Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

My Juliet...

by Jane Hill

The letter arrived three days after Juliet's funeral—written in her hand and warning me not to attend.

I reread it. What did she not want me to attend? I hoped she didn't mean her funeral, as I'd already been, and nothing had happened to cause either of us undue concern.

The funeral itself had been a ramshackle affair, hastily thrown together by her mum and dad, who had no idea how their daughter had lived. She'd left home without their blessing or support and, out of necessity, had been forced to make her own way in the world. Her mother and father were nauseatingly conspicuous in their grief, with mourners gravitating towards them to share in their sorrow.

I couldn't bring myself to speak to them, aside from a tearful acknowledgement across the chapel. Whatever they were feeling, it should have included overwhelming pain and guilt for treating their daughter so badly.

I'd known Juliet since we were seven years old. We collected frogspawn, kept spiders in jars, learned French skipping, wore American tan tights with knee-length white socks, fancied Robert Simmonds and Steven Rouse, learned all the words to 'Make Me a Star', and got our first Saturday jobs at the big Sainsbury's... All my memories were the same as hers.

We'd been pretty much inseparable for years, until we ended up in different catchment areas for senior school. Still, I was the first person she called after walking out of her childhood home with nothing but two suitcases and her Post Office savings book.

I was at a loss as to how I could help her. My parents had always treated Juliet like another daughter and, bless them, they offered her a room for a few weeks until she found somewhere more permanent. I know they helped her out with money too, but that is a secret I will never tell.

We lost touch after that summer. We'd both done pretty well in our A levels, and I went on to Newcastle to study Art History, whereas she opted for Media Studies somewhere in Cornwall. Obviously, we stayed in touch, writing and phoning whenever we could, but as time passed, we settled into our separate lives, gradually falling into the habit of exchanging only birthday and Christmas cards.

I later married my beautiful Ethan, and we had two beautiful children. Of course, I invited Juliet to the wedding, but she didn't turn up. I sent her photographs of us and, later, of the children, but apart from our twice-yearly card exchanges, it was as though she'd fallen off the face of the earth.

The next time I heard anything about Juliet was when her mother called to tell me that my oldest friend had died. She knew we kept in touch, so I must have known her daughter was in the hospice. She was sure Juliet would have told me she was ill.

I was shocked to my core. My birthday had been only a couple of months earlier, and I'd received a lovely card from Juliet with the sweetest message—but no hint that she was sick.

Then, three days after bidding farewell to my best buddy, I arrived home and picked through the day's post. I discarded most of it onto the side table for later, but one envelope stopped me.

It was addressed in Juliet's handwriting.

I tore it open and read:

'Dear wonderful friend,

This is my last request. My darling Debbie, please do not go. Please stay away. It won't help either of us.

Please, for me, don't go.'

I'm at a loss as to what she means. Where mustn't I go?

Whatever the puzzle, I can't think about it now. Upstairs, bedroom doors open and footsteps cross the landing, punctuated by the familiar shouts of my precious boys wanting to know what's for tea.