

**Praise for  
THE ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF  
LENNI AND MARGOT:**

‘This is something special: moving, joyful and life-affirming’  
*GOOD HOUSEKEEPING* Book of the Month

‘Full of wisdom and kindness. Just the kind of book I adore’  
JOANNA CANNON

‘So touching, honest and funny. I’ll feel  
for these two characters’  
*PRIMA*, Book of the Month

‘A beautiful, funny and incredibly assured story  
filled with rich characters’  
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‘The most beautifully written love letter to friendship,  
managing to make you laugh uncontrollably.  
Simply brilliant’  
*WOMAN AND HOME*

‘Cronin’s characters are fully drawn, and chime together to  
tell a sweet story about connection, loss and living’  
*IRISH TIMES*

‘Filled with kindness and quirky characters who restore  
your faith in life. This debut will stay with you, answering  
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*MY WEEKLY*, Book of the Week

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survive. It celebrates friendship, finds meaning in difficulty  
and lets the reader explore dark places while always  
allowing for the possibility of light’

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‘An extraordinary tale of living, love and heartbreak’

*THE SUN*

‘Full of honesty and warmth. A beautiful debut’

*CULTUREFLY*

‘Lenni and Margot are two of the most wonderful, warm,  
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CLARE POOLEY, author of *The Authenticity Project*

‘Charged with light and colour. Gloriously original and full  
of wisdom, humour and hope. It made me think and care  
and laugh and cry. One of my all-time favourite books’  
HAZEL PRIOR, author of *Away with the Penguins*

‘Emotional, involving, witty and sad. Everyone is  
going to love Lenni and Margot’

JILL MANSELL

‘Sharp and funny, warm and wise, a remarkable friendship  
sparks two lifetimes of shared stories in one  
unforgettable book. I loved it’  
JESS KIDD, author of *Himself*

‘A truly gorgeous book, brimming with life and colour’  
JOANNA GLEN

‘Such a delight! I fell head over heels for Lenni and Margot, their wit and vibrancy and marvellous outlooks on life. An utter joy’  
ABBIE GREAVES

**Readers love for  
THE ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF  
LENNI AND MARGOT:**

‘If you only read one book this year, make it this one’

‘I would recommend this book thoroughly but suggest you have a box of tissues on hand for a bit of blubbing’

‘My first chuckle was on page 7. My first tear was near the end. There’s a whole heap of life in this book, so each reader is bound to connect with something somewhere’

‘I was absolutely bowled over by this beautiful book. I was blown away by the quality of the writing and the emotions it evoked. It is a truly awesome read’

‘What can I say about this book that hasn’t been said already. Marianne Cronin has created a story that makes you want to read on, but not want it to end’

‘OMG! This book is absolutely wonderful. I laughed & cried (I mean proper sobbed). It is sad & it is beautiful & it is full of the joys of the people in our lives & the impact they have on us. ABSOLUTELY LOVED IT!!’

‘The kind of book you will find yourself falling into, both out of respect for the characters in it, and to let their dust settle’

‘This book bought me two things that I haven’t had from a book in such a long time. One, a huge reluctance to finish it, because I never wanted it to end and two, it made me cry, really cry. It has wonderful real characters I really cared about and invested in’

‘Just lovely. Emotional but not depressing tale of a terminally ill seventeen-year-old who meets an 83-year-old woman in the hospital and forms an art club with her which celebrates the 100 years they have lived. Add in a friendship with a hospital vicar and a helpful nurse and this book explores friendships and the need to live your life to the max every single day. I loved it’

‘What a beautiful book. It’s rare to find stories of friendship between people of such different ages such as 80-plus Margot and seventeen-year-old Lenni. The friendship is touching and tender and very real. I would recommend this book thoroughly’

‘Adored this and wish I had written it. Raw characterisation, each with very realistic quirks that brought them alive. A great plot, paced well and with an overall story that draws it together perfectly. An emotional read you will always remember’

‘The story of seventeen-year-old Lenni and 83-year-old Margot and their combined 100 living years is just wonderful. They meet as patients in hospital, both with life-limiting illnesses and decide to celebrate their centenary by painting pictures of memories from their years gone by. It is funny, it is heartbreaking and it is just on the right side of quirky. I was blown away by the quality of the writing and the emotions evoked – it is a truly awesome read’

THE ONE HUNDRED YEARS  
OF LENNI AND MARGOT

Marianne Cronin



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## PART ONE





## Lenni

WHEN PEOPLE SAY 'terminal', I think of the airport.

I picture a wide check-in area with a high ceiling and glass walls, the staff in matching uniforms waiting to take my name and flight information, waiting to ask me if I packed my bags myself, if I'm travelling alone.

I imagine the blank faces of passengers checking screens, families hugging one another with promises that this won't be the last time. And I picture myself among them, my suitcase wheeling behind me so effortlessly on the highly polished floor that I might be floating as I check the screen for my destination.

I have to drag myself out of there and remember that that is not the type of terminal meant for me.

They've started to say 'life-limiting' instead now. 'Children and young people with life-limiting conditions . . .'

The nurse says it gently as she explains that the hospital has started to offer a counselling service for young patients whose conditions are 'terminal'. She falters, flushing red. 'Sorry, I meant *life-limiting*.' Would I like to sign up? I could have the counsellor come to my bed, or I could go to the special counselling room for teenagers. They have a TV in there now. The options seem endless, but the term is not new to me. I have spent many days at the airport. Years.

And still, I have not flown away.

MARIANNE CRONIN

I pause, watching the upside-down rubber watch pinned to her breast pocket. It swings as she breathes.

‘Would you like me to put your name down? The counselor, Dawn, she really is lovely.’

‘Thank you, but no. I have my own form of therapy going on right now.’

She frowns and tilts her head to the side. ‘You do?’

## Lenni and the Priest

I WENT TO meet God because it's one of the only things I can do here. People say that when you die, it's because God is calling you back to him, so I thought I'd get the introduction over and done with ahead of time. Also, I'd heard that the staff are legally obliged to let you go to the hospital chapel if you have religious beliefs, and I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to see a room I'd not yet been in *and* meet the Almighty in one go.

A nurse I'd never seen before, who had cherry red hair, linked her arm through mine and walked me down the corridors of the dead and the dying. I devoured every new sight, every new smell, every pair of mismatched pyjamas that passed me.

I suppose you could say that my relationship with God is complicated. As far as I understand it, he's like a cosmic wishing well. I've asked for stuff a couple of times, and some of those times he's come up with the goods. Other times there's been silence. Or, as I have begun to think lately, maybe all the times I *thought* God was being silent, he was quietly depositing more nonsense into my body, a kind of secret 'F-you' for daring to challenge him, only to be discovered many years later. Buried treasure for me to find.

When we reached the chapel doors, I was unimpressed. I'd expected an elegant Gothic archway, but instead I came up

against a pair of heavy wooden doors with square frosted windows. I wondered why God would need his windows frosted. What's he up to in there?

Into the silence behind the doors the new nurse and I stumbled.

'Well,' he said, 'hello!'

He must have been about sixty, wearing a black shirt and trousers and a white dog collar. And he looked like he couldn't have been happier than he was at that moment.

I saluted. 'Your honour.'

'This is Lenni . . . Peters?' The new nurse turned to me for clarification.

'Pettersson.'

She let go of my arm and added gently, 'She's from the *May Ward*.'

It was the kindest way for her to say it. I suppose she felt she ought to warn him, because he looked as excited as a child on Christmas morning receiving a train set wrapped in a big bow, when in reality, the gift she was presenting him with was broken. He could get attached if he wanted, but the wheels were already coming off and the whole thing wasn't likely to see another Christmas.

I took my drip tube, which was attached to my drip wheelie thing, and walked towards him.

'I'll be back in an hour,' the new nurse told me, and then she said something else, but I wasn't listening. Instead, I was staring up, where the light shone in and the glow of every shade of pink and purple imaginable was striking my irises.

'Do you like the window?' he asked.

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A cross of brown glass behind the altar was illuminating the whole chapel. Radiating from around the cross were jagged pieces of glass in violet, plum, fuchsia and rose.

The whole window seemed like it was on fire. The light scattered over the carpet and the pews and across our bodies.

He waited patiently beside me, until I was ready to turn to him.

'It's nice to meet you, Lenni,' he said. 'I'm Arthur.' He shook my hand, and to his credit he didn't wince when his fingers touched the part where the drip burrows into my skin.

'Would you like to sit?' he asked, gesturing to the rows of empty pews. 'It's very nice to meet you.'

'You said.'

'Did I? Sorry.'

I wheeled my drip behind me and as I reached the pew, I tied my dressing gown more tightly around my waist. 'Can you tell God I'm sorry about my pyjamas?' I asked as I sat.

'You just told him. He's always listening,' Father Arthur said as he sat beside me. I looked up at the cross.

'So tell me, Lenni, what brings you to the chapel today?'

'I'm thinking about buying a second-hand BMW.'

He didn't know what to do with that, so he picked up the Bible from the pew beside him, thumbed through it without looking at the pages, and put it down again.

'I see you . . . er, you like the window.'

I nodded.

There was a pause.

'Do you get a lunch break?'

'Sorry?'

‘It’s just, I was wondering whether you have to lock up the chapel and go to the canteen with everyone else, or if you can have your break in here?’

‘I, um—’

‘Only, it seems a bit cheeky to clock out for lunch if your whole day is basically clocked out.’

‘Clocked out?’

‘Well, sitting in an empty church is hardly a nose-to-the-grindstone job, is it?’

‘It’s not always this quiet, Lenni.’

I looked at him to check I hadn’t hurt his feelings, but I couldn’t tell.

‘We have Mass on Saturdays and Sundays, we have Bible readings for the children on Wednesday afternoons, and I get more visitors than you might imagine. Hospitals are scary places; it’s nice to be in a space where there are no doctors or nurses.’

I went back to studying the stained glass window.

‘So, Lenni, is there a reason for your visit today?’

‘Hospitals are scary places,’ I said. ‘It’s nice to be in a space where there aren’t any doctors or nurses.’

I think I heard him laugh.

‘Would you like to be left alone?’ he asked, but he didn’t sound hurt.

‘Not particularly.’

‘Would you like to talk about anything specific?’

‘Not particularly.’

Father Arthur sighed. ‘Would you like to know about my lunch break?’

‘Yes, please.’

## THE ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF LENNI AND MARGOT

'I take it at one until twenty past. I have egg and cress on white bread cut into small triangles, made for me by my housekeeper. I have a study through that door' – he pointed – 'and I take fifteen minutes to eat my sandwich and five to drink my tea. Then I come back out. But the chapel is always open, even when I'm in my study.'

'Do they pay you for that?'

'Nobody pays me.'

'Then how do you afford all the egg and cress sandwiches?'

Father Arthur laughed.

We sat in silence for a while and then he started talking again. For a priest, he wasn't that comfortable with silence. I'd have thought the quiet would give God an opportunity to make himself known. But Father Arthur didn't seem to like it, so he and I talked about his housekeeper, Mrs Hill, and how she always sends him a postcard whenever she goes on holiday and then, when she returns, how she fishes them out of his 'in-tray' and sticks them on the fridge. We talked about how the bulbs are changed for the light behind the stained glass window (there's a secret passageway around the back). We talked about pyjamas. And despite how tired he looked, when the new nurse came to collect me, he told me that he hoped I would come back.

I think, however, he was surprised when I arrived the next afternoon in a fresh pair of pyjamas and now free of my IV. The head nurse, Jacky, wasn't thrilled about the idea of me going back a second day in a row, but I held her gaze and said in a small voice, 'It would mean a lot to me.' And who can say no to a dying child?

When Jacky called for a nurse to walk me down the corridors, it was the new nurse who turned up. The one with the cherry red hair, which clashed with her blue uniform like there was no tomorrow. She'd only been on the May Ward a matter of days and she was nervous, especially around the airport children, and desperate for someone to assure her she was doing a good job. As we made our way along the corridor towards the chapel, I commented on how excellent her chaperoning skills were. I think she liked that.

The chapel was empty again except for Father Arthur, who was sitting in a pew, wearing long white robes over his black suit and reading. Not the Bible, but an A4-sized book with cheap binding and a glossy laminated cover. When New Nurse opened the door and I followed gratefully through, Arthur didn't turn round right away. New Nurse let the door close behind us, and at the sound of the heavy thud he turned, put his glasses on and smiled.

'Pastor, um . . . Reverend?' New Nurse stumbled. 'She, um, Lenni asked if she could spend an hour here. Is that okay?'

Arthur closed the book in his lap.

'Certainly,' he said.

'Thank you, um, Vicar . . .?' New Nurse said.

'Father,' I whispered. She grimaced, her face reddening – which clashed with her hair – and then she left without another word.

Father Arthur and I settled into the same pew. The colours in the stained glass were just as lovely as the day before.

'It's empty again today,' I said. It echoed.

Father Arthur said nothing.



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‘Did it used to be busy? You know, back when people were more religious?’

‘It *is* busy,’ he said.

I turned to him. ‘We’re the only ones here.’

Clearly, he was in denial.

‘It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it,’ I said. ‘It must be embarrassing. I mean, it’s like you’re throwing a party and nobody’s turned up.’

‘It is?’

‘Yes. I mean, here you are, in your best white party dress with lovely grapes and things sewn onto it, and—’

‘These are vestments. It’s not a dress.’

‘Vestments, then. Here you are, in your *party vestments*, you’ve got the table laid ready for lunch . . .’

‘That’s an altar, Lenni. And it’s not lunch, it’s the Eucharist. The bread of Christ.’

‘What, he won’t share?’

Father Arthur gave me a look.

‘It’s for the Sunday service. I don’t eat the holy bread for lunch, and I don’t eat my lunch at the altar.’

‘Of course, because you have egg and cress in your office.’

‘I do,’ he said, glowing a little because I had remembered something about him.

‘So, you’ve got everything ready for the party. There’s music’ – I pointed to the sad CD/cassette tape combo in the corner, beside which some CDs were neatly piled – ‘and there’s plenty of seating for everyone.’ I pointed to the rows of empty pews. ‘But nobody comes.’

‘To my party?’

'Exactly. All day, every day, you are throwing a Jesus party and nobody's coming. It must feel horrible.'

'That's . . . um . . . Well, that's one way of thinking about it.'

'Sorry if I'm making it worse.'

'You're not making anything worse, but really, this isn't a party, Lenni. This is a place of worship.'

'Yes. No, I know that, but what I mean is that I get where you're coming from. I had a party once, when I was eight and I'd just moved to Glasgow from Sweden. My mum invited all the kids in my class, but hardly anyone came. Although, at that point my mum's English was patchy, so there's every chance they all went to the wrong place, holding presents and balloons and waiting for the party to start. At least that's what I told myself at the time.'

I paused.

'Go on,' he offered.

'So, when I was sitting there on the dining-room chairs that my mum had arranged into a circle, waiting for someone to turn up, I felt horrible.'

'I'm sorry to hear that,' he said.

'So, that's what I'm saying to you. I know how much it hurts when nobody comes to your party. I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I just don't think you should deny it. You can't fix a problem until you've faced it head on.'

'But it *is* busy, Lenni. It's busy because you are here. It is busy with the spirit of the *Lord*.'

I gave him a look.

He shuffled in the pew. 'And besides, a little solitude isn't to be laughed at. This may be a place of worship, but it's also

a place of peace.' He glanced up at the stained glass. 'I like to be able to talk to patients one-to-one; it means I can pay them my full attention, and don't take this the wrong way, Lenni, but I think you might be a person the Lord would like me to pay my full attention to.'

I laughed at that.

'I thought about you at lunch time,' I said. 'Did you have egg and cress again today?'

'I did.'

'And?'

'Lovely, as always.'

'And Mrs . . .?'

'Hill, Mrs Hill.'

'Did you tell Mrs Hill about our conversation?'

'I didn't. Everything you say here is confidential. That's why people like coming so much. They can speak their minds and not worry who will find out later.'

'So this is confession then?'

'No, although if you wish to go to confession, I would gladly help you arrange it.'

'If it isn't confession, then what is it?'

'It's whatever you want it to be. This chapel is here to be whatever you need it to be.'

I took in the empty rows of pews, the electronic piano draped in a beige dust cover, the noticeboard with a picture of Jesus pinned to it. What would I want this place to be if it could be anything?

'I would like it to be a place of answers.'

'It can be.'

'Can it? Can religion ever really answer a question?'

‘Lenni, the Bible teaches us that Christ can guide you to the answer to *every* question.’

‘But can it answer an actual question? Honestly? Can you answer me a question without telling me that life is a mystery, or that everything is God’s plan, or that the answers I seek will come with time?’

‘Why don’t you tell me your question, and we will work together to see how God can help us find an answer?’

I leant back in the pew and it creaked. The echo reverberated around the room.

‘Why am I dying?’

## Lenni and the Question

I DIDN'T LOOK at Father Arthur when I asked him the question; instead I looked at the cross. I heard him breathe out slowly. I kept thinking he was going to answer, but he just carried on breathing. I considered that perhaps he didn't know I was dying. But, I rationalized, the nurse had told him I came from the May Ward, and nobody on the May Ward is looking forward to a long and happy life.

'Lenni,' he said gently after a while, 'that question is bigger than all other questions.' He leant back and the pew creaked again. 'You know, it's funny, I get asked *why* more often than I get asked anything else. *Why* is always the hard one. I can do the *how* and the *what* and the *who*, but the *why*, that's the one I can't even pretend to know. When I first started doing this job, I used to try to answer it.'

'But you don't any more?'

'I don't think that answer is in my jurisdiction. It is only for Him to answer.' He pointed to the altar as though God might be crouching behind it, just out of sight, listening.

I gestured towards him, in a 'see, I told you so' kind of way.

'But that doesn't mean there is no answer,' he said quickly. 'It is just that the answer is with God.'

'Father Arthur . . .'

'Yes, Lenni?'

‘That’s the biggest pile of crap I have ever heard. I’m dying here! And I have come to one of God’s designated spokes-people with a really important question, and you refer me back to him? I tried him already, but I didn’t get an answer.’

‘Lenni, answers don’t always come in the form of words. They can come in a variety of forms.’

‘Well then, why did you say that this was a place of answers? Why not be honest and say to me, “Okay, well the biblical theories aren’t watertight and we can’t give you answers, but we do have a nice stained glass window”?’

‘If you got an answer, what do you think it might be like?’

‘Maybe God would tell me he’s having me killed because I’m restless and annoying. Or maybe the real God is Vishnu, and he’s hella pissed that I’ve never even tried to pray to him but kept wasting my time with your Christian God. Or maybe there is no God and there never was, and the whole universe is being controlled by a turtle who’s massively out of his depth.’

‘Would that make you feel any better?’

‘Probably not.’

‘Have you ever been asked a question you couldn’t answer?’ Father Arthur asked.

I had to admit, I was impressed at how calm he was. He really knew how to turn a question around. I was obviously not his first ‘why am I dying’ rant. Which, in a way, made me feel worse.

I shook my head.

‘It’s horrible, you know,’ he continued, ‘to have to tell people I don’t have the answer they want. But that doesn’t

mean this isn't a place of answers – it's just that they might not be the answers you expect.'

'Tell me then, Father Arthur, shoot from the hip. What is the answer? Why am I dying?'

Arthur's soft eyes fixed on mine. 'Lenni, I—'

'No, just tell me. Please. Why am I dying?'

And just when I thought he was going to tell me that an honest answer was in breach of church protocol, he ran his hand over the grey stubble on his chin and said, 'Because you are.'

I must have frowned, or he must have regretted being tricked into saying something truthful, because he couldn't look at me. 'The answer I have, the only one I have,' he said, 'is that you are dying because you are dying. Not because of God's deciding to punish you and not because He is neglecting you, but simply because you are. It is a part of your story as much as you are.'

After a long pause, Arthur turned to me. 'Think of it this way. Why are you alive?'

'Because my parents had sex.'

'I didn't ask *how* you came to be alive, I asked *why*. Why do you exist at all? Why are you alive? What is your life for?'

'I don't know.'

'I think the same is true of dying. We can't know why you are dying in the same way that we can't know why you are living. Living and dying are both complete mysteries, and you can't know either until you have done both.'

'That's poetic. And ironic.' I rubbed at the spot on my hand where the cannula had been digging in the day before.

It had left behind an ache. 'Were you reading religious stuff when I came in?'

Arthur held up the book beside him. It was yellow with wire binding, tatty edges and bold letters – *The AA Road Atlas of Great Britain*.

'Were you looking for your flock?' I asked.

When New Nurse came to get me, I thought Arthur might fall to the ground and kiss her feet or run through the newly opened door screaming, but instead he waited patiently as I made my way to the door, handed me a pamphlet and said he hoped I would come again.

I don't know whether it was the impertinence of his refusal to shout at me, his reluctance to admit I was annoying him or the fact that the chapel was so nice and cool, but as I took his pamphlet, I knew that I would be back.

I left it for seven days. I thought I would give him long enough to presume that I probably wasn't coming back. Then, just as he settled into his lonely life inside his empty chapel, bam! There I was, tottering slowly towards him, my best pink pyjamas on and my next round of challenges to Christianity loaded and ready to fire.

This time, he must have spotted me coming down the corridor through those frosted windows, because he was holding the door open for me and saying, 'Hello, Lenni, I wondered when I'd be seeing you,' and just generally ruining my dramatic re-entrance for everyone.

'I was playing hard to get,' I told him.

He smiled at New Nurse. 'How long do I have the pleasure of Lenni's company today?'



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'An hour,' – she smiled – 'Reverend.'

He didn't correct her, but instead held the door open as I rattled down the aisle. I chose a front-row seat this time, to get a better chance of God noticing me.

'May I?' Father Arthur asked and I nodded. He sat beside me.

'So, Lenni, how are you this morning?'

'Oh, not too bad, thank you. And yourself?'

'You aren't going to comment on how empty the chapel is?' He gestured around the room.

'Nope. I figure that the day when someone other than us is in here will be the day worth commenting on. I don't want to make you feel bad about what you do.'

'That's very kind of you.'

'Maybe you need someone to work on your PR?' I asked.

'My PR?'

'Yeah, you know, the marketing: posters and adverts and stuff. We need to get the word out. That way the pews will fill up and you might make a profit.'

'A profit?'

'Yeah, right now you can't possibly be breaking even.'

'I don't charge people to come to church, Lenni.'

'I know, but think how impressed God would be if you had a nice buzzing church and started making some money for him at the same time.'

He gave me an odd smile. I took in the smell of recently blown out candles, which made me feel that a birthday cake must have been lurking somewhere.

'Can I tell you a story?' I asked.

'Of course.' He clasped his hands together.

‘When I was at school, I used to tag along with this group of girls on nights out in Glasgow. There was this really expensive night club that nobody could ever afford to go in. It never had a queue outside, but you could tell just from the black velvet ropes and the silver-painted doors that it would be special. It had two bouncers either side of the doors, despite the fact nobody ever seemed to go in and nobody seemed to come out. All we knew was that it cost seventy pounds to get in. We told ourselves it was too expensive, but any time we passed that club, we got more curious. We had to know why it was so expensive and what was on the other side. So we made a pact, saved up, and we took our fake IDs and we got in. And do you know what?’

‘What?’ he asked.

‘It was a strip club.’

Father Arthur raised his eyebrows and then self-consciously lowered them, as though he were worried I might mistake his startled look for one of intrigue, or arousal.

‘I’m not sure I understand the moral of the story,’ he said carefully.

‘What I’m saying is, it was the fact it was *so* expensive that made us think going inside would be worth it. If you charged a door fee, people might be intrigued. You could get bouncers too.’

Arthur shook his head. ‘I keep telling you, Lenni, the chapel is well attended. I spend a lot of time speaking with patients and relatives. People often come in to see me, it’s just that—’

‘It’s just that by coincidence I always happen to stop by when the people aren’t here?’

Father Arthur looked up at the stained glass window, and I could almost hear his internal monologue, asking God for

the strength to tolerate me. 'Did you think any further on what we talked about during your last visit?'

'A bit.'

'You asked me some good questions.'

'You gave me some unhelpful answers.'

There was a pause.

'Father Arthur, I was wondering whether you would do something for me?'

'What would you like me to do?'

'Can you tell me one truth, one cool, refreshing truth? No church spin, no fancy wording, just something you know to your core to be true, even if it hurts you, even if you would be fired if your bosses heard you say it to me.'

'My *bosses*, as you put it, are Jesus and the Lord.'

'Well, they certainly won't fire you – they love truth.'

I thought he would need more time to think of something true. I assumed he would need to contact a pope or a deacon and check whether he was allowed to dole out and administer the truth without any official guidelines. But just before New Nurse arrived, he turned to me awkwardly. Like someone who's about to give a gift when they're not at all sure that the recipient will like it.

'Are you going to tell me something true?' I asked.

'I am,' he said. 'Lenni, you said you wish that this could be a place of answers and . . . well, I wish it were a place of answers too. If I had the answers, I would give them.'

'I already knew that.'

'Then how about this?' he said. 'I really hoped you'd come back.'

\*

When I made it back to my bed, New Nurse had left me a note: *Lenni, talk to Jacky – social service’s.*

I corrected her grammar with the pencil she’d left and then headed over to the nurses’ station. Jacky, the heron-haired head nurse, wasn’t there. That’s when something caught my eye.

Beside the nurses’ station desk, the recycling trolley was awaiting the return of Paul the Porter. It’s a big wheeled bin. It used to have the words ‘mean machine’ penned in permanent marker on the handle, but that’s been painted over now. Paul’s trolley is not usually something I would find interesting, but the interesting thing about it that day was the elderly lady who was hanging halfway out of the bin, rustling through its papery contents with both hands, her small purple-slipped feet barely touching the floor.

Seeming to have found whatever it was she was looking for, the old lady straightened up, her grey hair fluffy from the effort. She slipped an envelope into the pocket of her purple dressing gown.

The door to the office made a clunk as someone pulled on the handle. Jacky and Paul were coming out.

The old lady caught my eye. I got the feeling she didn’t want to be seen doing what she had just done.

As Jacky and Paul the Porter emerged from the office, looking tired and bored respectively, I made a yelping sound.

They stared at me.

‘Hey, Lenni!’ Paul grinned.

‘What is it, Lenni?’ Jacky asked. The part of Jacky’s face where she really should have had a beak was set into a flat line of irritation.

## THE ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF LENNI AND MARGOT

I didn't want them to take their eyes off me as, behind them, the purple lady climbed down from the edge of the bin and began her extremely slow getaway.

'I . . . there's a . . . spider,' I said. 'In the May Ward.'

Jacky rolled her eyes as though it were my fault.

'I'll get it for you, darlin',' Paul said, and they both walked off past me into the May Ward.

Now safely at the end of the corridor, pulling the envelope from her pocket, the old lady stopped and turned. Then she caught my eye and she winked.

To my great surprise, Paul actually managed to find a spider in the corner of the window at the end of the May Ward. I wondered if it was a biblical sign. Seek and ye shall find. He captured it in a plastic cup and held his hand over it and let us have a peek. I noticed that the tattoos on his knuckles spelled out the word 'free'. Seeing the spider, Jacky told me to *man up*, and that if I wanted to see a *real* spider I should hang out in her back garden in the summer time when she has barbecues. Apparently, the spiders that live beneath her wooden decking are so big that if you try to trap them with a pint glass, their legs stick out of the bottom and end up getting severed. I politely declined the invitation and made my way back to bed.

Father Arthur's latest pamphlet was lying on the pile of similarly tragic offerings on my bedside table. A different Jesus on each one. Concerned Jesus, Jesus with sheep, Jesus with a group of children, Jesus on a rock. Each more Jesus-y than the last.

I drew the curtain around my bed and got into my thinking position. Father Arthur said that he wished he could give people answers. I thought how frustrating it must be for him

to be in a position where people constantly ask you questions you can never answer. Being a priest without any answers is like someone who can't swim being asked for swimming lessons. And he was clearly incredibly lonely. I knew and had always known that I would not find the answers to anything behind those heavy chapel doors. What I had found instead was someone who needed my help.

It took a couple of days to draw up my many-pronged plan to get more patients to visit the chapel. I'd make some eye-catching yet mysterious posters, maybe even get a spot of media attention. The hospital radio station could probably be coerced into giving the chapel a shout-out. Instead of focusing on religion, I would emphasize the therapeutic nature of my chats with Father Arthur, and perhaps as a side note I would mention how cool the chapel is. The other patients would like that, because it seems there is some law that says hospitals must be kept just above a comfortable temperature at all times. Just hot enough so that you're always a bit clammy. Not so hot that you can toast marshmallows.

New Nurse took me to the chapel, and to make sure Father Arthur was in a suitable mood for a marketing meeting, I peeped through the crack in the door. But he wasn't alone.

Father Arthur was standing in front of a man in an identical outfit – the white collar, the smart dark shirt and trousers. As he and Father Arthur shook hands, the man wrapped his other hand protectively around their union, as though he were keeping it sheltered from cold weather or a strong wind that might tear them apart and undo whatever agreement was being made.

The man had dark eyebrows and dark hair. It was hard to tell his age. He was smiling. Like a shark.

'Is there someone in there?' New Nurse asked.

'Yeah,' I whispered.

It was then that the ageless man made his way to the door. I had just enough time to straighten up as the door opened to reveal Arthur and the man, staring at me.

'Lenni, what a surprise!' Arthur said. 'How long have you been waiting there?'

'You did it!' I said. 'You got someone in.'

'Sorry?' Arthur said.

'You've got another customer.' I turned to the ageless man. 'Hello, fellow friend of Jesus, or Father Arthur.'

'Ah, well actually, Lenni, this is Derek Woods.'

Derek held out a hand. 'Hello,' he said smoothly. I shoved my Save the Chapel project plans under my arm and shook Derek's hand.

'Derek, this is Lenni,' Father Arthur said, 'a frequent visitor.'

'Lenni, it's a pleasure,' Derek said, smiling at me and New Nurse, who was hovering awkwardly near the doorway.

'To be honest, I'm just glad that someone besides me comes in here. You're the first person I've seen and it's been weeks.' Arthur looked at the floor. 'So, on behalf of the Save the Chapel focus group, I'd like to thank you for making the chapel your religious destination of choice.'

'The focus group?' Derek asked, turning to Arthur.

'I'm sorry, Lenni, I don't quite follow,' Arthur said, glancing at New Nurse.

'It's fine. I'll tell you all about it in our next meeting.' I turned to Derek. 'I hope you feel better.'

'Derek isn't a patient,' Father Arthur said, 'he's from the Lichfield Hospital Chapel.'

'Hey, a bum on a seat is still a bum on a seat, and I have this plan to get some Christ—'

'Derek has just agreed to take up the position here.'

'What position?'

'Mine. Unfortunately. I'm retiring, Lenni.'

I felt heat rise up in my cheeks.

'But *I* would very much like to hear about your plans for the chapel,' Derek said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

And then I turned.

And then I ran.