

## ***Shmoo* by Catriona Reeby**

### **Final Chapter**

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Sarah lay on the bed, crumpled sheets damp beneath her from crying. How could this be happening? She'd always been so careful to guard her heart, but when she'd met Robert she'd trusted him. That he had problems in his family meant he understood her and for the first time in years she'd felt safe. They'd even made a pact to do better than their parents.

Now it turned out all that wasn't true. She couldn't imagine what it must have been like for him, growing up in the shadow of his brother's death. Despite everything she wanted to hug him and tell him it was going to be okay. Then she remembered how he'd lied to her. How could he be who she thought he was when he'd deceived her so monumentally? Now she was lying in tears with her marriage in tatters, just like her mum.

Slowly sounds from the house drifted up to her. The TV was on and Sarah recognised the theme tune to Scooby Doo, so presumably her in-laws were looking after Charlie. What on earth could she tell Charlie? She heard voices, and then the unmistakable sound of footsteps on the stairs.

After a moment there was a gentle tap at the door. Sarah couldn't face Robert's parents. Not now. She turned away, twisting the sheet in her hand. The knock came again, and then the door squeaked as someone came in.

"Sarah," Liz said quietly. "Sarah, I need to talk to you."

"Go away," she replied. She wanted to shout, or throw something, but she felt utterly drained. Everything good had flooded out of her life in a moment. Well, not everything. She thought of Charlie sitting on the sofa downstairs and her heart contracted.

After a moment the bedroom floor creaked as Liz came in, and then the bed dipped as she sat on the edge. It felt like an invasion of Sarah's grieving zone.

"I'm afraid I can't just go away and leave everything like this," said Liz.

Sarah rolled over to face her, dark eyed and angry. "Leave me alone! My God, hasn't your family done enough?"

Liz looked shaken by the vehemence in her voice, yet it was quickly replaced by a determined expression. "Sarah. Believe me when I say that I do know what you're going through. I've felt what you're feeling, and I know that you think you can never forgive or trust Robert again."

"Spare me!" spat Sarah.

"When I found out about Gordon's affair I was desperately upset and furious with him," Liz carried on. "All I could think about was how much Gordon had hurt me, and how much I hated him for making me feel like I did. Weak and foolish. The wife who couldn't stop her husband from wandering. I was so wrapped up in myself that I couldn't see how much it affected my boys. They went out for a walk that day because I'd just thrown Gordon out of the house and the atmosphere was unbearable. And because of that Daniel never came back. All my upset and self-pity became irrelevant when he died. I sacrificed my happy family, and ultimately the life of my oldest son, because I was angry with Gordon. And I have regretted it every single day since."

Liz looked away from Sarah's harsh gaze and picked at a thread on her skirt. "Please don't make the same mistake I made."

Sarah glared at Liz. How dare she try to empathise? This was her tragedy, her marriage. Yet something about Liz looked like her mum. Worn down but soldiering on. And something else looked like her, Sarah. That determined set to Liz's jaw, not willing to give up.

Still, Sarah didn't want to be talked around. "He lied to me! For years. Robert is the one person I thought I could say anything to. Be myself with. The one person in the world I trusted

not to let me down, and yet he's been lying from the start." She could feel her face twisting in anguish. "I don't know what to do, or what to think. He's kept so much from me. He can't be the person I thought he was."

She sat up, the bedding tangling about her and pulling her closer to Liz who sat, quietly immovable.

"Who did you think he was?" asked Liz.

"Oh, I don't know. Loving, dependable..." A harsh laugh escaped her as she said it. Yet Liz's question forced her to think about him. All the things he was to her. "Eccentric, funny, a daydreamer. Someone who's been hurt in the past but has coped, like me. A survivor."

Liz looked at her hands. "You thought he was a man who loved his family. Who would do anything to protect them. Even if it meant pretending a tragedy hadn't happened. To spare them, as well as himself," she answered. "Robert is that man. Loving, kind, fun, protective and damaged. As you said, he's a survivor. He's not perfect though. He's a coward. He couldn't face the truth about Daniel." She sighed heavily. "And it turns out he couldn't bear the guilt of his part in it. I didn't know until today that he'd pushed Daniel. But I know Robert and I know it was an accident."

Her hands clenched and unclenched in her lap. "We all deal with death differently. I was completely devastated, and I felt guilty for years but I had to pull myself together for Robert's sake. So I put on a brave face and only cried when I was alone. If I'm honest I tried not to think about how he felt. I couldn't bear it."

They sat side by side, lost in their own thoughts.

Sarah rubbed her hand wearily across her eyes. "I can see that it must have been dreadful for him as a child, but he's lied to me and I don't want to forgive him. I can't act as if it's nothing. It isn't nothing. I feel really betrayed," she said. "He knew what happened in my family. He knew I had issues with trust, and yet he's deliberately misled me. I don't know what to think."

Liz was quiet next to her.

Sarah looked sideways at her but Liz didn't meet her gaze. Unbidden, images of Robert playing robots with Charlie appeared before her. Two kids having fun together. She shook her head yet the picture wouldn't go.

She exhaled slowly. "But I don't want to destroy our family either. Charlie and Robert adore each other. He's a great dad. A liar, but a good father. There's no easy solution, is there?" she asked.

This time Liz looked up at her. "No, there isn't," she said. "Being a mother means being strong. It means accepting sacrifices and compromises. Knowing it's in your child's best interests. I've no idea why women are called the weaker sex. We have to take more than our fair share of disappointment, and then smile as we make it work. You need to be strong for Charlie. He needs to know that everything is going to be all right. And you need to be strong for Robert too. He'll need you now more than ever."

Sarah looked at Liz. "What about this other persona? This voice he hears? You heard him in the hallway. He was arguing with himself. That's not normal, is it?" She was dreading the answer.

Liz thought for a moment before replying. "You know he talks to himself, don't you?" Sarah nodded.

"I think Robert initially used Shmoo as a way of coping with losing Daniel. And I'm sure Robert knows he's not real, though it did sound like Shmoo has more, erm, influence than I'd thought. I think this is something you need to talk to Robert about, and perhaps go and see a specialist together. I certainly don't think he's delusional, or schizophrenic. More confused. Still, I don't really know. I think that's something you'll have to work out together."

Sarah sat on the bed letting it all sink in: her hurt at being lied to, the sadness she felt for him losing his brother, and the uncertainty of what they now faced. Liz was right about one thing though. They were a family, even if it was now a dysfunctional one. Somehow she needed to make it work, for Charlie's sake.

"It's not fair, and I don't forgive him for lying to me. I just don't want Charlie to lose his dad either. Damn it!"

She cast a glance at Liz and wondered how a nice, normal housewife had coped with so much and managed to be so wise.

"Can I make you a cup of tea? Or get you something stronger?" Liz asked. Then seeing the time she added, "Oh dear. I suppose we ought to be going soon, it's a long drive home. Will you be all right, or would you like me to stay? Gordon will want to be in his own bed tonight, but I can always get the train back to Poole tomorrow, if you'd like some company."

Sarah stood up and wiped ineffectually at her streaked mascara. "Can you stay until I've put Charlie to bed? I suppose I ought to ring Robert later, when we've both calmed down a bit. I'm still too pissed off with him right now."

She paused, thinking about what she'd said to him, and the conversation they still had to have. It filled her with dread.

Robert spent the night in a cramped single bed listening to the sounds of the road and railway outside. The Station Tavern had boasted "comfortable rooms and a friendly atmosphere" but had neglected to mention the 1970s decor or sticky carpets. Not surprisingly they'd had vacancies. As he'd hunted in his pockets for his credit card he'd realised that he'd left his mobile phone behind.

"I wonder if this is the hotel Dad stayed in after Mum kicked him out?" he asked the walls. It didn't bode well if it was.

So many times through the night he'd been on the verge of picking up the hotel phone to ring Sarah. Each time he'd been halted by the memory of the look on her face when she'd told him to go.

"She hates me and I don't blame her," he told the wallpaper. It felt strange not having Shmoo there to answer him.

As soon as he could the next morning he went down to breakfast. The lounge bar doubled as the hotel restaurant and it smelt of beer and sweat. The waitress was bored and hung-over as she reeled off the different versions of a fry up he could have. His stomach yearned for muesli and his heart for forgiveness as he opted for a full English breakfast with all the trimmings. It felt like an appropriate meal for a condemned man.

What am I going to do now? he thought to himself. There was no response. The space that Shmoo had occupied was empty and he felt utterly alone. I guess I'm going to have to stop talking to myself too, he thought.

Another diner came into the room. Another sad and lonely man in an ill-fitting suit. Probably a salesman. Probably divorced, with weekend visiting rights to his children and trips to McDonald's. Robert caught his eye and they both instantly looked away. Embarrassed at recognising themselves in each other.

Robert shifted on the hard wooden chair and felt something dig into him. Investigating his trouser pocket he found the security access key from work, and a memory stick that had all the campaign materials for South East Trains on it. Both the property of Creative Concepts. Oh great, he thought, I'll have to return these.

His breakfast arrived. The greasy plate looked unappealing and his appetite instantly disappeared. Still undecided about his life options he trudged slowly back to his room. At least the memory stick gave him an excuse to ring someone.

Ignoring the hotel phone charges, Robert rang Jocelyn at work just after eight, knowing she'd be in.

She answered immediately.

"Hi, Jocelyn. It's Robert. How are you? And how's your son? Was he okay after his accident at school?"

"Robert! Thank goodness. Well, Logan's fine actually, just a nasty strain, so no more football for two weeks, but haven't you got my messages? I've been trying to get hold of you since yesterday afternoon." She sounded unusually excited.

He remembered the gentle buzzing of his mobile while he'd been at the library the previous day. Once he'd seen it was a work number he'd ignored it. That seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Um, no. I've been out of contact," he replied.

"Well it's all changed again here. They want you back. Oliver Stevens came down yesterday morning and gave Brian a roasting. The whole office heard it. It turns out South East Trains are insisting you come back to lead the contract. Haven't you seen the news? Jimmy Allcock did a TV interview on Monday night that hit all the papers. He's suddenly a PR hero, talking about his life and his right to be gay. So now South East Trains want to catch the wave. They've said they'll only continue if you lead it. Ed Mulligan insisted. He said something about putting right an old wrong, whatever that means."

"Blimey, Jocelyn, I don't know. A lot's happened since then." Robert rubbed his hand over his face.

"It was just Monday night. You've only missed one day at work," she replied. "Please come back, Robert. I don't know if I can bear to stay here otherwise. The rest of the team feel the same. You could almost hear a cheer go up when Stevens told Brian he had to get you back. You know," her voice dropped to a whisper, "the MD said he wanted you back at any cost, and that you could name your own terms. You should have seen Brian's face."

Robert shook his head. That the managing director, Oliver Stevens, should come down himself was unheard of. That he'd demanded Brian reinstate Robert was unbelievable. He couldn't take it all in. Jocelyn was talking again and Robert only caught the end of it.

"... had something to do with it. Turns out he's the chairman's nephew, although he kept that quiet. He stood up for you and told his uncle what had been going on, so the chairman overruled Brian's decision to fire you. It's been a weird few days, I can tell you."

"Sorry, Jocelyn. Who did you say spoke to the chairman?" Robert asked.

"Claus. Our Claus. He's a dark horse. We gave him quite a lot of teasing yesterday, but he took it well."

Robert stared at the brown and orange patterns on the wall, and at the mustard yellow carpet, not seeing the shabby room. It was all too much to process. In the space of thirty-six hours he'd been fired, consoled by his wife, had his hidden past exposed, been thrown out of his house, and now his boss was offering him his old job back. As if nothing had happened. When everything had changed, including Robert.

There was a pause on the line and then Jocelyn said, "Robert, are you still there?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm here. Just thinking. Can you tell Oliver Stevens that I'll come in and see him tomorrow to discuss things, although I'm not promising anything. I haven't got my mobile on me at the moment, so I'll give you a ring later today to confirm what time. I've got some things I have to do first."

"Great. It'll be really good to see you. Let me know if there's anything you need beforehand." She sounded relieved.

Robert rang off and thought long and hard. All his life he had been running away from the truth about losing Daniel, when Daniel had been with him all along. In his thoughts and his memories, in his heart and in Shmoo. Daniel was woven into him. He missed him, and he knew he always would, but he felt the lasting effect Daniel had on him. It was a good feeling. Sadness that was tempered by happy memories. Memories he'd been denying himself. Sunshine through the showers.

"Live your life," Shmoo had said. "Go to Sarah and Charlie and be happy."

With a clear purpose he packed his meagre possessions, paid his bill, and strode towards the station.

He was home just over an hour later. Sarah's car was parked outside so he guessed she was home too, even though it was an "office" day. He paused a long time before approaching



the front door. All the things he'd practised saying to her suddenly seemed lacking, but he had to go through with this. Determined and terrified he went up to his front door and turned the handle. It opened and he stepped inside.

"Back so soon?" called a voice from the kitchen and then his mother stepped into view.

"Oh," she said, and Robert was caught off-balance. Then Liz rushed to him and hugged him. "We've been so worried," she said. "We didn't know where you were, or if you'd done something rash." She released him and they looked at each other. It lasted a moment and a lifetime.

"I'm okay, Mum," he said, and he breathed in her wonderful, comforting mum-smell. It transported him back to his childhood. The happy times.

"Where's Sarah? I need to talk to her."

"She's taken Charlie to school. She should be on her way back by now." Liz looked at him with a slight frown. "You look different somehow. A bit tired and pale, understandably, but there's something else. I don't know, you look grown up."

"Well, I guess it had to happen sometime."

"I suppose so," she said, her eyes twinkling. "Your father went home last night. He really was sorry for causing so much upset. He drove around the neighbourhood for an hour trying to find you until I dispatched him home to ours."

Robert felt sheepish. He'd forgiven his dad years before, even though Shmoo hadn't, but he'd allowed the silence to build between them. He should have stood up to Shmoo sooner.

"I'd better ring him later and apologise," he said. "In fact, I need to apologise to all of you." He paused. "I am really sorry. For pushing you away, and for making you worry. "

She tried to brush it off but he held her hand fast.

"No, I mean it. You had so much of your own grief to deal with, without me making it worse. I put you and Dad in an impossible position, and I tried to keep you away from Sarah and

Charlie. And for what? It's all come out anyway. I've been such a fool, and I've missed you so much, Mum. I'm so sorry."

He hung his head, ashamed, and she wrapped him in her arms like he was her little boy again.

"I've missed you too," she whispered. "And I'm sorry I didn't help you more. I knew something was wrong but I was scared of losing you again."

They stayed like that for a long time until Liz stiffly disentangled herself.

"Sarah said she was going to try to find you after dropping Charlie off. We tried ringing your mobile, and then we found it upstairs. By the way, your office has been ringing and leaving frantic messages."

"Yes. They've offered me my job back."

"Well, that's positive," replied Liz. "Do you want a cup of tea?" she asked and she began to move towards the kitchen.

"Not right now, thanks, Mum. I need to talk to Sarah. Do you know where I can find her?"

"No, but she's got her mobile phone. She was very upset, you know. She's a lovely girl, though actually quite vulnerable under that tough exterior."

He went upstairs to find his phone. It was bristling with missed calls and texts, both from work and home, which he parked for the moment. Feeling nauseous, Robert dialled her number. It rang several times and he thought it would go to answer-phone but then she picked up at the last moment.

"Hi, Sarah? It's me. Look, I need to talk to you. I've got so much explaining to do, and apologising, but can we do it face to face?" He waited, unsure whether she'd already hung up on him. Then he heard a faint sigh.

"Come and meet me. I'm at the park opposite Charlie's school." She paused. "Come alone. I want to talk to you, not Shmoo," she said.

The park was empty. It was too early for the mid-morning mothers going to the playground and too cold for casual walkers. Robert looked around fearing she'd changed her mind. Then a shape by the roundabout stood up, revealing Sarah in her thick coat.

She looked small, and it twisted his heart that he'd done this to her. They walked slowly towards each other, wary of what might be said in the next few minutes. Robert stopped a few paces in front of her, awkward with the weight of explaining he had to do.

What can I possibly say that will make it all right again? he thought.

And then, just as the silence was becoming a wall between them, he felt a distinct shove between his shoulder blades that propelled him forward. He stumbled into her arms and hugged her as if his life depended on it. Which it probably did.

She froze and then, as he sobbed into her neck and told her how sorry he was, she wrapped him up in her strong arms. They stood like that for a long time, clinging to each other and whispering their love as the first of the dog walkers passed by them oblivious.

Shmoo watched from the shadows as they uncoupled and started to walk home, hand-in-hand and heads together with a mountain of resolving ahead of them.

"Goodbye, Bobby," he whispered to the wind, and perhaps his words were carried because Robert turned to glance backwards, but he didn't see anything there. The ghost of Daniel Bennett had finally been set free.

They got home an hour later, as they'd taken the long way back. There had been a lot to talk about.

Liz met them in the hall. One look was enough to tell her they were on the road to recovery. “Well I’m glad you two have made up. It’s been crazy here. The phone hasn’t stopped,” she said. “I’ve got a great list of messages to give you.”

“I think my work can wait,” said Robert. “They deserve to sweat a bit.” He helped Sarah off with her coat.

“Your first priority is to call Dr Rawlins and make us an appointment,” she said as she reappeared out of the padding.

“Yes, absolutely, I will,” he said. It was a small concession to make for getting his wife back.

“I didn’t mean you, Robert,” said Liz. “It was some American chap for Sarah. He keeps making offers, saying he’ll agree to extra annual leave and better relocation, whatever that is.” As if it knew, the phone started ringing again. “Oh, I’m fed up with it. You answer it Sarah, it’s you he’s after.”

Sarah looked at Robert who just shrugged, so she went and picked up the handset. Robert and Liz watched her.

“Hello. Yes. Well, that’s very generous,” she paused as Brendan pleaded at the other end of the phone. After a minute she said, “Can you hold on for a moment?”

She put her hand over the mouthpiece and motioned Robert closer.

“They’re offering me twenty percent more salary, an extra week’s leave and an amazing relocation package. But they want me to start straight after Christmas. What do I say?” she whispered.

“Say yes!” exclaimed Robert.

“What about your job?”

“I’ll tell them that I’ll help get the campaign set up and then I’ll leave at Christmas. That should carry them over. This is an opportunity of a lifetime. Let’s do it. You, me and Charlie. It’ll be a new start. If it doesn’t work out then we’ll just come back.”

“And what about Shmoo?” she asked quietly.

“I think he’s gone. I miss Daniel now. But that’s okay.”

“And what about therapy? You promised.”

“I will. I’ll start before we go, and I’ll see if Harriet can do it by Skype once we’re in the States. If not I’ll get a therapist in Boston.” He held her hand. “We’ll sort this out, I promise. No more secrets.”

“What about you? Are you all right?” She peered long and hard into his eyes, searching for an insight into his complicated mind.

He looked back at her, and at his mum standing behind her. He thought of all the things he had, and the things he had lost. “Yes, I think I am,” he said.

She stretched up to kiss his cheek and then said into the phone, “Okay, Brendan, I’ll take the job.”