

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.

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 counsellor, 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.

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.'

'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.

'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?'