

## Harvest

She presses her lips together tightly. It's different to the smile she gave the customer before me in the queue. The new father. That one involved her cheeks and eyes too.

All the small tables in the hospital cafeteria are taken. I consider going outside, but I don't suppose you're allowed to take the porcelain cups out there and I don't fancy standing amongst the smokers with their drip stands anyway.

There's a large communal table and dotted amongst the patrons already seated there are a few available spots. I scan those I'd be seated next to and choose a vacant stool beside a man whose shoulders are hunched over his phone. He appears deeply engrossed. I will be able to enjoy my coffee in peace.

I plonk down on the stool. The man looks at me briefly. I give him the same tight-lipped smile.

Stupidly, the metal cutlery is in the middle of the table, out of most people's reach.

'Could you pass me a spoon? Please.'

He looks up from his phone to locate the canister of cutlery and slides it in my direction.

With the finest pincer grip I can manage, I select a teaspoon from the canister without touching the heads of any other spoons or the tines of any forks. I'll never understand how it is safer to keep the knives with their blades pointing down whilst the eating surfaces of the forks and spoons are exposed to grimy hands and airborne diseases. In a hospital, of all places. Are they looking for admissions?

I use the teaspoon to lift large soapy bubbles from the top of my coffee and slop them onto the saucer. When it bears some semblance to the flat white I'd ordered, I bring the cup to my

lips. It's half the size of any of our mugs at home, its rim three times as thick. I use the same pincer grip to hold its ridiculous little handle.

The man beside me looks up after I slam the cup down.

'No good?'

It was bitter and far too hot. I should have known.

'Remember they're volunteers, not baristas.'

He has a small pot of tea in front of him. He obviously remembered.

His phone beeps and he excuses himself to look at it.

Afterwards, he puts the phone down face-up on the table. I catch a glimpse of the wallpaper – a family photo.

'I'm sorry, I'm waiting for some news.'

News about one of those kids, perhaps. Or his wife. Perhaps about one of their elderly parents.

He moves the phone closer to him and turns his body towards me. 'I hate it when people look at their phones when they're talking.'

I didn't know we were talking. But since he thinks we are, I try to think of something to say.

'How's the tea?'

He picks up his cup and holds it in both hands.

'It's supposed to be comforting.'

I stir my coffee vigorously to get some air flowing through it. A thin white skin tangles around the handle of the teaspoon. He looks at me, biting his lip.

Damn it. I didn't want a conversation. I'd wanted to get out of that hospital room to a place where I felt like I had a choice. Even if it was just between a flat white and a cappuccino. And I still didn't get what I wanted.

Since I can't yet go back to the ward, it looks like I have no choice but to enter this conversation.

'Not doing the job?' I ask.

He grunts and smooths the front of his shirt before leaning forward, clasping his hands under his chin. 'No, it's not.' He inhales deeply. 'We don't know if they actually have one, if it'll be a match, if she'll survive the surgery. There's so much uncertainty.'

How's that for irony? I rub the back of my neck.

I've never been any good at small talk. Strangers talking about tea and coffee and the weather. Never saw any point. And here we are way beyond small talk. I don't want him asking any questions. Does he want me to ask any? Why would I do that when I have enough on my own plate?

He keeps talking. 'Especially after last time.' He picks up the teapot and swirls it then tips it towards his cup. Nothing comes out. He pushes them both away and checks the screen of his phone.

I twirl my wedding band around the base of my finger.

If I had a choice, I'd choose uncertainty.

'She's been on the list for years. Last week we got the call. There was one available. We couldn't believe it.' I look up as he shakes his head. 'We celebrated too early. We had a kidney, you know? They'd whack it in and boom! Our kids still had a mum. I still had a wife.'

My brows furrow. Our eyes meet and I can't help but nod.

It's all I want too. My wife. The mum of our kids.

'I sat here, right here.'

Oh, dear God, he's still talking.

He's tapping the table with his finger. 'They put her under. But when the kidney arrived, it was dead.' He shakes his head again. Rubs his temples. 'It wasn't over at all. We were back at the start. She went back on the list, and we went back to the uncertainty.'

If I was a woman, perhaps I'd reach out and touch his hand. That's what my wife would have done, back when she could control her hands. Even when they'd given her a prognosis of less than six months, I'd seen her do that to comfort an upset friend. But I wasn't a woman and he wasn't my friend.

'So, this morning, we got another call. They're prepping her for theatre. Just in case.' He clears his throat. 'I want her to live so bad. Our kids are so young. She's afraid they won't remember her if she goes.'

Now he's hit a nerve. I put my hands under the table and turn to him. This is my problem. I'm afraid our kids won't remember their mum. But their mum is afraid of how they'll remember her.

'How old are your kids?'

He picks up his phone and shows me the screen. I recognise this man in the image. Sitting on a red leather couch between him and a dark-haired woman with pale skin are two little girls. They're probably around six or eight years old. The oldest one looks around the same age as our youngest. But our girls have beautiful curly hair like their mother. Will they have any memories of her or just her curly hair?

I nod. 'Nice kids.' My wife probably would have shown him our girls on her phone. I've seen her with her friends ogling each other's kids on their phones.

'I want to be excited.' He reaches for his empty cup and looks in it. 'But I've also got to be prepared for the heartbreak if it doesn't happen today. Would you let yourself get excited this time?'

'Excited that my wife might live and come home to her family? Damn right, I would.'

I stand up.

He does the same. 'You're right, man. Thank you!' He looks at his phone screen again. 'I'm ready to go and wait with her now. I needed this. Thank you.'

We shake hands.

I need to be with my wife. The two separate medical teams should be finished in her room now and I'll be allowed back in. I check my watch. Her parents will be here any moment with our girls.

I arrive back at the ICU as one of the clinicians is coming out of my wife's room. She closes the door gently behind her.

'Ah, you're back,' she says. 'You must be so proud of her decision.'

'Which decision?' I fold my arms across my chest.

'Both.' She rests her hand on my upper arm.

I step back from her touch. 'I have to be. It's not my choice.'

'No, it wasn't your choice,' the clinician's voice is tender. 'Neither of them was. They were her decisions to make. And she's at peace with both.'

My jaw tightens.

‘Your wife has chosen to end her life with dignity.’

I swallow hard and shove my fists into my pockets.

A surgeon wearing teal scrubs emerges from my wife’s room. The first clinician introduces him as part of the harvest team.

He reaches for my hand. I can’t bring mine out of my pocket to shake his. I’m not pleased to meet him. And if he’s offering his gratitude, I don’t want that either. This wasn’t my doing.

‘I want you to know that the heroic act of donating her organs will save the lives of four people. What an amazing and generous woman your wife is.’

Is.

Soon, we will refer to her in past tense.

I know she’s generous. A hero. She’s always been amazing and that’s why I can’t bear to let her go. I cover my face and feel the light touch of their hands on my back.

A gentle ding down the hallway echoes and I instinctively look up. The doors open to reveal her parents, holding the hands of our two daughters.

I can’t hold back the tears then. I want to turn away. I want to run away. But I join them and we enter my wife’s room to say our final goodbyes.

They let us walk beside her gurney as far as the surgery doors. The girls walk on either side of her, holding a hand each like they did when we’d walk down and get ice cream on summer holidays.

It’s still warm, they assure me.

When the doors open, I see the man from the cafeteria, standing beside a patient gurney.

Our eyes meet. We look at each other’s wives before our eyes lock again.

'I'm sorry.' He mouths the words. 'Thank you.' Tears spill down our cheeks.