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The Goodbye Gift

Written by Amanda Brooke

Published by Harper

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Three best friends. One tragic accident.

the goodbye GIFT

AMANDA
BROOKE

the
goodbye
GIFT

AMANDA BROOKE

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Harper
An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2016
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A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-00-811652-1

Set in Sabon LT Std by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

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

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The Accident

The suitcase lay open on the bed, its yawning mouth revealing neat piles of holiday clothes. There were summer tops and cropped shorts that would fit a twelve-year-old, a collection of child-sized bikinis, a couple of sparkly dresses and a cardigan for cooler evenings. The requisite clean underwear was hiding beneath a beach towel together with a pair of sandals, sun cream and other holiday essentials, all of which took up less than half the case. The remaining space was packed tight with enough medical supplies to keep a small pharmacy in stock for weeks.

Lucy had been dreaming of this holiday, and after going through everything one last time, she closed the suitcase and zipped it up. She took a deep breath, which was hard fought for, as was every breath.

‘I think that’s it,’ she said.

‘Are you sure?’

Lucy turned to her younger sister. Hayley was almost a foot taller and although her figure was slender, she was a couple of stone heavier than her petite twenty-four-year-old

sister. They each had their mother's dark looks but where Hayley's hair was cropped short to give her an edgy look, Lucy had opted for a longer, more feminine hairstyle. Washing and styling it could be exhausting at times but it was a price she was willing to pay to avoid being mistaken for a boy. 'Yes, I've got everything I need. Any last-minute additions can go in my hand luggage tomorrow. We could take this downstairs now if you like?' she said.

Ignoring Lucy's impatience to get away, Hayley said, 'No, I mean are you sure you still want to go? I know you wanted to prove a point and no one, not even Mum, could deny you've done that, but it's not too late to change your mind. No one would blame you.'

'Are you backing out on me?'

Hayley took longer than Lucy would have liked to answer. 'If something happens while we're away, it's going to be on my conscience . . .'

Lucy could feel her pulse rising from a lethargic plod to a gentle trot – her defective organ was rarely capable of racing, nor was it recommended. She took a couple of strained breaths to fill her lungs with sufficient air to speak with the kind of authority the situation demanded. 'So Mum's got to you then?'

'Look, I would love nothing better than for the two of us to spend a wild and furious week going out clubbing and getting drunk, staggering back to the hotel at dawn and spending the afternoon zonked out on the beach recovering. But that's not going to happen, is it?'

'No, it isn't, because we're going to a quiet resort in Lanzarote. It's hardly Kavos or one of those crazy places you go to with your mates. And it's not even for a whole

week, for God's sake,' Lucy said, repeating arguments she had already put to her family. She had been talking about going on holiday for the last six months and had eventually managed to wear down her doctors, but not her parents and especially not her mum. She had followed medical advice and had waited until she was sure she was fit enough to travel before speaking to the nice lady in the travel agent's who had been on standby and had found the perfect package deal for her and her sister. The taxi was booked for tomorrow afternoon and she was determined for everything to go as planned, even if it killed her.

'But you haven't got medical insurance. What if . . .'

'If I don't feel well then I have the travel agent's number and we get on the next flight home. I've been saving up for this for ages, Hayley. It's February and the weather out there isn't going to get any better in Liverpool. I want some sun and I want some fun! Sorry but I am going – with or without you.'

When her warning failed to quell her sister's last-minute nerves, Lucy went in for the killer comment. 'Please, it's my dying wish.'

'You're not dying,' Hayley said quickly.

'No, I'm not, but I am getting tired standing here arguing. Are you going to help me with this, or not?'

Lucy's mum had heard the rhythmic thump of the suitcase being dragged downstairs and stood glaring at it until she was sure she had her emotions under control.

'Lunch is ready,' she said quietly without looking at either daughter.

Before taking a seat at the table, Lucy switched on the

TV. Her mum normally frowned upon watching TV at mealtimes but today they were going to need help filling the uncomfortable silences.

At first the conversation was limited to polite exchanges as her mum served up a Spanish omelette. Lucy made a show of being absorbed in the antiques programme being aired but the programme soon finished and was followed by the lunchtime news. The headlines included reports of a terrible train crash and Lucy caught a look from her mum that she ignored.

‘Are you sure you’ve packed everything?’ her mum asked. It was the first time she had acknowledged that her daughter was going to follow through with her plans.

‘Yes, Mum. And we have our passports, our holiday money and I’ve booked the taxi.’

‘There’s still time for your dad to book a day off and take you to the airport.’

‘I know, but . . .’ Lucy began and then shrugged her shoulders. She chose not to remind her mum how she had been told in no uncertain terms that neither of her parents would help with the arrangements for their daughter’s ill-conceived adventure. ‘If he can pick us up when we get home again, that would be a help.’

Mrs Cunliffe nodded with grim determination as if to cement the idea that her daughter would be returning home. It was an impossible task and when she put down her knife and fork, she clenched her fists tightly. ‘Is there anything I can do to change your mind?’

‘No, Mum.’

‘I’ve already tried,’ Hayley offered.

Glancing briefly at the harrowing footage of the rail

crash, Mrs Cunliffe said, 'Please, Lucy.' The firmness in her voice had withered away to nothing. 'What if something happens?'

'I've packed all the meds I need for every eventuality, Mum.'

'What if your luggage goes missing? It does happen.'

'I'll have a couple of days' supply in my hand luggage.'

'Are you *sure* you're well enough?' Mrs Cunliffe asked as she narrowed her eyes. She had twenty-four years' experience of assessing Lucy's current state of health simply by looking at her. She could spot a fever at fifty paces, tell within hours if the latest operation had improved her daughter's condition, and she was always, if not the first, then the second person to know when the latest repair job was failing.

'I'm fine,' Lucy told her honestly.

'But what if you pick up a bug while you're there?'

Lucy lowered her gaze and concentrated on cutting up her omelette, letting her mum know she would answer no more questions. The message was far too subtle and Mrs Cunliffe hadn't finished.

'What if the transplant nurse calls?'

Anger bubbled to the surface and Lucy's weak heart rattled against her ribcage. 'Mum, stop! I'm tired of keeping my life on hold waiting for that call. Chances are it isn't going to come, and even if it does, it's hardly going to happen the minute I step on the plane.'

In the background, the TV reporter had moved on to the travel update with news of yet more accidents including a jackknifed lorry that had closed a motorway and a bus hitting a bridge. Lucy wanted to get up and switch it off

but it wouldn't stop her thinking unthinkable thoughts. She had been on the transplant list for eighteen months and the anticipation of receiving that call had been agonizing and distinctly uncomfortable as she waited for someone else to die. She paid morbid attention to the news and thought of herself as a vulture eyeing up the slim pickings. And they were *so* slim. She was tired of feeding off someone else's misery. She needed to get away.

When the cavalcade of ambulances arrived, the air was thick with oily fumes that darkened the day and Anya was momentarily disorientated as she jumped out of her vehicle. The sound of wailing sirens came from all directions and muffled the shouts and cries for help. The accident had been classed as a major incident and she had arrived as part of the emergency response team. Her confusion was compounded by the fact that she had sauntered into work that morning expecting to start her usual shift on a surgical ward only to be reassigned to A & E who were desperately short of staff. It had been a while since she had worked as a triage nurse, but it took only moments for her training to kick in. She was quickly on the move, taking direction from the officer in charge so she could help where she was needed most.

Anya knelt down beside a young woman who she guessed was in her mid-thirties, although it was difficult to tell because her face was smeared with blood and grime. There were others nearby, crying out in pain, but this woman drew her attention first because she was unresponsive.

Unlike Lucy Cunliffe who was watching the reports on the news, it wouldn't have crossed Anya's mind to wonder

if her patient was carrying a donor card: her first priority was to save the life in her hands. She would only discover later that the woman was a registered organ donor, as were her companions.

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Four months earlier . . .

7.30 p.m. tonight in the Elephant. Need you there.

If Julia Richardson were to scroll through her messages, she would find texts of a similar vein to this appearing time and again. The requests weren't so frequent that they became a chore or in any way routine and there had been a couple of years where they had barely appeared at all, although that had been some time ago. None of that mattered, however, because when the call came the response was never in question. Julia sent a message back confirming she would be there and then gave herself time to consider the trickier task of rearranging her other plans. For that, a text message wouldn't do.

'Hi, are you busy?' she asked when her call was answered.

'Oh, you know, the usual. I've just finished one meeting where I've been given a shedload of work and I'm about to go into another which will probably be more of the same,' Paul said, sounding completely disheartened, which

was nothing unusual when he talked about his job these days. Her husband worked for a housing association that had dwindling funds and increasing demands on its services, and it wasn't the job he had once thrived on. 'How about you?'

'Nothing nearly as exciting,' she said as she wrapped a stray lock of auburn hair around a long, slender finger. Despite the neutral tone of voice, her green eyes sparkled and the corner of her mouth twitched with the beginnings of a smile. 'I had a new client in this morning who wants a diamond and gold pendant for his wife, and I'm working up some designs for him now.'

Unaware of the ulterior motive behind the call, Paul's ears pricked at his wife's poor attempt to sound dismissive about her latest commission. 'Would this be an expensive design, by any chance?'

The commission in question was from a wealthy businessman who wanted something stunning, distinctive and unique for his wife to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Julia had been personally recommended which was how she secured most of her commissions.

'Money no object,' she confirmed.

'Wow!'

'Yes, that pretty much sums up the brief.' Julia was smiling now as she leaned back in her chair, which squeaked noisily.

Her workshop consisted of two rooms above a small art gallery on Bold Street in Liverpool's city centre. The front reception room had been refurbished and was bright, clean and modern to give her clients a good first impression, but it was the room she was in now where the real work took place. It had a fifties feel about it, partly due to the reclaimed furniture which had been in situ when she had set up shop

ten years earlier. In a previous life, the offices had belonged to an accountancy firm that had stopped trading many years – if not decades – earlier. The dark wood and green leather furniture smelled of decay and her latest commission could be used to spruce the place up if Julia didn't have other plans for her nest egg. There were some things that were far more important than work.

'So will my talented wife's profits stretch to a celebratory meal after the gym tonight?'

'Ah.'

'What?' Paul asked.

'Would you mind if I gave you a rain check?'

'For the gym or the meal?'

'I can still do the gym if we can meet up at five, but I need to get to the Elephant for seven thirty.'

'Would this be a meeting of the coven by any chance?'

Julia smiled at the note of resignation in Paul's voice. His wife and her two best friends, Helen and Phoebe, were as close as sisters and shared a history that stretched back to their childhood when Julia had been called upon to babysit the other two. She was ten years their senior and although those little girls were twenty-nine now, she was still taking care of them.

'So who's in need this time?' he asked.

'Helen.'

'Man trouble?' Paul asked, pretending he had even the vaguest idea of what the friends talked about.

'In the absence of any man in her life, I shouldn't think so. I don't know what's up, Paul, and I won't find out until tonight, but I have to go.'

'I know.'

Having known Julia for ten years and been married to her for five of those, Paul had long since accepted that although his wife would put him first in all other circumstances, when one of her friends called an emergency meeting, Julia would move heaven and earth to be there. And of course, it wasn't only her friends who made the call, they had been there for Julia too, and Paul had had the vicarious benefit of their small but effective support network.

'You don't mind?'

'I could always spend an extra hour at the gym and get something to eat on my way home,' he mused.

'Burn off enough calories to justify a takeaway, you mean?'

'Hmm, that's an idea,' he said as if it had only just occurred to him.

She smiled and not for the first time reminded herself how lucky she was. There might be areas of her life that were lacking, but a loving husband was not one of them. 'I love you.'

'I love you too, even with all your afflictions.'

'What afflictions?' she demanded.

'Helen and Phoebe.'

Phoebe Dodd was standing in the hallway with her coat on as she debated whether or not to stand outside in the rain for her lift to arrive or wait for the arc of Julia's car headlights to sweep across the front of the house. She opted for the relative safety of the small porch but the moment she pulled open the front door, her nan's psychic ability was triggered.

‘Phoebe? Are you going now?’

‘Yes, Nan, I’ll see you later.’

There was the creak of the drawing room door and when Phoebe turned towards the noise, her nan was already in the hallway. Eighty-six-year-old Theresa wasn’t exactly nimble and if Phoebe didn’t know better, she had been lurking. The two shared a house that Phoebe had lived in for most of her life but there was never any doubt that this was her grandmother’s domain. Theresa had been left well provided for by her late husband and the family home had been carefully maintained and extensively improved over the years. The triple glazing and heating system provided a tropical paradise in the midst of winter and was currently making beads of sweat form on the back of Phoebe’s neck.

‘Is it the Elephant tonight?’

‘Yes, I told you,’ Phoebe answered patiently, suspecting the question was a test rather than a symptom of her nan’s failing memory.

‘Hmm. And what time did you say you’d be back?’

‘Not late and I’ve written down where I am on your reminder board in the kitchen just in case,’ she said. ‘Is there anything you need before I go?’

Theresa sighed. ‘No, I’ll be fine. You go off and enjoy yourself,’ she said and before Phoebe could assure her that she would, her nan added, ‘But don’t drink too much.’

‘I won’t.’

‘You say that, but you have no self-control.’

Phoebe immediately proved her wrong by swallowing her annoyance and forcing a smile to her lips. ‘Stop worrying,’ she said. ‘Can I go now, Nan?’

There was the sound of someone tapping on glass and Phoebe turned to find Julia's bright, cheery face peering beneath her umbrella. Her friend wouldn't think to open the porch door without invitation and such invitations were rare. While Phoebe would happily open up her home to her friends, it wasn't in her gift.

'I thought you said you were going out with Helen too?'

Theresa had crept close enough to spy Julia over Phoebe's shoulder.

'She's meeting us there.'

'Us?'

'Me and Julia.' Phoebe kissed her nan dutifully on the cheek. 'I'll see you later.'

'Hello, Mrs Dodd,' Julia called when Phoebe opened the porch door and stepped outside. 'I hope you're well.'

Theresa had a tight grip on the front door and was eyeing Phoebe's friend with suspicion. 'Don't keep her out late,' she said by way of an answer.

'I won't,' Julia replied even as Phoebe pulled her away.

The scene was reminiscent of Phoebe's childhood. She and her mum had lived with her grandparents until she was nine and both mother and daughter had suffered under Theresa's iron rule. Twenty years on, she still felt a certain giddiness whenever Julia helped her escape her grandmother's clutches. Back then, Julia had technically been Helen's babysitter, but Phoebe had stayed over at her friend's so often that Julia had been obliged to look after them both and she still did.

'I can't stay out long either,' Julia said after they had jumped into her car and escaped the large double-fronted

house with its thick sandstone wall that imprisoned a carefully manicured garden.

Giving her the kind of look her nan would be proud of, Phoebe said, 'You're just saying that to make me feel better, aren't you?'

Even in the dim light Julia looked stunning, effortlessly so, with flawless skin that meant few people noticed the age difference between the friends. Her sense of style was timeless too, and tonight she had opted for jeans and a linen top beneath a woollen jacket. By contrast, Phoebe would describe herself as the short dumpy one, a perception that was reinforced, in Phoebe's mind at least, whenever she was in the company of her tall and leggy friends. To deflect her obvious failings, or perhaps to exaggerate them, Phoebe went for a more distinctive look. She might have outgrown her penchant for body piercing in her early teens, but she still liked to experiment with hair colour, or at least as much as her employer would allow. At the moment her short hair was a flaming shade between crimson and orange.

'I'm not, honestly,' Julia said, trying a little too hard to sound genuine. 'I've got a lot of work on at the moment and one of the reasons I wanted to bring the car was so I didn't drink.'

'Sounds like business is booming.'

'I have a new order and, oh, Phoebe, I can't tell you the last time a commission fired me up like this,' Julia began and went on to describe how desperate she was to impress her new client and his wife who she hoped would show off the piece to her friends and secure new orders. She made a steady income resizing rings and replacing missing

gemstones to cover the rent of her workshop but this was the sort of work that gave her butterflies. She had until next week to come up with a selection of designs and her head was buzzing with ideas.

As Phoebe listened on, she tried hard to absorb her friend's enthusiasm but it didn't come easily. It had been Julia's love of art that had nurtured a similar passion within Phoebe, having set her two charges little art projects just to keep them out of trouble. Phoebe's dream had been to go into fashion design, but unlike Julia, an artistic career was nothing more than wishful thinking and the closest she came these days to designer labels were the ones she sold as a sales assistant in Debenhams.

'I'm so jealous,' she said, knowing she could speak her mind.

'I know, Phoebe, but your time will come.'

Although Phoebe knew any realistic opportunity had already passed her by, she was tempted to imagine she still had time, until Julia's next comment served up a dose of reality.

'Your nan looks well. How's she doing?'

'She went out shopping at lunchtime and left the grill on. It's a wonder she didn't burn the house down. Everything stinks of smoke now.' She wafted her coat sleeve in front of Julia's face.

'I did wonder about the smell.'

'I've unplugged everything in the kitchen just in case she decides to make some supper for herself,' she said, which explained her need to return home at a reasonable hour.

'Do you have any idea why Helen's called the meeting?' asked Julia.

‘No. I take it you haven’t either.’

‘Well, we’ll soon find out,’ Julia said.

They were approaching the Elephant, which was on the corner of a row of shops and restaurants that ran the length of the main road through Woolton Village. From a cursory glance, the quaint village with its pretty churches and old-style cinema could be a rural outpost rather than a suburb less than ten miles from Liverpool city centre. Parking was at a premium but Julia spied an empty space in the tiny sunken car park that occupied the site of the old duck pond and was partly obscured by trees and a steep dip in the road. She made a sharp left turn without indicating and then had to swerve out of the path of a couple of pedestrians in her eagerness to grab the space before anyone else.

‘Ready?’ she asked as she brought the VW Beetle to a screeching halt, making them both lunge forward.

‘I think I’d feel safer with my nan at the wheel!’

‘She’s not still driving, is she?’ Julia asked as she rummaged on the floor to retrieve her umbrella.

‘She would if she had her way but I’ve started hiding the keys and the car’s been left languishing on the drive since before her knee op. I wish I’d got around to learning to drive,’ Phoebe added, voicing another regret.

‘I’ll teach you if you like.’

Phoebe’s look of horror wasn’t feigned, but she tried to let her friend down gently. ‘I wouldn’t want to put you to any trouble and besides, I’d rather have proper lessons than learn your bad habits,’ she said, jumping out of the car before Julia could retaliate.

‘If you’re sure,’ Julia said when she rejoined her,

holding out her umbrella so they could both take shelter beneath it.

Phoebe refused this offer too. 'The rain might wash off the smell of smoke,' she said, already on the move.

They hurried across the road and into the pub where the third member of their group was waiting.

Helen Butler was standing at the bar with a half-empty glass of white wine in her hand. When she spied Phoebe at the entrance, she turned her back deliberately on the bloke who had spent the last ten minutes trying to chat her up, and waved at her friend who was busy scrunching up her flattened hair to give it some volume. Julia wasn't far behind but remained at the doorway determined to shake her umbrella dry. Helen surreptitiously picked up her own umbrella, leaving a large puddle on the floor where she had thoughtlessly dumped it earlier. Shaking it, she splashed her uninvited suitor who was forced to take a step back, allowing room for Phoebe to squeeze in next to her.

After giving her friend a hug, Helen handed her the glass of wine she had already ordered before saying, 'You stink by the way.'

Phoebe laughed as she slipped off her coat. 'Long story.'

Although they were the same age, Helen was often surprised at how different their tastes in fashion were. The skater dress and Doc Martens combo that Phoebe had chosen gave her a grungy look that was meant to frighten men off but actually made her look dangerously attractive. Helen, on the other hand, didn't really have a style of her own. Her youth had been cut short by

unplanned motherhood and she rarely found time to think through her fashion choices. She had grabbed a lace dress from the laundry pile because it was the only decent outfit she had to hand that didn't need ironing, and had paired it with footless tights and platform shoes. As the mother of an eleven-year-old, she felt a bit of a fraud dressing so young and when she saw Julia's outfit, she wished she had gone for jeans too. They had similar body frames, but where Julia was more catwalk skinny with sleek auburn hair, Helen had softer curves and blonde curls and she knew she could never emulate Julia's air of sophistication, no matter how hard she tried.

After releasing Julia from the requisite hug, Helen said, 'I haven't ordered your drink yet, but I take it you don't want wine?'

'No, orange juice for me, please, with a splash of soda because I like living dangerously.'

Helen had also been offered a lift to the pub, but she had preferred to get there under her own steam. She was a nurse in a cardiology clinic and routinely worked beyond her shift, after which there followed various domestic duties which centred round her daughter, Milly. Things rarely went to plan which inevitably meant she would be the last to arrive. Today, however, the urge for that first glass of wine had spurred her on and she was already contemplating her second.

After ordering Julia's drink and a bottle of wine for the non-drivers, Helen said, 'I've booked a table – we are all eating, aren't we?'

'Oh, yes,' Julia said.

Helen could almost hear her friend salivating. 'Have

we been building up an appetite at the gym by any chance?’

‘We? Since when did you go the gym?’

‘Life is my workout,’ she replied. ‘OK, then, have *you* been to the gym?’ When Julia nodded primly, she added, ‘You and Paul are such fitness freaks, it’s not healthy,’ but then quickly pursed her lips, regretting the words as soon as they had left her mouth. When Helen spoke again, her usual flippancy had been replaced by the kind of serious tone she normally reserved for work. ‘Still, it could be worse.’

Phoebe and Julia shared a look, each waiting for the other to ask why they had been summoned. When neither of them spoke, Helen was relieved. She wasn’t quite ready to talk yet.

‘Come on, our table’s ready,’ she said.

Two minutes later they were sitting at a table near a window, glasses in hand and a good view of the passers-by being hurried along by a biting November wind and sheets of icy rain – except Helen wasn’t so much looking out of the window as she was peering into the middle distance in search of answers to unfathomable questions.

‘So?’ Julia said softly. ‘We’re listening.’

‘He died,’ Helen said, only then turning away from the window to face her friends.

‘A patient?’ Julia asked, knowing that if it had been a close relative or family friend, she would have already heard. Helen and Julia’s mums were also best friends and their lives had combined to make one extended family. Even though Julia’s mum had retired to Spain, it wouldn’t have stopped the news from being relayed through the family network by now.

‘Craig Winchester was thirty-one years old, a married father of two with another on the way. He was fit and healthy until two years ago when he contracted a virus that left his heart weakened. Surgery did the trick for a while, but things took a turn for the worse . . .’

‘My God, he was younger than me or Paul,’ Julia said.

‘And not much older than us,’ added Phoebe. ‘It doesn’t bear thinking about.’

‘That’s why it got to me, or at least part of the reason why. I’m thirty next year and I still don’t feel like my life’s got going properly – excepting the odd false start,’ Helen said, referring to the failed marriage already under her belt. Her daughter Milly was the product of an intense teenage romance that had led to a relatively short-lived marriage. John and Helen had stayed together just long enough for her to complete her nursing training before she was thrown into single parenthood.

‘And you’re not the only one,’ added Julia.

Helen wrinkled her nose at Julia to let her know she understood what she meant, and for a moment neither of them realized Phoebe was waiting to be noticed. When they did look at her, she said, ‘Some of us haven’t even made it to the starting line yet.’

Helen gave her a smile that she hadn’t thought she had in her. However frustrated she felt now and again at having her wings clipped too early in life, she was blessed in comparison to the friend she had known since nursery school. It was there that they had formed a formidable friendship, dreaded by their teachers and envied by their classmates, and it had been strong enough to survive a lengthy break. Phoebe’s mum had run off with her daughter

to Manchester when Phoebe was nine and when they had met up again in their teens, the intervening years had left their mark on both of them. Helen was the not-so-proud mother of a newborn baby while Phoebe was damaged for reasons she would never share. She had been wild and reckless, even by the standards of a teenage mum, and it had taken the determined Theresa Dodd to eventually tame her granddaughter, destroying her free spirit in the process.

‘And his wife was pregnant?’ Julia asked as the finer details of the stranger’s life came into clear focus in her mind.

Helen took a long sip of wine that practically drained the glass. ‘Yes, and she was convinced we would be able to save him, especially after he was put on the list for a heart transplant. Craig, on the other hand, took a lot of persuading that he should be considered at all. He was such a lovely person,’ she said of the man who had made a lasting impression on her. ‘Although I’m sure he thought coming to clinic was a bit like stepping into the confessional. Every time I saw him he’d tell me about some past misdemeanour or other as if to prove how unworthy he was of being a recipient. He told me about pinching his dad’s cigarettes when he was a teenager, and how he got so drunk at a wedding that he and his brother did their very own version of *The Full Monty*.’ Helen tried to laugh but it was as much as she could manage to staunch her tears. ‘I would have liked to have seen that because he looked a bit like Robbie Williams.’

‘Your one true love,’ Julia said, referring to Helen’s teenage obsession.

‘Except, dare I say it, Craig was even lovelier. He argued against getting bumped up the list in case he took the place

of someone who, in his opinion, might be more deserving. Even in the last month when he was told it might only be a matter of weeks . . .’

‘What that family must have gone through. What his wife *will* be going through . . .’ Julia said, shaking her head as her words trailed off.

‘She was going to be induced on Thursday,’ Helen said, then had to swallow hard before adding, ‘Just so he could hold the baby.’

Again Helen and Julia held each other’s gaze and when Julia looked away, she glanced longingly at the bottle of wine.

‘You could always leave the car and pick it up tomorrow,’ Helen said. ‘Or phone Paul. Couldn’t he jog over and drive you home tonight?’ She knew Paul well and the suggestion was a reasonable one.

‘I shouldn’t,’ Julia said.

Helen knew there was more to Julia’s decision not to drink than simply the car, so she didn’t push. As it turned out she didn’t have to because within moments, Julia had sent and received a reply from Paul.

‘I do love that man,’ she said, grabbing an empty glass from the next table. ‘He’ll pick us all up whenever we’re ready to leave.’

Phoebe poured the wine. ‘You don’t know how lucky you are.’

‘Oh, yes, I do,’ Julia said, took a sip of wine and then added, ‘OK, maybe I do take Paul for granted *sometimes*.’

‘We all take our health for granted,’ Helen piped up. She spied the waiter coming over and scanned the menu that she already knew off by heart. ‘Maybe I should order a salad.’

‘What can I get you, ladies?’ he asked.

‘More wine, please,’ Helen said without hesitation and then turned to square up to her friends. ‘I said we take our health for granted. I don’t remember saying anything about living like nuns. And because we have Julia setting us a good example with her health regime, we’re probably entitled to some brownie points just by association. Wouldn’t you say so, Phoebe?’

‘I’ll drink to that!’

There were smiles all around and by the time the waiter had taken their order – which didn’t include a single salad leaf – the shadow that had followed Helen from the hospital had begun to recede. But before all thoughts of their fragile mortality could be laid to rest, Julia had an idea. ‘I think I’ll register as an organ donor.’

‘You mean you’re not already?’ Helen said, genuinely shocked. ‘I work in a cardiology unit, for goodness’ sake! We’re the ones struggling to keep alive the patients who don’t get the call from the transplant centre, all because there aren’t enough donor organs to go around. Have you not been listening to a word I’ve said all these years?’

Julia shrugged guiltily. ‘I had thought about it, I just hadn’t got around to doing it.’

‘And what about you?’ Helen demanded of Phoebe. Another shrug told her all she needed to know. ‘Right, you two, let’s do it now.’

Helen took out her phone, opened up the Internet and found the online registration page. ‘OK, who wants to go first?’ she asked.

They emerged from the pub to find the night as blustery as they had left it, but at least the rain had been swept

away. Linking arms, they crossed the road with Helen and Julia teetering like fawns down the steep incline into the car park. If it weren't for Phoebe in her Doc Martens, they would have fallen at least twice and, as it was, Julia only managed to stop herself when she thumped against a car. Thankfully it was hers.

‘Had a nice night, ladies?’

The three women were still interlinked and a sudden fit of giggles made the task of detangling themselves doubly hard. Their observer waited patiently. He was wrapped up against the elements with the collar of his heavy woollen jacket turned up and a scarf wrapped around his neck that matched his beanie hat. He was tall with dark features that belied the gentlest of hearts and he was the man Julia had been looking for, although she hadn't known it the first time she had set eyes on him.

Julia had been distinctly wary when Paul had started chatting her up at the gym. She had just turned thirty and was recovering from her break-up with her pathetic excuse of a fiancé, who had waited until a week before their wedding to tell her he wasn't ready to settle down. When she had been playing hard to get with Paul, there had been no acting required. She had been deeply suspicious of his motives, not sure why someone five years her junior would be interested in her, but his deep brown eyes had drawn her to him, as they did now.

‘You didn't mind coming out, did you?’ she asked.

‘That depends. Are you all going to behave?’

‘Not if you don't want us to,’ Helen said as she took what she intended to be a step forward, except her balance was

out of kilter and she tumbled into his arms. ‘Hey, watch where you put those hands, pal!’ she cried.

Julia gently prised her friend from her husband. ‘Excuse me! You watch where you’re putting *your* hands.’

‘It was worth a try,’ Helen said and grabbed hold of Phoebe for consolation. ‘Nobody wants us, Phoebes. We’ve got too much baggage.’

Phoebe and Julia wore identical scowls although for entirely different reasons. ‘Speak for yourself,’ Phoebe said, ‘I’m alone because I choose to be, and my nan wouldn’t be too pleased if she heard you referring to her as baggage.’

‘And I’m sure Milly would object to being called baggage too,’ Julia reminded Helen.

Helen waved her hand dismissively. ‘Oh, my little Milly the Millstone has heard me say it often enough.’

‘You had better not call her that to her face, Helen!’ Julia said, suddenly sobering up. ‘I’m not suggesting you have it easy but you shouldn’t take her for granted.’

There was a mixture of pain and envy in Julia’s face that Helen couldn’t ignore. ‘I was only joking, Julia, you know what I’m like,’ she said. ‘Life’s too short to be taken seriously, but it doesn’t mean I don’t love my little—’ When she faltered, it was obvious she was struggling to think of a more flattering description for her daughter than one of a collection she would normally use. Sounding distinctly unsure that she had found the right word, she said, ‘My little *princess*. Milly is more important to me than life itself and she knows it.’ She cupped Julia’s face. ‘Friends?’

‘Always.’

Phoebe cleared her throat. She had been standing to one side looking dejected.

‘Come on,’ Julia said, tugging her sleeve so they could form an untidy rugby scrum.

Paul was shaking his head and Helen caught him. ‘And you too,’ she said. ‘Come on, don’t be shy.’

‘Maybe we should let Paul join our other club too,’ Phoebe suggested once they were in the car.

‘I’m on the case,’ Helen said. She took out her phone and her tongue poked out as she tried to focus on the screen. Paul was driving away from Woolton towards their first drop-off point, which was Helen’s house. ‘Right, what’s your full name, Paul?’

‘Erm, I don’t think so. I’m not signing up for anything until I know what you lot are up to.’

‘Paul Ernest Richardson,’ Julia said.

‘I should have remembered that,’ Helen said, and once the sniggers had died down she tapped in the details and ignored Paul’s demands to know what she was doing.

‘Date of birth?’

Paul pulled up at a red light and turned to glare at his wife. ‘No, Julia, not until you tell me what’s going on.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ she said, leaning over to kiss his pouting mouth. ‘We’re just making you even more of a hero than you are already.’

When Paul continued to look uncomfortable it was Phoebe who put him out of his misery. ‘It’s nothing bad. We’ve all signed up as organ donors, that’s all.’

‘That’s all?’ he repeated with a note of incredulity.

Paul was still staring at his wife, his face glowing red,

amber, and then green in the reflected light. 'The lights have changed,' she said.

'One of my patients died today waiting for a heart transplant,' Helen explained. 'Julia and Phoebe have registered and now it's your turn. So? Can I have your date of birth?'

Making an exaggerated effort to navigate another junction, Paul let the silence extend long enough to let his reluctance be known. The subject was dropped, and at first the silence was broken only by the occasional hiccup from Phoebe. Eventually Helen started babbling on about Milly's latest antics, stories her friends had already heard but it was better than nothing. But once Helen had been dropped off, it was left to Julia and Phoebe to fill the void, and Paul spoke only when he was asked a direct question.

'Phoebe's thinking of learning to drive,' Julia told him. 'You'll give her lessons, won't you?'

Paul was tapping his fingers on the steering wheel as he waited for another set of traffic lights to change. 'Yeah, sure.'

'Julia, I said I'd sort it myself,' Phoebe insisted.

'Oh, you'd never get round to it if we didn't give you a little push. You've put it off long enough as it is. Helen passed her test when Milly was still a baby.'

'Good for Helen.'

Ignoring the huffing and puffing from her friend, Julia continued, 'All I'm saying is you should have done it years ago.'

There was a deep sigh and when she did speak, Phoebe's voice was slurred and yet still barbed with pain. 'Well, I can't

go back and change things, can I? And believe me, if I could then learning to drive wouldn't even make the top ten.'

'Sorry, I know I'm being pushy,' Julia said. Her friend had always played down the struggles she had faced during her early life, and had outright refused to talk about her mum's death, which had prompted her return to Liverpool. But as the years went by and Phoebe's life continued to stall, it was becoming increasingly hard for Julia to stand back and let it happen. 'I won't mention it again.'

'It's OK, Julia, I know you're only looking out for me.'

When they pulled up outside Phoebe's grandmother's house, Julia noticed a curtain twitch.

'I don't mind giving you lessons,' Paul said as Phoebe got out of the car. 'The offer's there if you want it.'

Once she was alone with her husband, Julia said, 'So you do have a heart after all.'

'Yes, and one I intend to use for my own purposes, thank you very much.'

'But why? Why don't you want to register as an organ donor, Paul?'

He squirmed a little in his seat. 'I'm just a bit creeped out by it, that's all. It's the whole idea of bits of me living on while the rest of me is dead and buried.'

'I was planning on having you cremated.'

'You know what I mean.' He visibly shuddered when he repeated, 'It's just the thought of it.'

'But the point is, Paul,' Julia said, trying to form a cohesive argument while fighting through a hazy, alcohol-induced fog, 'you'll be dead so there'll be no "thinking" involved.'

'I know but, I'm sorry, I just don't want to do it.'

‘Why not? You’re a lovely, sweet, generous man, Paul, and I’m struggling to understand.’

‘I don’t think I can explain. I wouldn’t want someone walking around with my heart beating inside them, and I certainly wouldn’t want them walking around with yours.’

‘Well, I don’t care what you think, I’m registered – and it’s my wishes that count.’

‘They’d still have to ask for my consent.’

Julia stared open-mouthed at her husband, her expression all the more exaggerated after consuming far more wine than her body was used to of late. ‘You mean you’d go against my wishes?’

‘It just doesn’t feel right.’

‘I’ll tell you what’s not right. People who deserve a chance to live just as much as you and me, are dying when they could be saved. Helen sees it all the time and she was really upset this evening. The patient who died was younger than us and . . .’ An image came to mind of three children who would grow up without a father, one of whom hadn’t even entered the world yet. ‘And his wife’s pregnant.’

Paul took a deep breath and his words were released almost as a sigh. ‘Is that what this is about?’

The flare of anger came from nowhere, and whereas a sober Julia could dampen her fury, venomous words tumbled out of her mouth unabated. ‘No, *that* isn’t what it’s about! Do all my motives and reactions have to be centred round the fact that I can’t have a baby? Am I not allowed to sympathize with a woman – pregnant or not – whose husband has just died needlessly when there might have been a potential donor out there somewhere except he felt a bit “creeped out” about organ donation?’

‘Julia—’

‘Why does it always have to come back to having babies? Why has our whole life been taken over by me getting pregnant? Everything we do, including doing *it*, has to be checked and double-checked against a schedule. I can’t look at a calendar without thinking about my monthly cycle or how I’m approaching forty at breakneck speed. I can’t put anything in my mouth without considering how it’s going to affect my fertility. I’m riddled with guilt just because I had a drink tonight, and I’m sick of it, Paul, sick of trying so bloody hard and getting nowhere. I want the waiting to be over, I can’t stand it any more!’

She hadn’t noticed that Paul had pulled over to the kerb until he unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned towards her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held onto him as she began to sob.

‘It’s all right,’ he whispered, ‘I know it’s hard but we have to keep believing it’ll be worth it in the end.’

Julia sniffed back her tears as the embarrassment of making a fool of her drunken self took hold, but her feelings had broken free and it was too late to backtrack now. ‘But it’s already been two years, Paul. If it hasn’t happened by now, maybe it never will.’

‘So isn’t it time we went back to the doctor and asked for a referral to see a specialist?’

It had been a contentious issue between them for almost a year now. They had gone as far as broaching the subject with their GP and with the help of the practice nurse Julia had thrown herself into learning all the self-help techniques, from ovulation tests to strict diets, relaxation methods to the best positions during sex. They had followed all the

advice to the letter and every month they had experienced a fleeting sense of hope when Julia was convinced her body felt different only to realize it was nothing more than the usual premenstrual changes. And this had happened every month without fail since she had stopped using contraceptives more than two years ago, at a point in their lives when they had settled into married life and their careers were established. She had been thirty-seven and she had presumed that the time for children had been right. She had thought they would be planning for baby number two by now, sitting in a people carrier rather than crammed into the VW Beetle that was starting to make her feel claustrophobic.

The next step would be for both of them to go through a series of exploratory tests to identify potential problems, and it was Julia who had been prevaricating, praying month after month that it was an unnecessary intervention. In truth she was frightened about what might be uncovered and every scenario held its own horrors. How would she feel if she were infertile, which was the most likely outcome given her age? Would Paul blame her or at least resent her? He wanted to be a father so much and if she couldn't make that happen, would she be able to live with the guilt? Worse still, how would she console Paul if it were him? And what if the doctors couldn't find a problem, what would they do then? What if there was no quick fix? Would they need to go through fertility treatment? Would they even be eligible now that she was so old? How many more months, if not years, of agonized waiting lay ahead? Would their marriage survive that kind of stress or would she be jilted yet again?

'I can't,' she said, sitting up straight to wipe her eyes and then focusing on the road ahead. She had to place a

hand over her chest to calm her racing heart. ‘Can’t we just go home?’

Paul didn’t move. ‘I know you’re scared, Julia, I am too, but we can’t go on like this.’

‘The only thing I feel right now is tired and a bit queasy. If you don’t get me home soon I just might throw up in the car.’

The threat worked and when they arrived home a few minutes later, the issue was put off for yet another day.