PS, I Love You

Cecilia Ahern

Published by Harpercollins Publishers Ltd

Extract

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Chapter One

Holly held the blue cotton sweater to her face and the familiar smell immediately struck her, an overwhelming grief knotting her stomach and pulling at her heart. Pins and needles ran up the back of her neck and a lump in her throat threatened to choke her. Panic took over. Apart from the low hum of the fridge and the occasional moaning of the pipes, the house was quiet. She was alone. Bile rose in her throat and she ran to the bathroom, where she collapsed to her knees before the toilet.

Gerry was gone and he would never be back. That was the reality. She would never again run her fingers through his soft hair, never share a secret joke across the table at a dinner party, never cry to him when she got home from a hard day at work and just needed a hug, she would never share a bed with him again, never be woken up by his fits of sneezes each morning, never laugh with him so much her stomach would ache, never fight with him about whose turn it was to get up and turn the bedroom light off. All that was left was a bundle of memories, and an image of his face that became more and more vague each day.

Their plan had been very simple: to stay together for the rest of their lives. A plan that anyone within their circle would agree was accomplishable. They were best friends, lovers and soul mates, destined to be together, everyone thought. But as it happened, one day destiny greedily changed its mind.

The end had come all too soon. After complaining of a migraine for a few days, Gerry had agreed to Holly's advice to see his doctor. This was done one Wednesday on a lunch break from work. They thought the migraine was due to stress or tiredness, and agreed that at the very worst he might need glasses. Gerry had been upset that he might need glasses. He needn't have worried, since it turned out it wasn't his eyes that were the problem. It was the tumour growing inside his brain.

Holly flushed the toilet and, shivering from the coldness of the tiled floor, she shakily steadied herself to her feet. He was thirty years old. By no means was he the healthiest man on the earth, but he was healthy enough to . . . well, to live a normal life. When he became very sick he would bravely joke about how he shouldn't have lived life so safely. Should have taken drugs, should have drunk more, should have travelled more, should have jumped out of aeroplanes while waxing his legs . . . his list went on. Even as he laughed about it Holly could see the regret in his eyes. Regret for the things he'd never made time to do, places he'd never seen and sorrow for the loss of future experiences. Did he regret the life he had had with her? Holly never doubted that he loved her, but feared he felt he had wasted precious time.

Growing older became something he wanted desperately to accomplish rather than merely a dreaded inevitability. How presumptuous they both were never to consider growing old as an achievement and a challenge. Ageing was something they wanted so much to avoid.

Holly drifted from room to room while she sobbed fat, salty tears. Her eyes were red and sore, and there seemed to be no end to this night. None of the rooms in the house provided her with any solace, just unwelcoming silences as she stared around at the furniture. She longed for the couch to hold out its arms to her but even it ignored her.

Gerry would not be happy with this, she thought. She took a deep breath, dried her eyes and tried to shake some sense into herself. No, Gerry would not be pleased at all.

Holly's eyes were tender and puffy from crying all through the night. Just as she had every other night for the past few weeks, she had fallen into fitful sleep in the early hours of the morning. Each day she woke to find herself sprawled uncomfortably across some piece of furniture – today it was the couch. Once again it was the phone call from a concerned friend or family member that roused her. They probably thought that all she did was sleep. Where were their phone calls when she listlessly roamed the house like a zombie, searching the rooms for . . . for what? What was she expecting to find?

'Hello,' she answered groggily. Her voice was hoarse from all the tears but she had long stopped

caring about maintaining a brave face. Her best friend was gone and nobody understood that no amount of make-up, fresh air or shopping was going to fill the hole in her heart.

'Oh, sorry, love, did I wake you?' the concerned voice of Holly's mother came across the line. Every morning her mother called to see if she had survived the night alone, always afraid of waking her, yet always relieved to hear her speak; safe in the knowledge her daughter had braved the ghosts of the night.

'No, I was just dozing, it's OK.' Always the same answer.

'Your dad and Declan have gone out and I was thinking of you, pet.'

Why did that soothing sympathetic voice always send tears to Holly's eyes? She could picture her mother's face, eyebrows furrowed, forehead wrinkled with worry. But it didn't soothe Holly. It made her remember why they were worried and that they shouldn't have to be. Everything should be normal. Gerry should be here beside her, rolling his eyes up to heaven and trying to make her laugh while her mother yapped on. So many times Holly would have to hand the phone over to Gerry as her fit of giggles took over. Then he would chat away, ignoring Holly as she jumped around the bed, pulling her silliest faces and doing her funniest dances just to get back at him. It seldom worked.

She 'ummed' and 'aahed' throughout the conversation, listening but not hearing a word.

'It's a lovely day, Holly. It would do you the world of good to go out for a walk. Get some fresh air.'

'Um, I suppose.' There it was again – fresh air, the alleged answer to all her problems.

'Maybe I'll call round later and we can have a chat.'

'No thanks, Mum. I'm OK.'

Silence.

'Well, all right . . . give me a ring if you change your mind. I'm free all day.'

'OK.' Another silence. 'Thanks, though.'

'Right then . . . take care, love.'

'I will.' Holly was about to replace the phone when she heard her mother's voice again.

'Oh, Holly, I almost forgot. That envelope is still here for you – you know, the one I told you about. It's on the kitchen table. You might want to collect it. It's been here for weeks now and it might be important.'

'I doubt it. It's probably just another card.'

'No, I don't think it is, love. It's addressed to you and above your name it says . . . oh, hold on while I get it . . .'

The phone was put down, the sound of heels on the tiles toward the table, chairs screeched against the floor, footsteps getting louder, phone being picked up . . .

'You still there?'

'Yeah.'

'OK, it says at the top "The List". Maybe it's from work or something, love. It's worth just taking a . . .'

Holly dropped the phone.