

Emma
Heatherington

the
Legacy
of Lucy
Harte

A poignant, life-affirming
novel that will make you
laugh and cry



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**The Legacy of Lucy Harte: A
poignant, life-affirming novel
that will make you laugh and cry**

Аннотация

This beautiful, heartbreaking novel is a must read for fans of bestselling authors Jojo Moyes, Kelly Rimmer and SD Robertson. 'Sometimes time is all we have with the people we love. I ask you to slow down in life. To take your time, but don't waste it...' Maggie O'Hara knows better than most that life can change in a heartbeat. Eighteen years ago she was given the most precious gift - a second-hand heart, and a second chance at life. Always thankful, Maggie has never forgotten Lucy Harte - the little girl who saved her life. But as Maggie's own life begins to fall apart, and her heart is broken in love, she loses sight of everything she has to live for... Until an unexpected letter changes Maggie's life. It seems Lucy's final gift to Maggie is much more than the heart that beats inside her. It's a legacy that Maggie must learn to live by, a promise to live, laugh, fall in love and heal her broken heart for good. Because as the keeper of a borrowed heart, Maggie's time is more precious than most. She must make every cherished second count... Praise for The Legacy of Lucy Harte: 'An inspiring read... beautifully written, Emma Heatherington

keeps you guessing on each turn of the page' Irish News' A wonderfully compelling read, beautifully written and a most heart-warming story'
Upstairs Downstairs

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The Legacy of Lucy Harte EMMA HEATHERINGTON



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For Ciaran and Ashley

#donatelifе

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Prologue

I thought I saw you once on a train to Dublin.

You were about six years old. You were slurping on an ice-cream, your face covered in chocolate sprinkles and you were laughing so hard at the little boy beside you that I thought you were going to choke.

I thought I saw you a few years later, but this time you were a curly-haired toddler in a park throwing a high-pitched tantrum when you couldn't reach the swing. A handsome man scooped you up in big strong arms and took you to a pram, where you kicked and screamed, your little arms stretched out, your hands opening and closing and reaching back towards the play area.

I thought I saw you as a lanky teenager one sunny afternoon when I was in London as you shopped for clothes with your mother, arguing with her over a pair of ripped jeans versus a pretty floral dress.

I think I see you all the time, even though I have no idea what you look like, who you are or what your story might have been.

You are inside me. You are part of me. You are within my every move.

I feel like I know you, Lucy Harte, I really do.

But you will never, ever know me.

Chapter 1

Monday 10th April

I am dying.

I am drowning, or else I am having a heart attack, but either way, whatever it is, I can't breathe and I'm definitely dying this time. How ironic it would be for me to die today, of all days...

Oh God, please help me.

I sit up on my brand-new bed and automatically fall back again, my squinted eyes unable to open just yet and my shaking body needing much more time to recuperate from my latest 'party for one'.

This is no ordinary hangover. Hell, no. My head is like a bowling ball, I can't open my dried-out mouth, the phone is ringing off the hook and I wish whoever it is would just stop already because I don't want to talk to anyone.

Not Flo, not my parents, not my boss and definitely not my excuse for a husband.

I really can't listen to lectures or 'I told you so', not today, not today of all days, please no. Plus... I can't remember where I was or what I did last night and I'm afraid. I am so afraid that if I answer the phone I will hear what I did last night and I can't face up to that truth ever.

Did I do something wrong? Did I leave my apartment? I can't

remember!

No, no I didn't. I definitely didn't. Not this time.

With relief I get glimpses of flashbacks of turning off the TV, stumbling into bed in my pyjamas (always a good sign when you wake up wearing pyjamas), so I can't have done that much damage, can I?

Unless I was texting everyone about how miserable I am or sharing my suffering on Facebook. Please no! Or even worse, I could have been texting *him*.

Ah Jesus! Oh why do I do the things I do? It wasn't me, it was the wine. Oh, for God's sake Maggie *get it together!*

But I can't get it together and the phone won't stop ringing! Why can't they leave me alone? I don't want to talk to anyone and I just can't bring myself to look at it to see who has woken me from my deep, drowning, drunken sleep so I shove the phone from its usual perch on the bedside locker and feel instant relief when it hits the bedroom floor in silence and falls into three pieces – the front, the back and then the battery.

There now. All is quiet at last.

But the constant pounding of my head from dehydration, and the voices of my nearest and dearest echoing, remind me of how, no matter how quiet it is here, I am so not at peace at all these days.

'Are you sure you're okay, Maggie? We're really worried you aren't able to cope with this stress.' (My mother/father – delete as appropriate.)

‘Why don’t you come and stay with me for a while? I have a spare room?’ (My best friend, Flo.)

‘Are you on some sort of death wish or what? Get a grip, Maggie!’ (My ever-sympathetic brother, John Joe.)

‘What? Ah Maggie! Why do you need to work from home again?’ (My boss/colleagues.)

‘You are going to have to move on, Mags! Get over it! Get over me and you!’ (My husband, I mean, ex-husband, Jeff.)

‘You really need to stop drinking so much. It’s not helping’ (All of the above.)

I really should stop drinking. I really should stop avoiding them all.

I really should just answer the phone and face up to their concerns, or at least reassure them that, yes, I am certainly having a shit time coping with this whole marriage break- up thing and, yes, I know my job is suffering and, yes, I need to pull myself together and get back on track, but I’m not just ready to. Not just yet.

Ah, sweet Jesus, not the landline now too! Whoever it is they are pretty bloody persistent!

‘Stop! STOP!’ I shout into the emptiness of my new apartment.

Its IKEA shininess and anonymity makes me want to smash it up and crawl out of my skin or at least under the covers, where I don’t have to be constantly reminded that this is where I live now and it doesn’t feel like home. I don’t feel like me.

I don't know who the hell I am any more.

I am alone, '*separated*', desperate and miserable in a hazy, drunken limbo between marriage and dreaded divorce and I have no idea of who I am or what I'm supposed to be doing.

'Please stop calling me! Please *stop!*' I sob into the spongy new pillow that smells like lavender – a tip from my mother to help me sleep, but the scent of it makes me want to retch.

'It's much better than wine, love,' were her words, but what would she know? She's been teetotal all her life.

The phone continues to ring, piercing my fragile brain and I picture the caller, determined to 'do the right thing by poor Maggie' and check in on me at every bloody turnaround.

Have they no stupid lives of their own? Do I constantly barrage them with phone calls and concern every time they screw up? No I don't.

But then they don't really screw up, do they?

And then I realise it's Monday. Ah, Jesus. It's Monday.

I have no idea what time it is or if I am meant to be in work right now. Normally, on waking up like this, I would already be in the shower in a blind fit of panic and praying for time to stand still so that I could get to my latest appointment or show my face in the office and convince everyone that I am fine but today... today is different.

I don't care if I am late because there is somewhere else I need to be and, at the risk of losing my job, which is no doubt already written on the cards, the place I have to go is much more

important. I hate my job. I hate everything right now, but most of all I hate Jeff and his new ‘girlfriend’ and how he has made me into this shell of nothingness, desperate and empty and drunk and sad.

I sit up on my bed again and focus.

The phone has stopped ringing. There is a God.

I open my eyes slowly and steady myself and consider what to wear, but I don’t really care about that either.

It’s time for me to go. It’s time for me to talk to Lucy Harte.

It’s weird thanking someone from the depths of your soul when you can’t see them, have never met them, when they can’t hear you and when they have no clue who you are.

It’s a bit like talking to God, I suppose. It takes faith and belief, so here I am an hour after my latest meltdown of loneliness, in a church, lighting candles, saying prayers and thanking Lucy Harte for my life – and she can’t hear a word I am saying.

I hope she is here somewhere, floating invisibly like a little angel with a smile on her face and taking in my every word, glad to have given me part of the life she left behind.

I like talking to Lucy, even if it’s via my mind and not aloud and even if it is only once a year when I get the chance to really dig deep and have a good old chin wag. I think about her every single day, but it’s always on this date that I feel her closest.

I talk to her like an old friend. Well, she *is* an old friend if you consider that our one-way conversations have been going on for exactly seventeen years today. Not many friendships last that

long, especially when, like ours, they are totally one-sided.

Even my marriage didn't last that long – seventeen *months* and ten days, to be precise, but then again, that was pretty one-sided too.

I wanted to be married to him. He didn't want to be married to me. Pretty simple, when you think of it that way ...

'Elizabeth Taylor was married eight times and had seven different husbands,' my father reminded me when I told him that Jeff was leaving. *'And you're even more beautiful than Elizabeth Taylor, I've always said it, so I wouldn't worry too much about Jeff bloody Pillock.'*

Yes, Pillock. Thank God I didn't take his name.

He's ever so slightly biased, my dad, but then again, I am his only daughter. He has to say nice things like that. It's kind of his job.

My mother's reaction, on the other hand, was a bit more traditional.

'But he can't just leave you!'

'He can, and he did,' I told her.

'But not so soon!' she said, bewildered, as we both sobbed uncontrollably for days over endless cups of tea in her kitchen, then damning Jeff to a life of misery without me and insisting that karma would one day come to bite his sorry ass. *'Marriage is so throwaway these days. And all that money on the hotel and fancy dresses all down the drain. Disgraceful. Promises and dreams down the feckin' drain.'*

She is right, of course. All those big promises and dreams just thrown away before the real hurdles of life had even set in. And, as for the money... I shudder to think what our wedding cost. It was wonderful, but hardly worth it for seventeen months and ten days ...

It's cold in the church and I hug my jacket around my waist. There are a handful of others in here, older people mainly, whose whispers sound like they are whistling as they chant with rosary beads clasped tight around their wrinkly hands.

I close my eyes and focus on Lucy again. Today is our special day. Today is the day she gave me life, a life so precious that I am reminded whenever I feel her heart beating in my chest. This heartache I am experiencing right now, as painful as it may be, reminds me of the gift of life her family gave me when they gave me her heart seventeen years ago.

I want to thank Lucy for everything I can remember in this thirty-minute window I have allowed for this encounter. It's important for me to thank her on this day, at this time every year. It's the nearest I get to gratitude, I suppose, and it keeps me sane and positive.

I try to focus on the good times from the past twelve months since we last 'spoke' and I can't help but smile at the irony. The good times are hard to come up with, believe me –but with some reflection they begin to roll off my tongue, silently, of course. I'm sure the little old ladies and gentlemen who sit around me with their eyes shut don't want to hear my life story and I find strange

comfort in my thoughts over their repetitive whispery chants of the rosary.

I thank Lucy for my promotion in January, which was mega and which means I have actually got spending money at the end of each month and savings. Actual *savings*. My father always told me that money burned a hole in my pocket – I would either spend it straight away or give it away by buying random presents for everyone and anyone I could, but now that I am totally all on my own in the big bad world I'm starting to put some away for a rainy day and it's starting to look good.

I give thanks for my apartment. I'm getting used to living on my own again (*I am so not, but I keep telling myself that and one day it will be true*) and it even has a garden. Well, it has a window box and a small, decked balcony with potted plants, but it's enough of a garden for me, for now. I can barely look after myself these days, never mind tend to a real garden with weeds and growing grass and other living things that need attention.

Then I get to the really good bits, where I tell her of all the crappy parts of the past year and how they have turned my once pretty-damn-fine life on its head.

I tell her of the night I embarrassed myself in front of my now ex-husband's family by singing Britney Spears 'Hit Me Baby One More Time' along with a full-on dance routine wearing his dad's tie with my skirt hitched up after five-too-many glasses of Prosecco. I don't even like Prosecco. Hell, I don't even know if I like Britney Spears that much, if I'm honest, so God knows

where the idea to imitate her came from.

I have a feeling that night was the beginning of the end for Jeff and I. Maybe that's when it all started to go wrong? Who knows? I've kind of blamed everything I can at this stage and still can't get my head around it. But, for now, let's blame Britney and Prosecco...

I tell her about the last few months I spent with Jeff as his wife, which was mainly made up of a) me checking his phone and b) me finding what I didn't want to see, and I pray to Lucy to help me find acceptance that he is now with her, the one he left me for only ten weeks ago. Her name is Saffron, she is an air stewardess who speaks with a lisp and they met on Facebook. Lovely.

That's as much as I know so far, despite my full-time mission to suss her out through social-network stalking but her bloody pages are all private and the most I can see is that she seems to really like cats. This makes me happy. Jeff is allergic to cats – they bring him out in hives and welts. *Delighted.*

'She must have done something wrong,' I overheard my mum say to my dad a while ago when she thought I couldn't hear her. *'A man doesn't leave his wife for no reason. There must have been something.'*

Once again my father's logic put a different spin on things as I listened from the kitchen.

'I never really liked him anyway,' he told her from behind his newspaper. *'He dyes his hair that colour, you know. Weird blacky brown. I could never trust a man who dyes his hair, especially the*

colour of cow dung. And he wears heels on his shoes.'

My dad is so on the ball. Jeff does dye his hair and he has a 'special' cobbler who he visits every time he gets new shoes...

'Jeff? Heels? Are you sure, Robert? I never noticed that.'

'Yes, heels,' my dad said. 'Put it like this, a man who needs inches there probably needs them in other places too. Nah. I never liked him. Let him get on with it. Our Maggie's way out of his league.'

I haven't told my parents about Saffron, the stewardess, and I probably never will. That would totally put my mother over the edge and we can't have that. She may wonder if any of this was my fault, but she is old-school and sweet and innocent to the ways of the modern world and she would never get how Jeff was able to fall in love with someone he met just once in a sweaty gym and then wooed through private messaging on Facebook, while I was still admiring our wedding photos and choosing names for our future family.

Instead of telling my parents the real reason behind my big fat failure of a marriage, I spill my heart out to a dead fourteen-year-old just as I tell her my secrets every year on the same date and same time of the morning, when the rest of the world is doing school runs or in rush-hour traffic heading to work or having coffee in front of early-morning television.

I tell all of this to Lucy Harte, a fourteen-year-old girl who I never met but who gave me a second chance at life, even though she has no idea that I even exist. I pray for her family, whoever

they are, and I thank them from the bottom of my borrowed heart for the day they said yes to organ donation.

Then I bless myself quickly and aim to get out of the church before someone mistakes me for a real Christian and I leave Lucy to do whatever it is dead fourteen-year-olds do up in heaven, while I go back to my new life of singlehood, meals for one and real estate, which is highly pressurised, fast-moving and a far cry from the soft Irish countryside where I was brought up.

I am being brave.

I am being brave but I am not brave.

I am not brave at all. In fact I am bloody scared stiff.

Fuck you, Jeff.

I want to scream and shout and kick and cry so loudly but I am in a church so I can't and it's so damn frustrating.

Fuck you for leaving me and fuck her for taking you away. Why? What the hell did I do that was so bad?

I think I am going to cry and I so don't want to cry in public.

I close my eyes, breathe in and out, in and out, in and out and focus on Lucy Harte. I am not here to think about Jeff. I am here to say thank you to Lucy.

It's been a long time, Lucy Harte. Seventeen years is a long, long time for you to beat inside of me. Why do I have the feeling that we haven't very long left?

I really should get to work.

Chapter 2

‘Are you *sure* you are okay? You don’t *sound* okay? I’ve been calling you all weekend, Maggie!’

And don’t I know it...! My mother’s voice is always high-pitched, but today it is more frantic than ever.

‘I’m fine, Mum. I’m driving,’ I tell her. I shouldn’t have answered. My head...

I’m not really driving but it’s the only thing that might get her off the line. My mother would talk the hind leg off a donkey but she sees right through the whole ‘*I’m sorry, you’re breaking up*’ or ‘*I’m in a bad area*’ or ‘*I have an important call coming through*’ excuses I usually make when I can’t be bothered with conversation.

‘You’re not fine. I know you’re not fine. Robert, she says she’s driving and she’s fine.’

‘Lies!’ my father shouts back. ‘She’s not fine. Maggie, you cannot do *stress*! You need to rest. No stress!’

‘You should have taken the day off and done something nice, Maggie. Even your father says so. You can’t afford this stress.’

‘Yes, she should have taken the day off and done something nice,’ I hear him echo in the background. I can just picture him, standing in his green wellies and baggy old-man trousers with his braces over his checked shirt, hovering by the ancient navy-blue landline phone that is attached to our kitchen wall back

home in the big farmhouse I grew up in. He will be chewing on something, the end of his pipe, probably, and he will have a pen behind his ear (chewed also), just like I always do when I am doing something I enjoy and he will smell already of manure and sawdust.

‘I’m going out for dinner with Flo after work and she is meeting me outside the office at six, so it’s best I’m there,’ I lie. ‘I’m really looking forward to it.’

‘Oh, that’s nice. Where are you going for dinner? Robert, she is going for dinner. With Flo.’

‘We’re going to... um, we’re going to that new place,’ I waffle. ‘You know, my favourite. On George Street.’ More lies. ‘You see, I’m keeping busy, Mum. Busy, busy, busy.’

‘Well, I suppose that’s better than having too much time to think. Did you go to the church?’

‘Yes.’

‘Robert, she went to the church.’

Oh, Christ.

I hear a rustle as my dad takes the phone.

‘I hope you weren’t making an eejit out of yourself in front of those people,’ he says in a fluster.

By ‘those people’, he means ‘a man of the cloth’. By ‘eejit’ he means going to what Catholics call ‘Confession’. There is no one my dad hates more in this world than the Clergy.

‘I wasn’t.’

‘You could say your piece in your own apartment and it would

do the same good than telling ‘them’ boyos your problems. None of their bloody business. Nosey –.’

‘I didn’t even see a priest, Dad. I just said what I wanted to say to Lucy, lit a few candles and left. I’m about to walk into the office now, so I’d better go.’

That bit wasn’t a lie. I was standing outside our office block and Davey, the porter, was winking at me as he did every morning and checking out my boobs, legs, bum and everything in between. Davey loved a good old perv.

‘You’re a good girl, Maggie O’Hara,’ says my dad and I can hear his voice shake. ‘A really good girl and you deserve the best and you deserve to be here. God bless wee Lucy Harte, but you deserve to have a life too and a great one at that. Now, push those guilty feelings to the side and have a good day, do you hear me? And look at Princess Diana. Charles didn’t want her but it didn’t stop her finding a man again, did it?’

‘No, it didn’t, but then she died,’ I remind him.

‘Well you’re not going to die, are you? You’re even nicer than Princess Diana. You’re even nicer than Princess Diana *and* Elizabeth Taylor. You’re nicer than the whole bloody lot of them rolled into one and don’t you ever forget it!’

I turn my back on Davey. I feel his eyes burning on my backside.

‘I hear you, Dad,’ I say and feel tears sting my eyes. ‘I am absolutely fine and as much as I wish I looked like Lady Di or Liz Taylor or the whole bloody lot of them, believe me when I say

that finding a man is the least of my worries. Now, stop worrying! I am thirty-three years old. I can cope with being dumped and having my heart broken. I've coped with a lot worse...'

I know that he is pointing his finger through the air in front of him as he speaks. I can just see him.

'Well, I'm just saying that when the time comes to find love again, you'll have no bother,' he tells me, 'so don't be worrying that you are going to be on your own because you won't be on your own for long. You've been through enough in your life and if I was talking to the man upstairs if there even is such a thing as the man upstairs I would be telling him that enough is enough and it's about time he left you alone! Enough is enough!'

And at that I burst out crying.

'Yes and *that* is well enough, Robert!' my mother shouts in the background. 'Enjoy dinner with Flo and send our love to her, Maggie. Is she crying?'

'I'm not crying,' I say, wiping black blobs of mascara onto the back of my hand. 'I love you both, okay? See you soon. I will come visit really soon.'

'Do. Yes, see you soon, love,' says my dad and I can tell that he is crying too.

This makes me feel even worse because every time my second-hand heart breaks, I think my parents feel my pain even more than I do.

'Morning, Maggie,' chirps Bridget, our long-serving receptionist who caters for the six businesses who share our

building, diverting calls and taking appointments and basically minding other people's business. 'My God, what happened? You look a mess. And you're very late!'

Bridget is salt of the earth, but she couldn't tell a white lie to save her own life. I know I look like shit. I don't need her to remind me. I also know I'm late too! I fucking hate this place right now.

I stop in my tracks. I am not just late for work. I am late for a really, really important meeting. Oh shit!

'Can you tell the guys I will be up in two? And give my apologies, please, of course. I've had a rough morning.'

Bridget looks back at me somewhat reluctantly.

'A speedy two-minute fix-up in the bathroom isn't going to make much difference, is it?' I say.

She shrugs and lifts her phone while I quickly nip into the bathroom and see her honestly staring right back at me. I have a face that would scare babies, all blurred mascara, and I am as white as a ghost. Ah well, nothing that a hairbrush and some good old war paint won't fix. Thank heavens for make-up. I need to compose myself and then forget what day it is.

Lucy Harte, just for now, I will have to try and let your sweet memory go.

A few minutes later I am in the elevator. My eyes are only slightly puffy but I've made a good job of looking as normal as I possibly can under the circumstances.

I'm half an hour late for a meeting with Will Powers Jr. I

should be terrified. I urge the elevator to speed up. My heart begins to race. See, it works. It may be broken but it works and I am reminded of its presence every day as it breaks into tinier pieces over Jeff and that cat-loving smurf he is living with....

But anyhow...Will Powers... the boss's son ... the smooth-talking, suit-wearing, stereotypical rich kid who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and was blessed with brooding good looks to boot is waiting for me and he is probably foaming at the mouth in temper.

Will lives in Spain most of the year but comes back and forth to deal with mainly human resources matters and is always tanned and tries his best to be nice but would stab you in the back if you didn't watch yourself. You could say he has it all really... until he opens his mouth and talks the biggest load of shite you ever did hear in a fake American accent. He has it all, apart from a heart, that is. He could be doing with a transplant too, I often think. Swap his swinging brick for something that actually shows some compassion now and again.

'Sorry I'm late,' I say, trying to sound convincing but I'm not really sure that I'm sorry. I can't feel sorry for anyone, only myself, these days.

Will looks at his watch, then, like a Mexican wave at a football match, the rest do too. Copy-cats. Five faces stare back at me and I feel my face flush.

They are waiting on my excuse. Their silence tells me so. 'I... I was...'

‘Sit down, Maggie,’ says Will.

I wasn’t expecting such a gathering and I have no idea what this meeting is even about. I was probably informed in advance, but, surprise, surprise, I can’t remember.

The company directors, all of them, are here in one room. I bet I have big red blotches all over my chest, which always bloody happens when I’m under pressure, but, more importantly, what on earth is going on?

Will pulls out a seat and I do as I am told. I sit. He smells of posh cologne and flashes an uber-white smile. ‘I know this is a difficult day for you.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Just try and relax, Maggie. Thirty minutes late is not going to change the world. Have a seat and chill.’

Chill? Who does he think he is, Jay-Z? Who even says ‘chill’ these days?

Why is everyone staring? And what on earth does he know about my difficult day and its relevance to my life? I hadn’t told anyone that it’s my heart anniversary and I keep my private life very much private. No one even knows I broke up with Jeff. Well, apart from Bridget downstairs whose brother knows Jeff’s family and, yes, I told Diane who sits opposite me and... okay, so I may have told a few people. Maybe they all know more than I thought they do about me. But what the hell is going on?

‘I’m sure you have been wondering what this meeting is all about, Maggie,’ said Will. ‘I hope I haven’t been causing you

sleepless nights.'

Sleepless nights? I haven't had a full night's sleep since Jeff dumped me. It's not easy to sleep and stalk mutual friends on Facebook for clues on his whereabouts at the same time.

'I haven't been sleeping well lately but...'

The five faces are staring at me.

Will looks up at me from beneath dark knitted eyebrows that I notice are the exact same as his father's. No, Will Sr's are even thicker. But greyer. Why am I even thinking about eyebrows?

'Maggie?'

'I'm fine. Just the odd sleepless night, but yes. I'm... I'm fine,' I say, screwing up my forehead. I think I have overused that word for one day but it's all I can think of. I reach out my hands in front and clasp them together. I wish I had papers to shuffle, or a diary to check or something to do with my hands.

'You don't have to pretend you are fine,' says Sylvia Madden, one of the CEOs, from across the table. 'You have been through quite a lot personally lately and no one expects you to be fine.'

They are all staring at me. I need to get out of here. I don't want to be here any more. I feel the room closing in.

'I can't do this any more,' I say, but I barely recognise my own voice. I stand up. 'I need to go... I need to quit. I can't do it. Sorry.'

I am going to cry. Will shakes his head. He is smiling. Why is he smiling?

'I understand why you would feel like giving it all up, quitting,'

he says. 'But you're not a quitter, Maggie.'

Now, I really *am* crying. Big sobs just like I was earlier when I was on the phone to my dad. I sit down again.

'I have to... I just need some time to get through this.'

I manage to blurt out the words semi-coherently as Sylvia hands me a tissue across the table.

'Yes, I can see that,' says Will. 'Your work has slipped since the promotion and having done some homework, we think you need a break, but only for a while, for health reasons.'

'Slipped?' I splutter. 'I suppose that's one way of putting it. I feel like a failure. I should probably go.'

I try to recall how my work has 'slipped' and I cringe at the realisation. Sure, I'd taken some days out after the break-up with Jeff and before that, when things weren't going well with us, I'd had to leave early a few times and then there was the day when I broke down in the coffee room, but that was it really. Oh, apart from the day when I was showing a client around a property and I cried because he reminded me of Jeff and I might have flirted with him a bit more than was professionally advisable... crap. And that day last week when a potential buyer from America had to wait while I got sick in the bathroom of a boutique hotel I was showing him round after drowning the poor man in the stink of vodka from the night before. Oh shit.

'Yes, it has been poor lately and not like the vibrant go-getter we know, Maggie,' says Will, but he is still smiling. He is not mad. 'Days off, working 'from home', late arrivals, missed

appointments... but your health comes first and foremost and you are too big an asset to our team to take any chances on. You seem very stressed and upset so I'd like to offer you some time out, with a payment plan, of course, to get yourself together and when you feel like coming back, the door is always open.'

Stressed? Well, of course I am stressed. My husband left me for a younger model and seventeen years ago today I lay on an operating table and I've outlived any expectancy the doctors could have given me, and believe me, the reminder every year of another year of survival is a big burden and a huge heap of gratitude to carry around.

But time out... a payment plan? I think I am going to choke and the walls are moving towards me again. Why are they offering me this lifeline? I don't deserve this.

'Can I get you some water?' asks Sylvia. I wish they would stop staring and smiling. Why do they have to be so nice? It's making me worse.

I look up to see Will Powers Sr enter the room, apologising too for being late. Sweet Jesus, this really is serious. *Very* serious. To have both 'Wills' in the same room always indicates a crisis. In fact, it is a sight that's enough to put the fear of God into any working member of staff.

Sylvia gives me the glass of water and I sink it in one. I didn't realise I was so thirsty.

Will Sr pulls a chair out right beside me and clasps my cold, sweaty hand tight. I always admired him so much and he knows it

and he has nurtured me through my whole time at the company, giving me opportunity after opportunity. I feel like I have let him down.

‘Maggie, we don’t want to lose you,’ he says gently, reminding me of my father. They are about the same age, but their lives are worlds apart. My dad drives a tractor while Will Powers Sr drives a Jaguar. My dad holidays in a caravan in Donegal while Mr Powers takes his wife on Caribbean cruises. Yet there is something about him that reminds me of old Robert back on the farm with his cows and sheep and love of a good old fry-up on the weekends and his current obsession with celebrity divorce.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Powers. I’m sorry if I’ve disappointed you in any way. I know I have missed quite a few days and my work probably has um, *slipped*, but I can assure you that I will make it up to you. To all of you.’

Here I am, almost thirty-four years old, in my fancy suit and expensive shoes, at almost the peak of my career and I feel like a schoolgirl who hasn’t done her homework or who has been caught cheating in an exam.

‘You have let no one down,’ says Mr Powers. The others move their heads like nodding dogs. ‘And don’t be panicking and thinking we have called a crisis meeting which is all about you. We have a few major projects to discuss today, which is why we are all here together, but it is because you are so special to us that we wanted to show you our full support in helping you get through whatever it is you need to get through.’

I think of other incidents; the car accident I almost had when I arrived at work a little tipsy from the night before... the days I had turned up so hung over I could hardly string a sentence together ... there were many little things I had chosen to ignore and now they had all come to the forefront, like an abominable snowball rolling down a hill towards me. The day I sent an email to a wrong client and put 'x' like a kiss at the end of it, again due to a boozy lunch, and the time I called another a wrong name throughout an entire meeting because my head was too fuzzy and full of anger with Jeff to have done any preparation.

And they are giving me a lifeline. Instead of telling me to clear my desk and never come back, they are giving me a chance to put my life back together. Wow.

'We were thinking of six to eight weeks, initially,' says young Will Powers from the head of the table. 'If this isn't long enough, just let us know. We all need time out, Maggie. Hell, I know I do from time to time. I don't want to see any of our staff burn out, least of all someone as valuable to the team as you are.'

My God, the Man of Steel does have a heart after all and a pretty big one at that.

'I... I don't know what to say.'

'Do you agree it might help?' asks Sylvia who sits opposite me. I always thought she was a bit of a self-absorbed snob and now I swear I can see her eyes fill with tears in empathy.

'Yes,' I mumble back to her and nod, wiping my nose. 'Yes, I do. I didn't think that things were so bad, but now that I'm here...

well, yes, I do think it will help.’

‘That’s good,’ says Will Sr. ‘I want to see you get back in the hot seat here at Powers Enterprises as quickly as possible and if there is anything else we can do to help, just give me a call.’

I look at the business card he presses into my hand and flip it over to find his personal number written in his own handwriting. I am overwhelmed with a flurry of emotions, like a slow-motion movie is unfolding as I watch on in disbelief.

‘Thank you, Mr Powers,’ I whisper, still staring at the card. ‘Thank you. All of you.’

He walks me to the door but instead of stopping there, Will Powers Sr walks me through the open-plan office, past my colleagues, who don’t even lift their heads (no one ever does when he is around) and down into the foyer. Thankfully Bridget isn’t at the front desk. We walk outside and the rain has stopped and Davey the porter must be on a cigarette break, so I have a clear path to the car, but Mr Powers stops just before we reach it.

‘Sometimes, Maggie, life moves too fast and we can’t keep up no matter how hard we try. Before you know it, you’re facing retirement and kicking yourself, wondering how on earth you’ve missed out on the simple things in life. Take some time and *breathe*. Do at least one nice thing every day, something for yourself. Build yourself back up again and then I want you right back here where you belong. Do you hear?’

I nod back at him and smile. Carlsberg don’t do bosses ...

‘You’re a very special and very kind man, Mr Powers,’ I tell

him. 'I will never forget you for this. Thank you.'

'I'll see you back here really soon,' he tells me and for a second, I think he is going to give me a fatherly hug, but he stops and pats me on the shoulder and then walks off towards the tower block where I have spent most of my life for the past five years.

I sit in the car for a few moments and breathe right to the pit of my stomach, trying to digest what has just happened on today of all days. I feel a weight lifting off my shoulders, a pressure gone already and I take my time before I drive off and don't stop until I reach the off license.

I need a drink.

Chapter 3

It's almost ten at night and I am watching my wedding DVD all on my own and I keep rewinding it to the part where Jeff reads out the poem he wrote especially for me and there's a big close-up on me and my eyes are stinging red from crying at his overwhelming love.

Now they are stinging red from overwhelming love for Sauvignon Blanc. Isn't it amazing what a difference a year or two makes?

'You lift me up when I'm feeling down. You light up my world when you smile. You are my one and only, the one I love and the one who I want to grow old with.'

Vomit...

I can see that it's straight from Google, or else a Ronan Keating song, now that I have snapped out of my starry-eyed romantic honeymoon phase. I am now in a 'bitch of darkness phase' after my afternoon of sleeping and drinking and sleeping and drinking and ignoring more phone calls. (It's Flo this time. She will be grand, as they say here in Ireland. *Grand.*)

I switch off the DVD, put on some eighties' classics and sway to the beat of Rick Astley, then look out the window onto the city below me and I raise my glass to my freedom and my future. I have got to be positive. I am merry and positive and I am on a 'career break' – that's what they call it these days. I have it all at

my feet and the world awaits, starting with this city I call home.

Plus it's still my heart anniversary, isn't it? On this day, seventeen years ago I was at death's door and then a miraculous gift of life from a little girl in Scotland and her totally amazing family gave me the chance to grow into adulthood. So what if I don't have a husband any more. So what if I almost lost my job by acting the eejit lately. I still have life! I don't know how much longer I have it, but for now I do and it's for living!

'I still have life!' I shout out through my open window and a couple below me shout back at me to fuck off. I smile at them and wave. I am drunk again. And I am loving it! I love everything right now!

Mostly, I love Belfast. I love the buzz, the people-watching, the culture, the accents, the shopping, the night-life and the sense of community that still exists, even though it's very much a big city to a country girl like me with its universities, cosmopolitan quarters and bloody dark history.

I think of all the men I have loved and lost since I moved here in my university days and I start to laugh and laugh and laugh at the memories.

There was Bob, the engineering graduate (or Bob the Builder, as we all called him), who moved to Australia when I was in the thick of my studies and who never returned. There was Martin, an accountant from Dublin, who said he loved me but that with my temporary tattoos and purple hair at the time, he could never see me being the 'wife' type; there was Andrew who worked in

sales but who turned out to have a criminal record the length of my said long legs and more, and then there was Jeff, the teacher who, as already mentioned, left me for Saffron the Stewardess quicker than the shine wore off his wedding ring.

My love life has been, let's just say, colourfully complicated.

'I love being colourfully complicated!' I shout out loud and continue dancing with myself.

'Fuck off', shouts Mr Smart Ass from below again. This time I give him the fingers, then laugh my way to the sofa, totally absorbed in Wham!, who are now playing on the music channel. This is fun. No work tomorrow, a white-wine buzz and Wham! What more would a girl want? Who needs a husband and a job anyway? I'm drunk and I'm on top of the world! I've got this! I've finally got this!

I see my mail on the coffee table. How exciting! I've got mail! Real snail mail. I lift it up and try to sort it while still dancing, but my vision is blurred and I have to set down my wine glass to focus.

A letter from my mobile-phone company, a credit-card bill... I fling them on the floor.

A list of offers from the local supermarket? A voucher with a pound-off washing powder. How exciting?! And it's on the floor it goes too!

But then a handwritten letter catches my eye and it stops me in my tracks.

I study it, knowing almost immediately that this is of some sort

of huge importance but the words are moving, dancing before my eyes. I squint to focus. No good. I close one eye. The writing is neat, all in capital letters and in blue biro. It reminds me of the letters I used to get from a pen pal I once had who lived in Brighton and who drew lines on her envelopes with a pencil and ruler and then rubbed them out when she had written the address in perfect symmetry. Weirdo.

I try to read the postmark on the letter and eventually it comes clear. It says the letter was posted in town of Tain, near Inverness in Scotland.

Scotland, right? *Tain*? Oh holy shit!

My heart stops. Quite ironic, really, but it literally skips a beat and when I find my breath again I reach for my wine and take a long gulp, draining the glass.

There is only one person I know from Tain. One person I know, but who I never have met and never will.

That person is Lucy Harte.

And Lucy Harte is dead.

Chapter 4

I wake up in daylight with the letter in my hand, still unopened. I must have collapsed into a drunken coma – again – or else from the shock of what could lie inside this envelope.

‘Just open it, Maggie,’ Flo tells me when I call her. She doesn’t even get mad that it’s just gone seven in the morning, but then again, her son has probably been awake for at least an hour so it’s like the middle of the day to her. ‘There’s no point staring at it and wondering. Are you sure you don’t want me to come over?’

I am still holding the letter and I try to sip the last glass of wine from last night which tastes like vinegar and makes me gag. I am not yet totally sober. But unfortunately Flo can’t just ‘come over’ – as much as I’d want her to. As a single parent, she can’t exactly up sticks and leave with a two-year-old on her hip at this time of the morning. He goes to school. No, he is only two so he doesn’t go to school. He goes to day care. I am such a crap friend.

‘Don’t be silly,’ I tell her, even though I would give my right arm for her to be sitting here with me now. ‘You have Billie to get sorted. Do you really think it’s from them?’

I can hear Flo inhale deeply and finally she replies.

‘Well, unless it’s some sick joke, yes I do think it’s from ‘them’. I mean, Tain is hardly the centre of the universe and from your description of the envelope, it’s not a bill or one of those random marketing leaflets or charity letters. It has to be them.’

‘Them’ are the Harte family. Lucy Harte’s family. I don’t know how many of ‘them’ they are or if they are men, women or children; her grandparents, her mother or her father and despite my efforts in my early twenties to find ‘them’ to thank ‘them’ by going through the official route via hospitals and social systems, this is the first correspondence I have ever had and certainly not the way I expected to hear from them.

But why would they be writing to me? Why now? And why not when I wanted them to in years gone by?

‘They aren’t supposed to get in touch with me directly, Flo,’ I say, looking around the kitchen now and searching in every corner for a cigarette. I don’t smoke and never have done, but I need something to ease my nerves and Jeff used to have the odd smoke when he felt anxious, so maybe it would work for me. ‘It’s a delicate process. It’s supposed to go through the hospitals if there is to be any correspondence.’

‘That doesn’t say they won’t find you if they want to,’ said Flo. ‘The world is tiny, Maggie. You know Lucy’s name, so I’m sure they could have found out yours if they wanted to. A quick Google search or a nosey on Facebook and *voilà*. It’s not rocket science.’

‘I suppose,’ I mumble. ‘But what would they want from me?’ ‘Well, what have you always wanted from them?’ asks Flo. ‘Closure, maybe? A chance to say thank you for my shitty life.’ ‘You don’t have a shitty life,’ Flo assures me. ‘It’s just temporarily shit.’

I light up a cigarette I found in a box in a drawer. I knew there had to be one from the house-warming/birthday party I had. The morning after left all sorts of evidence of a heavy night.

‘Are you smoking?’ asks Flo.

‘Are you psychic?’ I retort. My God, she doesn’t miss a beat.

‘I sometimes think I am a bit. Do you think I am?’

‘No. Yes, I am smoking and I’d take stronger stuff if I could get my hands on it, believe me,’ I say, which is so not true as I am petrified of anything stronger than a menthol cigarette, in reality, and Flo knows it.

‘Anyhow, are you going to open the letter, or are you not?’ she asks. ‘No matter if this is the official way of doing things or not, you are going to have to open it before you send yourself crazy and me with it.’

‘Okay, okay, I’m on it.’

I stare at the handwriting again and put the cigarette on an ashtray, then exhale smoke from my lungs, polluting my beautiful kitchen. I start to cough. Guilt and an urge to vomit make me put the cigarette out after one puff. Disgusting.

‘I thought this was what you always wanted, Maggie?’

‘It is what I’ve always wanted,’ I whisper and, as if on autopilot, my fingers start to pull the envelope apart as I nestle my phone under my ear. ‘But I’m absolutely petrified, Flo. I think I’m in shock.’

‘Okay, pause a second. Wait!’ says Flo. I am totally convinced she can see me. The woman should have been a detective. She

can read me like a book.

‘What? I’m in the middle of opening it, for crying out loud!’

‘I just want you to think of what it is you would like this letter to say. What is it you had ever hoped to gain from meeting with, or talking to, the Harte family? You say closure. Is there anything else?’

‘I suppose... I suppose I just want to let her go,’ I say and I close my eyes as my own made-up images of Lucy flash through my mind. ‘I want to be able to close the door on Lucy Harte and get on with my own life. And I guess the only way I’ve ever felt that would be possible was if I got a chance to say thank you to whoever it was who decided to offer up her organs to someone like me when they had just suffered the ultimate tragedy of losing their own child.’

‘Well, that’s certainly it in a nutshell,’ says Flo and, before I know it, I have the letter unfolded and the words blur before me. The writing inside, like on the envelope, is handwritten in neat black ink. I am impressed.

‘Oh God, Flo.’

‘Oh God Flo what? *What?*’

‘It *is* them. It really is them! Will I read it out?’

‘Well, I can’t see it from here, can I?! Yes! Read it out.’ She stops for a second. ‘Only if you want to, of course... I can hang up and hear from you later if you want to do this yourself?’

There is no way I want to do this myself, which is why I called Flo in the first place. I have read the first line twice but still

haven't digested a word.

'Okay, here goes,' I say, clearing my throat, as if I am in front of a huge audience. 'Dear Maggie...'

Dear Maggie,

I hope I haven't shocked you too much by contacting you directly and to your home address but I have work connections in Belfast and, with a bit of poking around, I found you at last. We have a mutual friend, believe it or not, and he was able to give me your address. At least, I hope it's you and not some other random lady called Maggie O'Hara, who will have no clue what I am talking about.

My name is Simon Harte and I am the older brother of Lucy, who died on 10th April 1999 and who was your organ donor. I still remember that day and those before it like I do yesterday, but I won't burden you with the details of how she died as it's not essentially why I am getting in touch.

I know you tried to contact us a few years back and I'm sorry that we only got so far and the process stopped, but my father, well he wasn't capable of it, Maggie. He wasn't capable of a lot since our family was torn apart that day. He was a broken man from that day on – a broken man who never was fixed.

He thought donating organs was the right thing to do at the time, but he cursed himself for years afterwards, having nightmares about his decision. I hope you understand that meeting you would have not given him any comfort. In fact, it might have tipped him over the edge.

However, the decision to reply to you is no longer in his hands. Sadly my dad, after years of suffering, passed away last month and now it's just me left... just me, my memories of my family and an Irish girl who holds the heart of my dead sister. There are others, I suppose, who are out there, but you are the only one to ever look us up.

This week marked Lucy's anniversary and the first one I had to face up to on my own. And now I am writing to you...

I don't want to freak you out, Maggie. I ask nothing from you and if you don't reply I will try and forget that you exist and do my best to move on with my life.

But you contacted us first and now that the next step of the process is in my hands and mine only, I want to let you know that I'm up for a chat if you think it would help you move on or close a chapter that I can imagine has been haunting you for years, as it has done me. I would love to see how my sister's legacy has lived on.

My contact details are on the page enclosed. We could chat on the phone or even email if you prefer? Don't worry – I won't land at your door! And you can take my offer or leave it.

I hope you take it.

With very best wishes,

Simon D. Harte

I put the letter onto the table and slowly let go of it, but my eyes are superglued to his signature. Simon D. Harte. Lucy Harte's brother. And a mutual friend? Who could that be?

‘Christ almighty,’ says Flo. ‘What do you think of that, Maggie? Are you alright there?’

I’m not sure if I’m alright. I’m not sure if I am even still breathing. I need to read it again and again. It is both heart-breaking and breath-taking and so different to how I imagined this moment would happen. I never really believed the day would come when I would hear from the Harte family and now it has and it’s even more overwhelming than I expected it to be.

‘Are you going to get in touch? I’d be itching to if I were you. But have a think about it first. He seems nice. But then I thought Damian was nice and he fled before Billie was out of nappies. I hope he is nice,’ says Flo. She is rambling. Flo always rambles when she is nervous.

‘Yes, I am going to contact him,’ I say, and of that I am sure. ‘In fact, I am not going to waste another second. I am going to contact him now.’

I stand up and the room starts to spin, so I sit back down again and try and regain some focus. Am I crazy? Am I even ready for this? It’s something I have always dreamed of happening, but I’ve just taken time off work to get myself together and I’m not sure if this is the way to do so. Or maybe it is. Maybe this is what’s meant to be...

‘Now? Are you going to contact him now?’ says Flo. ‘Maybe you should wait... you know, sleep on it.’

‘Sleep on it?’ I ask her. ‘Sleep on it? I can’t sleep on it!’

‘Okay, okay. What are you going to say to him, then?’ asks Flo.

I stand up again, this time more slowly, and lean against the worktop for support. What am I going to say? What *am* I going to say? I have absolutely no idea...

'I'll tell you when I do. Thanks Flo.'

'Keep it simple, Maggie. Polite and simple.'

She says goodbye and hangs up and I am left in my kitchen with an empty glass of last night's wine, a smoky room and a mind full of whirlwind thoughts. I have so much to say, but where on earth do I start? I have absolutely no idea.

At 8am I am in bed and on my third draft of what I'd decided, on Flo's advice, was meant to be a very polite and simple reply – in which I would thank Simon Harte for getting in touch, hope he was well, give sympathy to him on the death of his father and take it from there. As in, wait for a reply and see how it goes. Simple.

But it wasn't simple at all. I have so many questions I want to ask him and they just won't stop gushing out. What was Lucy like? What happened to her? Did she die suddenly? Did she suffer? Does he resent me like his father did? Are there other people walking around with Lucy's organs inside them? What about her poor mother? Where is she now? Is she still around? Did knowing about me make him feel like Lucy wasn't really dead? Has he tried to contact me before or even thought about going behind his father's back to do so? How long did it take to find me? Who told him my name? Who the hell is our mutual friend? Was he doing this through grief or was it something he

had thought about properly? Had he sought professional help before even considering such a decision?

I write and delete and write and delete and my eyes are starting to drop again but I won't give in to sleep until I press send. Eventually I settle for this...

Dear Simon,

First of all, I am so sorry to hear of your loss. I cannot put into words how thrilled I am to hear from you.

Thrilled. No, I'm not thrilled. That sounds desperate. I start again.

Dear Simon,

Thank you so much for getting in touch. How brave of you to send your letter. You have indeed found the right Maggie O'Hara and I am delighted to hear from you after a long time searching and wondering.

I am so very sorry to hear of the loss of your father.

I have so much I want to ask and say and I've written this email over and over again to avoid waffling and now here I am doing exactly that ... waffling.

Anyhow, yes, it's me.

I too have listed my contacts below, should you want to chat further.

God bless you,

Maggie

I press send. *God bless you?* What? I must be turning holy. My stomach is in my mouth as I close the laptop and curl up under

my duvet in a mixture of delirium and exhaustion. I re-read the email. Shit, but it is awful. It's bitty, it's nervy, it's rushed. Shit. But it's done.

I need to sleep.

Simon D. Harte. I wonder what the D stands for. Derek? David? Daniel? Yes, I bet it is Daniel. Why am I even wondering that? What difference does that make?

I wonder lots of things. I wonder where he is right now. Well, he is in Tain, I suppose. But where exactly?

Is he a sad and lonely man who is clinging on to a last-chance family connection and is going to want to meet me like I'm long-lost family? Is he lying right now in bed with his arms around an oblivious woman who has no idea of his pursuing me and will go nuts when she finds out in case it takes him away from her? Maybe it's been a lengthy obsession with him to find the people who carry parts of his dead sister around?

My mind continues to race furiously.

Maybe Lucy Harte was murdered or killed in a freak accident and he is out for revenge and will now track me down in a fit of rage and jealousy that I am alive and she isn't! Oh, good Lord!

Maybe he is outside my door now and has been following my every move in some stalker-type way and is going to break in and kidnap me and hold me to ransom!

Or my parents! What if he has tracked them down too and wants to blackmail them in some sick kind of way and threatens to kill them all!

Maybe I am the one going nuts!

Maybe Flo was right and I should have slept on it.

I lie and stare at the ceiling. It's going to be a long, long day.

I wake up later that morning with a crick in my neck and a thumping headache and check my phone with the same dread that comes with every hangover.

I turn to say good morning to Jeff but he isn't there, of course.

It's just me and the plush, unslept-on new pillow beside me and this strange room that I am so trying to get used to with its new pale grey-and-white gingham bedcovers and matching curtains and clean white walls that I am trying my best to suit the new me.

I scroll through Facebook, but it only serves to annoy me as I read of people I hardly know and their pretend-perfect lives, then turn to Twitter for a snapshot of random thoughts from more people I don't know. And then I check my emails and a rush of excitement fills my veins when I remember the early-morning message I sent to Simon D. Harte.

I have two messages in my inbox, so I'm guessing that the emails, or at least one of them, are from Simon.

But they are not. One is from a finance company offering loans at a ridiculously high interest rate and another is offering me Viagra for a discount price of \$5. I'm gutted. Why hasn't he replied?

Probably because he hasn't read it yet and is at work or doing whatever people do in the north of Scotland like eating a late breakfast or an early lunch or reading the paper or on a train to

a meeting somewhere?

Yes. Probably.

I sneak another look at Facebook, despite how much it aggrieves me these days. Jeff and I have lots of mutual online friends and I know I run the risk of his photo popping up on my newsfeed is a huge probability and I will sink into further self-pity when it happens. Especially if it is one with 'herself' in it. I wonder, do they take selfies and post them like we used to? I wonder, does he take her picture at every turn like he used to do with me?

And then my phone pings and I open my Inbox, wide-eyed and hoping.

This time it isn't junk mail. It is him.

It's Simon D. Harte. Oh, good God above.

I bless myself and press open, then I bless myself again. I will be joining the golden oldies in the church soon and saying the rosary in whispers if I keep up this rate of acknowledging God, but somehow it feels like the right thing to do.

Dear Maggie,

I take a very deep breath.

I don't know when the last time was that I cried.

I don't even think I cried at the funeral way back then but, to be honest, that's all a blur. I was only seventeen and I think I stayed in shock for at least a year after that. What I am trying to say is that I am really not a man who cries easily, or even when pushed, and believe me I have been pushed to the limits many times. My

wife is having our first baby and is very emotional, so I need to let her do most of the crying these days!

I cried, however, when I read your email. I have never been so relieved about anything in my whole life as I am now that I have heard back from you and that you are not mad or telling me to butt out of your life or reporting me to the medical authorities for contacting you directly.

I too am trying not to waffle but there is so much to ask you, so much to say. Do you feel the same?? Please be honest. I can't emphasise this enough – I don't expect anything from you. You don't have to reply again if you don't want to. I'm just so happy to hear from you and to know that you are well. You are well, aren't you? I really hope you are.

Now I am so waffling.

I will go and wish you a great day.

Best wishes and most of all, thank you for getting in touch.

Thank you

Simon

No 'D' this time. Just Simon. Just plain informal chatty 'Simon'.

I read it all over again. And then again. And then again.

He seems pretty normal, right? Not too serial killer-ish, so I think I'm pretty safe for now. He has a wife. They are having a baby. I picture him, sitting at a breakfast table, or maybe on a train. He is somewhere out there, pressing send and waiting in the same anticipation as I have been on a response. Even in my

dreams I was waiting on a response. What does he look like? What did Lucy look like? My mind is racing. I have so many questions! Where do I start? I haven't even got out of bed and there is so much I need to say and do!

I start typing back immediately.

Dear Simon...

So lovely to hear from you again. If you want to talk, any time, please feel free. My number is on my signature at the bottom of my email, so do give me a buzz anytime.

We all need to talk. I know I really do right now.

Chat soon,

Maggie

And then I send. And I wait.

Chapter 5

My mother calls me later that afternoon when I am toying between a bunch of lilies or a bunch of tulips in Tesco.

‘And I just told her that when it comes to John Joe, he will do what he wants when he wants and no one, not even her, will stop him,’ she says.

‘Told who?’

‘Vivienne!’

I am still none the wiser. ‘Who?’

‘*Vivienne!* John Joe’s girlfriend!’

I have no idea why my mother thinks the domesticities of my older brother and his latest squeeze hold any interest for me, but I try and keep up with her.

‘Right, okay,’ I mumble, checking the price tags on the flowers to help me decide. Tulips it is.

‘I mean, even your father says that John Joe is his own worst enemy when it comes to relationships. He can’t handle sharing his space. He can’t handle sharing a bag of bloody chips, never mind anything that might dare last longer! So I thought I did right by setting the poor girl straight. What do you think? Did I say too much?’

‘What?’

‘Did I say too much? I mean, it’s not as if I have even met her, but she called me for advice and I could barely make out her

accent. I think she is French. I always try to give good impartial advice, even to the lovers of my own two children, no matter what their nationality.'

I put the tulips back and pick up the lilies. I should probably get a basket. I fancy a browse around the clothes section for Billie.

'You did the right thing, Mum,' I reassure her, even though I have barely listened to a word she was saying. 'Is this the girl who had his name tattooed on her chest?'

'Lord no,' she says. 'She was last year's model. This is the girl that his friend Clive, the country singer, introduced him to. You see, our John Joe was working on Clive's ranch shoeing horses near Nashville for a few weeks and he met her. Poor girl. She is in for an almighty fall.'

'Oh men! They are all filthy rotten lying fucking bastards,' I say a little too loud and a passing stranger gives me a dirty look.

'Exactly!' says my mum. 'I couldn't have put it better myself. And speaking of men ... any word from -'

'No, Mum, no word from Jeff,' I reply quickly. 'I don't want to ... oh no!'

I trail off. I freeze. Ah Jesus. Ah Jesus no.

'Maggie?' my mother calls. 'Maggie, are you there?'

Please no. Don't do this to me. Not now. No.

My skin goes cold. I didn't think that could actually physically happen but every part of me tingles with angst from my very toes to my fingertips. Fizzy, prickly, pins and needles of anxiety.

'I have to go, Mum. I've just spotted ... someone I used to

know. I'll call you back.'

I stand there, bunch of lilies in one hand and my phone in the other, in the kids' clothes section of my local Tesco watching, as if in slow motion, as Jeff, my 'husband' and his fancy woman walk obliviously towards me, laughing and looking into each other's eyes as she pushes a trolley full of fucking groceries.

I think I am going to actually vomit as an invisible wrench clasps my whole insides. Oh God!

She leans on the trolley and he stands behind her, playfully putting his hands on her waist as she walks along, scanning the aisles with a love-struck smile on her face.

He used to do that to me.

'Are you okay, love?' asks a little old lady. 'You look like you've seen a ghost.'

Jeff sees me.

Our eyes lock and he raises his hand, a desperate look of guilt replacing the smug look of love from seconds before. I can't move. I don't want to look but like one does at a car crash I can't help but stare and stare and then she follows his eye line and looks towards me and her face sours and she looks panicked up at him and I just want to go home. Now.

'Have some lilies,' I tell the old lady, handing her the flowers. 'You're right. I have seen a ghost. I have to get out of here.'

I make it to the car before I burst into tears and huge unapologetic cries of despair empty out from my lungs.

I hit the steering wheel.

‘Bastard! Seventeen fucking months! What does she have that I don’t have? What?’

I turn the ignition. I am in no fit state to drive. I want to go to Loch Tara, far away, and lock myself in my room and hide under my duvet and hug my mum and dad and just crawl out of my own skin.

I want to punch him. I want to punch her.

I have no energy to punch anyone.

A message comes through on my phone but I don’t dare look at it yet. If it is Jeff ... if he has the audacity to apologise in a text message, I don’t know what I will do. I don’t want to hear from him. I want to hear from him, but I don’t want to. I don’t know what I want.

I look at the phone. It’s not a text, but an email and it’s from Simon Harte.

‘Can I call you?’ is all it says.

I put the car into reverse and speed out of the car park.

I need a fucking glass of wine.

I dash into my apartment block to avoid the late-afternoon April shower, kicking myself for being so upset at seeing Jeff and that giraffe-like bitch who he was all over like a rash.

I am bigger and better than that, I say, as I climb the stairs to my front door, stomping up each step with vengefulness. How dare he? How dare he?

I fling off my coat and throw my bag on the floor, then bend down to get my phone and contemplate messaging Simon back.

I don't know if I have the energy for Simon and Lucy Harte.

I will shower, get freshened up and then I will reply to him. Maybe.

I am towel-drying my hair when the phone rings and I look at it in disbelief. It's him. It's his number, glaring at me, urging me to pick up and actually ... well, talk, I suppose. Actually speak instead of typing bravado questions and messages. *Talk.*

I quickly tie my hair back.

'Hello?'

'Maggie!' says a very rich, more mature and confident voice than I had expected. But then he breaks slightly. 'My God, Maggie.'

I don't speak. I can't speak. I sit down on the bed.

'Are you okay?' he asks, but I don't know what the answer to that question is. Am I okay? Probably not. Is it anything to do with him? Probably not.

Or maybe it is. I don't know anything any more.

'I'm looking at flights to Belfast,' he says eventually. 'Are you free this weekend for a coffee? I need to see you, Maggie. In person.'

I stand up again. Then I sit again. A coffee? With him? Here? In Belfast? What the actual fuck? Already? What?

'Flights?'

'Yes,' he laughs. 'You know those things that take you from one country to another in an aeroplane. Flights. At least that's what we call them in Scotland.'

This has floored me. We only found each other yesterday and now he wants to fly here and get together over a coffee? His accent is delicious. He sounds like Gerard Butler. He is not Gerard Butler, I remind myself.

‘Are you sure you want to meet me? Isn’t this all a bit –?’

‘Soon?’ he asks.

‘Yes, soon.’

‘Maggie, I have waited for years to find you,’ he says. One minute his voice is an emotional quiver and then it extends into an almost overactive excitement. ‘There is a football game this weekend I need to cover in Belfast – well, that’s not exactly true. I don’t need to cover it but I could if I wanted, so I figured I can mix business with, well, with finally getting to meet you. Only if you want to, of course. If you decide after this that you don’t want to hear from me again, that’s fine. It just feels amazing to have been able to chat to you.’

I seriously do not know what to say. I can’t really argue with what he has said. Why wouldn’t we meet up for a coffee? It’s what I have always wanted. Closure. A chance to say thank you to someone related to the mysterious Lucy Harte.

But the weekend... that *is* soon. I need to prepare myself. I need to prepare the apartment. Will he want to come here at any time? I look around my bedroom. It’s an absolute tip. The spare room is a mess. The living room is a mess and the kitchen resembles a bombsite. Is he expecting to stay here? I did tell him about my apartment and that I had a spare room. I feel a bit

claustrophobic with it all.

‘I can book in somewhere nearby,’ he says, as if he read my mind.

Oh, thank God.

‘Oh-okay,’ I say with relief. ‘Well, then, yes. Why not? Let’s meet for a coffee. I know a great B&B on the Lisburn Road. It’s lovely and it has real chandeliers and a library. Yes, okay. No harm in that at all.’

Real chandeliers and a library? What the hell am I on about?

‘Perfect,’ he says. ‘You had me at chandeliers. Send me the name and I will book in. I’ll check out more flight options and text you when I get into Belfast on Friday afternoon. I can’t wait to meet you in person and I can’t wait to tell you all about Lucy.’

I relax again. Simon is cool. Any pressure I felt for that moment has passed.

‘I can’t wait to hear about her too,’ I tell him and I really do mean it.

I am in Flo’s kitchen, freshly applied *au natural* look make-up on my face and rollers in my hair. Yes, rollers. Not the little-old-lady type but the big giant ones that promise volume and lift to my long hair, which is in need of some TLC. Flo is tweaking and checking the rollers as Billie vies for my attention, wriggling like a worm to get up on my knee and then immediately wanting to get back down again. He then ditches me for *Peppa Pig*.

Story of my life, being ditched for a pig – so no surprise there...

‘So let’s go over this all again,’ says Flo. She is beginning to sound like my mother.

‘Honestly, Flo, there really is no need. It’s not like this is some dodgy online date, you know,’ I retort. ‘You are being over-protective.’

‘I am not being over-protective. I am being sensible and wise,’ she says, undoing one of the rollers and then putting it back in its place. ‘Now, the signal is, you tweak your right earring if you need help and I will call your phone.’

‘Who said I was going to wear earrings?’

‘You always wear earrings. That way, you can make an excuse and go outside to take the call if you think he is a nutcase and I will follow you out and make up an escape plan.’

She is beginning to sound ridiculous.

‘Flo! Simon is not a nutcase! He is the same as me in this whole situation,’ I explain, picking a sticky stray Cheerio courtesy of Billie from the edge of my jeans. ‘He just wants some closure and, on top of it all, he seems really nice, so there is no need for you to come along and sit at another table in the bar like some undercover detective. And besides, what will you do with Billie? There is no way he will sit for any length of time in a public place and he will probably make it clear that he knows me.’

Billie gives me a knowing look. He goes bananas when he hears my voice on the phone and is always hyper at first sight. I guess that’s something to do with the treats and toys I brought for him, but as his godmother I believe that is my duty.

Flo rolls her eyes. There is no way I am putting her off.

‘Billie is going to Ursula’s for the afternoon. You know, Jack’s mum from the mother-and-toddler group? We take turns when things come up to arrange a quick playdate to allow us both the odd hour off here and there out of daycare hours. I don’t know what I would do without her.’

Now it is my turn to roll my eyes. I have heard it all now. A *play date*.

‘So you mean, Ursula is going to babysit for a while at her place? Why didn’t you just say that? What’s with all these fancy ‘new-age mummy’ terms? What is happening to you?’

Flo laughs. She knows I have a point. It’s the type of thing the two of us would have sneered at before Billie came along, only because we were secretly jealous, of course, and would love to be in the whole baby club. Now she is in that club up to her neck, though it’s not exactly how she had planned it.

‘Oh your day will come, Miss Power Suit,’ she tells me. ‘I bet you will be making up your own terms for mummy issues when you have a little ankle-biter. Now, let me see you.’

She has unravelled all the rollers and, I have to say, she has done a great job on my hair and my make-up is so subtle and effortless, which is exactly what I wanted for today. For the last ten years of her career, Flo was one of the city’s most sought-after top stylists and beauticians, but had to work part time from home when little Billie came along and the aptly named Damien (think *The Omen*) she made him with did a runner. It’s how I

met her. She cut my hair for my job interview at Powers and we have been best friends ever since.

‘Oh you’re a star,’ I tell her, loosening the curls with my fingers. My hair is well grown down, which is just how I like it and the curls give it just a little bit of bounce. ‘I could never have done that in a million years. Now, do you still think jeans and a nice top? Or should I go summer dress? It’s not too bad outside. Or maybe I should glam it up just a wee bit? You know, show an effort?’

Flo is concerned. I know she is. She does this thing with her nose, like a tiny twitch, when she is hesitant or a bit anxious about something. I’m trying to control my nervous excitement but we know each other too well to keep any secrets.

‘Remember, Maggie. This is not a date.’

‘I know it’s not! He has a wife, for goodness sake, and a pregnant one at that. Plus, in case you didn’t notice, I am in no fit state to be on a date, but I just want to look nice. You would too!’

‘I just want you to be careful,’ says Flo, hoisting little Billie on to her hip like it’s the most natural thing in the world. I’m constantly amazed at how motherhood totally transforms a woman and I can’t help but wish that woman one day soon will be me. Though not like Flo. I want the man too, if you don’t mind, but I’m not exactly going in the right direction for that – with a failed marriage behind me.

‘It’s like this,’ I explain, hoping to reassure her. ‘Simon is the brother of the little girl who gave me life. I have had so many

issues and struggles with trying to close the door on Lucy Harte for seventeen years now. She has haunted me forever and this might be my ticket to let her go.'

I sigh from the tips of my toes and get my coat, ignoring for now the chocolate finger prints that Billie has kindly left on it for me. Just as well this coat wasn't part of my planned outfit for later this afternoon.

'Simon gets into the city at two; we are having some pub grub and a chat at The John Hewitt after that. It's all very cool and it's all very casual and if you insist on sitting at a table in a corner in case he murders me in a public place, then so be it. I know what I am doing, Flo. Believe me.'

She walks me to the door and I give her a light hug, then kiss Billie very quickly on the cheek. There is no way I am risking kid snot or dribble on my newly applied make-up.

'Say what you want but I will be there just in case,' she says.

'Say what you want but you're just nose,' I say, walking to my car. 'You're dying to check him out all for yourself.'

She expertly pinches Billie's snot and wipes it on her shirt.

'Believe me, sunshine,' she says in earnest. 'Gawping at a man is the last thing on my mind right now. Go get ready. I'll be the one in the long trench coat. Just call me Jessica Fletcher.'

Chapter 6

I am early. I couldn't settle at home and I've been 'ready' for at least an hour, so I thought the best thing to do was just come here and wait. I do feel like it's an awkward blind date, even though I know it couldn't be anything more different. I chose my outfit carefully, a little too carefully perhaps, but I think I've got just about the right balance. Not too dressy, not too casual. The sun was shining and there was a hint of summer in the air as I drove here, which made my white jeans and pale-blue chiffon blouse feel just perfect for the occasion.

The occasion... what on earth is this occasion anyhow?

I am pondering this to myself when I see Flo come into the bar and she takes a seat and then hides her face behind a menu. I catch her eye and shake my head in laughter. She orders a drink from the waiter and then gives me the thumbs-up. I may have wound her up for doing this but now she is here I actually do feel a bit more settled. I am meeting a total stranger in very emotional circumstances, after all, so it's good to know she has my back, should it, for whatever reason, go horribly wrong.

I get the waiter's attention and ask for a tall gin and tonic. I need some Dutch courage now – more than I've ever done in my entire life.

'Are you there yet?' It's a text from Simon.

'I'm here,' I message back. 'I'm early.'

‘Good, so am I,’ he replies. The waiter returns and is just placing my drink on the table when I see him.

Jesus.

It really is him. Not Jesus, no, but Simon Harte, Lucy’s brother, walking towards me right here, right now. I smile. I breathe. I glance over at Flo who is staring at him like he is the Second Coming.

I wave. He waves back and smiles and runs his hand through his hair, looking as nervous as I feel.

This is so, so surreal. I stand up to greet him. He is tall. Boy, but he is tall. I swallow back a rainbow of emotions and I can’t hear anything now. The muffled sounds of cutlery and background music and people chatting fade into the background. Everything sounds and looks like a blur. I can see nothing and I can hear nothing. Nothing. Only him. It’s like time has stood still and it is making me very dizzy.

‘Maggie,’ he says, in his soft Scottish brogue. ‘Maggie, Maggie, Maggie.’

His eyes fill with tears and mine do too. He keeps saying my name, whispering it and then he kisses me lightly on the cheek.

‘I... I have to say thank you, Simon,’ I mumble. ‘I just really want to say thank you to you and your family for what you have done for me.’

He stands back, his hands holding my wrists lightly and his eyes dancing, like this is truly a moment he has been longing for as long as I have. I am afraid that if he lets go of me I might fall.

The room is really spinning. I focus on his face. His beautiful, smiley, friendly face.

‘You’re real,’ he says. ‘You’re Maggie.’

I feel my heart beat. My lonely, borrowed heart. I think of Lucy and I wonder if she is watching. Does she feel what I feel, what he feels – her very own big brother, who she left behind when she was much too young, has found me? A piece of her is inside of me. I feel guilty and grateful all in one big blow of emotion.

‘I can’t believe you are here,’ I manage to whisper.

For some reason it’s like my own world finally makes sense, like I make sense now. It is Lucy Harte’s brother and his family is the reason I am still alive.

‘I can’t believe I am here either,’ he says and I know he means it. ‘I can’t believe I am here... with you. This is... this is... pretty amazing.’

I feel so unsteady. If Flo looks at me now she will be calling an ambulance as I’m bound to be a deathly shade of white. He purses his lips and breathes in long and hard, then exhales and smiles and his eyes wrinkle and I can tell he is finding this just as overwhelming as I am.

‘Thank you for seeing me,’ he says. ‘I have wondered about you forever. I think we should sit down. Will we sit down?’

‘My heart is racing I’m so totally nervous,’ I mutter and when he looks at me I can see the pain etched in his eyes as the reality of my heart, Lucy’s heart, racing sinks in for him.

He guides me to my seat and I sit down slowly, then take a sip of my drink, hoping it will bring me round. We stare at each other again and smile and stare and smile and stare.

‘You look different to what I expected,’ he says. ‘Not in a good way or a bad way, just different. God, I am waffling again.’

‘Well, you look... you look more tanned than I expected,’ I say with a nervous giggle. ‘Have you been on holiday? I feel very pasty and... well, Irish in comparison.’

He takes a seat opposite me, still smiling, still staring.

‘Yes, I thought I’d mentioned that,’ he says and his eyes wrinkle again.

‘No, you didn’t,’ I reply. I am shaking, but hearing his voice is soothing and I get a real sense of familiarity just being in his company.

I am nervous. I am emotional and I am in awe of this moment. It’s like I am meeting a long-lost family member, someone who has been looking for me and I have been looking for them for years and years and we are finally finding each other and it’s so darn overwhelming.

I signal the waiter’s attention again and Simon orders a beer as he tells me of a week in Greece he spent just after his father’s funeral. He went alone, which impresses me greatly.

‘Do you travel alone much?’ I ask. ‘I’m a bit of a chicken when it comes to going places alone. I always drag Jeff, well used to drag Jeff along or my mum and dad or a girlfriend. Some people prefer it. Do you?’

‘No, not normally,’ he says and his eyes divert from me slightly.

‘Did I say something wrong?’ I ask. He looks sad now. ‘God I’m talking too much. Sorry, I’m just so –’

‘No, you’re not, you’re not at all!’ he says, brightening up a bit. ‘It was more of a time to grieve than a holiday, that’s all, but anyhow...’

He goes quiet and the waiter thankfully breaks the brief silence by serving Simon’s beer, a Budweiser, by the bottle, like he asked for it. I stir my gin and tonic and feel butterflies in my tummy. Where on earth do we go from here? Food. Yes, food would be the next stage, though I don’t know if I can actually stomach food right now.

‘You must be starving,’ I say, handing him a menu, which I realise I have two of. ‘I had a sneaky peek while I was waiting so I kind of know what I want. Though I am so nervous I don’t know if I can eat.’

‘I’m nervous too but I’m always hungry,’ he says. ‘My mum used to say...’

He trails off again and I notice him bite his lip.

‘Go on...’

‘Ah, it doesn’t matter,’ he says. ‘I won’t bore you with trips down memory lane just yet. Now, what do you recommend? I’m normally a steak-and-chips kinda guy.’

I glance over at Flo, who seems to have forgotten her detective mission and is wolfing down a humongous burger. Unlike me,

she didn't have small talk to go through before placing her order, so is well ahead with her grub. It's just as well I'm not in any despair over here.

I realise that Simon is looking at me, waiting on my answer regarding the food.

'Oh, sorry, do excuse me!' I say. 'I thought I recognised someone there but it's an uncanny lookalike. Yes, recommendations. Well, I'm having salmon. I had steak here before and it was really good, so I'd say go with your usual.'

He flashes a smile at me and closes the menu. We are slowly beginning to relax now. It is a huge relief as my tummy starts to settle and my senses come back to me. I never felt nerves like that in my life, not even when I met Jeff's fancy-pants-rich parents and, believe me, that was nerve-wrecking because they hated me and I knew it and that was way before my Britney Spears impression.

'Steak and chips it is, then,' he says. 'Sorry if I'm staring. You're shaking. Are you really that nervous?'

He keeps looking at me. Yes, staring, but I am doing the same back.

'I'm something but I don't know what it is,' I confess. 'I am nervous, yes, overwhelmed more so, but I am slowly starting to come around now, very slowly. You?'

'Same,' he says and his eyes smile. 'I'm just in awe that this has finally happened. It's like this was always meant to be. I just had to find you...'

He fidgets a bit and then continues.

‘Maggie, I hope I haven’t frightened you by landing so soon.’

‘No ... God, no.’

‘I’m in deep grief once again in my life,’ he explains. ‘I am vulnerable at the minute and raw but I just needed to see you. I wanted to see that in some strange way, I still have part of my family alive. Does that make me sound like some freaky weirdo?’

I look at Flo. She is still attacking her burger. If she was Jessica Fletcher she would be sacked by now.

I look back at Simon. I look at the table. I look at my hands. And then I find my voice.

‘No, I don’t think you are some freaky weirdo,’ I tell him softly. ‘I have always wanted to meet you, or someone connected to Lucy, so that I could say thank you. I wanted to thank you, thank Lucy, for my life.’

He really looks like he could cry. If I am vulnerable, he is even more.

‘My wife thinks this is a bit crazy but I need to do this,’ he says. ‘I suppose that when my dad died, part of me died too and I just had to find something to hold on to. I’m making this all sound so desperate, but Lucy, well she was special to me and I wanted to see she... well, how she lives on. In you.’

I purse my lips and he puts his hands to his face in sorrow. Oh God, we should have met somewhere more private. This is all too much for a public bar. I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to say.

‘Are you okay, Simon? Do you want to go somewhere else? We could go to the park? For a walk?’

‘No, no, of course not,’ he says, taking a deep breath. ‘I’m sorry. I kind of knew this would happen but... sorry, it’s just a big moment for me, that’s all. I’m very raw right now, Maggie.’

Of course he is. It all makes perfect sense. His little sister, to lose her so young must be the worst thing ever and now watching me, living, breathing, drinking, talking, sitting opposite him. This is a big moment for him, for sure. And for me.

‘I hope I’m doing a good job with her heart,’ I whisper, ‘but to be honest, it’s been broken quite badly lately and I really need to fix it.’

He looks up at me with tears in his eyes. I shouldn’t have said that.

‘Let’s eat first,’ he says as the waiter finally brings our food. ‘Look, I am going to make this meeting positive because it *is* positive and there’s no point us both sitting here blubbering over our food.’

He attempts a smile.

‘It would be a shame to put this to waste,’ I say, looking at the delicious steaming dishes that are set before us.’

‘It surely would. *Bon appetit*, Maggie,’ says Simon Harte. ‘I won’t bombard you with everything too soon, but I have something for you that might, just might, help fix your broken heart. Or at least point you in the right direction.’

Chapter 7

After a fairly quiet but relaxed dinner, we decide to move on to somewhere new and as we walk through the evening sunshine I feel the warm fuzziness of the alcohol kicking in.

Before we left the bar, I gave Flo a discreet ‘thumbs-up’ when she finally had finished her burger followed by what looked like a chocolate sundae. She paid her bill and when Simon left the table to use the bathroom I sent her a text to tell her that he was very nice and very attached so that she could settle in the knowledge that I wasn’t about to jump his bones and then find myself embroiled in yet another messy relationship in which I try to sprint before I can even crawl.

She replied with a lecture on not drinking too much and not to divulge too much information on the first meeting, but I could tell she was much more content about me spending the evening with Simon, as was I. Plus she had just herself indulged in her mighty chocolate sundae so she was, indeed, very happy and content with her full belly, never mind my predicament.

If only Simon Harte knew how much I had allowed my errant husband to tramp all over Lucy’s precious heart and leave me in such a mess. If only he knew...

We walk past city hall and I do my best tourist-guide impression, pointing out different streets and hotels and interesting facts about Belfast. I tell Simon about Jeff and

Saffron, about my job and how our break-up affected me, despite my denial at the time. I don't mention my growing alcohol problem, of course. He doesn't have to know *everything*.

'Sorry but Jeff sounds like a right plonker,' says Simon as we cross the street and head towards the Europa Hotel. I suggest the Europa because it's less noisy and not as stuffy as any city centre pub and we can have a proper chat in civilised surroundings without a live band or jukebox ringing in our ears. Plus they have a pianist in the lounge which I think will complement the mood nicely.

'That's one word for him. A plonker,' I joke back. 'I can think of a whole range of others. But maybe he is happy now. Maybe I didn't make him as happy as I wanted to. I am trying to believe in fate and that everything happens for a reason. Mind you, at this stage of the game, I have to believe in something.'

We go inside, take a seat in the piano lounge and order our drinks – Simon sticks with his Budweiser and I decide to treat myself to a Cucumber Cooler from the cocktail menu.

The pianist tinkles the ivories in the background at just the right volume and after a brief argument about what he was playing, which Simon wins – it was not a nineteenth-century classic, which I suggested, but a rather toned-down funky version of an Ellie Goulding song – we finally get down to business.

'Do you want to tell your side of the story, or shall I go first?' he asks. 'I'd love to know how a girl in Ireland needed a new heart and I'm sure you want to know what happened on our side

of the pond.’

Since mine is much less complicated, I decide to take the reins.

‘Well, rather than bore you to tears with my whole life story, which is completely irrelevant anyhow, I will fast-forward to when I was sixteen and where our story begins, when I was apparently a very healthy, normal teenager.’

‘You were normal?’ he says in mock surprise. So he has a sense of humour...

‘Very funny,’ I say and have a sip of my delicious cocktail. The mood is slowly loosening up with the help of good old alcohol. ‘I do share a birthday with Amy Winehouse. Same year and everything.’

‘Cool,’ he says. ‘That’s pretty impressive. Can you sing?’

‘In the shower I’m a rock star.’

‘Snap,’ he says with a smile, and then it’s time to tell him my story.

I haven’t really spoken to anyone in depth before about how I became the keeper of a borrowed heart – well, it might seem like party piece-style entertainment, but most people shy away from the subject as quickly as their eyes divert from the light scar on my chest – should they spot it – so talking to Simon, who is all ears and who has a genuine interest, is a whole new experience.

‘I was quite the athlete back then,’ I explain. ‘I won most of the prizes on every sports day and the farmhouse was like a shrine to my achievements on the track and field.’

‘Really?’ he says, seriously surprised. ‘I had visions of you as a really sick kid for years, or someone who was born with a heart condition.’

‘Not at all,’ I explain. ‘Had I had any warning signs, what unfolded would have been less of a shock. It all happened very suddenly. Totally out of the blue.’

‘Go on.’

‘I have one brother, John Joe, who is a bit older than me,’ I explain. ‘My parents had gone to the market one Saturday and left us both to take care of things on the farm, just as they had been doing for years.’

The piano man is playing an Elton John favourite and in other circumstances I would stop to listen, but I know if I don’t keep going I will never finish and I want to hear about Lucy as soon as possible and get my side over and done with.

‘John Joe and I, well, we used to be really close before I got sick. Looking back, I think he resented me for not only coming along and ruining his status as an only child, but also for then totally stealing his thunder for taking most of my parents’ attention when I almost died,’ I explain, realising that I am talking very, very fast. ‘I was helping him on the farm and I remember feeling ill, really ill. So, so ill.’

I slow down now and Simon is taking in every word, sipping his beer.

‘I went into the house, despite John Joe’s insistence on labouring me with more chores,’ I tell him. ‘He kept telling me

I was faking it and being lazy and saying I looked okay and to just get on with it... I suppose he was just teasing me like any brother in charge would, but...'

'Take your time, Maggie,' he says. Everything feels like slow motion. The piano man has gone silent and things are blurry. Simon takes my hand.

'These... these,' I whisper, 'well, they were like really heavy flu symptoms, were becoming more and more severe. I couldn't breathe. I was sweating. I was so, so hot. I felt like I was shutting down inside. Because I was shutting down. My whole body was shutting down.'

I feel my voice break slightly so I decide to keep going and push on through the pain barrier that comes with reflecting on that dark day. If I stop talking now I will never be able to tell this story again.

'I had to lie down, so I went to the house and when it got even worse, I called for my brother, but he didn't come,' I tell him, and I feel all the hurt and resentment for John Joe rush through my veins again. 'He says he didn't hear me but I know he did. He heard me, Simon. He heard me and he didn't come.'

'Oh, Maggie, he couldn't have. He mustn't have heard you.'

My tears flow now and I look around, not wanting to cause a scene in such a warm and social environment. I can hear the piano again. I am going to be okay.

'Everyone says that but I think he did. I don't know. It doesn't matter... well, it does matter...'

God, this is harder than I thought it would be.

‘Take a deep breath, Maggie,’ says Simon. ‘We have all night. Take your time.’

He puts his hand on top of mine again and I want him to hold me so badly. I want to lean in on his manly chest and cry and cry and never stop.

But I can’t. So I do what he says. I take a deep breath and continue as best I can.

‘They say I passed out and when I woke up, I could literally see that my heart had swollen in my chest,’ I explain. ‘It looked like it was going to burst. I tried to scream but I couldn’t get a breath. And then everything went black again and I woke up in hospital, where I lay attached to a machine for almost two weeks waiting for a transplant – and then a miracle occurred. And that miracle was your sister’s gift. To me.’

‘Wow....’

‘Yip. Wow indeed.’

I stare into my glass. Simon is still holding my hand.

‘So, who found you?’ he asks. ‘Who came to your rescue? Was it John Joe?’

I see protection in Simon’s eyes and it makes me want to never let go of him.

‘My parents found me,’ I tell him. ‘When I got to hospital my heart was failing pretty rapidly. Turns out I had a congenital condition that would have killed me had they not come back when they did. I was inches from death and I needed a heart

transplant to save me. Basically, I needed someone to die to keep me alive. And that someone was your sister. I'm so sorry.'

We both sit in silence, absorbing the moment. I have a flurry of emotions running through me right down to my toes. Relief, gratitude, love, grief, sorrow... but, most of all, guilt. Why did Lucy have to die and I got to live? Surely that isn't fair?

'And what happened since then? Could it happen to you again? Could Lucy's heart fail?'

It's the question I am asked the most and the one that I can never bear to answer.

'I take immune suppressing drugs every twelve hours and will do so all my life,' I explain to him. 'It's so my body doesn't try to fight the foreign cells, which would send me into rejection, which would be the worst thing ever.'

He knows what I mean. 'So, is there a life expectancy? Sorry, I shouldn't have asked you that.'

'It's okay, Simon,' I tell him. 'I know my special heart won't last forever and that someday I will need a new one to live and I see my consultant often enough to keep an eye on things. If that doesn't come my way, I'm grateful for all I have and all I got to see and do. Me and Lucy, well we just take one day at a time and so far we are doing just fine.'

Simon has gone to the bathroom and I sit there waiting, hoping my side of the story hasn't upset him too much. I feel like I have cheated him, like I have cheated Lucy and all their family. Why should I have survived when she didn't?

When he finally comes back, I see tiny beads of water on his forehead. It's not sweat because he didn't have it before he left. He must have splashed his face with cold water in the bathroom.

'Is this too much?' I ask him.

'No, please, no,' he says with such sincerity. 'It is why I am here. I have wanted to know this for so long. Tell me about your brother. Tell me the rest.'

'I feel so guilty, Simon. I feel so bad that I am here talking to you and Lucy isn't. You must resent me so much.'

'Maggie, Maggie, Maggie,' he says, sounding just like he did when he first came into the bar to meet me a few hours ago. 'Lucy died and that was nothing to do with you. You have given me hope. To find you is like finding a missing jigsaw puzzle piece that I lost all those years ago. She lives on in you and to see you in real life is something I have always dreamed of! Please tell me the rest of your story and then I will tell you mine and I hope that, in some way, all of this can help both of us. Please, go on.'

And so I continue...

'It took a long, long time to get the full story of what happened that day and then more time to forgive my brother,' I tell Simon. 'Years, really. Mum always idolised John Joe and she forgave him slowly once I had the operation and the transplant was a success. For my dad, it took a lot longer, but they managed to work together in some sort of civilised manner and then John Joe moved to America and has been womanising ... I mean, working there ever since.'

Simon looks puzzled.

‘That was my idea of a joke,’ I say with a shrug. ‘He seems to go through a *lot* of woman. Anyhow, I’ve stayed out of his way and he’s stayed out of mine. With that unspoken arrangement in place, we all get along fine. At least we had a happy ending, thanks to your family and the brave decision your parents made.’

We sit in silence again for a few moments, both taking in the incident that I have just relived – something that I have avoided talking about for years and yet which kept me awake at night after night.

‘I’d love to give you a hug,’ says Simon.

‘I’d love you to as well,’ I say. I need a hug really badly.

I lean into him and he holds me and I close my eyes, my chest moving up and down as I focus on breathing in and out, in and out.

‘I can feel your heart beat,’ he whispers and I close my eyes and breathe.

Then I excuse myself and it is my turn to go to the bathroom. I need to compose myself before I hear Simon’s side of the story. Apart from my grievance with my brother, at least my story *has* a happy ending.

His doesn’t.

Chapter 8

‘My sister Lucy was wise way beyond her years,’ Simon tells me later and I lean on my hands, my eyes dancing in reflection of his happy memories. ‘She was so clever, so tuned in and she looked after me and our younger brother, Henry, like we were precious jewels. She really was a special kid. I know I’m biased, but she was.’

He gulps and his mood drops a little.

‘Her death, it happened at such a weird time for us,’ he explains. ‘My sister, our brother, Henry, and I were close, so close and we’d had such a brilliant few days as a family, which unfortunately was pretty rare for us. Mum and Dad were in top gear, you know, really flying after a few tortuous years when they had depended on others to come and pick up the pieces, but at that time... at that time, we were good, you know?’

He rubs his eyes. He is tired and it is getting late and we are both getting a bit tipsy by this stage. I contemplate stopping him, asking him to pause and tell me this when we hadn’t consumed alcohol because, to be honest, I am afraid that when I wake up the next morning I will forget what he had said thanks to the amount of gin and the level of emotions that are swilling around in my head.

‘My mum was an alcoholic,’ he tells me.

Oh God. Ouch.

‘... and for most of our childhood it was misery, but on that day, everything seemed, ironically, perfect, like she had finally put us before the bottle. But she hadn’t.’

Jesus. I don’t know what to say. This is not what I was expecting from this strong, beautiful man who has contacted me out of the blue. I think of my own drinking and the selfish way I have brought misery and worry onto others. I push away my glass. Then I reach for it again and feel the familiar glow the alcohol brings – like an old friend who is really your worst enemy.

‘Are you sure you don’t want to leave this until tomorrow?’ I ask him. ‘You look tired. You don’t have to tell me this at all if you don’t want to.’

‘I want to,’ he says.

Simon’s childhood sounds so painful and worlds away from the idyllic upbringing I had on the farm with my older parents, despite my clashes with my big brother. My life sounded perfect compared to what Simon, Lucy and wee Henry had gone through and I feel like such a spoilt brat for complaining about John Joe.

He pauses for a second.

‘I think I need to get this out of my system. It helps talking about it. Do you mind?’

‘I don’t mind at all,’ I reply. ‘Tell me anything you want to.’

He smiles. I am so touched by his honesty, about his pain, about the heartache he has lived through and I totally respect that he has been to hell and back and has taken the time to find me and tell me Lucy’s story.

‘So Mum was insisting that Lucy had a haircut that day, which in any other family would be no big deal, right?’

‘Of course,’ I say, remembering in a flashback the time my own mother made me have my hair cut in a ‘page-boy’ style, which was all the rage. I looked like a cross between Lady Diana’s bridal party and a cocker spaniel. I want to tell him that, to try and make him laugh, but now is not the time.

‘Lucy had refused for so, so long. She didn’t want to have her hair cut but that day she finally gave in. So Mum, Lucy and Henry set off and the mood was good. She seemed happy but we had no idea that she had been sipping away at her vodka all that morning,’ he goes on, with deep sorrow in his voice and his eyes drop. ‘I have gone over and over that morning since then, analysing her every move. Wondering what would have triggered it. A row with Dad? Or another crazy notion that his eyes were roaming towards any random woman that came his way? But there was nothing. Even Dad said there was nothing. He had gone to his conference that morning in high spirits, confident that when he came home, it would be as it had been for the last few days ... I had sneaked my girlfriend around and was too worried about how she might feel if I kissed her for the first time. Just a normal, pretty nice day, but of course it didn’t end that way at all.’

The barman signals to us that last orders are being taken and the piano man is packing up his song sheets. The room goes quiet as punters filter out and welcoming low-key house music fills the stillness in the air.

‘Would you like another drink?’ he asks and I shake my head.

‘I think I have had enough.’ His mother was an alcoholic. I can’t go a day without a drink lately. Like John Joe said, I need to get a grip.

‘Two whiskies, then,’ he tells the barman.

‘Whiskies?’ Ah, Jesus.

‘I think we might be glad of them. What is it you say in Ireland? One for the road?’

I can’t really argue with that, can I?

‘Okay, then,’ I tell him. ‘Let’s have one for the road.’

I dread to think how bad his story will end, but no matter how much I anticipate, the real story is a whole lot worse.

‘Mum drove into town after a morning’s drinking behind our backs,’ he tells me. ‘We found her stash in the hot press, under the kitchen sink, in her old handbags, everywhere there was evidence that she had been topping up all along. They hit a car in a head-on collision and she was killed instantly. Lucy lived for two days, but her injuries were too much for her to survive.’

‘Oh my God!’ My hands cover my mouth. ‘Not your mother too! No...’

‘The other driver escaped almost unmarked, which was lucky for him. He was as devastated as we were.’

‘And Henry? Was he okay?’

I am almost afraid to ask.

‘Henry is ... well, Henry is alive,’ says Simon. ‘Well, as alive as he can be. He was in a coma for three weeks with a brain injury

and he stayed in hospital for two months after the accident. He needed special care after that and has lived with our Aunt Josie in Glasgow ever since. I see him when I can but he remembers very little really. He doesn't speak much. He exists, but he doesn't really live any more. He is twenty-eight years old but has the mind of the little boy he was on that awful day.'

We sit together, numbed at the story that has unfolded and for once in my life I am truly lost for words. Simon seems to be too as we stare at the table, at each other, at the barman who is wiping down empty tables and at the piano, which is now idle and without a tune.

'I think we should go,' he tells me.

'Yes,' I say. 'I think we both need some sleep.'

We have thrashed out enough, more than enough, for one night and our minds and bodies need to rest and digest all that we have told each other, though, to be honest, despite the rush of alcohol that fills my veins, I doubt there will be very much sleep for me tonight.

I say goodbye to Simon Harte and watch him from the back seat of my taxi as he walks towards the Lisburn Road to the B&B with the real chandeliers.

He looks so lost and lonely and his sister's heart aches inside of me with longing to ease his pain. I only hope that meeting me can give him the closure he so desperately needs so that he can look forward to his new life with his wife and their baby.

Chapter 9

I count sheep. I count them in English and then in French and then *As Gaelige* and then backwards in each language, but still sleep won't come. I see her every time I close my eyes. I see her freckled nose and her glasses and her long wavy, tatty hair that needed to be cut so badly that day. I hear her voice, or what I think it might sound like, and I feel... well, I feel her heart beat inside me and it makes me very sad.

'God bless you, Lucy,' I say out loud. 'God bless you poor, poor Lucy Harte.'

I think of Henry and his wide-eyed innocence. A little boy at only twelve years old, now orphaned and trapped in a man's body and fully depending on his ageing aunt. I think of Simon, sat that morning with his young girlfriend and worrying about how he might kiss her, when the police arrived at the door. I think of their father, now dead and buried too, and all the pain and regret he must have lived with for so many years. And I think of their desperately addicted mother, who probably thought she was doing the right thing that day by taking her daughter to have her hair cut, topped up in Dutch courage by the dreaded drink.

Life is cruel. Life is crap and cruel and I can't sleep.

I get out of bed and take my insomnia to the living area, where I curl up on the sofa under my throw again and turn on the TV. Shopping channels. Yes, that should do it. I lie there and squint

at the screen, the rush of gin pumping through my veins and my head begins to spin. I am going to be sick. No... I am not. Yes I am... no... should I get up? What time is it? I feel dizzy again... I'm so....

The TV has gone onto standby and I wake up to the sound of a car radio booming outside. I lift my head from the sofa. Ouch. Damn you Cucumber Coolers. Then I remember about the whiskey. My mouth is like sandpaper. No bloody wonder. Yuk.

I am raging to be awake as I was having the most glorious dream where Jeff came to my door, totally unannounced, but looking oh-so handsome apart from needing a haircut, and like someone had waved a magic wand, he told me that Saffron didn't even exist and it had all been a big mistake. There was no affair. In fact, there was no one in this entire world called Saffron. No one in the entire universe called Saffron, in fact. *Saffron who?* He kept saying this. *You must have been dreaming, babe! You're my wife and I love you.*

He wanted to take me back to the place we called home, the terraced house we bought in Stranmillis until we decided where to build our dream pad, and the place where we would bring our first baby home to in just a few months' time because I was already pregnant and didn't even know it. It would be a girl, he said, and we would call her Lucy Harte. Will Powers Sr was with him at the door and he was laughing at the idea of me thinking they had told me to take time out from work. *Don't be so silly, Maggie,*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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