

## UNTIL LIFE US DO PART



Revenge, they tell you, is a dish best served cold. Since Julia had discovered Aidan's betrayal, she'd had plenty of time to cool down. It wasn't the first time. When the rat had first cheated on her, a year or so into their marriage, she had hurled his car books into a pyre and watched them burn, green flames reflected in her damp eyes.

But that was then. Her core had iced over. Propped up in bed in their London flat, flaming hair spilling onto the pillow, Julia shivered in the grey dawn. In a corner, a S.A.D. light manufactured sunshine.

It wasn't enough. She needed real sun.

Aidan was shaving, his slim torso bent over the basin, boyish face covered in lather. Julia cleared her throat. 'Darling? Remind me how long you'll be away.' Her heart pummeled as she uttered the first line of her well-rehearsed plot.

'Sorry Pumpkin, I'm not sure.' Aidan shouted from the bathroom. 'Two weeks at least. You know what Scots are like.'

Digs at the Scots were part of their subtext. Julia had inherited the wild temperament and snaking curls of her ancestors and tamed them both, though when she'd discovered Aidan's first fling nine years ago, she'd tried to claw his eyes out. But she had loved him then.

This time, she would play it his way. She would play it the English way.

'Aidan?' Julia opened her translucent negligee.

He walked into the bedroom running a comb through his hair, using both hands, Elvis fashion. 'Hm?'

'Who's driving to Aberdeen with you?' She just wanted to test how confidently he would lie. He held her gaze. 'Old Marchant from marketing. He'll smoke and talk about football all the way up. I should have taken the train.'

'Poor you. Have they found you a place to stay?'

'Bloody Maureen's messed up again.' He cocked his head to one side, 'I've no idea where we're going to end up.'

'Never mind. I have your mobile number if I need you.'

It would be switched off.

Julia had read in a psychobabble book how men compartmentalise their feelings. Aidan was a master compartmentalist.

In the other compartment of his life, he would be driving up to Scotland with Heather-Heather from Accounts, Heather with whom he'd been 'working' increasingly late recently. Julia had seen the online photos of the Christmas party.

The negligee fell from her shoulder. She slowly lifted a knee.

Aidan glanced at the alarm clock, strolled to the bed and snuggled under the duvet. He smelled of shaving foam and shampoo.

Julia's body tingled. Wild fiery tension built up inside her. Her stomach tightened with lust, lust for vengeance, lust for blood. She grabbed his damp hair, pushed his head back and sucked the

side of his neck until it turned purple. She suspected that Aidan, like any cheating husband, had told Heather that their love life was dead. Men always did. Well, the buxom accountant would be disappointed with her colleague's performance tonight. Nearing forty, it took Aidan a whole day to recover. Julia applied every trick she had learned during their ten years of marriage, plus a few more discovered in *Cosmopolitan*. She dug her nails into his back and engraved a stern, 'Julia was here' warning into his skin. Heather could have the leftovers.

Panting, faking, viciously ecstatic at what she had set in motion, Julia watched him with glee. Time had come to get rid of him, of her old life, her old flat, her old job. Time to say goodbye, good riddance, and head for the sun.

'Yes!' She shouted at the end of her rodeo, echoing Aidan's 'yes yes, oh baby yes!'

It was the last time they would ever agree on anything.

She fell back onto the pillow while he caught his breath.

'Ping!' A message landed on his phone. He staggered out of bed, grappled for the phone on his way to the bathroom and closed the door.

'Was it Marchant?' she asked when he came out. 'Darling, I'm so sorry I've made you late.' She put on her robe and stood by the door while Aidan picked up his case, handsome and business-like in a dark suit.

Her heart constricted. 'Have a good time, won't you?'

Aidan's face took on the expression of a spaniel denied a walk.

'Oh Jools, you know I'd rather be here with you than drive for ten hours with that pompous old fart.'

The final dialogue she had spent weeks rehearsing now unfurled without a hitch. Malevolent shivers rippled down her spine.

'Chin up, dear. You know I'll be here for you when you get back.'

Raindrops tapped on the windowpanes. Aidan glanced down into the street. 'There's a 'to let' sign in front of the building. 'Who's selling?'

Julia swallowed hard and slotted the final block into her Jenga tower of lies. 'Didn't you know? The Porters are relocating to Australia.'

Aidan grabbed his suitcase, gave her a peck on the cheek and sauntered down the stairs.

Julia padded to the window, hugging herself as he clattered down whistling *Scotland the Brave*. A blast of icy air shot up through the stairwell. The metal front door clanged.

Inside the car below, parked a few yards away, 'Marchant's' lacquered fingers drummed on the steering wheel.

Julia leaned into the coats and sobbed.

She sobbed over ten years of marriage, lies, dashed hopes and unborn children. She drew a long, ragged breath and took stock.

The flat was in her name. The furniture they had spent months choosing had lasted well. Not so the leather sofa, now scuffed and worn. Like their marriage, it had come with a lifetime guarantee. In the bedroom, a book lay open on his bedside table. Aidan hadn't planned to read in Scotland. Gripped by a sudden rage, Julia hurled it at the wall, followed by his alarm clock, his favourite mug, his old record collection and their wedding photo. A wave of grief washed over her. They had loved each other once.

She blew her nose and got to work. She had planned her operation as meticulously as the Great Escape. This time, he really had gone too far. There was no going back.

She dialled a number. 'Palmer Lettings, good morning.' A brisk male voice.

'Hello. I'm Julia Cawley, we spoke yesterday.'

'That's right. The furnished flat.'

'Yes. It is available from this week.'

'I have a couple here, a Monsieur and Madame Dubois. Could they visit this morning?'

Julia scanned the mess in alarm. 'This morning?'

'Yes. Flat four, isn't it?'

'That's right, second floor.' Julia cradled the phone to her shoulder and picked the clothes from the floor. 'What time would be convenient?'

There was a muffled conversation in the background.

'How about in, say, twenty minutes?'

Her feet crunching the smashed vinyls, she answered breezily, 'Yes. Twenty minutes will be perfect.'

That was it. She had set the pendulum in motion. A wave of nausea overcame her. She slammed a steel cage around her heart to stop it from shattering.

She stuffed Aidan's worn-out clothes into bin bags, together with his books and their wedding portrait, dragged the bags downstairs and hurled them into the communal bins. The rest would go into storage. She rushed back up, straightened the bed and swept the kitchen detritus under a mat. She had just picked her bathrobe from a chair when the bell rang. She stuffed it into the fridge.

Mr and Mrs Dubois hesitated on the threshold. Julia brushed the hair from her damp forehead and invited them in. The young couple glanced around the flat. Everything delighted the slender Mrs Dubois, while her husband frowned manfully.

'Will you be in England long?' Julia said.

'Yes, we arrive last week.'

'I see. And how long will you stay?'

'We work here for one year. Our société is in Paris.'

'Paris, how lovely. I am moving to France myself.'

'Ah oui? Où?'

'Paris, of course.'

Mr Dubois thawed a little. Julia flaunted the convenient access to the tube, shops and lovely English pubs. The place was free immediately and came fully furnished.

In the bedroom, the young couple imagined their new London life in hushed tones, while Julia pictured a rather different scenario.

Aidan drags a case full of dirty washing up the stairs and unlocks the 'home compartment' of his mind, looking forward to a home-cooked dinner and a quiet night in. He takes out his key and the nightmare begins as he stumbles in on the Dubois calmly eating at his table. He apologises, checks his key, scratches his head, bends over the banister and counts the floors. The line deepens across his brow. Aidan rushes to a wardrobe and yanks the doors open, hoping to find his suits. Monsieur Dubois objects. Heads are shaken, the French becomes more strident, the scenario darker. The tenants produce the rental contract and wave it at him.

The house of cards Aidan had so carefully built crumbles. He casts a last look at his home, at the couple living the life he has just squandered.

Head low, he staggers back onto the pavement, dirty laundry in tow. He calls Julia's mobile, urging her to answer. He swears. The Estate agent is closed. Fumbling, he opens his laptop and brings up Julia's Facebook, only to find that she had blocked him.

After a restless night, haggard and unshaven in a hotel, he storms into Palmer's office.

'Ah! Mr Cawley,' Palmer says. 'We were expecting you. Here you are, your wife left leave something for you.' He hands Aidan an envelope.

Inside is the key to a storage unit in Watford wrapped inside the purple G-string which Heather had once left under the sofa while Julia was visiting her sister.

Julia leaned on the railing, *le bastingage*... Her hair blown about by the wind, she tasted the French word, *bastingage*, so maritime, so evocative of corsairs and adventure.

In the distance, the spinnaker tower had shrunk to the size of a finger. Below her, the wake frothed in a foam that bubbled up to the surface, fizzed and fizzled away, leaving a long trail that fanned out and died... The pattern of Aidan's life.

Her phone rang.

Aidan.

Julia took a long breath of sea air. She leaned over the soapy wake, opened her fingers and dropped the still ringing phone into the sea.

A couple of seagulls dived and squabbled over it, mistaking it for a tasty morsel.

She grinned. She too had made that mistake.

In a few hours, the ship would reach Saint Malo, the walled city redolent of oysters and pirates, the springboard to her future. Julia was not going to Paris but to a tiny village on the Brittany coast where, in the courtyard of a stone cottage, she would learn jewellery making.

Back in London, Aidan would hear from her lawyer and Heather would receive a small package, a pair of delicate earrings, tiny seashells edged in gold, and a card. 'He's all yours now. Good luck.'