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The Perfect Gift

Written by Emma Hannigan

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Emma
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The Perfect Gift

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My darling, my beautiful, my daughter,

You are ten days old and we don't have long left together. Panic is a terrible thing. It takes away all rationale. But my love for you has spurred me on and helped me find a way to leave you a part of myself.

Beside me on the bed sit twenty-nine cards, to be sent to you each year on your birthday. I want you to know that I am thinking of you always. You must have so many questions about me and the circumstances of your birth. The most important thing you need to know is this: I love you as only a mother can.

What I want more than anything else is to stay, to watch you grow up, learn to walk and talk. To see you find happiness. To know you've found love.

The truth is, I am dying. A large part of me wants to scream and throw things violently at the walls and let all the anger out at the injustice of it all. But I cannot waste the energy I have left. I want to cherish each and every moment I have left with you, my darling girl.

Being pregnant with you, feeling those tiny flutters in the beginning as you grew, then bringing you into this world, holding you, feeding you – this has been the perfect finale before I go. All my life I have been weakened by my illness. So knowing that I defied the odds and you are here has made it all worthwhile.

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Being your mother has given me the greatest sense of achievement and happiness. I will never tire of stroking your cheek and watching your solemn eyes gazing purposefully back at me. Having you has made sense of everything. I now know my main purpose in life was to bring you into the world. And I know you were brought here to carry on where I've had to leave off. Live for us both and seize every moment. For me and, most of all, for you, my little miracle, just as I have been doing for these past nine months. Enjoy the scent of every flower, dance to every song, laugh until you cry, walk barefoot by the sea, but no matter what, let your passions soar.

I will watch over you always and I know we will meet again some day. There is nothing more I can say except that I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you, my darling girl, my perfect gift.

Mam

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Chapter 1

RÓISÍN STIFLED A YAWN AS SHE STRETCHED UP HER arms and rose to the tips of her toes to engage the pole with the shutter in order to close her shop for the night. Well, Nourriture – Food For The Soul might be just a shop to the passing gaze of a tourist, but it was Róisín's entire world.

Clicking the sturdy padlock in place, she grinned at her own suspiciousness. The sleepy fishing village of Ballyshore was hardly up there with the crime hotspots of the world. As she turned and inhaled the damp saltiness of the early evening air, she closed her eyes momentarily. Her time away from her home village had made her appreciate the rugged west of Ireland beauty that surrounded her all the more.

A spatter of fat raindrops plopping onto her cheeks dragged her from her reverie. Stooping to grab the bottle and the box of Sushi she'd swiped from her well-stocked food emporium, she slung her battered soft leather fringed bag over her shoulder. She knew all too well that the heavens could open and drench her with a chilly late spring shower. The cottage she shared with her oldest and best friend Jill was a ten minute walk at a brisk pace. Róisín had grown up at the other side of the bay, a short drive away, but she preferred living near the hub of the village.

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Despite the low temperature the air was unmistakably soft. Róisín could almost hear the kinks forming in her dark, glossy hair as the salty air worked its magic. Glad of the sturdy comfort of her scuffed Dr Martens black boots, she wished she'd brought a downy puffa coat instead of the leather biker jacket she'd paired with her pale pink tulle skirt today. The watered-down lemony sunshine this morning had lulled her into a false sense of summer.

Balancing the shopping bag containing the wine bottle and Sushi in the crook of her arm, she wrestled with the jacket zip. The cross-over cardigan with flimsy tank top underneath was adequate while she ran from the kitchen to the counter and back up to her office in Nourriture during the busy working day, but it was no match for the now squalling rain.

At a trot she passed the sharply curving stone wall that separated the narrow country road from the sea. Darting across to the other side, she hoped the overhanging trees might offer more shelter. In another few weeks the tiny buds that dotted the hedgerows would flourish and ripen into juice-laden blackberries. She licked her lips, longing to taste the rich jam she'd make from her pickings.

Róisín sighed in grateful relief as she rounded the corner and saw the small white-washed cottage shining like a beacon through the rain. Bellows of grey smoke belched from the chimney and Róisín trotted happily towards the door.

'Hi honey, I'm home!' she called out, then started coughing. The open-plan kitchen-cum-living room was smokey from the fire and her friend was nowhere to be seen.

'Jill?'

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Setting her bag and wine on the kitchen table, she rushed to the potbellied stove and snatched up the poker. Shoving the single log and pyramid of peat briquettes into the back of the grate, she secured the door shut. She was too cold to open the windows and doors, so instead Róisín escaped into her bedroom. Too small to host a double bed as well as the wardrobe and dressing-table, she'd opted for an iron-framed single bed.

'It's not as if I'm entertaining queues of hot lovers,' she had joked with Jill. 'For the moment, a single bed with a feather duvet and a pile of pillows will do me nicely.'

Jill, on the other hand, had said she'd rather hang her clothes on the floor than pass up her double bed.

'I mightn't have a steady boyfriend yet,' she'd said, hands on hips, as they'd moved in together three years ago, 'but I've every intention of interviewing for the post.'

A teacher in the local primary school, Jill was vivacious and enthusiastic. From the time they'd held hands in the Montessori room in Ballyshore National aged three, she and Róisín had been inseparable.

'That you, Ro?' Jill called out now.

'No, I'm a masked murderer.'

'Stop it!' Jill said, bursting into the bedroom and flinging herself onto the end of Róisín's bed with her hair turbaned in a towel. 'How's it going? Good day at the office?'

'Yeah, it was really busy. That burst of sunshine this morning brought the tourists and locals out in force.'

'So aren't you going to ask me how I got on last night?' Jill said, eyes shining.

'I heard how you got on,' Róisín grinned. 'You weren't exactly keeping it to yourself last night.'

'I know! And on a school night, too. I'm such a rebel.'

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She sighed. 'I was a bit hung-over this morning. Dreadful idea when there are twenty-five pairs of eyes squinting suspiciously at yours for six hours.'

'I don't know how you work as a teacher, but doing it with a hangover and very little sleep seems like self-inflicted torture to me.'

'Gordon was worth it,' she said dreamily.

'Gordon? With a name like that he hardly sounds too rock 'n' roll.'

'He didn't seem it either when we first met. He was at the enrolment for the summer evening classes. He's not actually taking part, he was simply there to set up the computer for one of the lecturers. I enrolled for bird-watching.'

'Bird-watching? You? Don't you need to be quiet and still for that?'

'Yeah,' she sighed and rolled onto her back while rubbing her damp hair with the towel. 'I'll call and say I've changed my mind. I really wanted to do Italian. But the woman enrolling that course was like an ancient little shrivelled person who'd been exhumed after the disaster in Pompeii.' Róisín laughed and shook her head. Jill was incorrigible, but she adored her.

'I brought Sushi for you to try,' Róisín said. 'And some delicious white wine. It's a Riesling. A really special Spätlese to be precise.'

'A who?'

'Spätlese, or sweet wine from the Rhone valley. It's usually served with desserts, but I think it'll work magically with the fish and rice along with the pickled ginger.'

'You're not selling this to me, Róisín,' Jill said, looking mildly disgusted. 'I'm hankering after a bowl of creamy pasta or a bag of chipper chips.'

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'Trust me, you'll love this. I'll get it sorted while you get dressed.'

She padded into the kitchen and waved her hand to try and clear the settling smoke. Róisín prepared a platter with the Sushi, hoping the pretty array of pinks and white would entice Jill. She popped the cork on the wine just as Jill appeared in a rabbit onesie and snuggled into the sofa.

'Let's eat in here, by the stove,' she said. 'The chairs are too hard and upright for my poor body.'

Róisín brought the platter to the coffee table and instructed Jill to remove the pile of corrections she'd flung there.

With the encouragement of the glass of wine and Róisín's earnest nods, Jill popped a piece of Sushi into her mouth. Grimacing, she held it there without chewing.

'For crying out loud, you're acting as if I'm feeding you slugs! Eat it, you goon!'

As she chewed, Jill's eyes popped open in surprise. 'Wow,' she said swallowing. 'That's really tasty.'

'I know,' Róisín said in mild exasperation.

'Wine is divine too,' she said, drinking greedily. 'Looks like that time in France wasn't a total waste after all. You know your gargle, my friend,' she said, helping herself to another piece of sushi.

Róisín smiled, because that was what Jill expected. But whenever France was mentioned, and specifically her time spent there in an exclusive French culinary school after she had graduated from university, it was as if Róisín had been punched in the gut. She had learned far more than wine appreciation in her time there. Over the two-year period she'd spent near Bordeaux she'd probably experienced every emotion known. But she knew the best policy

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was to keep France and all the events that had unfolded there to the back of her mind.

'Looking forward to your party tomorrow?' Jill asked, with a fresh look of glee in her eyes. 'Do you feel old? I can't believe you're leaving your twenties behind and heading for your thirties,' she teased.

'Jill, I'm two months older than you. Enough of the old talk,' she said. She tried to keep her tone light-hearted, but Róisín was actually dreading hitting the big 3-0. She glanced at Jill, who was horsing into the Sushi and making appreciative noises. She wished she shared her friend's carefree attitude to life.

'Touchy, touchy,' Jill said. 'So answer my question. Are you looking forward to the party or not?'

'So-so.' Róisín hesitated. 'Actually, I'm dreading it. I feel like a total wipe-out. What have I got to show for myself at thirty? Look at Liv. She's younger than me and she's married with two children. I thought I'd be settled and happy too, by now.'

'Oh bloody hell, Ro, let's tune the violin. Seriously? Are you really saying you'd be happier if you were surrounded by nappies and whinging?'

'Well, when you put it like that . . .'

'Take it from me. I'm with small children day in, day out. They're gorgeous and funny and full of life and completely head-wrecking. Thirty is young, for God's sake. It's only the beginning. We have years ahead for worrying about body clocks or wiping noses all day. There are places to see, wine to drink, men to shag and a whole host of nonsense we need to get involved with. So enough of your depressing talk. Tomorrow is the beginning of the next decade. Grab it by the balls and live your life, my friend!'

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In spite of her inward gloom, Róisín couldn't help laughing at Jill. Her *joie de vivre* was infectious. Jill filled their glasses and raised hers up high. 'To you,' she said. 'May your thirties be flirty and fabulous!'

Róisín stood up, clinked her glass against Jill's and smiled.

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