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## Out on a Limb

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### Chapter 1

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY you get given a leg.

'It seemed the perfect parting gift,' my friend Dee explains helpfully, as she presents it to me. 'Kind of symbolic. Losing you is going to be like losing a limb, so we thought we should make it official.'

'I don't know what to say,' I respond, because you tend not to know what to say when someone presents you with a leg, do you? 'Except thank you. This really means a lot. Such a lot. I'd have it mounted in the clinic but I'm not sure I should. I might scare away all my patients.'

The leg, which is a prosthetic lower one (complete with ankle and foot, obviously), has been in the orthopaedics outpatient department for as long as anyone can remember, and has always been an object of mystery. Nobody has ever known how it got here or where it came from. It just turned up one day, in pre-history, almost, and no one ever hopped in to claim it. Since then it's been our mascot. Our orthopaedic lucky charm.

And now its mine to take home with me, and everyone's signed it. I'm having to work hard not to burst into tears.

It's pretty grim leaving somewhere when you don't want to go. I don't think I appreciated just how grim it would be until the moment when I took possession of the limb. After all, it was my choice, wasn't it? But it's funny the way parties – such merry occasions – are so good at making people sad. Though understandable, given that it's a leaving party. And given the circumstances of this particular leaving, I guess. Up to now, I've always left what I've left in a state of readiness and expectation. School, university, the PTA, my marriage. With some sadness, of course, the odd regret or two, a trace of apprehension about the future, for certain, but those feelings, up to now, have always been tempered with the thrill of moving on to something new.

We tend not to do grand parties at Highfield Park Hospital. Not unless somebody important's showing up. Like the Queen, or Prince Charles, or someone famous off the telly. It's said that some time back Bruce Forsyth paid a visit. But it's only a rumour. There's no evidence.

My own leaving party, which has not be graced with any dignitaries bar me, has been taking place in the same outpatient clinic that has been home to the leg all these years. Happening amongst the frayed easy chairs and tired pot plants and coverless copies of Take a Break and My Weekly, on a floor thinly carpeted with NHS issue carpet tiles, and bound by walls that are similarly, if much more thickly carpeted, with an aggregate of paperwork that spews from strained push pins in irritable gusts whenever the automatic doors open. Charts of skeletons, charts of muscles, pictures of smiling pensioners, instructions for operating the vending machines, yellowed thank you letters, posters advertising upcoming fundraising activities, children's madly scribbled pictures, and the map of the world with the stuck on string arrows that lead you to handwritten laminated lists that tell you what vaccinations you need to go where.

And in the bottom right corner of the bottom right cork board, a little yellow rabbit, aged and dusty, which has been attached to the wall by a silver topped drawing pin, by its ear, for as long as I can remember. Funny to think that the owner of that rabbit is probably in high school by now.

I glance across at it and I wonder if I will miss the sight of that little rabbit as much as that little rabbit must have been missed when it was left here.

'God, God, God,' said Dee, who being my best friend, I knew I would miss a great deal. 'God, how I am going to get through this without blubbing, I really don't know. I just really don't know.'

This was earlier, when we were getting the party food ready, and she was holding a paper plate full of quartered pork pies. We always have pork pies at leaving parties here. I don't know why, but as with much that happens in the outpatient department, it just is. Pork pies and Twiglets. Because everyone likes Twiglets. Not much green stuff. Because green stuff almost always gets left. So much for the H in NHS.

'We'll blub together,' I suggested, taking the drum of Twiglets from underneath her arm and picking up a paper cup of breadsticks. 'We'll blub copiously and extravagantly and with absolute abandon.'

She looked stricken. 'Oh, God, Abs, you mustn't!' she replied. 'Once you start I'm done for.'

'Okay, okay! I won't, then!'

It's always difficult to know which tack to take with Dee at present. She put the pork pies down, blew her nose, then picked the plate up again.

'Of course you won't,' she said, almost managing to convince both of us. 'You're so brave,' she added, 'So strong and courageous.'

No, I'm not, I thought. That's piffle. That's what she is. Whereas I'm actually being weak willed and cowardly. If I were strong and courageous I'd be toughing it out. Were I strong and courageous I wouldn't be leaving. But, hey, when you've got to go you've got to go.

And almost everyone came to see me off, which was lovely. My fellow physios, lots of nurses – the whole orthopaedics team, pretty much – the new registrar, Julie, a brace of porters, Will and Phil, Carolyn from the WRVS shop, most of radiology, Karin from reception, Boris from the canteen. And Charles. He came too. We were honoured.

Charles Scott-Downing is a consultant orthopaedic surgeon. He fixes hips and femurs and knees and ankles and shoulders and arms and, well, pretty much any ill-behaved or malfunctioning bone that happens to happen along. He is all those things a consultant surgeon should be. Dashing and handsome, much loved by his patients, respected by his peers, fondly tolerated in his foibles (which are many) by the nursing staff, mothered by the secretaries, swooned over by almost everyone (particularly when in his greens), and a-bit-of-a-babe, all agree. That's the thing about working in a hospital, I think now. It's a whole cross section of society in miniature. It throws together people from all walks of life.

Throws together people. Which isn't always to be wished for. Because that's precisely why I've decided to go.

As well as presenting me with the leg, they've had a bit of a collection. With which they've bought me a beautiful bouquet of flowers, an embarrassingly large amount of vouchers to spend in Next, and a 'ME-time' day at EXO, which is a posh spa in the Bay. Two 'treatments' and unlimited use of the facilities, which include all the things a 'me' with some time to kill could want. Which is nice, because I know I'm going to have some. Dee is now sobbing quietly into a paper towel while I attempt to gather enough and suitable words and expressions to make a passable thank you speech.

Julie, the new registrar, makes a speech too. She thanks me for all the help and support I've given her with her research (which makes it sound like I did something clever and important, which I didn't, which makes me go red), thanks me on behalf of everyone present, thanks me on behalf of all the patients who have signed the lovely card she then gives me, and ends on a note of celebration and felicitation, by wishing me luck in my new job at Aches and Pains. Then Mr Scott-Downing, in his greens now, leads the throng in a rousing, if slightly off-key chorus of 'for she's a jolly good fellow'.

Charles Scott-Downing. Who arrived mid-presentation. Who is watching my every move as he sings .

'I hope you don't think you're getting out of here without saying a proper goodbye,' he booms at me from the far side of a table and some chairs, once it's over. Furniture's the thing, I've decided.

He's smiling from over the top of a well piled plate of sandwiches and crisps. Which someone has hastily procured for him. Some men just do that to women, don't they? Mr Scott-Downing is here, therefore it's clearly necessary to procure a plate of sandwiches for him without delay. He is a very busy man and he has come straight from theatre to grace us with his presence. He cannot possibly be expected to procure his own sandwiches. People fight each other for the privilege.

I smile a wan smile and then I shake my head. 'No.'

I wish I was, for certain sure. But no. I don't doubt it. 'I've got a present for you, too,' he adds, in the same loud look-at-me-I'm-absolutely-above-board voice that he has perfected so well these past months. 'It's up in my office. We'll have to go fetch it.' He makes a small gesture with his head.

'Oh, bless him,' says Carolyn, who is a few feet to his left. She doesn't say it to me, but to Dee, who is beside her, and who, despite catching my eye momentarily, still manages to smile and nod her assent.

'He's such a sweetie, isn't he?' comments someone at my side. I turn to see Dorothy, the outpatient administrator. Who is very nearly sixty and in love with him too. They all are, to a greater or lesser extent. Except me.

'Mmm,' I answer. 'Yes.'

'Such a lovely man.' She nudges me. 'I wonder what it is?'

I don't. I really don't want any more presents.

It's while I'm thinking just that that I make a fatal technical error. While Carolyn has waylaid him in conversation, I decide to nip off to the loo. Of course, nipping off to deal with three paper cupfuls of orange juice (and just the one of ASDA cava – I'm driving) is the sort of thing one does because one has to, but foresight should have told me that this is one occasion when going to the loo with a friend would have been, as it almost never is, the correct course of action. Not least because the nearest ladies – the one we all tend to use when we're working in outpatients – is tucked along the sort of out of the way corridor that sees little traffic after five.

Which Charlie Scott-Downing knows only too well. Which is something I should have recalled before I went. Which is why I'm an absolute klutz.

I smell him before I see him, so my nose is already braced on the rest of my behalf. The now familiar cocktail of expensive aftershave and Hibiscrub – the industrial strength cleanser the surgeons use to scrub up.

He's loitering outside. And clearly with intent. 'Come with me,' he says. 'I told you, I've got something for you.'

'No,' I say stoutly. 'I'm going back to the party. I'll be missed.'

'Missed!' he rolls his eyes. 'Tell me, Abbie, are you choosing your words specifically to break my heart?' Charlie talks this way to me most of the time right now.

'Don't be silly,' I say. Because I always say that. He takes my hand. Squeezes it. 'Please?'

'Charlie,' I say, holding my ground. 'I specifically told you not to get me anything. No parting shots. No tugs at my heart strings. I'm going. I'm gone. You've got to stop this.'

He ignores this. And understandably. I've said it – or a version of it – so many times before, and up to now I've always failed to follow through. 'Come on,' he coaxes again. 'Come up and see what I got you.'

There is, as there always is, little room for manoeuvre. I sigh defeat. 'Can't you bring it down here?' I ask him, quite reasonably.

'Absolutely not,' he replies.

So I go with him. Because not to do so would make a mockery of this whole sorry business. Not to do so – to take him on, to fight him, to run away – anything – would render the whole purpose, well, purposeless, really. I'm supposed to have taken control here, am I not? So I go with him up the corridor, out through the double doors, along another corridor which is being languidly mopped by a cleaner whose face I thankfully don't recognise, past the montages of photos detailing many a jolly fundraising activity, past the hand drawn six foot picture of a thermometer that marks the progress of that for which we always party and sponsored-walk and duck-race so slavishly, past the fish tank (two fish), the WRVS shop (now shuttered) and round the corner, where he turns around to smile.

It's that smile. Always has been, and suddenly I'm anxious. Anxious that I got it all wrong. That this whole leaving business isn't going to serve any purpose. That I'll leave but in my head I'll still be tethered here anyway. To him. Which I mustn't let happen. So I stop.

There are very few places in a hospital that are truly private, and the east wing corridor, at whose apex he now stands, is by no means one of them, for in its offices live secretaries, technicians, scientists, stray goblins, confused patients, and, in the

last room, a store room, often staff involved in clinches or rows. But it is gone six, and all those who are not at the party are not on this corridor either.

Charlie – ‘I say. ‘No. Okay? NO. I’m going back to the party. I really can’t do this. I’m going back.’

‘Please,’ he says, closing on me now like a missile. A green surface to air missile on the warpath. And this does feel a little like a war now, for certain. A war of attrition, in every last way. ‘Please?’ he says again. ‘Just a goodbye hug. Please?’ And then his hands are on my face and his lips are meeting mine. So much for doing the right thing.

Grr. Grr. Grr. Right thing, best thing, only thing, whatever. None of them actually fit right. The right thing would be never to have succumbed to his charms in the first place. The best thing, having done so, to have ended it straight away. The only thing? No. Were I a stronger, better, more steely willed person, I could, I suppose, have toughed it out. But that takes two, and as at least one of us was, has been, is still not remotely interested in ending it, the odds on it not ending were altogether too great. Which makes me a wimp, and I don’t want to be that. From a distance (Aches and Pains, Collin House, 27 Wharton Terrace – which should be just about far enough, I reckon) I can, I am sure enough to feel hopeful, be strong.

It was only a kiss, I remind myself crossly as the party begins drawing to a close. Just a farewell kiss. Which prefix makes it seem altogether more benign, more innocent, than it actually was. But it was just a kiss. A last kiss. It’s over.

It’s not much to say goodbye to, all things being considered. Now I’ve done the farewells and the tears and all that. Just grey concrete buildings. Just a workplace. Just a place. Such people that matter – which is most of them, admittedly – will still be there, in some way, shape or form in my life.

Coming out into the car park, Dee at my side, helping with the flowers and tutting about the litter, I take in the low pewter clouds, the sorry state of the paintwork, the super-annuated stems of the optimistically planted petunias, the bins, the general air of decay. And I conclude that actually there’s not much to miss. Which gladdens my heart and helps re-establish my optimism. I’ve done it. I really am going.

‘That’s that, then,’ says Dee, who is not and who is sad. ‘Another day, another dollar. I can’t believe you’re not going to be here on Monday.’ She waits then, frowning and silent, while I fish around in my handbag for my car keys.

‘Nor can I,’ I say, frowning right on back at her. It’s been wearing on the face, all the smiling. Though, in fact, I do feel like smiling now. Just a little bit, anyway. I feel liberated. Decisive. Back in control. I press the remote to open the passenger door, and Dee carefully places the bouquet in the footwell.

So what was it, then?’ she asks finally, as she straightens. ‘What did he really give you?’

Charlie, who has an awful lot of letters after his name, is nothing if not intelligent. He announced there was a present, so I must be seen to have got one. Thus as well as the leg, which is under my arm, I am also clutching a second bouquet of flowers. Red roses, lots of them, which I know his secretary will have been instructed to ring and have delivered at some point earlier in the day. I put the flowers on the seat and pull a slim box – my proper present – from my handbag.

As proper presents go, it’s a stunner. Dee yanks it open and diamonds wink up at her. Roses. Diamonds. Cliché upon cliché. But then, hey, what was our affair if not that? ‘Wow!’ she says. ‘Wow, Abs. It’s stunning.’

I take it back and lever the lid closed with a snap. ‘It is,’ I agree, shaking my head sadly. ‘Such a waste.’

I watch her scurry back across the car park as I rummage once again in my bag for my phone. We’ve been such good friends for such a long time, and I know I’m going to spend an inordinate amount of time fretting about her, now I’m all freed up from fretting about myself.

But for now I must shrug off the last threads of memories and fret in the moment – about tea. I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that Jake will have forgotten I told him I’d be home late about fifteen seconds after me having told him this morning, so I open my phone fully expecting to find I’ve been sent a text saying where U?????. But the display, when I switch it back on, shows that voicemail have been trying to contact me, which is the sort of thing Jake would never do. Being male and fifteen, he would no more send me a voicemail message than consider a coat hanger as being related to clothes. Sebastian, then? Now, that would be nice.

I connect. It’s not Seb. It’s my mother.

My mother has just the two main modes of operation. Either slightly dramatic or seriously dramatic. That this is the latter means just the one thing. That my day is about to get worse. ‘Oh, darling! She warbles. ‘Where are you? I need you! It’s Hugo! He’s left me! He’s gone!’