, and by the look of the horse's back he also had taken a harsh punishment. Like Rosie, that quiet old horse did not have a bad bone in his body, so what could either the horse or Rosie have done to warrant such a beating?

He was deeply concerned about Rosie, and so he told John, 'I don't want to go home yet. Please may I stay with the horse until you come back out?'

John understood and was grateful for Harry's concern. 'You're a great help to me,' he told him. 'Remember, just keep the old horse calm, and I'll be out as soon as I can.'

Now, his priority had to be Rosie. The little girl was his life.

He felt Rosie clinging tighter to him the closer they got to the house.

'It's all right, sweetheart,' he promised. 'Your mother will never hurt you again . . . not if I can help it.'

Molly watched through the window as her angry husband approached, their daughter in his arms. 'That's right,' she muttered spitefully, 'fussing over the little brat as usual! Oh, but don't worry about me, and the humiliation I've endured today, and all because of your precious little innocent.'

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When he came into the house, John could hardly look at her. ‘Take a look at what you’ve done. What kind of mother would do such a thing to her own child? You should be ashamed.’

He pointed to two red marks on Rosie’s arm where her mother had held her in a vicious grip. Dark bruises on her neck and face were becoming increasingly visible, and trickles of blood were running from her nose.

Molly looked away.

‘Yes! You *should* look away,’ John said in a low, trembling voice. ‘This is your daughter, just turned five years old, and this is how you treat her.’ He pointed to the swelling weals and bruises on Rosie’s face and arms. ‘What you’ve done here is assault . . . pure and simple. People get put away for less than this. If it was reported to the police, you’d be locked up for a long time, and you would damned well deserve it, too!’

‘Hmm!’ Taking a step closer, Molly sneered, ‘Report me then, why don’t you?’

John glared at his wife in disgust. ‘I don’t even know who you are these days . . . maybe I never did. Why would you want to hurt a helpless child like that . . . our own little daughter? It beggars belief.’ Leaning forward, he whispered harshly, ‘I should hurt you, just like you’ve hurt Rosie. That way, you might realise how it feels.’

Molly Tanner smiled nastily. She knew he would never hurt her. He was too kind. And far too weak.

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Unable to look on her a moment longer, John hurried Rosie away to bathe her wounds.

As her father carried her to the kitchen, Rosie looked back to see her mother smiling.

For a moment Rosie thought her mother was trying to say she was sorry, but then she realised the smile was neither reassuring nor warm, but cold and hateful, and the little girl held on all the tighter to her father.

John carefully settled his daughter at the kitchen table while he drew a bowl of warm water and found a flannel, which he rinsed under the cold tap.

Bringing the flannel to her face, he told her, 'Put your head back a little, sweetheart. Keep this pressed to your nose, and the bleeding will soon stop.' He then treated the bruises with saltwater and camomile, constantly assuring her that by the morning the bruises would be almost gone. Privately he thought it would be a long time, if ever, before Rosie would be able to forget how badly her mother had beaten her, and for what? He was determined to get to the bottom of it all.

When she was cleaned up he carried his small daughter upstairs and put her to bed.

'I'll be up again in a while to see if there's anything you need,' he promised.

Leaving the door slightly open in case she might call out, he paused on the landing, and when it seemed the ordeal had tired Rosie out, he leaned

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on the banister and softly cried, asking himself over and over how Molly could be so wicked as to hurt their child like that.

Somewhere along the way, deep in his heart, he had lost a huge measure of respect for this woman whom he felt he hardly knew any more. In fact, at some time during the past six years, since they were married, he had come to realise she was not the woman he had believed her to be.

If he had known at the outset what she was really like, he might have walked away, but even now, after what she had done, he still loved and needed her, and if that made him a weak man, then so he was. Above all else, John Tanner was a good and forgiving man. In spite of what he had witnessed this sorry day, he convinced himself that the woman he had taken as his wife must surely have a measure of compassion in her soul.

One way or another, he meant to find it.