

When I Was

Distance, family tensions, and, most recently, the pandemic have kept sisters Rachel and Fiona apart for seven years, but when Fiona is widowed and falls ill, Rachel agrees to care for her young son while she receives treatment. Tired after her long journey and unsure what to expect, Rachel meets Finn, her five-year-old nephew, for the first time.

Finn sidled into the kitchen, keeping his head down. He climbed onto a chair and returned to the exercise book he'd abandoned to size up Rachel through the window.

'Put that away now and say hello,' Fiona called over her shoulder. 'Auntie Rachel's driven a very long way to see us.'

He looked up from his book. 'You told me. Lots of times.' Sweeping his fringe to one side, he fixed Rachel with the same intense stare she recalled his father possessing. 'Hello, Auntie Rachel. I'm Finn. And I don't need a babysitter because I can look after myself.'

'Hello, Finn,' she said, amused by his self-assurance. 'It's nice to meet you at last.'

He licked the tip of his pencil. 'I suppose it is.'

Fiona tutted. 'Pack away your things and go do your teeth.' She set two mugs on the worktop, then turned to Rachel. 'Bedtime was an hour ago, but as he doesn't need to get up in the morning, I said he could hold on to see you.'

Finn spread his hands over his book. 'But I haven't finished my work.'

'Do it tomorrow. School doesn't go back for another five days.'

Encouraged by her nephew's lack of reserve, Rachel walked across and sat at the table. She'd been afraid he'd be shy around someone he didn't know, concerned they'd struggle to communicate once Fiona had gone. 'What's that you're writing?'

‘It’s not writing.’ He twisted the book around to show her. ‘It’s handwriting practice. I’ve got to do ten lines of big M, but I’m doing a page.’

‘They’re very good,’ she said. Each of the repeated double arch shapes he’d drawn touched the book’s ruled lines in the same places as the example at the top of the page. ‘I take it you like writing, if you’re doing extra?’

‘Not much. But I like doing big M, because when I do two side by side, they look like initials. See?’

Rachel nodded, keen to keep the conversation going. She racked her memory, aware her knowledge of children’s films and television was twenty years out of date. ‘MM for Mickey Mouse?’

Finn laughed. ‘No, silly. It’s MM for me.’

‘For you?’ She glanced at Fiona for guidance, but her back was turned. ‘I thought your initials would be F for Finn and V for Vaughan.’

‘They are.’ He wrinkled his nose. ‘MM were my initials before.’

‘Before?’

‘When I was a—’

‘Enough.’ Fiona set the drinks on the table. ‘Teeth. Now.’

‘But—’

‘But nothing.’ She tugged the book from under his hand. ‘Auntie Rachel’s had a long day, and she needs to be left in peace.’

‘It’s alright,’ Rachel said, as Finn gathered his belongings. ‘He was just—’

‘Just talking nonsense,’ Fiona’s jaw tightened as she sat down, ‘when he ought to be doing his teeth.’