

SAM BAKER

To My Best Friends

HARPER

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are
the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is
entirely coincidental.

Harper

An imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.harpercollins.co.uk

A Paperback Original 2011

1

Copyright © Sam Baker 2011

Sam Baker asserts the moral right to
be identified as the author of this work

A catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978 0 00 730554 4

Set in Meridien by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior
permission of the publishers.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or
otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it
is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



Mixed Sources

Product group from well-managed
forests and other controlled sources
www.fsc.org Cert no. SW-COC-001806
© 1996 Forest Stewardship Council

FSC is a non-profit international organisation established
to promote the responsible management of the world's forests.
Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified
to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed
to meet the social, economic and ecological needs
of present and future generations.

Find out more about HarperCollins and the environment at
www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

*To my best friends
Nancy, Clare, Catherine
Jude
Shelly
And, above all, Jon*

PROLOGUE

That navy Prada suit, the one with the nipped-in waist you wished you'd never bought? Trust me, get the skirt taken up two inches and wear it with my red Marc Jacobs mary-janes. The ones with the blue trim. They always fitted you better than they did me, anyway. You'll look a million dollars . . .

Slipping the lid back on the cartridge pen, Nicci dropped it on the duvet beside her and let her head fall back onto plumped pillows. She closed her eyes and felt the bedroom spin. It was a familiar sensation now, almost comforting, in a sick sort of way.

Three and a half lines of writing. Five sentences. Fifty-five words. How could fifty-five measly words be so exhausting? They weren't even the important words. Those were still to come. These were just the preamble, the housekeeping. Nicci risked opening her eyes and the room sped up.

Damn it, she thought, and let her lids drop, feeling the spinning recede. This wasn't her. Illness didn't suit her. Nicci Morrison didn't do sick, just as she didn't do sitting around at weekends, chilling or downtime. And she didn't do lying

in bed in the middle of the afternoon. At least not since she was twenty-one and had met David. Then they'd done nothing much other than lying in bed all afternoon when she should have been writing a ten-thousand-word dissertation on the way clothes reflect women's place in society in nineteenth-century literature. Well, not so much lying, but bed had figured prominently. Bed, the floor, the bath . . .

Nicci smiled at the memory. Half sad, half glad they'd had that then, and the rest.

Come on, she urged herself. *Get a grip. One down, three more letters to go.*

The trick was catching her morphine at the right stage: long enough after her injection for the pain to have eased, but not so soon the opiates dulled her capacity to think straight. Pulling herself up, Nicci rummaged around her for the pen while trying to find her train of thought. Light shimmered at the edge of her vision, brighter than she could stand.

Jo wouldn't refuse, Nicci was sure of that. Especially not when she opened the parcel containing the red mary-janes, which David would deliver with the letter. How could she – how could any of them – when Jo knew only too well what Nicci had been through in the past year? Biopsies, mastectomy, chemo and radio. None of which, ultimately, had worked. Wasn't wearing an old navy-blue suit the least a girl could do for her best friend?

Looking at the sheet of thick cream paper resting on a magazine on her knee, Nicci smiled. She would have the last laugh. And her business partner would thank her for it. In the weeks to come, the last thing her friend would want to think about – the last thing any of Nicci's friends would want to think about – was what to wear.

Now, that's the outfit sorted. And don't argue, Jo. Remember, on the wardrobe front, Nicci knows best!!!

Just think of it as one less problem to worry about. After all, you're going to have enough on your plate with Capsule Wardrobe once I've gone.

But that's not the point of this letter. No, what I'm really writing about are my twin babies, my darling girls, my Charlie and Harrie, your goddaughters. And you've been such a good godmother, Jo, the very best. Which is why I want you to be more . . .

ONE

There were few things in life Nicci Morrison had not been able to control. But being buried on a dank, drizzly day in February was one of them.

It was not yet two o'clock, and the dirty grey cloud hung low over the church, obscuring the spire, making the hour seem closer to dusk.

'There you are!' Jo Clarke called out as a tall thin woman, hair frizzing from the bun at the nape of her neck, picked her way along the muddy path. She was clad head to toe in black – hardly unexpected at a funeral – but her spike-heeled ankle boots would have looked more at home in a bar.

'Let me guess,' Jo laughed, eyeing the Jimmy Choo boots. 'The person responsible for you buying those in the first place is to blame for you wearing them now?'

Mona Thomas raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly at the red mary-janes on Jo's feet. 'Takes one to know one,' she said.

'Typical Nicci, huh?' Jo hugged Mona hard to distract herself from her tears. Nicci had known outfit-planning would be the last thing on anyone's mind, and so, unable to break the habit of a lifetime, she had done it for them.

'Hello, Si.' Mona reached over Jo's shoulder to pat his cheek. 'Am I the last?'

Shaking his head, Si moved aside to make way for a group of unfamiliar faces waiting impatiently in the mizzle behind his wife and her friend.

'Lizzie and Gerry are inside. Well, Lizzie is. Gerry dropped her off at the gate and went to park the car. You on your own?'

'Yep. I thought I'd spare Dan. I know he was fond of Nicci – and he adores David – but, y'know . . . kids and funerals . . .' Mona's voice trailed away, and Jo and Si nodded. They knew. Adults and funerals, too.

'You guys go on in,' Si said. 'I'll wait for Gerry. The, erm, the . . . hearse will . . . you know . . . be here soon.'

Jo nodded gratefully and took Mona's arm. Si knew she wouldn't want to see her best friend arrive that way.

'So have you told Si yet?'

'Told him what?' Jo whispered, leaning across the pew so she could be heard by Lizzie and Mona, but not the random mixture of family members, customers and distant friends who had gathered to pay their respects.

'About the letter, of course,' Mona hissed.

Jo's eyes bulged. 'Of course I bl—' she stopped herself, remembering where she was. Jo wasn't religious, but even so. 'Of course I haven't! What was I supposed to say? "Hey, Si, after the last three years, all the money we've spent, all the . . ." she swallowed, focusing on her hands until Lizzie's freckled arm reached over and squeezed one of them, ". . . all the disappointment, guess what. It doesn't matter now if we can't have kids because we've been left shares in someone else's?" You can imagine how that would go down.'

Actually, now she thought of it, Jo didn't have the first

clue how that news would go down with Si. It was months, longer, since they had even talked about it.

'You don't have to put it quite like that,' Lizzie whispered gently. 'After all, it's not as if it's that straightforward.'

'It's not remotely straightforward.'

Closing her eyes, Jo leant back in the pew. Centuries-old oak dug uncomfortably into her vertebrae and the organ music was giving her a headache. Whatever Nicci's instructions for the funeral, and, Nicci being Nicci, there would have been plenty – the flowers for a start; the church was awash with blue and yellow, not a lily in sight – Jo was sure they hadn't included a wheezing, clunking rendition of 'Dido's Lament', or anyone else's lament come to that.

'I've told Gerry,' Lizzie coloured as she rushed the words out. She couldn't help herself; never had been able to. If there was a crease Lizzie had to iron it out. A silence – awkward or not – she had to fill it.

Jo's eyes flicked open. 'About our bequests?' she asked, her voice tight. 'Didn't we agree to keep that between ourselves for now, just while we work out what to do? Whether we have to, you know, comply with Nicci's wishes.'

'Not yours and Mona's, just mine.'

'Oh,' snorted Mona. 'That's hardly the same, is it? At least Nicci left you something—'

'Just out of interest,' Jo interrupted, hearing Mona's voice rise and seeing Lizzie's lip quiver, 'what *did* Gerry say, about your bequest, I mean?'

Lizzie's mouth twisted. 'What d'you think he said?'

'Let me guess,' Mona said. 'I bet it had something to do with cheap labour.'

Lizzie's laugh burst out over the hush of voices and the wheeze of the organ. She clapped a hand over her mouth, but not before earning a scowl from an elderly woman sitting on the other side of the aisle. 'That's about the sum of it.'

Gerry said . . . ' she put on his voice. It was posh Yorkshire. He used being northern when it suited him and hid it when it didn't, ' . . . "Don't you usually have to pay someone to do that?"'

Jo and Mona exchanged glances. They loved Lizzie but, despite years of trying, they still didn't get Gerry. If he hadn't married one of their dearest friends their paths would never have crossed. Nicci had barely tolerated him, declaring him smug and materialistic, and nowhere near good enough. But once Lizzie announced a date and flashed a rock that – as Nicci muttered later – cost a fortune and still looked as if it belonged in an Argos sale, she backed off. If Gerry was what Lizzie wanted then, like him or not, he was what they wanted for her too.

As 'Dido's Lament' segued clumsily into Albinoni's 'Adagio' Mona mimed sticking her fingers in her ears. 'Clearly there are some things even Nicci's ghost can't control. *Now That's What I Call Funerals.*'

'Still,' said Lizzie, 'what are the alternatives? Westlife? Celine Dion? Bette Midler?'

'That, and the self-invited guests,' said Jo. 'Guess it's what you get for being popular.'

'Yeah,' said Mona. 'Can you imagine having loads of people you hardly know turn up for your wedding?'

'I did,' Lizzie said. 'Remember? My mother insisted on inviting a bunch of aunties and cousins three times removed.'

'Nicci did too,' Jo said. 'But weren't they all distant relatives of David that he said he hadn't seen since his christening?'

A sudden hush cut them short. The organ music had died and all around them people were getting to their feet as the pallbearers entered the church. Si slid in beside Jo, Gerry behind him.

'Here we go, love,' Si said, slipping his arm around Jo's shoulder . . .

‘Ready or not,’ she agreed, reaching for Lizzie’s hand . . .
‘Not,’ Lizzie whispered, squeezing Mona’s hand in turn . . .
‘Never will be,’ Mona replied, squeezing it back.

‘Nicci had to be first at everything,’ said Jo, trying to raise her quavering voice so it was audible at the back. The flowers seemed to muffle it, each petal, leaf and stamen cushioning the sound. Who knew flowers bugged up your acoustics? Not even Nicci could predict that.

Think of this as a business presentation Jo coached herself. Imagine those red eyes and puffy faces belong to financial backers, not fellow mourners at your best friend’s funeral.

Her best friend’s funeral.

How had she got landed with this? She hadn’t known Nicci any longer than the others. Well, no longer than Lizzie. A day, maybe a week, certainly no more. Why did Jo always have to be the grown-up?

Gripping the lectern to steady herself, she took a deep breath. ‘You name it,’ Jo continued, ‘Nicci beat the rest of us to it. She was the first to meet *The One* – her lovely David.’ Jo ventured a smile at where Nicci’s widower sat in the front pew, two tiny blonde girls in mini-me coats held close on either side of him, confusion on their small faces. David’s parents sat either side of the three, creating a protective barrier around their son and granddaughters.

‘The first to marry, the first to have children . . .’ Jo swallowed. That last bit wasn’t strictly true. Mona had had her son long before the others even started thinking about kids, but they’d discussed it the night before and agreed that simply didn’t count. Mona had gone away, and when she came back there was Dan. It was different. They didn’t really know why, it just was.

‘. . . her adorable and much-loved Harriet and Charlotte.

Harrie and Charlie to their besotted godmothers – Mona, Lizzie and, of course, me . . .’

Did David know about the bequest, Jo wondered. Of course, he knew about the letters; he’d delivered them. But was he aware of their contents; that he was handing over grenades? He had to, didn’t he? Nicci wouldn’t have done that without telling him . . . would she?

Seeing a hundred faces gazing up at her, Jo forced herself on.

‘She was the first of us to have it all. To juggle her new family, her beloved husband and our little business: her other baby, Capsule Wardrobe. And now . . .’ Jo tried to concentrate on the neat capitals printed on the index cards in front of her. It wasn’t as if she didn’t know the words off by heart – poor Si had listened to this speech a dozen times in the last couple of days – but her eyes filled with tears, and the neat letters doubled and tripled until she couldn’t even see her words, let alone recall them.

‘And now, our beautiful Nicci . . .’ she heard Lizzie prompt gently from the front row.

Jo blinked away her tears. ‘And now, our beautiful Nicci,’ she repeated, ‘our best friend, the love – I know he won’t mind me saying – of David’s life, is the first of us to die.’ Looking up, she pasted on a smile. ‘Taking this number-one thing to extremes a bit, I think.’

A ripple of laughter echoed around the small church and Jo risked catching David’s eye. Misery, exhaustion and disbelief at finding himself in this place, for this unthinkable, unimaginable, reason . . . all her own emotions were in his gaze but ripped raw. He squeezed his daughters tighter. Was it her imagination, or was he sending a signal?

Stop it, Jo told herself. Concentrate.

'I met Nicci,' she continued, 'on my first day at university. She took me under her vintage-store-clad wing and I never looked back. Soon after, she found Lizzie and, for want of a better word, adopted her too. Then, by sheer fluke, Mona found us. And together we found David. The poor thing didn't know what he was letting himself in for . . .' Another ripple of laughter.

'Nicci wheedled her way into David's life, and his wardrobe!' More laughter, louder now. 'As she did for so many of us here.'

Jo let her gaze roam the front pews where Nicci's influence bloomed. How had Nicci known they would all be so obedient? Or were they all just too exhausted, too heartbroken, to greet Nicci's instructions telling them what to wear to their best friend's funeral with anything other than gratitude?

Lizzie's taupe cardigan was loosely belted over a beautiful floral Paul Smith tea dress that Jo knew for a fact had cost as much as half a month's mortgage; the Burberry trench coat that had cost the other half lay over the back of the pew behind her. Mona wore a slick black Helmut Lang trouser suit, which just about made up for the four-inch heels Nicci had convinced her 'cost per wear' would be a bargain. At the last count, 'cost per wear' those boots still stood at six months' Council Tax. David's scuffed Church's brogues, identical to the ones Nicci had bought him their very first Christmas together, already showed signs of missing Nicci's care. And Jo's own navy suit was nowhere near as frumpy as she remembered now the skirt was taken up, as per Nicci's instructions.

As ever, Nicci had been right. It might be her funeral, but her friends still looked a million dollars. In a subdued, funeral-appropriate, style.

'I know this isn't the done thing,' Jo said, deviating from her script, 'but I'd like to do a straw poll.'

A bemused murmur rippled through the congregation. Lizzie glanced at Mona, who shook her head. This wasn't planned.

'How many here today are wearing outfits, or at least items of clothing, that Nicci picked out for us?' Jo raised her own arm. She felt like an idiot. And from the way half the congregation stared at her, she knew she looked like one too.

Widening her eyes at them, she willed Lizzie and Mona to join her.

Mona raised her arm, then Lizzie. A second later, David joined them. Harrie and Charlie's arms were raised by their granny and grandpa. Then, as if in a Mexican wave, arms rose around the church, rippling right to the back where, Jo realised now, Capsule Wardrobe's most loyal clients stood, the pews too full to hold them.

Laughter burst from her. Jo couldn't help it; didn't even try to suppress it. The sound of the first genuine laugh she'd managed in the two weeks since Nicci's death pealed up into the apse.

'How much would Nicci love this?' Jo said. 'She made clothes her life, she believed that what we wore spoke volumes more than anything words could say; that a T-shirt, or a dress, or a pair of shoes, really was a statement. That woman contributed in some way to the outfits of what must be over a hundred people here.'

'My friends . . . all of whom, like me, loved and trusted Nicci, there can be no better affirmation of her life. Because if there's one thing I know Nicci would have wanted it's this: no frumps at her funeral.'

'Nicci, we love you, we miss you, and we don't yet know what we will do – how we will even begin to cope – without

you. But you are forever in our hearts . . .' Jo paused, locking wet eyes with Lizzie and Mona, strengthened by their tearful smiles.

' . . . And in our wardrobes.'