

# PROLOGUE

*Shoot for the moon and even if you miss you'll land  
among the stars.*

It's engraved on my husband's stone at the graveyard. It was a phrase he often used. His optimistic, cheery inflection oozed positive self-help phrases as though they were fuel for life. Positive words of reinforcement like that had no effect on me, not until he died. It was when he spoke them to me from his grave that I really heard them, I felt them, I believed them. I clung to them.

For a full year after his death, my husband Gerry continued his life by giving me the gift of his words in surprise monthly notes. His words were all I had; no more spoken words, but *words*, written from his thoughts, from his mind, from a brain that controlled a body with a beating heart. Words meant life. And I gripped them, hands clasped tightly around his letters until my knuckles went

white and my nails dented my palms. I hung on to them like they were my lifeline.

It's 7 p.m. on 1 April, and this fool is revelling in the new brightness. The evenings are stretching and the short, shocking, sharp sting of winter's slap is being nursed by spring. I used to dread this time of year; I favoured winter when everywhere was a hiding place. The darkness made me feel that I was concealed behind gauze, that I was out of focus, almost invisible. I revelled in it, celebrating the shortness of the day, the length of the night; the darkening sky my countdown to acceptable hibernation. Now I face the light, I need it to prevent me from being sucked back.

My metamorphosis was similar to the instant shock the body experiences when dipped into cold water. On impact there's the overwhelming urge to shriek and leap out, but the longer you remain submerged, the more you acclimatise. The cold, like the darkness, can become a deceptive comfort you never want to leave. But I did; feet kicking and arms sweeping, I pulled myself up to the surface. Emerging with blue lips and chattering teeth, I thawed and re-entered the world.

Transitioning day to night, in transitional winter to spring, in a transitional place. The graveyard, considered a final resting place, is less peaceful beneath the surface than above. Below the soil, hugged by wooden coffins, bodies are altering as nature earnestly breaks down the remains. Even when resting, the body is perpetually transforming. The giddy laughter of children nearby shatters the silence, unaware of or unaffected by the in-between

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world they stand on. Mourners are silent but their pain is not. The wound may be internal, but you can hear it, you can see it, you can feel it. Heartbreak is carried around bodies like an invisible cloak; it adds a load, it dims eyes, it slows strides.

In the days and months after my husband's death, I searched for some elusive transcendental connection to him, desperate to feel whole again, like an insufferable thirst that needed to be quenched. On days when I was functioning, his presence would creep up behind me and tap me on the shoulder, and suddenly I'd feel an unbearable emptiness. A parched heart. Grief is endlessly uncontrollable.

He chose to be cremated. His ashes are in an urn slotted into a niche behind a Columbarium Wall. His parents reserved the space beside his. The empty space in the wall beside his urn is for me. I feel as though I'm staring death in the face, which is something I would have embraced when he died. Anything to join him. I would have gladly climbed into that niche, folded myself up like a contortionist and cradled my body around his ashes.

He's in the wall. But he's not there, he's not here. He's gone. Energy elsewhere. Dissolved, besprinkled particles of matter around me. If I could, I would deploy an army to hunt down his every atom and put him together again, but all the king's horses and all the king's men . . . we learn it from the beginning, we only realise what it all means in the end.

We were privileged to have not just one but two good-byes; a long illness from cancer followed by a year of his

letters. He let go secretly knowing that there would be more of him for me to cling to, more than memories; even after his death he found a way to make new memories together. Magic. Goodbye, my love, goodbye again. They should have been enough. I thought that they were. Maybe that's why people come to graveyards. For more goodbyes. Maybe it's not about hello at all – it's the comfort of goodbye, a calm and peaceful, guilt-free parting. We don't always remember how we met, we often remember how we parted.

It's surprising to me that I'm back here, both in this location and in this frame of mind. Seven years since his death. Six years since I read his final letter. I had, *have* moved on, but recent events have unsettled everything, rattled my core. I should move forward, but there's a hypnotic rhythmic tide, as though his hand is reaching for me and pulling me back.

I examine the stone and read his phrase again.

*Shoot for the moon and even if you miss you'll land  
among the stars.*

So this must be what it's like then. Because we did, he and I. We shot straight for it. We missed. This right here, all that I have, and all that I am, this new life that I've built up over the past seven years, without Gerry, must be what it's like to land among the stars.

### Three Months Earlier

‘Patient Penelope. The wife of the King of Ithaca, Odysseus. A serious and diligent character, a devoted wife and mother, some critics dismiss her as a symbol of marital fidelity, but Penelope is a complex woman who weaves her plots as deftly as she weaves a garment.’ The tour guide leaves a mysterious pause while his eyes run over his intrigued audience.

Gabriel and I are at an exhibition in the National Museum. We’re in the back row of the gathered crowd, standing slightly away from the others as though we don’t belong, or don’t want to be a part of their gang, but aren’t too cool to risk missing what’s being said. I’m listening to the tour guide while Gabriel leafs through the brochure

beside me. He will be able to repeat what the guide has said later, word for word. He loves this stuff. I love that he loves this stuff more than the stuff itself. He's somebody who knows how to fill time, and when I met him that was one of his most desirable traits because I had a date with destiny. In sixty years, max, I had a date with someone on the other side.

'Penelope's husband Odysseus goes to fight in the Trojan War, which is fought for ten years and it takes him a further ten years to return. Penelope is in a very dangerous situation when one hundred and eight suitors in total begin demanding her hand in marriage. Penelope is clever, and concocts ways to delay her suitors, leading on each man with the promise of possibility but never submitting to any one.'

I suddenly feel self-conscious. Gabriel's arm draped loosely over my shoulder feels too heavy.

'The story of Penelope's loom, which we see here, symbolises one of the queen's cunning tricks. Penelope worked at weaving a shroud for the eventual funeral of her father-in-law Laertes, claiming she would choose a husband as soon as the shroud was completed. By day, she worked on a great loom in the royal halls, at night she secretly unravelled what she had done. She persisted for three years, waiting for her husband to return, deceiving her suitors until they were reunited.'

It grates on me. 'Did he wait for her?' I call out.

'Excuse me?' the tour guide asks, eyes darting to find the owner of the voice. The crowd parts and turns to look at me.

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‘Penelope is the epitome of conjugal fidelity, but what about her husband? Did he save himself for her, out there in the war, for twenty years?’

Gabriel chuckles.

The tour guide smiles and talks briefly about the nine other children Odysseus had with five other women, and his long journey to return to Ithaca from the Trojan War.

‘So, no then,’ I mumble to Gabriel as the group move on. ‘Silly Penelope.’

‘It was an excellent question,’ he says, and I hear the amusement in his voice.

I turn again to the painting of Penelope while Gabriel flicks through the brochure. Am I Patient Penelope? Am I weaving by day, unravelling by night, deceiving this loyal and beautiful suitor while I wait to be reunited with my husband? I look up at Gabriel. Gabriel’s blue eyes are playful, not reading into my thoughts. Amazingly deceived.

‘She could have just slept with them all while she was waiting,’ he says. ‘Not much fun, Prudish Penelope.’

I laugh, rest my head on his chest. He wraps his arm around me, holds me tight and kisses the top of my head. He’s built like a house and I could live inside his hug; big, broad and strong, he spends his days outdoors climbing trees as a tree surgeon, or arborist to use the title he prefers. He’s used to being up at a height, loves the wind and rain, all elements, an adventurer, an explorer, and if not at the top of a tree, he can be found beneath one, with his head in a book. In the evening after work, he smells of peppery watercress.

We met two years ago at a chicken wing festival in Bray, he was beside me at the counter, holding up the line behind him while he ordered a cheeseburger. He caught me at a good moment, I liked the humour, which was his intention; he'd been trying to get my attention. His chat-up line I suppose.

*Me mate wants to know if you'll go out with him.  
I'll have a cheeseburger, please.*

I'm a sucker for a bad chat-up line, but I've good taste in men. Good men, great men.

He starts to move one way and I pull him in the opposite direction, away from Patient Penelope's gaze. She's been watching me and she thinks she recognises her type when she sees one. But I'm not her type, I'm not her and I don't want to be her. I will not pause my life as she did to wait for an uncertain future.

'Gabriel.'

'Holly.' He matches my serious tone.

'About your proposition.'

'To march on the government to prevent premature Christmas decorations? We've just taken them down, surely they'll go up again soon.'

I have to arch my back and crane my neck to look up at him, he's so tall. His eyes are smiling.

'No, the other one. The moving in with you one.'

'Ah.'

'Let's do it.'

He punches the air and makes a quiet stadium-sized-crowd-cheering sound.



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‘If you promise me that we’ll get a TV, and that every day when I wake up you will look like this.’ I stand on tiptoe to get closer to his face. I place my hands on his cheeks, feel his smile beneath the Balbo beard he grows, trims and maintains like a pro; the tree man who cultivates his own face.

‘That is a prerequisite of being my flatmate.’

‘Fuck-mate,’ I say and we laugh, childishly.

‘Were you always so romantic?’ he asks, wrapping his arms around me.

I used to be. I used to be very different. Naïve, perhaps. But I’m not any more. I hug him tightly and rest my head on his chest. I catch Penelope’s judgemental eye. I lift my chin haughtily. She thinks she knows me. She doesn’t.

## 2

‘Are you ready?’ my sister Ciara asks me quietly as we take our positions on bean bags at the head of the shop while the crowd hums, waiting for the show to begin. We’re sitting in the window of her vintage and second-hand shop, Magpie, where I’ve worked with Ciara for the past three years. Once again, we’ve transformed the shop to an event space where her podcast, *How to Talk about . . .*, will be recorded in front of an audience. Tonight, however, I’m not in my usual safe place, servicing the wine and cupcake table. Instead, I have given in to the persistent requests of my beleaguering yet adventurous and fearless little sister, to be a guest on this week’s episode, ‘How to Talk about Death’. I regretted my yes as soon as the word left my lips and that regret has reached astronomical intensity by the time I sit down and am faced by the small audience.

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The rails and display stands of clothing and accessories have been pushed to the walls and five rows of six fold-up seats fill the shop floor. We cleared the front window so Ciara and I could sit at an elevated height while, outside, people racing home from work throw passing glances at the moving mannequins sitting on bean bags in the window.

‘Thanks for doing this.’ Ciara reaches out and squeezes my clammy hand.

I smile faintly, assessing the damage control of pulling out this minute, but I know it’s not worth it. I must honour my commitment.

She kicks off her shoes and pulls her bare feet up on to the bean bag, feeling perfectly at home in this space. I clear my throat and the sound reverberates around the shop through the speakers, where thirty expectant, curious faces stare back at me. I squeeze my sweaty hands together and look down at the notes I’ve been furiously compiling like a frazzled student before an exam ever since Ciara asked me to do this. Fragmented thoughts scribbled as inspiration seized me, but none of them make sense at the moment. I can’t see where one sentence begins and another one ends.

Mum is sitting in the front row, seats away from my friend Sharon who is in the aisle seat, where she has more space for her double buggy. A pair of little feet, one sock hanging on for dear life, one sock off, peeks out from beneath a blanket in the buggy, and Sharon holds her six-month-old baby in her arms. Her six-year-old son

Gerard sits on one side of her, eyes on his iPad, ears covered by headphones, and her four-year-old son is dramatically declaring he's bored and has slumped so low in the chair only his head rests against the base of the back of the chair. Four boys in six years; I appreciate her coming here today. I know that she's been up since the crack of dawn. I know how long it took her to leave the house, before entering it again three more times for something she forgot. She's here, my warrior friend. She smiles at me, her face a picture of exhaustion, but ever the supportive friend.

'Welcome, everybody, to the fourth episode of the Magpie podcast,' Ciara begins. 'Some of you are regulars here – Betty, thank you for supplying us all with your delicious cupcakes; and thanks to Christian for the cheese and wine.'

I search the crowd for Gabriel. I'm quite sure he's not here, I specifically ordered him not to attend, though that wasn't necessary. As someone who keeps his private life to himself and has a firm check on his emotions, the idea of me discussing my private life with strangers boggled his mind. We may have strongly debated it but right now, I couldn't agree with him more.

I'm Ciara Kennedy, owner of Magpie, and recently I decided it would be a good idea to do a series of podcasts titled '*How to Talk about . . .*' featuring the charities that receive a percentage of the proceeds of this business. This week we're talking about death – specifically grief and bereavement – and we have Claire Byrne from Bereave

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Ireland with us, and also some of those who benefit from the wonderful work that Bereave do. The proceeds of your ticket sales and generous donations will go directly to Bereave. Later, I'll be talking to Claire about the important, tireless work they do in assisting those who have lost loved ones, but first I'd like to introduce my special guest, Holly Kennedy, who just so happens to be my sister. You're finally here!' Ciara exclaims excitedly, and the audience applaud.

'I am,' I laugh nervously.

'Ever since I started the podcast last year, I've been pestering my sister to take part. I'm so glad you're doing this.' She reaches across and takes my hand, holds it. 'Your story has touched my life profoundly, and I'm sure that so many people will benefit from hearing about the journey you've been on.'

'Thank you. I hope so.'

I notice my notes quivering in my hand and I let go of Ciara's hand to still it.

"How to Talk about Death" – it's not an easy topic. We are so comfortable with talking about our lives, about how we are living, about how to live better, that often the conversation about death is an awkward one, and not fully explored. I couldn't think of anyone else that I would rather have this conversation about grief with. *Holly*, please tell us how death affected you.'

I clear my throat. 'Seven years ago I lost my husband Gerry to cancer. He had a brain tumour. He was thirty years old.'

No matter how many times I say it, my throat tightens. That part of the story is still real, still burns inside me hot and bright. I look quickly to Sharon for support and she rolls her eyes dramatically and yawns. I smile. I can do this.

‘We’re here to talk about grief, so what can I tell you? I’m not unique, death affects all of us, and as many of you here today know, grief is a complex journey. You can’t control your grief, most of the time it feels like it’s in control of you. The only thing you can control is how you deal with it.’

‘You say that you’re not unique,’ Ciara says, ‘but everybody’s personal experience *is* unique and we can learn from one another. No loss is easier than another, but do you think because you and Gerry grew up together that it made his loss more intense? Ever since I was a child, there was no Holly without Gerry.’

I nod and as I explain the story of how Gerry and I met, I avoid looking at the crowd, to make it easier, as if I’m talking to myself exactly as I rehearsed in the shower. ‘I met him in school when I was fourteen years old. From that day on I was Gerry *and* Holly. Gerry’s girlfriend. Gerry’s wife. We grew up together, we learned from each other. I was twenty-nine when I lost him and became Gerry’s widow. I didn’t just lose him and I didn’t just lose a part of me, I really felt like I lost *me*. I had no sense of who I was. I had to rebuild myself.’

A few heads nod. They know. They all know, and if they don’t know yet, they’re about to.

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‘Poo poo,’ says a voice from the buggy, before giggling. Sharon hushes her toddler. She reaches into a giant bag and emerges with a strawberry-yoghurt-covered rice cake. The rice cake disappears into the buggy. The giggling stops.

‘How did you rebuild?’ Ciara asks.

It feels odd telling Ciara something she lived through with me and so I turn and focus on the audience, on the people who weren’t there. And when I see their faces, a switch is flicked inside me. This is not about me. Gerry did something special and I’m going to share it on his behalf, with people who are hungry to know. ‘Gerry helped me. Before he died he had a secret plan.’

‘Dun, dun, dun!’ Ciara announces to laughter. I smile and look at the expectant faces.

I feel excitement at the reveal, a renewed reminder of how utterly unique the year after his death was, yet over time its significance has faded in my memory. ‘He left me ten letters, to be opened in the months after his passing, and he signed off each note with “PS, I Love You”.’

The audience are visibly moved and surprised. They turn to each other and share looks and whispers, the silence has been broken. Sharon’s baby starts to cry. She hushes him and rocks him, tapping on his soother repetitively, a faraway look in her eyes.

Ciara speaks up over the baby’s grumbling. ‘When I asked you to do this podcast, you were very specific about the fact you didn’t want to concentrate on Gerry’s illness. You wanted to talk about the gift he gave you.’

I shake my head, firmly. ‘No. I don’t want to talk about

his cancer, about what he had to go through. My advice, if you want it, is to try not to fixate on the dark. There is enough of that. I would rather talk to people about hope.'

Ciara's eyes shine at me proudly. Mum clasps her hands together tightly.

'The path that I took was to focus on the gift he gave me, and that was the gift that *losing* him gave me: finding myself. I don't feel less of a person, nor am I ashamed to say that Gerry's death broke me. His letters helped me to find myself again. It took losing him to make me discover a part of myself that I never knew existed.' I'm lost in my words and I can't stop. I *need* them to know. If I was sitting in the audience seven years ago, I would *need* to hear. 'I found a new and surprising strength inside of me, I found it at the bottom of a dark and lonely place, but I found it. And unfortunately, that's where we find most of life's treasures. After digging, toiling in the darkness and dirt, we finally hit something concrete. I learned that rock bottom can actually be a springboard.'

Led by an enthusiastic Ciara, the audience applauds.

Sharon's baby's cries turn to screams, a high-pitched piercing sound as though his legs are being sawn off. The toddler throws his rice cake at the baby. Sharon stands and throws an apologetic look in our direction before setting off down the aisle, steering the double buggy with one hand while carrying the crying baby in the other, leaving the older two with my mum. As she clumsily manoeuvres the buggy to the exit, she bumps into a chair,



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mows down bags sticking out into the aisle, their straps and handles getting caught up in the wheels, muttering apologies as she goes.

Ciara is holding back her next question until Sharon has gone.

Sharon crashes the buggy into the exit door in an effort to push it open. Mathew, Ciara's husband, rushes to assist her by holding the door open, but the double buggy is too wide. In her panic, Sharon crashes time and time again into the doorframe. The baby is screaming, the buggy is banging and Mathew tells her to stop while he unlocks the bottom of the door. Sharon looks up at us with a mortified expression. I mimic her earlier expression and roll my eyes and yawn. She smiles gratefully before fleeing.

'We can edit that part out,' Ciara jokes. 'Holly, apart from Gerry leaving letters for you after his death, did you feel his presence in any other way?'

'You mean, did I see his ghost?'

Some members of the audience chuckle, others are desperate for a yes.

'His energy,' Ciara says. 'Whatever you want to call it.'

I pause to think, to summon the feeling. 'Death, oddly, has a physical presence; death can feel like the other person in the room. The gaps that loved ones leave, the *not* being there, is visible, so sometimes there were moments when Gerry felt more alive than the people around me.' I think back to those lonely days and nights when I was caught between the real world and trapped in my mind. 'Memories can be very powerful. They can be the most blissful escape,

and place to explore, because they summoned him again for me. But beware, they can be a prison too. I'm grateful that Gerry left me his letters, because he pulled me out of all those black holes and came alive again, allowing us to make new memories together.'

'And now? Seven years on? Is Gerry still with you?'

I pause. Stare at her, eyes wide, like a rabbit caught in the headlights. I flounder. No words come to me. Is he?

'I'm sure Gerry will always be a part of you,' Ciara says softly, sensing my state. 'He will always be with you,' she says, seeming to reassure me, as if I've forgotten.

Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Dissolved, besprinkled particles of matter around me.

'Absolutely.' I smile tightly. 'Gerry will always be with me.'

The body dies, the soul, the spirit lingers. Some days in the year following Gerry's death, I felt as though Gerry's energy was inside me, building me up, making me stronger, turning me into a fortress. I could do anything. I was untouchable. Other days I felt his energy and it shattered me to a million pieces. It was a reminder of what I'd lost. I can't. I won't. The universe took the greatest part of my life and because of that I was afraid it could take everything else too. And I realise that all those days were precious days because, seven years later, I don't feel Gerry with me at all.

Lost in the lie I've just told, I wonder if it sounded as empty as it felt. Still, I'm almost done. Ciara invites the audience to ask questions and I relax a little, sensing the end

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is in sight. Third row, fifth person in, tissue squashed and rolled up in her hand, mascara smudged around her eyes.

‘Hi, Holly, my name is Joanna. I lost my husband a few months ago, and I wish he had left letters for me like your husband did. Could you tell us, what did his last letter say?’

‘I want to know what they all said,’ somebody speaks out, and there are murmurs of agreement.

‘We have time to hear them all, if Holly is comfortable with that,’ Ciara says, checking with me.

I take a deep breath, and let it out slowly. I haven’t thought about the letters for so long. As a concept I have, but not individually, not in order, not exactly. Where to start. A new bedside lamp, a new outfit, a karaoke night, sunflower seeds, a birthday trip away with friends . . . how could they understand how important all of those seemingly insignificant things were to me? But the last letter . . . I smile. That’s an easy one. ‘His final letter read: Don’t be afraid to fall in love again.’

They cling to that one, a beautiful one, a fine and valiant ending on Gerry’s part. Joanna isn’t as moved as the others. I see the disappointment and confusion in her eyes. The despair. So deep in her grief, it’s not what she wanted to hear. She’s still holding on to her husband, why would she consider letting go?

I know what she’s thinking. She couldn’t possibly love again. Not like that.

### 3

Sharon reappears in the emptying shop, flustered, with the baby asleep in the stroller and Alex, her toddler, holding her hand, red cheeks flushed.

‘Hello, buster.’ I lean towards him.

He ignores me.

‘Say hi to Holly,’ Sharon says gently.

He ignores her.

‘Alex, say hi to Holly,’ she growls, channelling the voice of Satan so suddenly that both Alex and I get a fright.

‘Hi,’ he says.

‘Good boy,’ she says ever so sweetly.

I look at her wide-eyed, always amazed and perturbed by the double personality that the mother role brings out in her.

‘I’m so embarrassed,’ she says quietly. ‘I’m sorry. I’m a disaster.’

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‘Don’t be sorry. I’m so happy you came. And you’re amazing. You always say the first year’s the hardest. A few more months and this little man will be one. You’ve almost made it.’

‘There’s another one on the way.’

‘What?’

She looks up, tears in her eyes. ‘I’m pregnant again. I know, I’m an idiot.’

She straightens up, trying to be strong, but she looks broken. She’s deflated, all wiped out. I feel nothing but sympathy for her, which is an emotion that has increased with each pregnancy reveal as the celebration levels have reduced.

As we hug we speak in unison. ‘Don’t tell Denise.’

I feel stressed just watching Sharon as she leaves with the four boys. I’m also exhausted after the nervous tension of today, the lack of sleep last night and from discussing a personal story in depth for an hour. It has wiped me out, but Ciara and I must wait until everybody has left to return the shop floor to the way it was and lock up.

‘That was nothing short of wonderful,’ Angela Carberry says, interrupting my thoughts. Angela, a great supporter of the shop who donates her designer clothes, bags and jewellery, is one of the main reasons Ciara can keep Magpie going. Ciara jokes that she thinks Angela buys things for the sole purpose of donating them. She’s dressed stylishly as always, a jet-black bob with a blunt fringe, a bird-like frame, and a set of pearls around her neck over the pussy bow tie on her silk dress.

‘Angela, so good of you to come.’ I’m taken aback when she reaches for me and hugs me.

Over her shoulder, Ciara’s eyes widen at the surprising display of intimacy from this usually austere woman. I feel Angela’s bones beneath her clothes as she hugs me tightly. Not one for impulsive behaviour or physical contact, she’s always seemed quite unapproachable on the occasions she personally delivered boxes of her clothes to the shop, shoes in their original boxes, bags in their original dust covers, telling us exactly where we should display them and how much we should sell them for without expecting a cent in return.

Her eyes are moist as she pulls away from me. ‘You must do this more often, you must tell this story to more people.’

‘Oh no,’ I laugh. ‘This was a one-off, more to silence my sister than anything else.’

‘But you don’t realise, do you?’ Angela asks, in surprise.

‘Realise what?’

‘The power of your story. What you have done to people, how you have reached in and touched every single heart in this room.’

Embarrassed, I look to the queue that has formed behind her, a queue of people who want to talk to me.

She grabs my arm and squeezes it, too tightly for my liking. ‘You must tell your story again.’

‘I appreciate your encouragement, Angela, but I’ve lived it once and told it once and I’m finished with it all.’

My words aren’t harsh but there’s a toughness to me

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that I didn't expect. An edgy, prickly outer layer that springs into existence in an instant. As though my thorns have pierced her hand, she immediately loosens her grip on my arm. Then, remembering where she is and that there are others who want to speak with me, she reluctantly lets go.

Her hand is gone, my prickles disappear, but something of her pinching grip stays with me, like a bruise.

I crawl into bed beside Gabriel, the room spinning after drinking too much wine with Ciara and Mum in Ciara's flat above the shop until far too late.

He stirs and opens his eyes, studies me for a moment and then grins at my state.

'Good night?'

'If I ever have any notions to do anything like that again . . . don't let me,' I murmur, eyes fluttering closed and trying to ignore the head spins.

'Agreed. Well, you did it. You're sister of the year, maybe you'll get a pay rise.'

I snort.

'It's over now.' He moves close and kisses me.

‘Holly!’ Ciara shouts my name again. Her tone has gone from patience to concern to sheer shrill anger. ‘Where the hell are you?’

I’m in the stockroom behind boxes, perhaps crouched down behind them, perhaps with some clothes draped over the top like a little den. Perhaps hiding.

I look up and see Ciara’s face peering in.

‘What the fuck? Are you hiding?’

‘No. Don’t be ridiculous.’

She throws me a look; she doesn’t believe me. ‘I’ve been calling you for ages. Angela Carberry was looking for you, she was insistent that she speak to you. I told her I thought you’d stepped out for a coffee. She waited for fifteen minutes. You know what she’s like. What the hell, Holly?’



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You made me look like I didn't even know where my own staff member was, which I didn't.'

'Oh. Well now you do. I'm sorry I missed her.' It's been a month since we recorded the podcast and Angela Carberry's advocacy for me sharing my story has developed into stalking, in my opinion. I stand up and stretch my legs with a groan.

'What's going on with you and Angela?' Ciara asks, worried. 'Is it something to do with the shop?'

'No, not at all. Nothing to do with the shop, don't worry. Didn't she just deliver another bag full of clothes?'

'Vintage Chanel,' Ciara says, relaxing, relieved. Then she's confused again. 'So what is going on? Why are you hiding from her? Don't think I haven't noticed – you did the same thing when she came by last week.'

'You're better with her on the floor. I don't know her. I find her very bossy.'

'She is very bossy, she has a right to be: she's giving us thousands of euros' worth of stuff. I'd display her necklace on my own naked body on a mechanical bull, if that's what she wanted.'

'Nobody wants that.' I push past her.

'I'd like to see that,' Mathew calls from the other room.

'She asked me to give you this.' She holds out an envelope.

There's something about this that makes me uncomfortable. Me and envelopes have a history. It's not the first time in six years that I've opened an envelope, but there

is a sense of foreboding about this one. I expect it to be an invitation to speak about grief at a ladies' lunch or something like it, organised by Angela. She has asked me several times if I'd continue my 'talk', or if I'd write a book. With each visit to the shop she has given me a phone number for a speaking events agent, or a contact number for a publishing agent. The first few times I politely thanked her, but on her last visit I shut her down so directly I wasn't sure if she'd ever come back. I take the envelope from Ciara, fold it and shove it into my back pocket.

Ciara glares at me. We have a stand-off.

Mathew appears at the door. 'Good news. Download statistics reveal "How to Talk about Death" was the most successful episode to date! It had more downloads than all the others put together. Congratulations, sisters.' He enthusiastically lifts his two hands for high-fives from both of us.

Ciara and I continue to glower at each other; me angry because her podcast has made me the target of Angela's almost obsessive attention, her angry that I'm annoying her greatest donator for reasons unknown.

'Ah, far out, don't leave me hanging.'

Ciara slaps his raised palm half-heartedly.

'Not what I was expecting,' he says, looking at me with concern and lowering his hand. 'I'm sorry, was that insensitive of me? I wasn't high-fiving Gerry, you know—'

'I know,' I say and offer him a smile. 'It's not that.'

I can't celebrate the podcast's success; I wish nobody

## POSTSCRIPT

had listened to it, I wish I hadn't done it. I never want to hear or speak of Gerry's letters ever again.

Gabriel's house in Glasnevin, a single-storey Victorian terraced cottage that he patiently and lovingly restored to life himself, is a cosy eclectic home that, unlike mine, oozes with character. We lie on the floor, on a monstrous velvet bean bag atop a comfortable shagpile rug, drinking red wine. The living room is an internal room and so light, albeit dull February light, streams down on us from the roof light. Gabriel's furniture is a mixture of antique and contemporary, whatever he liked and collected along the way. Every item has a story, even if it's not a moving one, or has any value, but everything's come from somewhere. The fireplace is the focus of the room; he doesn't have a TV, and instead entertains himself with obscure music on his record player, or reads from his copious book collection, the current read being the art book *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*, made up of black-and-white photographs of gasoline stations in the US. The music mood is Ali Farka Touré, a Malian singer and guitarist. I stare up at the evening sky through the skylight. It's wonderful, it really is. He's what I need, when I need it.

'When is the first house viewing?' he asks, growing impatient at how slowly things have been progressing since we made the decision well over a month ago. My distraction since the podcast has knocked me off course.

My house hasn't officially gone on the market yet, but I can't bring myself to own up to that, so instead I tell him, 'I'm meeting the estate agent at the house tomorrow.' I lift my head to sip my wine and then return to resting on his chest, as strenuous a duty as this day commands. 'Then you will be mine, all mine,' I laugh maniacally.

'I am already. By the way, I found this.' He puts his glass down and retrieves a crumpled envelope from between a messy pile of books by the fireplace.

'Oh yes, thanks.' I fold it over and squeeze it behind my back.

'What is it?'

'A guy heard me speak at the shop. Thinks I'm a sexy widow and gave me his number.' I sip my wine, serious.

His frown makes me laugh.

'A woman in the audience at the podcast recording wants me to continue telling my story. She keeps pestering me to do more events, or to write a book.' I laugh again. 'Anyway, she's a pushy rich woman that I don't know very well and I told her I'm not interested.'

He looks at me with interest. 'I listened to it in the car the other day. You spoke very movingly. I'm sure your words helped a lot of people.' This is the first time he's spoken positively about the podcast. I suppose my words were nothing he didn't already know – our early days and months were spent in respective intimate soul-digging as we got to know each other – but I want to leave it all behind me.

'I was helping Ciara.' I shut his compliment down.

## POSTSCRIPT

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to start talking about my ex-husband for a living.’

‘I’m not worried about you talking about him, it’s what constantly reliving it could do to you.’

‘Not going to happen.’

He squirms on the bean bag and wraps his arm around me, I think for a hug, but his hand goes down beneath me and he grabs the envelope instead. He pulls it free.

‘You haven’t opened it. Do you know what’s inside?’

‘No. Because I don’t care.’

He studies me. ‘You do care.’

‘I don’t. Otherwise I would have opened it.’

‘You do care. Otherwise you would have opened it.’

‘It can’t be important anyway, she delivered it to me weeks ago. I forgot I had it.’

‘Can I at least see?’ He rips the top.

I attempt to grab it from him and instead I spill my wine on the rug. I clamber up out of his arms, pull myself up from the bean bag on the floor with a groan and hurry to the kitchen to retrieve a damp towel. I can hear him ripping the envelope open while I run the cloth under the tap. My heart is pounding. The prickles are rising on my skin again.

‘*Mrs Angela Carberry. The PS, I Love You Club,*’ he reads aloud.

‘What?!’

He raises the card in the air and I move closer to him to read it, the damp cloth drips and trickles on his shoulder.

‘Holly,’ he moves, agitated.

I take the card from his hand. A small business card with elegant print. 'The PS, I Love You Club,' I read aloud, feeling curious and furious at once.

'What does that mean?' he asks, wiping the sloppy mess from his shoulder.

'I have no idea. I mean, I know what PS, I Love You means, but . . . is there anything else in the envelope?'

'No, just this card.'

'I've had enough of this nonsense. It's like stalking.' I grab my phone from the couch and move away from him for privacy. 'Or plagiarism.'

He laughs at my abrupt change of mood. 'You'd have to have written it down somewhere for it to be remotely so. Try to tell her to fuck off nicely, Holly.' He turns his attention to his art book.

It rings for a long time. I drum my fingers on the counter, impatiently constructing a firm dialogue in my head about how she needs to leave this alone, back off, fuck off, kill it immediately. Whatever this club is, I will have nothing to do with it, and I insist that nobody else does either. I was helping my sister, and all I felt afterwards was exhausted and used. And those words belong to my husband, in my letters; they are not hers to use. My anger intensifies with each new ring, and I'm about to hang up when a man finally answers.

'Hello?'

'Hello. Could I speak with Angela Carberry, please?'

I feel Gabriel's eyes on me, he mouths *be nice*. I turn my back to him.

## POSTSCRIPT

The man's voice is muffled as though he's moved his mouth from the mouthpiece. I hear voices in the background and I'm not sure if he's talking to them or me.

'Hello? Are you there?'

'Yes, yes. I'm here. But she's not. Angela. She's gone. She passed away. Just this morning.'

His voice cracks.

'They're here with me, the funeral people. We're planning it at the moment. So I have no information for you as yet.'

I brake hard, careen into a ditch, anger crashed and burned. I try to catch my breath.

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,' I say, sitting down, noticing as I do that I have Gabriel's full attention. 'What happened?'

His voice is coming and going, weak and strong, wobbly, away from the receiver, back again. I can sense his disorientation. His world is upside down. I don't even know who this man is and yet his loss is palpable and like a weight on my shoulders.

'It was very sudden in the end, took us by surprise. They thought she had more time. But the tumour spread, and that was . . . well.'

'Cancer?' I whisper. 'She died of cancer?'

'Yes, yes, I thought you knew . . . I'm very sorry, who is this? Did you say? I'm sorry I'm not thinking very clearly . . . '

He talks on, confused. I think of Angela, thin and needy, holding on to my arm, squeezing me so tightly it hurt. I thought she was odd, I found her irritating, but she was

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desperate, desperate for me to visit with her – and I didn't. I didn't even call her. I barely gave her time. Of course she was moved by my talk, she was dying of cancer. She was holding on to my arm that day as though she was clinging to life.

I must be making a noise, I must be doing something because Gabriel is down on his knees beside me and the man on the other end of the phone is saying, 'Oh dear, I'm sorry. I should have worded it better. But I haven't had to . . . this is all very new and . . . '

'No, no,' I try to keep it all together. 'I'm very sorry for disturbing you at this time. My sincere condolences to you and yours,' I say quickly.

I dissolve the call.

I dissolve.