

# *The Love Letter*

Also by Lucinda Riley

*Hothouse Flower*

*The Girl on the Cliff*

*The Light Behind the Window*

*The Midnight Rose*

*The Italian Girl*

*The Angel Tree*

*The Olive Tree*

The Seven Sisters Series

*The Seven Sisters*

*The Storm Sister*

*The Shadow Sister*

*The Pearl Sister*

*The*  
*Love Letter*

LUCINDA RILEY

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*For Jeremy Trevathan*

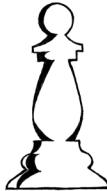


## Author's Note

(to come)



# *King's Gambit*



*Opening move wherein White offers  
a pawn to divert a Black pawn*



# *Prologue*

*London, 20th November 1995*

‘James, darling, what are you doing?’

He looked around him, disorientated, then staggered forward.

She caught him just before he fell. ‘You’ve been sleep-walking, haven’t you? Come on, let’s take you back to bed.’

The gentle voice of his granddaughter told him he was still on Earth. He knew he’d been standing here for a reason, that there was something urgent he must do that he’d been leaving right until the last moment . . .

But now it was gone. Desolate, he let her half carry him to his bed, loathing his wasted, fragile limbs that rendered him as helpless as a baby, and his scattered mind, which had once again betrayed him.

‘There now,’ she said as she made him comfortable. ‘How’s the pain? Would you like a little more morphine?’

‘No. Please, I . . .’

It was the morphine that was turning his brain to jelly. Tomorrow, he’d have none, and then he’d remember what it was he must do before he died.

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‘Okay. You just relax and try to get some sleep,’ she soothed him, her hand stroking his forehead. ‘The doctor will be here soon.’

He knew he mustn’t go to sleep. He closed his eyes, desperately searching, searching . . . snatches of memories, faces . . .

Then he saw her, as clear as the day he’d first met her. So beautiful, so gentle . . .

‘Remember? The letter, my darling,’ she whispered to him. ‘You promised to return it . . .’

*Of course!*

He opened his eyes, trying to sit up, and saw the concerned face of his granddaughter hovering above him. And felt a painful prick in the inside of his elbow.

‘The doctor’s giving you something to calm you down, James, darling,’ she said.

*No! No!*

The words refused to form on his lips, and as the needle slipped into his arm, he knew that he’d left it too late.

‘I’m so sorry, so very sorry,’ he gasped.

His granddaughter watched as his eyelids finally closed and the tension left his body. She pressed her smooth cheek against his and found it wet with tears.

*Besançon, France, 24th November 1995*

She walked slowly into the drawing room towards the fire. It was cold today, and her cough was worse. Edging her frail body into a chair, she picked up the fresh copy of *The Times* from the table to read the obituaries with her customary English breakfast tea. She clattered the china cup into its saucer as she saw the headline taking up a third of the front page.

#### LIVING LEGEND IS DEAD

Sir James Harrison, thought by many to be the greatest actor of his generation, died yesterday at his London home, surrounded by his family. He was ninety-five. A private funeral will take place next week, followed by a memorial service in London in January.

Her heart clenched, and the newspaper shook so violently beneath her fingers she could hardly read the rest. Alongside the article was a picture of him with the Queen, receiving his OBE. Her tears blurring his image, she traced the contours of his strong profile, his thick mane of greying hair . . .

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Could she . . . *dare* she return? Just one last time, to say goodbye . . . ?

As her morning tea cooled, undrunk beside her, she turned over the front page to continue reading, savouring the details of his life and career. Then her attention was caught by another small headline beneath:

### RAVENS MISSING FROM TOWER

It was announced last night that the famous Tower of London ravens have vanished. As legend has it, the birds have been in residence for more than five hundred years, keeping guard over the Tower and the royal family, as decreed by Charles II. The raven keeper was alerted to their disappearance yesterday evening and a nationwide search is currently taking place.

'Heaven help us all,' she whispered, fear flooding through her old veins. Perhaps it was simply coincidence, but she knew the legend's meaning all too well . . .

# 1

*London, 5th January 1996*

Joanna Haslam ran full pelt through Covent Garden, her breathing heavy and her lungs rattling with the effort. Dodging past tourists and groups of school children, she narrowly missed knocking over a busker, her rucksack flying to one side behind her. She emerged onto Bedford Street just as a limousine drew up outside the wrought-iron gates that led to St Paul's Church. Photographers surrounded the car as a chauffeur stepped out to open the back door.

*Damn! Damn!*

With her last iota of strength, Joanna sprinted the final few yards to the gates then into the paved courtyard beyond, the clock on the red-brick face of the church confirming she was late. As she neared the entrance, she cast her gaze over the huddle of paparazzi and saw that Steve, her photographer, was in prime position, perched on the steps. She waved at him and he gave her a thumbs-up sign as she squeezed through the crush of photographers who were crowding round the celebrity who had emerged from

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the limousine. Once inside the church itself, she could see the pews were packed, lit by the soft glow from the chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. The organ was playing sombre music in the background.

After flashing her press card at the usher and digging for breath, she slipped into the back pew and sat down gratefully. Her shoulders rose and fell with each gasp as she fumbled in her rucksack for her notepad and pen.

Although the church was frosty cold, Joanna could feel beads of sweat on her forehead; the roll-neck of the black lambswool sweater she'd thrown on in her panic was now sticking uncomfortably to her skin. She took out a tissue and blew her streaming nose. Then, sweeping a hand through her tangled mass of long dark hair, she leant back against the pew and closed her eyes to catch her breath.

Just a few days into a new year that had begun with so much promise, Joanna felt as if she'd been not so much as chucked, but hurled off the top of the Empire State Building. At speed. Without warning.

*Matthew . . . the love of her life – or rather, as of yesterday, the ex-love of her life – was the cause.*

Joanna bit her bottom lip hard, willing herself not to start crying again, and craned her neck towards the pews at the front near the altar, noting with relief that the family members everyone was waiting for had not yet arrived. Glancing back through the main doors, she could see the paparazzi lighting up cigarettes and fiddling with their camera lenses outside. The mourners in front of her were beginning to shuffle on the uncomfortable wooden pews, whispering to their neighbours. She hastily scanned the crowd and picked out the most noteworthy celebrities to

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mention in her article, struggling to distinguish them from the backs of their heads, which were mostly grey or white. Scribbling the names down in her notepad, images of yesterday invaded her mind again . . .

Matthew had turned up unexpectedly on the doorstep of her Crouch End flat in the afternoon. After the heavy shared revelry of Christmas and New Year, the two of them had agreed to adjourn to their separate flats and have a quiet few days before work began again. Unfortunately, Joanna had spent that time nursing the nastiest cold she'd had in years. She'd opened the door to Matthew clutching her Winnie the Pooh hot-water bottle, clad in ancient thermal pyjamas and a pair of stripy bed socks.

She'd known immediately that there was something wrong as he'd hovered near the door, refusing to take his coat off, his eyes darting here and there, looking at anything but *her* . . .

He had then informed her that he had been 'thinking'. That he couldn't see their relationship going anywhere. And perhaps it was time to call it a day.

'We've been together for six years now, since the end of uni,' he'd said, fidgeting with the gloves she'd given him for Christmas. 'I don't know, I always thought that, with time, I'd want to marry you – you know, tie our lives together officially. But that moment hasn't happened . . .' He'd shrugged limply at her. 'And if I don't feel that way now, I can't see that I ever will.'

Joanna's hands had clenched around her hot-water bottle as she had regarded his guilty, guarded expression. Digging in her pyjama pocket, she'd found a damp tissue

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and blown her nose hard. Then she'd looked him straight in the eye.

'Who is she?'

The blush had spread right across his face and neck. 'I didn't mean for it to happen,' he'd mumbled, 'but it has and I can't go on pretending any longer.'

Joanna remembered the New Year's Eve they'd shared four nights ago. And decided that he'd done a bloody good job of pretending.

She was called Samantha, apparently. Worked at the same advertising agency as he did. An account director, no less. It had begun the night Joanna had been doorstepping a Tory MP on a sleaze story and hadn't made it in time to Matthew's agency's Christmas party. The word 'cliché' still whirled round her head. But then she checked herself; where did clichés originate, if not from the common denominators of human behaviour?

'I promise you, I've tried so hard to stop thinking about Sam,' Matthew had continued. 'I really did try all throughout Christmas. It was so great to be with your family up in Yorkshire. But then I met her again last week, just for a quick drink and . . .'

Joanna was out. Samantha was in. It was as simple as that.

She could only stare at him, her eyes burning with shock, anger and fear, as he'd continued.

'At first I thought it was just an infatuation. But it's obvious that if I feel like this about another woman now, I simply can't commit to you. So, I'm only doing what's right.' He'd looked at her, almost beseeching her to thank him for being so noble.

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‘What’s right . . .’ she’d repeated, her voice hollow. Then she’d burst into floods of coldy, fever-induced tears. From somewhere far away, she could hear his voice mumbling more excuses. Forcing open her swollen, tear-drenched eyes, she’d regarded him as he’d sunk down, small and ashamed, into her worn leather armchair.

‘Get out,’ she’d finally croaked. ‘You evil, low-down, lying, double-crossing bloody cheat! Get out! *Just get out!*’

In retrospect, what had really mortified Joanna was that he’d taken no further persuading. He’d stood up, muttering stuff about various possessions that he’d left at her flat, and getting together for a chat once the dust had settled, then he’d virtually charged for the front door.

Joanna had spent the rest of yesterday evening crying down the phone to her mother, her best friend Simon’s voicemail and into the increasingly soggy fur of her Winnie the Pooh hot-water bottle.

Eventually, thanks to copious amounts of Night Nurse and brandy, she’d passed out, only grateful that she had the next couple of days off work in lieu of overtime she’d put in on the news desk before Christmas.

Then her mobile had rung at nine this morning. Joanna had raised herself from her drug-induced slumber and reached for it, praying it might be a devastated, repentant Matthew, realising the enormity of what he’d just done.

‘It’s me,’ a harsh Glaswegian voice had barked.

Joanna had sworn silently at the ceiling. “Lo, Alec,” she’d snuffled. ‘What do you want? I’m off today.’

‘Sorry, but you’re not. Alice, Richie and Bill have all called in sick. You’ll have to take your days in lieu another time.’

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‘They can join the club.’ Joanna had given a loud, exaggerated cough down the line. ‘Sorry, Alec, but I’m dying too.’

‘Look at it this way: work today, then when you’re fit you’ll be able to enjoy the time off owing to you.’

‘No, I really can’t. I’ve got a temperature. I can hardly stand.’

‘Then you’ll be fine. It’s a sitting-down job, at the Actors’ Church in Covent Garden. There’s a memorial service for Sir James Harrison at ten o’clock.’

‘You can’t do this to me, Alec, *please*. The last thing I need is to sit in a draughty church. I’ve already caught my death. You’ll end up at a memorial service for *me*.’

‘Sorry, Jo, no choice. I’ll pay for a cab there and back, though. You can go straight home afterwards and email me the piece. Try and talk to Zoe Harrison, will you? I’ve sent Steve to do shots. Should make the front page if she’s all dolled up. Right, speak later.’

‘Damn!’ Joanna had thrown her aching head back onto the pillow in despair. Then she’d rung a local taxi company, and staggered to her wardrobe to find a suitable black outfit.

Most of the time she loved her job, *lived* for it, as Matthew had often remarked, but this morning she seriously wondered why. After stints on a couple of regional papers, she’d been taken on as a junior reporter a year ago by the *Morning Mail*, based in London, and one of the top-selling national dailies in the country. However, her hard-won but lowly spot at the bottom of the pile meant she was hardly in a position to refuse. As Alec, the newsdesk editor, never ceased to remind her, there were a

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thousand hungry young journalists right behind her. Her six weeks in the newsroom had been the hardest posting so far. The hours were unremitting and Alec – by turn a slave-driver and a true dedicated professional – expected nothing less than he was prepared to give himself.

‘Give me the lifestyle pages any day,’ she’d snuffled as she’d pulled on a not-terribly-clean black sweater, a thick pair of woolly tights and a black skirt in deference to the sombre occasion.

The cab had arrived ten minutes late, then had got stuck in a monumental traffic jam on Charing Cross Road. ‘Sorry, love, nothing doing,’ the driver had said. Joanna had looked at her watch, chucked a ten-pound note at him and jumped out of the cab. As she’d hared through the streets towards Covent Garden, her chest labouring and her nose streaming, she’d wondered whether life could get any worse.

Joanna was snapped out of her reverie as the congregation suddenly ceased their chatter. She opened her eyes and turned round as Sir James Harrison’s family members began to file into the church.

Leading the party was Charles Harrison, Sir James’s only child, now well into his sixties. He lived in Los Angeles, and was an acclaimed director of big-budget action films filled with special effects. She vaguely remembered that he had won an Oscar some time ago, but his films weren’t the kind she usually went to see.

By Charles Harrison’s side was Zoe Harrison, his daughter. As Alec had hoped, Zoe looked stunning in a fitted black suit with a short skirt that showed off her long legs, and her hair was pulled back in a sleek chignon that set off her classic English-rose beauty to perfection. She was an actress,

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whose film career was on the rise, and Matthew had been mad about her. He always said Zoe reminded him of Grace Kelly – his dream woman, apparently – leading Joanna to wonder why Matthew was going out with a dark-eyed, gangly brunette such as herself. She swallowed a lump in her throat, betting her Winnie the Pooh hot-water bottle that this ‘Samantha’ was a petite blonde.

Holding Zoe Harrison’s hand was a young boy of around nine or ten, looking uncomfortable in a black suit and tie: Zoe’s son, Jamie Harrison, named after his great-grandfather. Zoe had given birth to Jamie when she was only nineteen and still refused to name the father. Sir James had loyally defended his granddaughter and her decisions to both have the baby and to remain silent about Jamie’s paternity.

Joanna thought how alike Jamie and his mother were: the same fine features, a milk and rose complexion, and huge blue eyes. Zoe Harrison kept him away from the cameras as much as possible – if Steve had got a shot of mother and son together, it would probably make the front page tomorrow morning.

Behind them came Marcus Harrison, Zoe’s brother. Joanna watched him as he drew level with her pew. Even with her thoughts still on Matthew, she had to admit Marcus Harrison was a serious ‘hottie’, as her fellow reporter Alice would say. Joanna recognised him from the gossip columns – most recently squiring a blonde British socialite with a triple-barrelled surname. As dark as his sister was fair, but sharing the same blue eyes, Marcus carried himself with louche confidence. His hair almost touched his shoulders and, wearing a crumpled black jacket and a white shirt

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unbuttoned at the neck, he oozed charisma. Joanna dragged her gaze away from him. *Next time, she thought firmly, I'm going for a middle-aged man who likes bird watching and stamp collecting.* She struggled to recall what Marcus Harrison did for a living – a fledgling film producer, she thought. Well, he certainly looked the part.

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.' The vicar spoke from the pulpit, a large picture of Sir James Harrison in front of him, surrounded by wreaths of white roses. 'Sir James's family welcomes you all here and thanks you for coming to pay tribute to a friend, a colleague, a father, grandfather and great-grandfather, and perhaps the finest actor of this century. For those of us who had the good fortune to know him well, it will not come as a surprise that Sir James was adamant that this was not to be a sombre occasion, but a celebration. Both his family and I have honoured his wishes. Therefore, we start with Sir James's favourite hymn, "I Vow to Thee My Country". Please stand.'

Joanna pushed her aching legs into action, glad that the organ began playing just as her chest heaved and she coughed loudly. Reaching for the order-of-service sheet on the ledge in front of her, a tiny, spidery hand, the translucent skin revealing blue veins beneath it, got there before hers.

For the first time, Joanna looked to her left and studied the owner of the hand. Bent double with age, the woman only came up to her ribs. Resting on the ledge to support herself, the hand in which she held the service sheet shook violently. It was the only part of her body that was visible. The rest of her was shrouded in a black coat that touched her ankles, with a black net veil shielding her face.

Unable to read the sheet due to the continued shaking

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of the hand that held it, Joanna bent down to speak to the woman. ‘May I share with you?’

The hand offered her the sheet. Joanna took it and placed it low so the old lady could see it too. She croaked her way through the hymn, and as it ended, the woman struggled to sit down. Joanna silently offered her arm, but the help was ignored.

‘Our first reading today is Sir James’s favourite sonnet: Dunbar’s “Sweet Rose of Virtue”, read by Sir Laurence Sullivan, a close friend.’

The congregation sat patiently as the old actor made his way to the front of the church. Then the famous, rich voice, that had once held thousands spellbound in theatres across the globe, filled the church.

“Sweet rose of virtue and of gentleness, delightful lily . . .”

Joanna was distracted by a creak behind her and saw the doors at the back of the church open, letting in a blast of freezing air. An usher pushed a wheelchair through them and placed it at the end of the pew opposite Joanna’s. As the usher walked away, she became aware of a rattling noise that made her own chest problems seem inconsequential. The old lady next to her was having what sounded like an asthma attack. She was staring past Joanna, her gaze through her veil apparently locked on the figure in the wheelchair.

‘Are you okay?’ Joanna whispered rhetorically, as the woman put her hand to her chest, her focus still not leaving the wheelchair as the vicar announced the next hymn and the congregation stood again. Suddenly, the old lady grasped at Joanna’s arm and indicated the door behind them.

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Helping the woman to her feet, then holding her upright by her waist, Joanna virtually carried her to the end of the pew. The old lady pressed into Joanna's coat like a child wanting protection as they came adjacent to the man in the wheelchair. A pair of icy steel-grey eyes looked up and swept over them both. Joanna shuddered involuntarily, broke her gaze away from his and helped the old lady the few paces to the entrance, where an usher stood to one side.

'This woman . . . I . . . she needs . . .'

'Air!' the old lady cried between gasps.

The usher helped Joanna lead the woman into the grey January day and down the steps to one of the benches that flanked the courtyard. Before Joanna could ask for further assistance, the usher had ducked back into the church and closed the doors once again. The old lady slumped against her, her breathing ragged.

'Should I call an ambulance? You really don't sound very well.'

'No!' the old lady gasped, the strength of her voice at odds with the frailty of her body. 'Call a taxi. Take me home. Please.'

'I really think you should—'

The bony fingers locked around Joanna's wrist. 'Please! A taxi!'

'All right, you wait there.'

Joanna ran out of the gates into Bedford Street and hailed a passing black cab. The driver gallantly got out and walked back with Joanna to help the old lady to his vehicle.

'She okay? The old duck's breathing sounds a bit off,' he said to Joanna, as the two of them settled the woman on the back seat. 'Does she need to go to hospital?'

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‘She says she wants to go home.’ Joanna leant into the cab. ‘Where is home by the way?’ she asked the woman.

‘I . . .’ The effort of getting into the cab had obviously exhausted her. She sat there, panting.

The cabbie shook his head. ‘Sorry, love. ’Fraid I can’t take her anywhere in that state, not by herself, like. Don’t want a death in the back of my cab. Far too messy. Could take her if you come too, of course. Then it’s your responsibility rather than mine.’

‘I don’t know her . . . I mean, I’m working . . . I should be in that church now . . .’

‘Sorry, love,’ he said to the old lady. ‘You’ll have to get out.’

The old lady lifted her veil and Joanna saw her terrified milky-blue eyes. ‘Please,’ she mouthed.

‘Okay, okay.’ Joanna sighed with resignation and climbed into the back of the cab. ‘Where to?’ she asked gently.

‘. . . Mary . . . Mary . . .’

‘No. Where to?’ Joanna tried again.

‘Mary . . . le . . .’

‘Do you mean Marylebone, love?’ the cabbie asked from the front seat.

The woman nodded with visible relief.

‘Right you are.’

The old lady stared anxiously out of the window as the cab sped away. Eventually, her breathing began to ease and she rested her head against the black leather seat and closed her eyes.

Joanna sighed. This day was getting better and better. Alec would crucify her if he thought she’d snuck off early.

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The story of a little old lady being taken ill would not wash with him. Little old ladies were only of interest to Alec if they'd been beaten up by some skinhead after their pension money and left for dead.

'We're nearly in Marylebone now. Could you try and find out where we're going?' called the cabbie from the front of the taxi.

'Nineteen Marylebone High Street.' The clipped voice rang out crisp and clear. Joanna turned to look at the old woman in surprise.

'Feeling better?'

'Yes, thank you. Sorry to put you to so much trouble. You should get out here. I'll be fine.' She indicated that they had stopped at a traffic light.

'No. I'll see you home. I've come this far.'

The old lady shook her head as firmly as she could. 'Please, for your own sake, I—'

'We're nearly there now. I'll help you inside your house and then go back.'

The old lady sighed, sank further down into her coat and said no more until the taxi came to a halt.

'Here we are, love.' The cabbie opened the door, relief that the woman was still alive clear on his face.

'Take this.' The woman held out a fifty-pound note.

'Haven't got change for that, I'm afraid,' he said as he helped the old woman down onto the pavement and supported her until Joanna stood beside her.

'Here. I've got it.' Joanna handed the driver a twenty-pound note. 'Wait for me here, please. Back in a tick.' The old lady had already slipped from her grasp and was walking unsteadily towards a door next to a newsagent's.

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Joanna followed her. ‘Shall I do that?’ she asked as the arthritic fingers struggled to put the key in the lock.

‘Thank you.’

Joanna turned the key, opened the door, and the old lady almost threw herself through it.

‘Come in, come in, *quickly!*’

‘I . . .’

Having delivered the old lady safely to her door, Joanna needed to get back to the church. ‘Okay.’ Joanna reluctantly stepped inside. Immediately the woman banged the front door shut behind her.

‘Follow me.’ She was heading for a door on the left-hand side of a narrow hallway. Another key was fumbled for, then finally fitted into the lock. Joanna followed her into darkness.

‘Lights are just behind you on the right.’

Joanna felt for the switch, flicked it and saw that she was standing in a small, dank-smelling lobby. There were three doors in front of her and a flight of stairs to her right.

The old lady opened one of the doors and switched on another light. Standing just behind her, Joanna could see that the room was full of tea chests stacked one on top of the other. In the centre of the room was a single bed with a rusty iron bedstead. Against one wall, wedged in between the tea chests, was an old armchair. The smell of urine was distinct and Joanna felt her stomach lurch.

The old lady headed for the chair and sank onto it with a sigh of relief. She indicated an upturned tea chest by the bed. ‘Tablets, my tablets. Could you pass them, please?’

‘Of course.’ Joanna gingerly picked her way through the

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tea chests and retrieved the pills from the dusty surface, noticing the directions for use were written in French.

‘Thank you. Two, please. And the water.’

Joanna gave her the glass of water that stood next to the pills, then opened the screw-top of the bottle and emptied out two tablets into a shaking hand and watched the old lady put them in her mouth. And wondered if she was now okay to leave. She shuddered, the fetid smell and dismal atmosphere of the room closing in on her. ‘Are you sure you don’t need a doctor?’

‘Quite sure, thank you. I know what’s wrong with me, my dear.’ A small, twisted smile appeared on her lips.

‘Well then. I’m afraid I’d better be going back to the service. I have to file my piece for my newspaper.’

‘You’re a journalist?’ The old lady’s accent, now that she had recovered her voice, was refined and definitely English.

‘Yes. On the *Morning Mail*. I’m very junior at the moment.’

‘What is your name, dear?’

‘Joanna Haslam.’ She indicated the boxes. ‘Are you moving?’

‘I suppose you could put it like that, yes.’ She stared off into space, her blue eyes glazed. ‘I won’t be here for much longer. Maybe it’s right that it ends like this . . .’

‘What do you mean? Please, if you’re ill, let me take you to a hospital.’

‘No, no. It’s too late for all that. You go now, my dear, back to your life. Goodbye.’ The old lady closed her eyes. Joanna continued to watch her, until a few seconds later, she heard soft snores emanating from the woman’s mouth.

Feeling horribly guilty, but unable to stand the atmos-

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phere of the room any longer, Joanna quietly let herself out and ran back to the taxi.

The memorial service was over by the time she arrived back in Covent Garden. The Harrison family limousine had left and there were only a few members of the congregation still milling around outside. Feeling really wretched now, Joanna just managed to take a couple of quotes from them before hailing another cab, giving up the entire morning as a bad job.

## 2

The bell was ringing. Again and again, it seared through Joanna's throbbing head.

'Oooh God,' she groaned, as she realised whoever was at the door was determined not to take the hint and leave.

*Matthew . . . ?*

For a split second, her spirits rose, then sank again instantly. Matthew was probably still toasting his freedom with a glass of champagne, in a bed somewhere with Samantha.

'Go away,' she moaned, blowing her nose on Matthew's old T-shirt. For some reason, it made her feel better.

The bell rang again.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger!'

Joanna gave in, crawled out of bed and staggered to the front door to open it.

'Hello, sex kitten.' Simon had the nerve to grin at her. 'You look dreadful.'

'Cheers,' she muttered, hanging on to her front door for support.

'Come here.'

A pair of comfortingly familiar arms closed round her

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shoulders. Tall herself, Simon, at six foot three, was one of the only men she knew who could make her feel small and fragile.

‘I got your voicemail messages when I got home late last night. Sorry I wasn’t there to play agony aunt.’

‘S’okay,’ she snuffled into his shoulder.

‘Let’s go inside before icicles start forming on our clothes, shall we?’ Simon closed the front door, an arm still firmly around one of her shoulders, and walked her into the small sitting room. ‘Jesus, it’s cold in here.’

‘Sorry. I’ve been in bed all afternoon. I’ve got a really terrible cold.’

‘Never,’ he teased her. ‘Come on, let’s sit you down.’

Simon swept old newspapers, books and congealing Pot Noodle containers onto the floor, and Joanna sank onto the uncomfortable lime-green sofa. She’d only bought it because Matthew had liked the colour and she’d regretted the purchase ever since. Matthew had always sat in her grandmother’s old leather armchair whenever he came round anyway. Ungrateful sod, she thought.

‘You’re not in a good way, are you, Jo?’

‘Nope. On top of being dumped by Matthew, Alec sent me out to cover a memorial service this morning when it was meant to be my day off. I ended up in Marylebone High Street with a weird old lady who lives in a room full of tea chests.’

‘Wow. And there’s me in Whitehall, and the most exciting thing that happened today was getting a different kind of filling from the sandwich lady.’

Joanna could barely raise a smile at his efforts to be cheerful.

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Simon sat down next to her and took her hands in his.  
‘I’m so sorry, Jo, really.’

‘Thanks.’

‘Is it over forever with Matthew, or do you think it’s just a blip on the road to marital bliss?’

‘It’s over, Simon. He’s found someone else.’

‘Want me to go and give him a good kicking to make you feel better?’

‘Truthfully, yes, but in reality, no.’ Joanna put her hands to her face and wiped them up and down her cheeks. ‘The worst thing is, that at times like this you’re meant to react in a dignified manner. If people ask you how you are, you’re meant to brush it off and say, “I’m absolutely fine, thanks. He meant nothing to me anyway and him leaving is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I’ve so much more time now for myself and my friends and I’ve even taken up basket weaving!” But it’s all *rubbish!* I’d crawl across burning coals if it would bring Matthew back, so that life can go on like normal. I . . . I . . . love him. I need him. He’s mine, he belongs to m-me.’

Simon sat with his arms around her while she sobbed. He stroked her hair gently and listened as the shock, grief and confusion poured out of her. When she was all cried out, he gently released her and stood up. ‘You light the fire while I boil the kettle for some tea.’

Joanna turned on the gas flames in the fireplace and followed Simon into the small kitchen. She slumped down at the Formica table for two in the corner, over which she and Matthew had shared so many lazy Sunday brunches and intimate candlelit suppers. As Simon busied himself

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making the tea, Joanna gazed at the glass jars lined up neatly along the worktop.

'I've always loathed sun-dried tomatoes,' she mused. 'Matthew adored them.'

'Well.' Simon took the jar full of the offending tomatoes and tipped them into the bin. 'That's one positive thing to come out of this, then. You don't have to eat them anymore.'

'In fact, now I think about it, there were lots of things Matthew liked and I just pretended to.' Joanna rested her chin on her hands.

'Such as?'

'Oh, going to see weird, foreign art-house movies on Sunday at the Lumière when I'd have preferred to stay at home and catch up on soaps. Music – that was another thing. I mean, I like classical in small doses, but I was never allowed to play my *ABBA Gold* or *Take That* CDs.'

'I hate to admit it, but I'm afraid I'm with Matthew on that one,' Simon chuckled, pouring boiling water over the teabags. 'You know, if I'm honest, I always felt Matthew was aspiring to be what he *thought* he should be.'

'You're right.' Joanna sighed. 'I just wasn't impressive enough for him. But that's who I am: just a boring middle-class Yorkshire girl.'

'I promise you, the one thing you're not is unimpressive. Or boring. Honest, maybe; down to earth, yes. But those are qualities to be admired. Here.' He handed her a mug of tea. 'Let's defrost by that fire.'

Joanna sat on the floor in front of the fire between Simon's knees and drank her tea. 'God, Simon, the thought of going through the dating process all over again is hideous,' she said. 'I'm twenty-seven, too old to start afresh.'

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‘Yes, you’re ancient, I can practically smell death on you.’

Joanna smacked his calf. ‘Don’t make light of this! It’s going to take me ages to get used to being single again.’

‘The problem with us humans is that we fear and dislike change of any kind. I’m convinced that’s why so many miserable couples stay together, when they’d be far better off apart.’

‘You’re probably right. Look at me, eating sun-dried tomatoes for years! Talking of couples, have you heard from your Sarah?’

‘She sent me a postcard from Wellington last week. She’s learning to sail there, apparently. Wow, it’s been a long year apart. Anyway, she’s back from New Zealand in February, so only a few weeks to go.’

‘You’ve been awfully good to wait for her.’ Joanna smiled at him.

“If you love someone, set them free.” Isn’t that the old adage? The way I see it is, if she still wants me by the time she arrives home, then we’ll both know that it’s right and for real.’

‘Don’t bank on it. I thought Matthew and I were “right” and “for real”.’

‘Thanks for your words of comfort.’ Simon raised his eyebrows. ‘Come on now, you have your career, your flat, and me. You’re a survivor, Jo. You’ll come out the other side, you wait and see.’

‘That’s if I still have a job to go back to. The piece I filed on Sir James Harrison’s memorial service was crap. What with Matthew, and my awful cold, and that weird old lady . . .’

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‘You say she was living in a room full of tea chests? Are you sure you weren’t delirious?’

‘Yup. She said something about not being here long enough to unpack.’ Joanna bit her lip. ‘Ugh, it smelt so strongly of wee in there . . . Will we be like that when we’re old? The whole thing completely depressed me. I stood in that room thinking that if this was what life brings you to, then what the hell is the point of struggling through anyway?’

‘She’s probably one of those mad eccentrics who lives in a dump and has millions stuffed away in the bank. Or in tea chests for that matter. You should have checked.’

‘She was fine until she looked at this old man in a wheelchair, who came to sit by the opposite pew to us during the service. She totally freaked when she saw him.’

‘Probably her ex-husband. Maybe *his* millions were stashed away in those tea chests,’ Simon laughed. ‘Anyway, sweetheart, I must be on my way. I’ve got some work to do before tomorrow.’

Joanna followed him to the door and he clasped her to him in a hug. ‘Thanks for everything.’ She kissed him on the cheek.

‘Anytime. I’m always there if you need me. I’ll call you from work tomorrow. Bye, Butch.’

‘Night, Sundance.’

Joanna closed the door behind him and drifted back into the sitting room feeling brighter. Simon always knew how to cheer her up. They’d been friends for all of their lives. He’d lived on the neighbouring farm to hers up in Yorkshire with his family and even though he was a couple of years older than her, living in such an isolated environment meant they had spent much of their childhood together. As an only

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child and a tomboy by nature, Joanna had been thrilled to have Simon's company. He'd taught her to climb trees and play football and cricket. During the long summer holidays, the two of them had taken their ponies up onto the moors and played lengthy games of cowboys and Indians. It was the only time they'd ever fought, as Simon always and most unfairly demanded that he live and she die.

'It's my game, we play by my rules,' he'd insist bossily, a large cowboy hat swamping his head. And after chasing each other across the coarse moorland grass, inevitably he would catch her up, tackling her from behind.

'Bang bang, you're dead!' he'd shout, pointing his toy gun at her, and she would stagger, then fall onto the grass, rolling around in pretend agony until she eventually gave in and died.

When he was thirteen, Simon had gone to boarding school and they'd seen less of each other. The old closeness had still remained during the holidays, but both had naturally made new friends as they grew up. They'd celebrated with a bottle of champagne up on the moors when Simon had won a place at Trinity College, Cambridge, Joanna going to university two years later at Durham to read English.

Then their lives had separated almost completely; Simon had met Sarah at Cambridge, and in her final year at Durham, Joanna had found Matthew. It wasn't until they'd both reconnected in London – coincidentally living only ten minutes apart – that their friendship had blossomed once more.

Joanna knew Matthew had never really taken to Simon. Apart from towering over him physically, Simon had been

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offered some kind of high-flying job in the civil service when he'd left Cambridge. He always said modestly that he was just an office bod at Whitehall, but that was Simon all over. Very quickly, he'd been able to afford to buy a small car and a lovely one-bedroom flat on Highgate Hill. Matthew, meanwhile, had gophered at an ad agency before being offered a junior position a couple of years ago, which still only afforded him a damp bedsit in Stratford.

*Maybe, Joanna thought suddenly, Matthew was hoping Samantha's superior position at the agency would boost his own career . . .*

Joanna shook her head. She refused to think about him any more tonight. Setting her jaw, she put Alanis Morissette on her CD player and turned the volume up. *Sod the neighbours*, she thought as she went into the bathroom to run a hot bath. Singing 'You Learn' at the top of her croaky voice, the water pouring out of the taps, Joanna did not hear the footsteps along the short path that led to the front door, or see the face peering into the windows of her ground-floor sitting room. She emerged from the bathroom as the footsteps receded back down the path.

Feeling cleaner and calmer, Joanna made herself a cheese sandwich, drew the curtains closed in the sitting room and sat in front of the fire, toasting her toes. And suddenly felt a faint flicker of optimism for the future. Some of the things she'd said to Simon in the kitchen earlier had sounded flippan, but they were actually true. In retrospect, she and Matthew had very little in common. Now, she was a free agent with no one to please but herself and there would be no more putting her own feelings second. This was her call,

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her life, and she was damned if she was going to let Matthew ruin her future.

Before her positive mood left her and depression descended once more, Joanna took a couple of paracetamol and headed for bed.

# 3

‘Bye bye, darling.’ She hugged him to her, breathing in his familiar smell.

‘Bye, Mumma.’ He snuggled into her coat for a few more seconds, then pulled away, watching her face for signs of unwelcome emotion.

Zoe Harrison cleared her throat and blinked back tears. This moment became no easier, no matter how many times she went through it. But it wasn’t done to cry in front of Jamie or his friends, so she put on a brave smile. ‘I’ll be down to take you out to lunch three weeks on Sunday. Bring Hugo if he’d like to come.’

‘Sure.’ Jamie stood awkwardly by the car, and Zoe knew it was her moment to leave. She couldn’t resist reaching out to brush a strand of his fine blond hair back from his face. He rolled his eyes, and for a second, he looked more like the little boy she remembered, and not the serious young man he was becoming. Seeing him in his navy school uniform, his tie done up neatly just like James had taught him, Zoe felt immensely proud of him.

‘Okay, darling, I’ll be off now. Ring me if you need anything. Or even if you just want to have a chat.’

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‘I will, Mumma.’

Zoe slid behind the wheel of her car, closed the door and started the engine. She wound down the window.

‘I love you, sweetheart. You take care now, and remember to wear your vest and *don’t* leave your wet rugby socks on for any longer than you have to.’

Jamie’s face reddened. ‘Yes, Mumma. Bye.’

‘Bye.’

Zoe pulled out of the drive, watching Jamie waving cheerfully in her rear-view mirror. She turned a bend and her son was lost from sight. Driving through the gates and onto the main road, Zoe brushed the tears away harshly and ferreted for a tissue in her coat pocket. And told herself for the hundredth time that she suffered more on these occasions than Jamie did. Especially today, with James gone.

Following signs for the motorway that would take her on the hour’s drive back to London, she wondered once more whether she was misguided to confine a ten-year-old boy to a boarding school – especially after suffering the tragic bereavement of his great-grandfather only a few weeks before. Yet Jamie loved his prep school, his friends, his *routine* – all the things she couldn’t give him at home. He seemed to be thriving at the school, growing up, becoming ever more independent.

Even her father, Charles, had commented on it when she had dropped him off at Heathrow yesterday evening. The pall of his father’s death hung on him visibly, and she’d noticed that his handsome, tanned face was finally bearing signs of age.

‘You’ve done so well, my darling, you should be proud

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of yourself. And your son,' he'd said in her ear as he'd hugged her goodbye. 'Bring Jamie out to stay with me in LA during the holidays. We don't spend enough time together. I miss you.'

'I miss you too, Dad,' Zoe had said, then stood there, vaguely stunned, as she'd watched him walk through the security gate. It was rare for her father to praise her. *Or her son.*

She remembered when she had found herself pregnant at eighteen, and nearly died of shock and devastation. Just out of boarding school and with a place at university, it had seemed ridiculous to even contemplate having a baby. And yet, throughout the barrage of anger and judgement from her father and her friends, coupled with pressure from a completely different source, Zoe had known, somewhere in her heart, that the baby inside her had to be born. Jamie was the product of love: a special, magical gift. A love from which, after more than ten years, she had still not fully recovered.

Zoe joined the other cars streaking towards London on the motorway, as her father's words from all those years ago rang in her ears.

'Is he going to marry you, this man who's knocked you up? I can tell you now, you're on your own, Zoe. It's your mistake, you fix it!'

*Not that there was ever any chance of marriage to him,* she thought ruefully.

Only James, her darling grandfather, had remained calm; a quiet presence exuding reason and support when all those around her seemed to be screaming at the tops of their voices.

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Zoe had always been James's special girl. As a child, she'd had no idea that the kind, elderly man with the rich, deep voice, who refused to be addressed as 'Grandpa' because he said it made him feel old, was one of the most lauded classical actors in the country. She had grown up in a comfortable house in Blackheath with her mother and older brother, Marcus. Her parents had already divorced by the time she was three and she had rarely seen her father, Charles, who had moved to LA. And so it was James who had become the father figure in her world. His rambling country home – Haycroft House in Dorset – with its orchard and cosy attic bedrooms, had been the setting for her most pleasurable childhood memories.

In semi-retirement, only popping off stateside occasionally to appear in a cameo film role, which 'brought home the bacon' as he put it, her grandfather had always been there for her. Especially after Zoe's mother had been killed suddenly in a road accident only a few yards from their house. Zoe had been ten, her brother Marcus fourteen. All she remembered of the funeral was clinging on to him and seeing his face set, jaw clenched, silent tears running down his cheeks as they listened to the vicar say the prayers. The service had been tense and bleak. She'd been forced to wear a stiff black dress, the lace irritating her neck.

Charles had returned from LA and tried to comfort a son and daughter he hardly knew, but it had been James who had wiped away her tears and hugged her as she wept long into the night. James had tried to comfort Marcus too, but he had closed up and refused to discuss it. The grief Marcus had felt for the loss of his mother had been locked away deep inside him.

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While her father had swept her up to live in LA with him, Marcus had been left at boarding school in England. It was as if she had not only lost her mother, but her brother too . . . her whole life all at once.

When she'd arrived in the dry, prickly heat at her father's hacienda-style house in Bel Air, Zoe had discovered she had an 'Auntie Debbie'. Auntie Debbie apparently lived with Daddy and even slept in the same bed as he did. Auntie Debbie was very blonde, voluptuous and not happy to have ten-year-old Zoe arrive in her life.

She'd been sent to school in Beverly Hills and had hated every moment of it. She'd rarely seen her father, who was too busy carving a niche for himself as a movie director. Instead, she'd endured Debbie's idea of child-rearing: TV dinners and wall-to-wall cartoons. She'd missed the changing seasons of England desperately and hated the harsh heat and loud accents of LA. She'd written long letters to her grandfather, begging him to come and fetch her so that she could live at her beloved Haycroft House with him, trying to convince him that she could look after herself. And that, really, she would be no trouble, if he'd only let her come back home.

Six months after Zoe had arrived in LA, a taxi had appeared on the drive. Out of it had stepped James, wearing a dapper Panama hat and a broad smile. Zoe still remembered the feeling of overwhelming joy as she ran down the drive and threw herself into his arms. Her protector had heeded her call and had arrived to rescue her. With Auntie Debbie banished to sulk by the pool, Zoe had poured out her woes into her grandfather's ears. Subsequently, he had called his son and told him of Zoe's misery. Charles – who

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had been filming in Mexico at the time – had agreed to let James take her back to England.

On the long flight home, she'd sat happily next to James, her small hand clutched in his big one. She had leaned on his firm, capable shoulder, knowing that she wanted to be wherever he was.

The cosy, weekly boarding school in Dorset had been a happy experience. James had always been glad to welcome Zoe's friends, either in London or at Haycroft House. It was only when she watched their parents' wide-eyed wonderment as they came to collect their children and shook hands with the great Sir James Harrison that she started to realize just how famous a man her grandfather was. As she grew older, James began to pass on to her his love for Shakespeare, Ibsen and Wilde. The two of them would regularly take in a play at the Barbican, the National Theatre or the Old Vic. They'd stay the night at James's grand London house in Welbeck Street, then spend Sundays in front of the fire going through the text of the play.

By the time Zoe was seventeen, she knew she wanted to become an actress. James sent off for all the prospectuses from drama schools and they pored over each, weighing up their pros and cons, until it was decided that Zoe should go to a good university and take an English degree first, then apply for drama school when she was twenty-one.

'Not only will you study the classic texts at university, which will give your performances depth, but you will also be older and ready to suck up all the information on offer at drama school by the time you get there. Besides, a degree gives you something to fall back on.'

'You think I'll fail as an actress?' Zoe had been horrified.

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'No, my darling, of course not. You're my granddaughter for a start,' he'd chuckled. 'But you're so damned lovely-looking that unless you've got a bloody degree, they won't take you seriously.'

They'd agreed between them that Zoe – if her A-level results were as good as expected – should apply to Oxford to study English.

And then she'd fallen in love. Right in the middle of her A levels.

Four months later, she was pregnant and devastated. Her carefully mapped-out future was in tatters.

Uncertain and terrified of her grandfather's reaction, Zoe had blurted it out over supper one night. James had paled a little, but had nodded calmly and asked her what she wanted to do about it. Zoe had burst into tears. The situation was so dreadful, so complex, that she could not even tell her beloved grandfather the whole truth.

All through that awful week when Charles had arrived in London with Debbie in tow, shouting at Zoe, calling her an idiot and demanding to know who the father was, James had been there, giving her strength and the courage to take the decision to have her baby. And he had never once asked who the father might be. Nor questioned the trip up to London that had left Zoe drained and ghostly white when he'd picked her up from Salisbury railway station and she'd fallen sobbing into his arms.

If it hadn't been for his love, support and his complete faith in her ability to make the right decision, Zoe knew she would not have made it through.

At Jamie's birth, Zoe had watched James's faded blue eyes fill with tears as he'd seen his great-grandson for the

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first time. The labour had been early and so swift that there had been no time for Zoe to make the half-hour journey from Haycroft House to the nearest hospital. So Jamie had been born on his great-grandfather's old four-poster bed, with the local midwife in charge. Zoe had lain there, panting with exhaustion and elation, as her tiny, squalling son was lifted into James's arms.

'Welcome to the world, little man,' he'd whispered, then kissed him gently on his forehead.

In that moment, she'd decided to name her baby boy after him.

Whether the bond had formed then, or in the following few weeks as grandfather and granddaughter took it in turns to get up at night and comfort a colicky, tearful baby, Zoe didn't know. James had been both a father and a friend to her son. Young boy and old man had spent many hours together, James somehow galvanising the energy to play with Jamie. Zoe would arrive home and find them out in the orchard, James throwing the football for Jamie to kick. He'd take him off on nature hunts through the winding lanes of the Dorset countryside, teaching his great-grandson about the flowers that grew in the hedgerows and in their gorgeous country garden. Peonies, lavender and salvia jostled for space in the wide beds. And in mid-July, the smell of James's favourite roses wafted through her bedroom window.

It had been a beautiful, tranquil time, Zoe simply content to be with her little son and her grandfather. Her own father was at the height of his fame, having just won an Oscar, and she rarely heard from him. She did her best not to mind, but still, just yesterday at the airport, when he'd

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hugged her and said he missed her, the invisible parental thread had tugged at her heart.

*He's getting old too . . .* she thought as she negotiated the roundabout at the end of the motorway and headed for central London.

When Jamie was three, it had been James who had gently convinced her to apply for drama school. ‘If you win a place, we can all live in Welbeck Street,’ he’d said. ‘Jamie should be starting nursery a couple of mornings a week soon. It’s good for a child to socialise.’

‘I’m sure I won’t get in anyway,’ she had muttered, as she’d finally agreed to try for a place at RADA, only a short bicycle ride from Welbeck Street.

Yet she *had* got in, and with the support of a young French au pair, who collected Jamie from his nursery at noon and cooked lunch for both him and James, Zoe had completed her three-year course.

Her grandfather had then corralled his theatrical agent, plus a raft of casting director friends, to attend her graduation performance – ‘My darling, the world is built on nepotism, whether you’re an actor or a butcher!’ And by the time she left, she had an agent and her very first small part in a television drama. By then, Jamie was at school, and Zoe’s career as an actress had subsequently blossomed. Although to her disappointment, it was the screen, rather than the stage – her first love – that formed her employment.

‘My dear girl, stop complaining,’ James had reprimanded her when she’d arrived home from a fruitless day on location in East London. It had rained solidly, and they hadn’t managed a single shot. ‘You’re employed, which is

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the most a young actor can hope for. The RSC will come later, I promise.'

If Zoe had noticed her grandfather's slow decline over the next three years, she realised she had chosen to ignore it. It was only when he began to wince in pain that she had insisted he go to the doctor.

The doctor had diagnosed bowel cancer in its advanced stages; it had spread through James's liver and colon. Because of his age and frailty, a gruelling course of chemotherapy had been ruled out. The doctor had suggested palliative care, to let him spend the time he *did* have left in a positive frame of mind, free of tubes and drips. If, as James deteriorated, that kind of equipment was needed for his comfort, then it would be provided for him at home.

Further tears filled Zoe's eyes as she thought of entering the empty house in Welbeck Street; a house that only two months ago had been filled with the pleasant aroma of Old Holborn tobacco, which James had smoked illicitly up until the day he died. In the last few months, he'd been very sick, his ears and eyes failing, and his ninety-five-year-old bones begging to be finally at rest. Yet his charisma, his sense of humour, his *life force*, had still filled the house.

Last summer, Zoe had made the heart-breaking decision to send Jamie away to school for his own sake. Watching his beloved great-grandfather deteriorate right in front of his eyes was not something she wished to put her son through. Because of their close bond, Zoe had known she must ease him into a life without 'Great-James', as Jamie called him, gently, with as little pain as possible. Jamie didn't see the lines deepening on Great-James's face, nor the way his hands shook as they played a game of Snap, or how

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he'd fall asleep in his armchair after lunch and not wake until early evening.

So Jamie had gone away to school last September and had thankfully settled down happily, while Zoe had put her burgeoning film career on hold and nursed an increasingly frail old man.

One bitter November evening, James had caught Zoe's hand as she took an empty teacup from him. 'Where's Jamie?'

'He's at school.'

'Can he come home this weekend? I need to see him.'

'James, I don't know whether that's such a good idea.'

'He's a clever lad, more so than most boys his age. I've known since Jamie was first born that I wasn't immortal. It was obvious I was unlikely to be around beyond his early years. I've prepared Jamie for my imminent departure.'

'I see.' The hand clutching her own teacup had shaken like her grandfather's.

'You'll call him home? I should see him. Soon.'

'Okay.'

Reluctantly, Zoe had collected Jamie from school that weekend. On the drive home, she'd told him how ill Great-James was. Jamie had nodded, his hair falling into his eyes and guarding his expression. 'I know. He told me at half-term, actually; said he'd call for me when it was . . . time.'

As Jamie had run upstairs to see him, Zoe had paced the kitchen, worrying how her precious boy would react to seeing Great-James so ill.

That night, as the three of them ate supper in James's room, Zoe saw the old man had brightened considerably. Jamie spent most of the rest of the weekend ensconced in

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James's bedroom. When she'd finally gone upstairs and told Jamie they had to leave for school to arrive in time for Sunday curfew, James had opened his arms wide to his great-grandson.

'Goodbye, old chap. You take care of yourself. And that mother of yours.'

'Yes. Love you!' Jamie had hugged his great-grandfather tightly, with all the abandon of a child.

They hadn't talked much on the journey down to Jamie's Berkshire prep school, but just as they'd pulled into the school car park, Jamie had finally spoken. 'I'll never see Great-James again, you know. He's going soon, he told me.'

Zoe turned and looked at her son's serious expression.  
'I'm so sorry, darling.'

'Don't worry, Mumma. I understand.'

And with a wave he was off up the steps and inside.

Less than a week later, Sir James Harrison, OBE, was dead.

Zoe pulled up next to the kerb in Welbeck Street, got out of the car and glanced up at the house, whose upkeep would now fall to her. The red-brick building, despite its newer Victorian facade, had stood here for over two hundred years, and she saw the frames around the tall windows were in dire need of repainting. Unlike its neighbours, its exterior curved out gently, like a pleasantly full belly, and it reached up five storeys, with the attic windows winking down at her like two bright eyes. Walking up the steps, she unlocked the heavy front door and closed it behind her, picking up the post from the mat. Her breath was visible in the cold air of the house and she shivered, wishing she could retreat back

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to the comforting, semi-isolation of Haycroft House. But work had to be done. Just before he'd died, James had strongly encouraged Zoe to take the leading role in a new film version of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* directed by Mike Winter, an up-and-coming young Brit. She had only given her grandfather the script to keep him from boredom during his illness – it was one of many that were sent to her every week – and had never expected him to read it.

Yet, once he had, James had grabbed her hand. 'A part like Tess isn't going to land in your lap every day and this script is exceptional. I entreat you to do this, dear girl. It will make you the star you deserve to be.'

He hadn't needed to say 'last request'. She'd seen it in his eyes.

Without taking off her coat, she walked down the hall and turned the thermostat up. She could hear the clanking as the ancient boiler was brought to life, and prayed that none of the pipes would freeze in the deepening winter temperatures. Wandering into the kitchen, she saw wine glasses and dirty ashtrays were still stacked by the sink, left over from the drinks-party-cum-wake she'd felt obliged to hold after the memorial service yesterday. She had perfected a gracious expression of gratitude as dozens of people had come to pay their respects and regale her with stories of her grandfather.

Half-heartedly, she emptied some of the ashtrays into the overflowing bin, knowing that most of the money from *Tess* would go on renovating the old house – the kitchen alone was in desperate need of an update.

The answering-machine light was blinking from the worktop. Zoe pressed 'play'.

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*'Zoe? Zoeeeeee . . . ??! Okay, you're not there. Ring me at home. Immediately. I mean it. It's urgent!'*

Zoe winced at the slur in her brother's voice. She'd been horrified when she'd seen what Marcus had turned up wearing yesterday at the church – not even a tie – and he'd snuck off as soon as he could from the wake afterwards, without even saying goodbye. She knew it was because Marcus was sulking.

Just after James had died, she, Marcus and her father had attended the reading of his will. Sir James Harrison had decided to leave virtually all his money and Haycroft House in trust for Jamie until he was twenty-one. There was also an insurance policy to pay for Jamie's school fees and university education. Welbeck Street had been bequeathed to Zoe, along with his theatrical memorabilia, which took up most of the attic space at Haycroft House. However, he'd left her no actual cash; Zoe understood that he wanted her to be hungry and continue to pursue her acting career. There was also a lump sum of money in trust to set up the 'Sir James Harrison Memorial Scholarship'. This was to pay the fees of two talented youngsters who would not normally be able to attend a reputable drama school. He had asked that Charles and Zoe set the scheme up.

James had left Marcus a hundred thousand pounds; a 'paltry token gesture', according to Marcus. After the reading of the will, she could feel the disappointment crackling like electricity from her brother.

She switched on the kettle, weighing up whether to call Marcus back, knowing if she didn't, he was likely to call her at some ungodly hour of the morning, drunk and unintelligible. However excruciatingly self-obsessed he could be,

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Zoe loved her brother, remembering her childhood with him and how sweet and kind he'd always been with her when she was younger. Whatever his more recent behaviour, she knew that Marcus had a good soul, but equally, his penchant for falling in love with the wrong women and his very bad head for business had subsequently rendered him broke and very low.

When he'd left university, Marcus had gone to LA to stay with their father and had tried to make his mark as a film producer. Zoe had known from what her father and James told her that things weren't going as he'd planned. Over the ten years Marcus had been in LA, one project after another had crumbled to dust, leaving him and his benefactor father disillusioned. And leaving Marcus virtually penniless.

'The problem with that young man is that his heart's in the right place, but he's a dreamer,' James had commented when Marcus had returned from LA to England three years ago with his tail between his legs. 'This new project of his –' James had flapped the film proposal Marcus had sent him in hope of funding – 'is full of sound political and moral ethos, but where's the story?' Subsequently, James had refused to back it.

Even if her brother had not helped himself, Zoe felt a sense of guilt for the fact that she and her son had been so favoured by James, both in his lifetime, and in the recent will.

Cradling a mug of tea in her hands, she wandered into the sitting room and glanced around at the scuffed mahogany furniture, the worn-out sofa and the old chairs, their undercarriages visibly sagging with age. The heavy damask curtains were faded, with small vertical slits woven through

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the fragile material, as if an invisible knife had cut through them like butter. As she mounted the stairs towards her bedroom, she thought she'd try removing the threadbare carpets to see if the hardwood floor beneath them could be salvaged . . .

She paused on the landing, outside the door to James's room. Now all the grim paraphernalia of life and death had been removed, the room felt like a void. She opened the door and stepped inside, picturing him sitting up in bed, a congenial smile on his face.

All her strength left her, and she slid to the floor, curling up by the wall, as all her grief and pain poured out in body-wracking sobs. She hadn't let herself cry like this up until now, holding everything together for Jamie. But now, here for the first time on her own, she cried for herself, and for the loss of her true father, *and* her best friend.

The ringing of the doorbell startled her. She stilled, hoping the unwelcome caller would go away and let her lick her wounds in peace.

The doorbell rang again.

'Zoe!' a familiar voice shouted through the letter box. 'I know you're home, your car's outside. Let me in!'

'Damn you, Marcus!' she cursed under her breath, angrily swiping the last tears from her face. She ran down the stairs, pulled the front door open and saw her brother leaning against the stone portico.

'Jesus, sis!' he said as he saw her face. 'You look as wrecked as I do.'

'Thanks.'

'Can I come in?'

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‘You’re here now, so you’d better,’ she snapped and stood back to let him through.

Marcus slid past her and headed straight to the drinks cabinet in the sitting room, where he reached for the decanter to pour himself a healthy slug of whisky before she had even closed the front door.

‘I was going to ask you how you were holding up, but I can see it in your face,’ he remarked, falling back into the leather wingback chair.

‘Marcus, just tell me what you want. I’ve got a lot to sort out—’

‘Don’t pretend you’ve got it so hard when good ol’ Jim left you this house.’ Marcus swept his arms around the room, the whisky sloshing perilously close to the rim of the glass.

‘James left you a lot of money,’ Zoe said through gritted teeth. ‘I know you’re angry—’

‘Damn right I am! I’m this close – *this* close – to Ben MacIntyre agreeing to direct my new film project. But he’s got to be sure I have the capital to begin pre-production. All I need is a hundred grand in the company account and I reckon he’ll say yes.’

‘Just be patient. When probate comes through, you’ll get it.’ Zoe sat back on the sofa, massaging her aching temples. ‘Can’t you get a loan?’

‘You know what my personal credit rating is like. And Marc One Films doesn’t have the best financial track record either. Ben’ll move on to something else if I hang about. Honestly, Zo, if you met these guys, you’d want to be involved too – it’s going to be *the* most important film of the decade, if not the millennium . . .’

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Zoe sighed. She'd heard plenty about Marcus's new project in the past few weeks.

'And we need to start applying for permits to film in Brazil soon. If only Dad would loan me the money until probate comes through, but he's refused.' Marcus glared at her.

'You can't blame Dad for saying no; he's helped you out so many times before.'

'But this is different, it's going to turn everything around, Zoe, I swear.'

She paused and held his gaze. He'd really unravelled in the past few weeks, and she was becoming seriously worried about his drinking.

'I have no cash, Marcus, you know that.'

'Come on, Zoe! Surely, you could easily remortgage this house, or even get a bank loan out for me just for a few weeks until probate's through.'

'Stop!' She slapped her hand down on the arm of the sofa. 'Enough is enough! Listen to yourself! Are you really surprised James didn't leave you his house when he knew you'd almost certainly sell it immediately? And you hardly visited him when he was ill. I was the one who cared for him, who loved him—' Zoe broke off, swallowing the sob that was threatening to escape her.

'No, well . . .' Marcus had the grace to look ashamed. He lowered his eyes and took a sip of his whisky. 'You were always his special girl, weren't you? I hardly got a look-in.'

'Marcus, what's happening to you?' she said quietly. 'I care about you, and I really want to help you, but—'

'You don't trust me. Just like Dad and Sir Jim. That's the real reason, isn't it?'

## LUCINDA RILEY

‘Oh Marcus, it’s hardly surprising, the way you’ve been acting recently. I haven’t seen you sober in God knows how long . . .’

‘Don’t you “oh Marcus” me! After Mum died, everyone was in bits over who would take care of precious Zoe! And who gave a toss about me, huh?’

‘If you’re going to drag up ancient history, then you can do it on your own time, I’m too exhausted for this.’ She stood up and gestured to the door. ‘Call me when you’ve sobered up, but I won’t speak to you when you’re like this.’

‘Zoe . . .’

‘I mean it. Marcus, I love you, but you have to pull yourself together.’

He stood up heavily, leaving his whisky glass on the carpet, and walked out of the room.

‘Remember, you’re taking me to that premiere early next week,’ she called.

There was no reply and she heard the front door slam behind him.

Zoe wandered into the kitchen to make herself a cup of soothing chamomile tea, then surveyed the empty cupboards. A bag of crisps would have to suffice as supper. She searched through the heap of unanswered mail by the telephone for the invitation to the premiere for the film she had finished just before James became really sick. As she checked the details so she could text Marcus to remind him, the name at the top of the card suddenly came into sharp focus.

‘Oh my God,’ she muttered.

She sank into a chair as her stomach did a 360-degree turn.