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The Husband's Secret

Written by Liane Moriarty

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The Husband's Secret

LIANE MORIARTY



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ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

To err is human; to forgive is divine.
Alexander Pope

Poor, poor Pandora. Zeus sends her off to marry Epimetheus, a not especially bright man she's never even met, along with a mysterious covered jar. Nobody tells Pandora a word about the jar. Nobody tells her not to open the jar. Naturally, she opens the jar. What else has she got to do? How was she to know that all those dreadful ills would go whooshing out to plague mankind forever more, and that the only thing left in the jar would be hope? Why wasn't there a warning label? And then, everyone's like, Oh, Pandora. Where's your will-power? You were told not to open that box, you snoopy girl, you typical woman with your insatiable curiosity, now look what you've gone and done. When for one thing it was a jar, not a box, and for another, how many times does she have to say it, nobody said a word about not opening it!

monday

chapter one

It was all because of the Berlin Wall.

If it wasn't for the Berlin Wall Cecilia would never have found the letter, and then she wouldn't be sitting here, at the kitchen table, willing herself not to rip it open.

The envelope was grey with a fine layer of dust. The words on the front were written in a scratchy blue ballpoint pen, the handwriting as familiar as her own. She turned it over. It was sealed with a yellowing piece of sticky tape. When was it written? It felt old, like it was written years ago, but there was no way of knowing for sure.

She wasn't going to open it. It was absolutely clear that she should not open it. She was the most decisive person she knew, and she'd already decided not to open the letter, so there was nothing more to think about.

Although, honestly, if she did open it, what would be the big deal? Any woman would open it like a shot. She listed all her friends and what their responses would be if she were to ring them up right now and ask what they thought.

Miriam Openheimer: Yup. Open it.

Erica Edgecliff: Are you kidding, open it right this second.

Angela Murphy: Yes you should open it and then you

should read it out loud to me.

Sarah Sacks: There would be no point asking Sarah because she was incapable of making a decision. If Cecilia asked her whether she wanted tea or coffee, she would sit for a full minute, her forehead furrowed as she agonised over the pros and cons of each beverage before finally saying, 'Coffee! No, wait, tea!' A decision like this one would give her a brain seizure.

Mahalia Ramachandran: Absolutely not. It would be completely disrespectful to your husband. You must not open it.

Mahalia could be a little too sure of herself at times with those huge brown ethical eyes.

Cecilia left the letter sitting on the kitchen table and went to put the kettle on.

Damn that Berlin Wall, and that Cold War, and whoever it was who sat there back in nineteen-forty-whenever it was, mulling over the problem of what to do with those ungrateful Germans; the guy who suddenly clicked his fingers and said, 'Got it by jove! We'll build a great big bloody wall and keep the buggers in!'

Presumably he hadn't sounded like a British sergeant major.

Esther would know who first came up with the idea for the Berlin Wall. Esther would probably be able to give her his date of birth. It would have been a man of course. Only a man could come up with something so ruthless: so essentially stupid and yet brutally effective.

Was that sexist?

She filled the kettle, switched it on, and cleaned the droplets of water in the sink with a paper towel so that it shone.

One of the mums from school, who had three sons almost exactly the same ages as Cecilia's three daughters, had said that some remark Cecilia had made was 'a teeny weeny bit

sexist', just before they'd started the Fete Committee meeting last week. Cecilia couldn't remember what she'd said, but she'd only been joking. Anyway, weren't women allowed to be sexist for the next two thousand years or so, until they'd evened up the score?

Maybe she was sexist.

The kettle boiled. She swirled an Earl Grey teabag and watched the curls of black spread through the water like ink. There were worse things to be than sexist. For example, you could be the sort of person who pinched your fingers together while using the words 'teeny weeny'.

She looked at her tea and sighed. A glass of wine would be nice right now, but she'd given up alcohol for Lent. Only six days to go. She had a bottle of expensive shiraz ready to open on Easter Sunday, when thirty-five adults and twenty-three children were coming to lunch, so she'd need it. Although she was an old hand at entertaining. She hosted Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day and Christmas. John-Paul had five younger brothers, all married with kids. So it was quite a crowd. Planning was the key. Meticulous planning.

She picked up her tea and took it over to the table. Why had she given up wine for Lent? Polly was more sensible. She'd given up strawberry jam. Cecilia had never seen Polly show more than a passing interest in strawberry jam, although now, of course, she stood at the open fridge staring at it longingly. The power of denial.

'Esther!' she called out.

Esther was in the next room with her sisters watching *The Biggest Loser* while they shared a giant bag of salt and vinegar chips left over from the Australia Day barbecue. Cecilia did not know why her three slender daughters loved watching overweight people sweat and cry and starve. It didn't appear to be teaching them healthier eating habits. She should go in and confiscate the bag of chips, except they'd all eaten

salmon and steamed broccoli for dinner without complaint, and she didn't have the strength for an argument.

She heard a voice from the television boom, 'You get nothing for nothing!'

That wasn't such a bad sentiment for her daughters to hear. No one knew it better than Cecilia! But still, she didn't like the expressions of faint revulsion that flitted across their smooth young faces. She was always so vigilant about making negative body image comments in front of her daughters, although the same could not be said for her friends. Just the other day, Miriam Openheimer had said, loud enough for all their impressionable daughters to hear, 'God, would you look at my stomach!' and squeezed her flesh between her fingertips as if it was something vile. Great, Miriam, as if our daughters don't already get a million messages every day telling them to hate their bodies.

Miriam's stomach *was* getting a little pudgy.

'Esther!' she called out again.

'What is it?' Esther called back in a patient, put-upon voice that Cecilia suspected was an unconscious imitation of her own.

'Whose idea was it to build the Berlin Wall?'

'Well, they're pretty sure it was Nikita Khrushchev!' Esther answered immediately, pronouncing the exotic-sounding name with great relish and her own peculiar interpretation of a Russian accent. 'He was like, the Prime Minister of Russia, except he was the Premier. But it could have been –'

Her sisters responded instantly with their usual impeccable courtesy.

'Shut up, Esther!'

'Esther! I can't *hear* the *television*!'

'Thank you darling!' Cecilia sipped her tea and imagined herself going back through time and putting that Khrushchev in his place.

No, Mr Khrushchev, you may not have a wall. It will not prove that Communism works. It will not work out well at all. Now, look, I agree capitalism isn't the be all and end all! Let me show you my last credit card bill. But you really need to put your thinking cap back on.

And then fifty years later, Cecilia wouldn't have found this letter that was making her feel so . . . what was the word?

Unfocused. That was it.

She liked to feel focused. She was proud of her ability to focus. Her daily life was made up of a thousand tiny pieces – 'Need coriander', 'Isabel's haircut', 'Who will watch Polly at ballet on Tuesday while I take Esther to speech therapy? – like one of those terrible giant jigsaws that Isabel used to spend hours doing. And yet Cecilia, who had no patience for puzzles, knew exactly where each tiny piece of her life belonged, and where it needed to be slotted in next.

And okay, maybe the life Cecilia was leading wasn't that unusual or impressive. She was a school mum and a part-time Tupperware consultant, not an actress or an actuary or a . . . poet living in Vermont. (Cecilia had recently discovered that Liz Brogan, a girl from high school, was now a prize-winning poet living in Vermont. Liz, who ate cheese and Vegemite sandwiches and was always losing her bus pass. It took all of Cecilia's considerable strength of character not to find that annoying. Not that she wanted to write poetry. But still. You would have thought that if anyone was going to lead an ordinary life it would have been Liz Brogan.) Of course, Cecilia had never aspired to anything other than ordinariness. *Here I am, a typical suburban mum*, she sometimes caught herself thinking, as if someone had accused her of holding herself out to be something else, something superior.

Other mothers talked about feeling overwhelmed, about the difficulties of focusing on one thing, and they were always saying, 'How do you do it all, Cecilia?', and she didn't know

how to answer them. She didn't actually understand what they found so difficult.

But now, for some reason, except that it had something to do with this silly letter, everything felt somehow at risk. It wasn't logical.

Maybe it wasn't anything to do with the letter. Maybe it was hormonal. She was 'possibly perimenopausal', according to Dr McArthur. ('Oh, I am *not*!' Cecilia had said, automatically, as if responding to a gentle, humorous insult.)

Perhaps this was a case of that vague anxiety she knew some women experienced. *Other* women. She'd always thought anxious people were cute. Dear little anxious people like Sarah Sacks. She wanted to pat their worry-filled heads.

Perhaps if she opened the letter and saw that it was nothing she would get everything back in focus. She had things to do. Two baskets of laundry to fold. Three urgent phone calls to make. Gluten-free slice to bake for the gluten-intolerant members of the School Website Project Group (ie Janine Davidson) which would be meeting tomorrow.

There were other things beside the letter that could be making her feel anxious.

The sex thing, for example. That was always at the back of her mind.

She frowned and ran her hands down the sides of her waist. Her 'oblique muscles' according to her Pilates teacher. Oh, look, the sex thing was *nothing.* It was not actually on her mind. She refused to let it be on her mind. It was of no consequence.

It was true, perhaps, that ever since that morning last year she'd been aware of an underlying sense of fragility, a new understanding that a life of coriander and laundry could be stolen in an instant, that your ordinariness could vanish and suddenly you're a woman on your knees, your face lifted to the sky and some women are running to help, but others are

already averting their heads, with the words not articulated, but felt: *Don't let this touch me.*

Cecilia saw it again for the thousandth time: Little Spiderman flying. She was one of the women who ran. Well, of course she was, throwing open her car door, even though she knew that nothing she did would make any difference. It wasn't her school, her neighbourhood, her parish. None of her children had ever played with the little Spiderman. She'd never had coffee with the woman on her knees. She just happened to be stopped at the lights on the other side of the intersection when it happened. A little boy, probably about five, dressed in a red and blue full-body Spiderman suit was waiting at the side of the road, holding his mother's hand. It was Book Week. That's why the little boy was dressed up. Cecilia was watching him, thinking, *Mmmm, actually Spiderman was not a character from a book*, when for no reason that she could see, the little boy dropped his mother's hand and stepped off the kerb into the traffic. Cecilia screamed. She also, she remembered later, instinctively banged her fist on her horn.

If Cecilia had driven by just moments later she would have missed seeing it happen. Ten minutes later and the little boy's death would have meant nothing more to her than another traffic detour. Now it was a memory that would probably cause her grandchildren to one day say, 'Don't hold my hand so *tight*, Grandma.'

Obviously there was no connection between little Spiderman and this letter.

He just came into her mind at strange times.

Cecilia flicked the letter across the table with her fingertip and picked up Esther's library book: *The Rise and Fall of the Berlin Wall*.

So, the Berlin Wall. Wonderful.

The first she'd known that the Berlin Wall was about to

become a significant part of her life had been at breakfast this morning.

It had been just Cecilia and Esther sitting at the kitchen table. John-Paul was overseas, in Chicago until Saturday, and Isabel and Polly were still in bed.

Cecilia didn't normally sit down in the mornings. She generally ate her breakfast standing at the breakfast counter while she made lunches, checked her Tupperware orders on her iPad, unpacked the dishwasher, texted clients about their parties, whatever, but it was a rare opportunity to have some time alone with her odd, darling middle daughter, so she sat down with her Bircher muesli, while Esther powered her way through a bowl of rice bubbles, and waited.

She'd learned that with her daughters. Don't say a word. Don't ask a question. Give them enough time and they'd finally tell you what was on their mind. It was like fishing. It took silence and patience. (Or so she'd heard. Cecilia would rather hammer nails into her forehead than go fishing.)

Silence didn't come naturally to her. Cecilia was a talker. 'Seriously, do you ever shut the hell up?' an ex-boyfriend had said to her once. She talked a lot when she was nervous. That ex-boyfriend must have made her nervous. Although, she also talked a lot when she was happy.

But she didn't say anything that morning. She just ate, and waited, and sure enough, Esther started talking.

'Mum,' she said in her husky, precise little voice with its faint lisp. 'Did you know that some people escaped over the Berlin Wall in a hot air balloon they made themselves?'

'I did not know that,' said Cecilia, although she might have known it.

So long Titanic, hello Berlin Wall, she thought.

She would have preferred it if Esther had shared something with her about how she was feeling at the moment, any worries she had about school, her friends, questions

about sex, but no, she wanted to talk about the Berlin Wall.

Ever since Esther was three years old, she'd been developing these interests, or more accurately, obsessions. First it was dinosaurs. Sure, lots of kids are interested in dinosaurs, but Esther's interest was, well, exhausting, to be frank, and a little peculiar. Nothing else interested the child. She drew dinosaurs, she played with dinosaurs, she dressed up as a dinosaur. 'I'm not Esther,' she'd say. 'I'm T-Rex.' Every bedtime story had to be about dinosaurs. Every conversation had to be related somehow to dinosaurs. It was lucky that John-Paul was interested, because Cecilia was bored after about five minutes. (They were extinct! They had nothing to say!) John-Paul took Esther on special trips to the museum. He brought home books for her. He sat with her for hours while they talked about herbivores and carnivores.

Since then Esther's 'interests' had ranged from rollercoasters to cane toads. Most recently it had been the *Titanic*. Now she was ten she was old enough to do her own research at the library and online, and Cecilia was amazed at the information she gathered. What ten year old lay in bed reading historical books that were so big and chunky she could barely hold them up?

'Encourage it!' her schoolteachers said, but sometimes Cecilia worried. It seemed to her that Esther was possibly a touch autistic, or at least sitting somewhere on the autism spectrum. Cecilia's mother had laughed when she'd mentioned her concern. 'But Esther is exactly like you were!' she said. This was not true.

'I actually have a piece of the Berlin Wall,' Cecilia had said that morning to Esther, suddenly remembering this fact, and it had been gratifying to see Esther's eyes light up with interest. 'I was there in Germany, after the Wall came down.'

'Can I see it?' asked Esther.

'You can have it, darling.'

Jewellery and clothes for Isabel and Polly. A piece of the Berlin Wall for Esther.

Cecilia, nineteen years old at the time, had been on a six-week holiday travelling through Europe with her friend Sarah Sacks in 1989, just a few months after the announcement that the Wall was coming down. (Sarah's famous indecisiveness paired with Cecilia's famous decisiveness made them the perfect travelling companions. No conflict whatsoever.)

When they got to Berlin, they found tourists lined along the wall, trying to chip off pieces as souvenirs, using keys, rocks, anything they could find. The Wall was like the giant carcass of a dragon that had once terrorised the city, and the tourists were crows pecking away at its remains.

Without proper tools it was almost impossible to chip off a proper piece, so Cecilia and Sarah decided (well, Cecilia decided) to buy their pieces from the enterprising locals who had set out rugs and were selling off a variety of offerings. Capitalism really had triumphed. You could buy anything from grey-coloured chips the size of marbles to giant boulder-sized chunks complete with spray-painted graffiti.

Cecilia couldn't remember how much she'd paid for the tiny grey stone that looked like it could have come from anyone's front garden. 'It probably did,' said Sarah as they caught the train out of Berlin that night, and they'd laughed at their own gullibility, but at least they'd felt like they were a part of history. Cecilia had put her chip in a paper bag and written my *MY PIECE OF THE BERLIN WALL* on the front, and when she got back to Australia she'd thrown it in a box with all the other souvenirs she'd collected: drink coasters, train tickets, menus, foreign coins, hotel keys.

Cecilia wished now she'd concentrated more on the Wall, taken more photos, collected more anecdotes she could have shared with Esther. Actually, what she remembered most

about that trip to Berlin was kissing a handsome brown-haired German boy in a nightclub. He kept taking ice cubes from his drink and running them across her collarbone, which at the time had seemed incredibly sexy, but now seemed unhygienic and sticky.

If only she'd been the sort of curious, politically aware girl who struck up conversations with the locals about what it was like living in the shadow of the Wall. Instead, all she had to share with her daughter were stories about kissing and ice cubes. Of course, Isabel and Polly would *love* to hear about the kissing and ice cubes. Or Polly would, maybe Isabel had reached the age where the thought of her mother kissing anybody would be appalling.

Cecilia put *Find piece of Berlin Wall for E* on her list of things to do that day (there were twenty-five items – she used an iPhone app to list them), and at about two pm, she went into the attic to find it.

Attic was probably too generous a word for the storage area in their roof space. You reached it by pulling down a ladder from a trapdoor in the ceiling.

Once she was up there, she had to keep her knees bent so as not to bang her head. John-Paul point-blank refused to go up there. He suffered from terrible claustrophobia and walked six flights of stairs every day to his office so he could avoid taking the lift. The poor man had regular nightmares about being trapped in a room where the walls were contracting. 'The walls!' he'd shout, just before he woke up, sweaty and wild-eyed. 'Do you think you were locked in a cupboard as a child?' Cecilia has asked him once (she wouldn't have put it past his mother), but he'd said he was pretty sure he hadn't. 'Actually, John-Paul never had nightmares when he was a little boy,' his mother had told Cecilia when she'd asked. 'He was a *beautiful* sleeper. Perhaps you give him too much rich food late at night?' Cecilia had got used to the nightmares now.

The attic was small and crammed, but tidy and well organised, of course. Over recent years, 'organised' seemed to have become her most defining characteristic. It was like she was a minor celebrity with this one claim to fame. It was funny how once it became a thing her family and friends commented on and teased her about, then it seemed to perpetuate itself, so that her life was now *extraordinarily* well organised, as if motherhood was a sport and she was a top athlete. It was like she was thinking, *How far can I go with this? How much more can I fit in my life without losing control?*

And that was why other people, like her sister Bridget, had rooms full of dusty junk, whereas Cecilia's attic was stacked with clearly labelled white plastic storage containers. The only part that didn't look quite 'Cecilia-ish' was the tower of shoeboxes in the corner. They were John-Paul's. He liked to keep each financial year's receipts in a different shoebox. It was something he'd been doing for years, before he met Cecilia. He was proud of his shoeboxes, so she managed to restrain herself from telling him that a filing cabinet would be a far more effective use of space.

Thanks to her labelled storage containers, she found her piece of the Berlin Wall almost straightaway. She peeled off the lid of the container marked *Cecilia: Travel/Souvenirs. 1985–1990* and there it was in its faded brown paper bag. Her little piece of history. She took out the piece of rock (cement?) and held it in her palm. It was even smaller than she remembered. It didn't look especially impressive, but hopefully it would be enough for the reward of one of Esther's rare, lopsided little smiles. You had to work hard for a smile from Esther.

Then Cecilia let herself get distracted (yes, she achieved a lot every day but she wasn't a *machine*, she did sometimes fritter away a little time) looking through the box, and laughing at the photo of herself with the German boy who did the

ice-cube thing. He, like her piece of the Berlin Wall, wasn't quite as impressive as she remembered. Then the house phone rang, startling her out of the past, and she stood up too fast and banged the side of her head painfully against the ceiling. The walls, the walls! She swore, reeled back and her elbow knocked against John-Paul's tower of shoeboxes.

At least three lost their lids and their contents, causing a mini landslide of paperwork. This was precisely why the shoeboxes were not such a good idea.

Cecilia swore again, and rubbed her head, which really did hurt. She looked at the shoeboxes and saw that they were all for financial years dating back to the eighties. She began stuffing the pile of receipts into one of the boxes, then her eye was caught by her own name on a white business envelope.

She picked it up and saw that it was John-Paul's handwriting.

It said:

For my wife, Cecilia Fitzpatrick

To be opened only in the event of my death

She laughed out loud, and then abruptly stopped, as if she was at a party and she'd laughed at something somebody had said and then realised that it wasn't a joke, it was actually quite serious.

She read it again – *For my wife, Cecilia Fitzpatrick* – and, oddly, for just a moment, she felt her cheeks go warm, as if she was embarrassed. For him or for her? She wasn't sure. It felt like she'd stumbled upon something shameful, as if she'd caught him masturbating in the shower. (Miriam Openheimer had once caught Doug masturbating in the shower. It was just so *dreadful* that they all knew this, but once Miriam was on to her second glass of champagne the secrets just bubbled out of her, and once they knew about this it was impossible to unknow it.) What did it *say*? She considered tearing it open right that second, before she had time to think about it, like the way she sometimes (not very often)

shoved the last biscuit or chocolate in her mouth, before her conscience had time to catch up with her greed.

The phone rang again. She wasn't wearing her watch, and suddenly she felt like she'd lost all sense of time.

She threw the rest of the paperwork back into one of the shoeboxes and took the piece of the Berlin Wall and the letter back downstairs.

As soon as she left the attic, she was picked up and swept along by the fast-running current of her life. There was a big Tupperware order to deliver, the girls to be picked up from school, the fish to be bought for tonight's dinner (they ate a lot of fish when John-Paul was away for work because he hated it), phone calls to return. The parish priest, Father Joe, had been calling to remind her that it was Sister Ursula's funeral tomorrow. There seemed to be some concern about numbers. She would go, of course. She left John-Paul's mysterious letter on top of the fridge and gave Esther the piece of the Berlin Wall just before they sat down for dinner.

'Thank you,' Esther handled the little piece of rock with touching reverence. 'Exactly which part of the Wall did it come from?'

'Well, I think it was quite near Checkpoint Charlie,' said Cecilia with jolly confidence. She had no idea.

But I can tell you that the boy with the ice cube wore a red T-shirt and white jeans and he picked up my ponytail and held it between his fingertips and said, 'Very pretty.'

'Is it worth any money?' asked Polly.

'I doubt it. How could you prove it really was from the Wall?' asked Isabel. 'It just looks like a piece of rock.'

'DMA testing,' said Polly. The child watched far too much television.

'It's DNA not DMA and it comes from people,' said Esther.

'I *know* that!' Polly had arrived in the world outraged to discover that her sisters had got there before her.

'Well then why –'

'So who do you reckon is going to get voted off *The Biggest Loser* tonight?' asked Cecilia, while simultaneously thinking, *Why, yes, whoever you are who is observing my life, I am changing the subject from a fascinating period of modern history that might actually teach my children something to a trashy television show that will teach them nothing but will keep the peace and not make my head hurt.* If John-Paul had been at home, she probably wouldn't have changed the subject. She was a far better mother when she had an audience.

The girls had talked about *The Biggest Loser* for the rest of dinner, while Cecilia had pretended to be interested and thought about the letter sitting on top of the fridge. Once the table had been cleared and the girls were all watching TV she'd taken it down to stare at it.

Now she put down her cup of tea and held the envelope up to the light, half-laughing at herself. It looked like a handwritten letter on lined notebook paper. She couldn't decipher a word.

Had John-Paul perhaps seen something on television about how the soldiers in Afghanistan wrote letters to their families to be sent in the event of their deaths, like messages from the grave, and had he thought that it might be nice to do something similar?

She just couldn't imagine him sitting down to do such a thing. It was so sentimental.

Lovely though. If he died, he wanted them to know how much he loved them.

. . . in the event of my death. Why was he thinking about death? Was he sick? But this letter appeared to have been written a long time ago, and he was still alive. Besides, he'd had a check-up a few weeks ago and Dr Kluger had said he was as 'fit as a stallion'. He'd spent the next few days tossing his head back and whinnying and neighing around the

house, while Polly rode on his back swinging a tea towel around her head like a whip

Cecilia smiled at the memory and her anxiety dissipated. So a few years ago John-Paul had done something uncharacteristically sentimental and written this letter. It was nothing to get all worked up about, and of course she shouldn't open it just for the sake of curiosity.

She looked at the clock. Nearly eight pm. He'd be calling soon. He generally called around this time each night when he was away.

She wasn't even going to mention the letter to him. It would embarrass him and it wasn't really an appropriate topic of conversation for the phone.

One thing: how exactly was she meant to have found this letter if he *had* died? She might never have found it! Why hadn't he given it to their solicitor, Miriam's husband, Doug Openheimer. So difficult not to think of him in the shower every time he came to mind. Of course it had no bearing on his abilities as a lawyer, perhaps it said more about Miriam's abilities in the bedroom. (Cecilia had a mildly competitive relationship with Miriam.).

Of course, given the current circumstances, now was not the time to be feeling smug about sex. *Stop it. Do not think about the sex thing.*

Anyway, it was dumb of John-Paul not to have given the letter to Doug. If he'd died she probably would have thrown out all his shoeboxes in one of her decluttering frenzies without even bothering to go through them. If he'd wanted her to find the letter it was crazy to just shove it in a random shoebox.

Why not put it in the file with the copies of their wills, life insurance and so on?

John-Paul was one of the smartest people she knew, except for when it came to the logistics of life.

'I seriously don't understand how men came to rule the world,' she'd said to her sister Bridget this morning, after she'd told her about how John-Paul had lost his rental car keys in Chicago. It had driven Cecilia bananas seeing that text message from him. There was nothing she could do!

This type of thing was always happening to John-Paul. Last time he'd gone overseas he'd left his laptop in a cab. The man lost things constantly. Wallets, phones, keys, his wedding ring. His possessions just slid right off him.

'They're pretty good at building stuff,' her sister and said. 'Like bridges and roads. I mean, could you even build a hut? Your basic mud hut?'

'I could build a hut,' said Cecilia.

'You probably could,' groaned Bridget, as if this was a failing. 'Anyway, men don't rule the world. We have a female prime minister. And you rule your world. You rule the Fitzpatrick household. You rule St Angela's. You rule the world of Tupperware.'

Cecilia was President of St Angela's Primary Parents and Friends Association. She was also the eleventh top-selling Tupperware consultant in Australia. Her sister found both of these roles hugely comical.

'I don't rule the Fitzpatrick household,' said Cecilia.

'Sure you don't,' guffawed Bridget.

It was true that if Cecilia died the Fitzpatrick household would just, well – it was unbearable to think about what would happen. John-Paul would need more than a letter from her. He'd need a whole manual, including a floor plan of the house pointing out the location of the laundry and the linen cupboard.

The phone rang and she snatched it up.

'Let me guess. Our daughters are watching the chubby people, right?' said John-Paul. She'd always loved his voice on the phone: deep, warm and comforting. Oh yes, her husband

was hopeless, and lost things and ran late, but he took care of his wife and daughters in that old-fashioned, responsible, I-am-the-man-and-this-is-my-job way. Bridget was right, Cecilia ruled her world, but she'd always known that if there was a crisis – a crazed gunman, a flood, a fire – John-Paul would be the one to save their lives. He'd throw himself in front of the bullet, build the raft, drive them safely through the raging inferno, and once that was done, he'd hand back control to Cecilia, pat his pockets and say, 'Has anyone seen my wallet?'

After she saw the little Spiderman die the first thing she did was call John-Paul, her fingers shaking as she pressed the buttons.

'I found this letter,' said Cecilia now. She ran her fingertips over his handwriting on the front of the envelope. As soon as she heard his voice she knew she was going to ask him about it that very second. They'd been married for fifteen years. There had never been secrets.

'What letter?'

'A letter from you,' said Cecilia. She was trying to sound light, jokey, so that this whole situation would stay in the right perspective, so that whatever was in the letter would mean nothing, would change nothing. 'To me, to be opened in the event of your death.' It was impossible to use the words 'event of your death' to your husband without your voice coming out odd.

There was silence. For a moment she thought they'd been cut off except that she could hear a gentle hum of chatter and clatter in the background. It sounded like he was calling from a restaurant.

Her stomach contracted.

'John-Paul?'