

Dear Len,

Well, if you are reading this, it's happened. And I suppose that I ought to be glad, and so should you. We've both spent such a long time waiting, and I could see how much it was wearing you down, as much as you tried to hide it.

Now, the life insurance policy is in the shoebox in the bedroom, on top of the wardrobe, under that hat I wore to our Dominic's wedding – remember? The one with the veil you said made me look like a femme fatale? You might not; you drank too much beer, and four of Dominic's friends had to carry you upstairs, you great oaf. It's not much of a payout, I don't think, but it will be enough for the funeral at least. I don't have any wishes concerning that matter. You know me better than anyone else will. I trust you to get it right.

The washing machine. It's easy, really: you turn the round knob clockwise to the temperature you want to wash at, but don't worry about that. Just wash everything at forty degrees. It mostly works out all right. And you put the liquid in the plastic thing in the drum, not in the drawer. I don't even really know why they have those drawers any more.

You need to eat – and not stuff you can microwave. You need to at least shake hands with a vegetable once a week, promise me. You always made the Sunday night tea – cheese on toast and baked beans on the side – so I'm sure you'll be able to keep body and soul together if you put some effort in. I expect at first lots of people will feed

you, but you'll need to get a cookbook. I think there's a Delia under the bed. I got it for Christmas last year from Susan, and I thought, what a cheek!

Len, do you remember the night we met? Do you remember how you led me on to the dance floor? You didn't talk, didn't ask me or anything, you rogue. Just took my hand and led me out there. And how we twirled and laughed – the room became a blur. And when the song stopped, you kissed me. Still hadn't said a word to me, mind you, and you kissed me right off my feet. The first thing you said to me was, 'You'd better tell me your name, as you're the girl I'm going to marry.' Cheeky beggar, I thought, but you were right.

It's been a good life, Len, full of love and happiness. Just as much – more than – the sadness and the bad times, if you think about it, and I have had a lot of time to think about it, lately. A person can't really ask for more. Don't stop because I've stopped; keep going, Len. Keep dancing, dancing with our grandchildren, for me. Make them laugh, and spoil them rotten.

And when you think of me, don't think of me in these last few days: think of me twirling and laughing and dancing in your arms.

Remember me this way.

Your loving wife,
Dorothy

PROLOGUE

STELLA

He was a runner. That was the first thing I knew about Vincent.

One hot July, four years ago, I saw him early each morning, running past me as I walked to work, for almost three weeks in a row.

That summer I'd decided to get up before seven, to enjoy the relative quiet of an early north London morning on my way to start a shift at the hospital. I was a trauma nurse back then, and there was something about the near stillness of the streets, the quiet of the roads, that gave me just a little space to exhale before a full eight hours of holding my breath. So I walked to work, sauntered more like, kicking empty coffee cups out of my way, flirting with street sweepers, dropping a strong cup of tea off to the homeless guy who was always crammed up against the railings by the park, working on his never-ending novel. It was my rest time, my respite.

At almost exactly the same time every morning, Vincent ran past me at full pelt, like he was racing some unseen opponent. I'd catch a glimpse of a water bottle, closely cropped dark hair, a tan, nice legs – long and muscular. Every

day, at almost exactly the same time, for nearly three weeks. He'd whip by, and I'd think, there's the runner guy, another moment ticked off on my journey. I liked the predictability. The flirty street sweeper, the cup of tea drop, the runner. Sort of like having your favourite song stuck in your head.

Then one morning he slowed down, just a hair's breadth, and turned his head. For the briefest moment I looked into his eyes – such a bright blue, like mirrors reflecting the sky. And then he was gone again, but it was already too late: my routine was disturbed, along with my peace of mind. All day that day, in the middle of some life-and-death drama or in the quiet of the locker room, I found the image of those eyes returning to me again and again. And each time it gave me butterflies.

The next morning, I waited for him to run past me again, and for normality to be restored. Except he stopped, so abruptly, a few feet in front of me and then bent over for a moment, his hands on his knees, catching his breath. I hesitated, sidestepped and decided to keep walking.

'Wait ... please.' He took a breath between words, holding up a hand that halted me. 'I thought I wasn't going to stop, and then I thought, sod it, so I did.'

'OK,' I said.

'I thought you might like to come for a coffee with me?' He smiled – it was full of charm; it was a smile that was used to winning.

'Did you?' I asked him. 'Why?'

‘Well, hoped, more like,’ he said, the smile faltering a little. ‘My name is Vincent. Vincent Carey. I’m a squaddie, Coldstream Guards. I’m on leave, going back to the desert soon. And you never know, do you? So I thought ... well, you’ve got lovely hair – all curls, all down your back. And eyes like amber.’

He had noticed my eyes – perhaps in that same second that I noticed his.

‘I’m a very lazy person,’ I told him. ‘I never go anywhere fast.’

‘Is that a weird way of saying no to coffee?’ I liked his frown as much as his smile.

‘It’s a warning,’ I said. ‘A warning that I might not be your kind of person.’

‘Sometimes,’ he said, ‘you just know when someone is your sort of person.’

‘From their hair?’ I laughed.

‘From their eyes.’

I couldn’t argue with that.

‘Mind if I walk part of the way with you?’ he’d asked.

‘OK.’ I smiled to myself as he fell in step next to me, and we walked in silence for a while.

‘You weren’t kidding about being slow,’ he said, eventually.

The second thing I knew about Vincent was that one day I was going to marry him. But the first thing I knew was that he was a runner.

WE ARE ALL MADE OF STARS

Which makes it so hard to look at him now: his damaged face turned to the wall as he sleeps, and the space where his leg used to be.

THE FIRST
NIGHT



CHAPTER ONE

HOPE

I can't sleep. I can never sleep these days – not in here, anyway, where they don't let it be truly dark, not ever. But it's not only that; it's because I can't stop thinking about how I came to be here. I know, of course: I caught something – a bug, bacterial, which is dangerous news when you live with cystic fibrosis. I almost died, and now I'm here, in this place where they never really turn the lights out on the long and painful road to recuperation. I know that, but I what I don't know, what I want to know, is *how*. I want to know precisely the second that little cluster of bacteria drifted like falling blossom into my bloodstream. I can't know, of course, but that doesn't mean I don't want to or that I can stop thinking about it. The frustrating thing about my condition is that I have a lot of time on my hands to think, but not a lot of time on the clock to live. Time moves slowly and quickly at the very same time – racing and stretching, boring and terrifying. And you can live your whole life with the idea of mortality – that one day it will be the last day – and still never really know or care what that means. Not until the last day arrives, that is.

I was at a party, when Death came to find me.

I hate parties, but my best friend Ben made me go.

‘You can’t stay in all your life,’ he said, dragging me out of my room and down the stairs. ‘You are twenty-one years old, nearly twenty-two. You should be out every night, enjoying the prime of your life!’

‘*You* are in your prime of your life; I’m most likely middle aged,’ I told him, even though I knew he hated me referring to my short life expectancy this way. ‘And anyway, I could. I could stay in all my life and listen to Joni Mitchell and read books, and design book covers, try and work out the solo of “Beat It” on my guitar, and I’d be perfectly fine.’

‘Mrs K.’ Ben dragged me into the living room, where my parents were watching the same old same old on TV – some police detective, who drinks too much and lost his wife in a bitter divorce, chasing down some psycho-killer. ‘Tell your daughter: she’s a twenty-one-year-old woman. She needs to go out and have fun! Remind her that life is for living, and not for sitting alone in her room reading about how other people do it! Plus it’s all the old crew from school, back from uni now. We haven’t been together in ages, and they are all dying to see her.’

Mum turned in her chair, and I could see the worry in her eyes, despite her smile. But there was nothing new there: she’d been worried for every moment of my twenty-one years, constantly. Sometimes I wonder if she’d wished she could change my name, after I was diagnosed as a baby

and the situation was officially hope-less, but it was too late by then; it was a name that already belonged to me – a cruel irony that we both have to live with now. My poor darling mum, she had enough on her plate. It wasn't fair to make her decide if I went out or not, because she'd spend the rest of the evening worrying either way, and later she would have torn herself to pieces with blame. So, making my own decision, that was one of the things I did right that night. It was just the choice that was wrong.

‘Oh, fine, I'm coming out, I'll get changed.’

Ben grinned at me and sat down on the bottom stair, and I thought of him there, in his skinny jeans, an outsize jumper sloping off one shoulder, jet black hair and eyes lined with smudges of Kohl, as I rifled through my wardrobe, looking for something, anything, that might even nearly equal his effortless cool. It wasn't fair, really – that little odd duckling, the boy that the other kids left out or pushed around, had suddenly grown into a sexy, hip swan. We had used to be lame kids together. That was how we came to be best friends; it was part of the natural process of banding together, like circling our wagons – greater safety, even in our meagre number of two, than being alone. Him: the skinny, shy kid with the grey collars and worn-down shoes; and me: the sick girl.

I don't think it was then that Death entered, when Ben came into the house, though it could have been. He could have left a trace of a germ on the bannister or the damp

towel in the downstairs loo. It could have been then, but I don't think it was, because near-death by hand towel isn't even nearly fitting enough.

I dressed all in black, trying to hide my skinny frame with a skater skirt and a long top, and wondered how many other girls my age longed to put weight on. I rimmed my eyes with dark eye shadow and hoped that would do the trick.

The moment we walked in through the door, and the wave of heat and sweat and molecules of saliva, which I know are in every breath I take, hit us, I wanted to go home. I almost turned around right then, but Ben had his hand on the small of my back. There was something protective about it, something comforting. And these were my friends, after all. The people I grew up with, who were always nice to me and did fun runs in my name. Who I could sit and have a coffee and a laugh with; who would always find something for us to talk about, while carefully avoiding those potentially awkward questions like, 'How's it going? Still think you'll be dead soon?'

'Hopey!' Sally Morse, my sort-of best female friend from school, ran the length of the hallway to engulf me in a hug. 'Oh shit, it's so good to see you. You look great! How's it going? What's new? You're like an entrepreneur or something, aren't you?' She hooked her arm through mine, briefly resting her head on my shoulder as she led me into the kitchen, and I noticed the slight pinkness around her nostrils: the remnants of a cold.

‘I’m OK,’ I told her, accepting a beer. ‘I started designing book covers for people, and it’s going quite well.’

‘That’s so cool,’ she said happily. ‘That’s so totally cool because, you know, really university is a huge waste of time; there are no jobs out there, and you end up in loads of debt – it’s a very expensive way to get laid and drunk. I emailed you loads, but you’re shit at replying. Too busy, I suppose, being a businesswoman.’

She paused for a moment, scanning my face, and then dragged me into a hug, filling my face with a curious combination of lemon- and smoke-scented hair, and I hugged her back. I’d thought I didn’t miss any of that: the people I once saw almost every day for most of life. I’d told myself that, anyway, but it turned out that I did. I was happy to see her in that moment, happy I had come. Perhaps it was then, perhaps in that little moment of optimism and nostalgia, in the midst of that hug, I’d inhaled my own assassin. I hope not. Although it would be just like the universe to try and undo you when you are happy, because in my experience the universe is an arse.

But the good thing about being amongst my old friends was that there was no need to explain – no need to have the eternal prologue of a conversation when I tell them about the CF, and they look sad and awkward in turn. It was a relief to be amongst the people who have been preparing for my exit, almost since the very first moment I made my entrance into their lives.

It wasn't long before Sally was tonsils-deep in some guy who I thought she'd most likely brought with her, because I didn't know him, so I made my way through the mass of people, looking for Ben.

'Hope!' Clara Clayton shrieked, planting a glossy kiss on my cheek. 'It's so good to see you! If you're here, that means Ben is here, and I want to see him. Bloody hell, he's grown up hot ... Hey, are you two ...?'

'Hello, Hope,' said Tom Green, the school heartthrob for so many years, and now no less sweet, blonde, or strappingly broad-chested. 'How are things? How are you doing?' He was still awkward, polite, kind, tall – all of the things about him that used to make me swoon when I was thirteen years old, though not anymore, I was interested to notice; now I thought he was lovely but sort of dull.

'I like your look,' he said, with some effort. 'Really... cool.'

As I made my way through the party, cigarettes being hastily put out as I approached, I relaxed. I felt at home here, amongst friends. I felt like a twenty-one-year-old woman at a party. I relaxed, and that was probably my mistake.

It could have been in any one of those miniature reunions that Death made its move, during that long hour of leaning in too close to people while they told me what degree they got, and what they were going to do next. It might have been then, or it could have been when the taxi driver coughed all over the change he gave me on the way over. But I don't think it was.

I think it happened when Ben kissed me.

Because, let's get this straight, I spend most of time in my bedroom in my parents' house pretending that designing a few book covers is a proper grown-up career, and reading books, lots of books. And a man kissing me would definitely be the cause of my demise in a Victorian novel.

I'm prone to dwelling. I'm a dweller.



Ben was drunk, in the way that only he gets drunk, which is not at all, then all at once. And he'd gone from being uber-cool to dancing and laughing and spinning, and hugging, and playing air guitar, and chatting up girls, who lapped up his nonsense, while I stood in the corner of the room, watching him, smiling despite myself. He loves to think he's cool – the guy in the rock band, the 'I don't give a toss about you' rock star – but it doesn't take very much for him to be his great big dorky self: the boy I used to know. The one who'd fill his pockets with worms to save them from other boys stomping on them; the guy who might look like he could snack on bats' heads by night but who is an assistant manager in Carphone Warehouse by day.

Suddenly, he careered into me, grabbing hold of my shoulders, and we both fell back onto the sofa laughing – him a little too hard, and me a little too politely.

'You are such a dick,' I told him, reasonably fondly, though.

'Then why am I your best mate?' he asked me, winding his arm around my shoulder and pulling me even closer to him, fluttering his ridiculously long brown lashes.

‘Oh, shut up,’ I said, screwing my face up as he rubbed his cheek against mine, like an over-friendly dog. I made my move to protect him from himself, which was to make him think he was protecting me, which meant he’d stop drinking quite so much, so fast. ‘You know what? This party, it’s not really doing it for me. I think I’m going to go home. Will you take me home?’

‘No, don’t go!’ Ben grabbed my face in his hands and made me look into his eyes, squeezing my mouth into a frankly ridiculous pout. ‘You’re always leaving places early. Stop leaving me, Hope. When are you going to get that I hate you leaving me behind? I want you around all the time.’

‘Don’t be a twat,’ I’d said, although hesitantly, because the way he was looking at me just then was angry and hurt all at once. It was hard to read, and I am not a fan of ambiguity. Just for a moment, for the briefest of seconds, I glimpsed that perhaps something about the way he was acting tonight had to do with me.

‘Just don’t go,’ he said.

‘But Ben, I ...’

Which was when he kissed me.

I mean really kissed me. Ben, who I had known since I was five years old. Ben, who once waded into a patch of nettles to carry me out. Ben, who’d held my hair and made small talk while I hawked up globules of mucus, during my nightly coughing rituals. Ben kissed me, and it was a real kiss, urgent and hard, and with his tongue. It was

physical, and awkward, and it took me by surprise, because I'd never been kissed like that before, with this kind of force or, well, *need*. As he pressed me back hard into the sofa, suddenly I felt like I couldn't breathe. I panicked and I pushed him away.

'Shit,' he said. 'I'm really drunk. Sorry. Sorry, shit.'

I got up and went to the bathroom. Flounced is probably a better word – I flounced off to cover my confusion, feigned fury and offence. I spent a long time looking at myself in the mirror, looking at my kiss-stained mouth. Somehow I knew that everything had changed, and that it wasn't going to be for the better.

When I came back, Ben had passed out on the sofa, his head lolling back in the cushions, his mouth wide open.

I got a taxi home alone and was in bed before midnight.

When I saw Ben the next day, he said he hardly remembered anything and told me to never let him drink again. He didn't mention the kiss, and I still have no idea if he has forgotten, or if he'd rather just not talk about it.

A week after that, I was admitted to hospital with a bacterial lung infection.

The pain, the pain, and the gasping for air, and the desperate need all the time for there to be more of it, took up most of my energy, but not all of it. There was a moment, just one, of perfect clarity, when I heard the doctor say to my mother, 'It's touch and go, I'm afraid.'

And I thought, I am not ready. I am not ready yet.

WE ARE ALL MADE OF STARS

I made it, I'm still here, still alive, almost ready to go back to life. I won this round. But I can't sleep, you see, because even though I can't know, I want to know. I need to know the exact moment that I let Death in, and I can't sleep – because what if I'm not ready the next time it finds me?