

PROLOGUE

ZOE

‘Zoe, wake up.’

A familiar voice fills my ears, jolting me from my deep sleep. It’s barely a whisper, quiet and scratchy like she hasn’t spoken in hours. Which would make sense considering it’s the middle of the night. I peel open an eye, adjusting to the darkness around me, except for the sliver of moonlight creeping through the slats of the blinds. Sleeping at Grandma’s is like crawling into a cave and closing yourself off from the world. There are no street lights and barely a sound in the Italian mountains where her house nestles. The only thing that can shock you awake is the occasional electrical thunderstorm that snaps and crackles across the midnight sky like a firework display. Well, that and my grandma and her disregard for the time.

I turn my head towards the figure crouching next to me.

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Grandma beams back at me, thrilled that her plan has worked. I can smell coffee on her breath, and I scrunch up my face.

‘Grandma,’ I moan half-heartedly, ‘why are you awake? It’s the middle of the night.’

I try to close my eyes again, but she gives me a shake.

‘I couldn’t sleep. I’ve been up for hours. Come on, get up. I’ve got something I need to show you.’

I hear the smack of her walking stick as she crosses the wooden floorboards, and I jump as she thwacks it against the door frame, shaking me immediately awake again.

‘Okay,’ I manage, ‘I’m up, I’m up.’

There is very little point me trying to get back to sleep now. Once Grandma has an idea in her head, there is no deterring her. If I don’t follow her downstairs in the next five seconds, she’ll return with a vengeance. Quite frankly, I wouldn’t put it past her to tip a bucket of water over my head.

I drag my legs out from underneath the thin sheet and follow the sound of her shuffling down the corridor. She’s like a wind-up toy. She can’t walk that easily (to be fair, the woman is in her nineties), but she shuffles with such speed that if you looked away for a second she’d be gone.

Only the moonlight peering through the shutters breaks up the darkness that has swept over the landing. I hold my hands out to try to steady myself as I make my way down the stairs. She clunks down each step and I wince every time she lands. We have spent this entire summer terrified that she’s about to fall over and break something, but Grandma goes out of her way to prove that she’s made of rubber. Last weekend she tried to get me to compete in a cartwheel race. Considering she can barely walk nowadays without her stick, I’m almost certain she was joking. But she’s so

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furiously against being old that I wouldn't want to challenge her. She'd probably try and forward-roll down the mountain.

'What's going on?'

I turn to look back up the stairs as a beam of light spills over Grandma and me. Mum is standing in her bedroom doorway, arms crossed, frowning down at us. She yawns loudly.

'Oh good, you're up.' Grandma waves her walking stick above her head, not an ounce of remorse on her face at having woken up the whole house. She has at least now reached the bottom of the stairs. 'Come on, Angie. There's something I want to show both of you.'

'Mum!' Exasperation carries Mum's voice. 'What are you doing? Do you have any idea what time it is?'

'Time?' Grandma scoffs. 'What is time? Inspiration knows no time. Magic knows no time, Angie. Time is just a state of mind.' She continues to shuffle into the living room.

Mum rolls her eyes at me, and I shrug. We both know that this is just Grandma – weird yet wonderful, mad but incredible. She's like a child hiding inside the body of an old woman. It's like she doesn't understand rules, or maybe she does and simply refuses to follow the beat of anybody else's drum. But she gets away with it because she's an artist, and that's why everybody loves her.

'Have you been drinking coffee?' Mum asks, pushing her thin hair out of her eyes as she follows her into the living room. 'You shouldn't, it's not good for you.'

'Would you rather I drank brandy?' Grandma challenges.

'Remind me to replace it with decaf tomorrow,' Mum mutters to me as Grandma turns to face us and waves her stick in the air, commanding attention.

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‘Well?’ she cries. ‘What do you think?’

‘Of what?’ I say. ‘I can’t see.’

‘Hang on.’ Mum steps back and turns on a lamp. As a warm glow pools around her, she tightens her cotton dressing gown over her floral nightie, her eyes scrunched up like prunes, trying to see without her glasses.

Grandma is wearing soft sunshine-yellow dungarees. Her white hair is wild, falling down her back, with tufts sticking up where she’s scratched her head. She has splats of paint across her face and she’s clasping a paintbrush. As she waves her hand around, her engagement ring catches the light. That ring has sat proudly on her hand for the past sixty years, and she’s always claimed that it’s magic. It’s how my grandpa speaks to her; she says each glint of the ring is him saying ‘hello’, or ‘go for it!’ or – more often than not – ‘I love you!’ Whenever I catch it glimmering, she gives me a knowing look as though we are sharing a secret.

Now her blue eyes are filled with excitement as they flash between me and her latest creation, and I finally look at what she’s woken us up for.

Standing on her easel is a canvas covered in paint. It’s messy, with a flurry of colours splattered across it – azure blue and rusted orange, with careful strokes of gold and buttermilk yellow. In the centre is a woman. She is at one with the colours, as though she’s created the mess. Her eyes are closed as she embraces the paint speckled across her face.

‘Wow,’ I breathe. ‘Grandma, it’s beautiful. I love it.’

‘You see, her life is full of colour and madness. It’s random and sometimes the colours don’t go together, but she’s happy. She doesn’t care what time it is.’

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‘Who is she?’

A wise smile pulls at her crinkled lips. She pauses for a moment before exclaiming, ‘Who do you think? She’s me!’

She holds out her hands, and me and Mum walk towards her. She takes our hands and turns her own so that the ring is facing us.

‘She is all of us,’ she says. ‘She’s magic.’

I laugh. ‘I’m not magic.’

She raises her eyebrows. ‘You don’t believe you’re magic?’

I grin. I’m twenty-five, but I don’t think Grandma will ever not speak to me like I’m the wide-eyed eight-year-old she used to play dragons and knights with.

She squeezes my hand. ‘When you’re wearing this ring, my love, you believe in everything.’

CHAPTER ONE

ANGIE

Six weeks later

They're everywhere, piles of them stacked up around the village hall. Chicken sandwiches, ham sandwiches, cheese sandwiches, tuna sandwiches. White bread and granary. Neat triangles with their crusts cut off. Little sausage rolls, and bowls of crisps that people continually dip their hands into. They're scooping dollops of hummus or sour cream and chive onto their paper plates, murmuring politely over cups of half-drunk tea and tepid, bitter coffee. It's a sea of drooped shoulders, shrouded in black clothing. And then there are the four of us. Me, Reg, Zoe and Harriet.

It always shocks you, death. Even if you know it's coming, if it's inevitable. You're never ready. Ever since her hand went cold in mine, I've felt as though someone has ripped me from my anchor and now I'm just floating around aimlessly. I'm starved of oxygen; I can barely breathe. But I need to keep moving. It's

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the only thing I know how to do, and I have no idea what will happen if I stop.

Mum wanted to be buried in Cornwall with my dad. So here we are. A service in the rain, a few polite readings, and now a village-hall wake, full of people I want to shake and scream at in the hope they'll tell me it's not real. That none of this is real.

But it is. I know that better than anyone.

Zoe has been in a corner since the moment she arrived, chatting with her best friend Harriet. Every now and again she glances at me, and I can tell she is about to march over with wide eyes and ask me how I'm doing and whether I'd like to talk. The only thing that could possibly make being at your mother's funeral worse is having your only daughter look at you with eyes full of worry. You're supposed to be worried about them, not the other way around.

Harriet is keeping her busy, chatting and filling her plate high with cake. She's a lifeline, Harriet. She's been a ball of energy ever since she turned up at my door for tea after school, aged eleven, with long, gangly legs and streams of straggly red hair. She's kept her place at our kitchen table ever since.

And then there is my brother, Reggie, the polar opposite of me in every situation. Today is no exception. His is the only laugh to be heard, ricocheting off the walls as he greets family members and old friends with slaps on the back, big, bracing hugs and jostles of shoulders. He seems to be doing a pretty good job of keeping it together.

I'm the fourth piece of the puzzle, and I'm starting to wonder if I could slip out of the door without anybody noticing. I can feel their eyes on me, trying to find the right moment to lay a gentle hand on my arm and tell me how sorry they are for my

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loss. But I can't have that happen. If a single one of these well-wishing friends even cocks their head in my direction, I'll fall apart.

So instead I focus on the sandwiches, and I'm doing a pretty good job of coping. That is, until the instantly recognisable glissando of ABBA's 'Dancing Queen' slides through the speakers and I rush off to hide in the toilet, where I sob into my sleeve, feeling like I might vomit.

Three minutes of allowing myself to drown. Then a deep breath, a splash of water to the face, and back to the sandwiches. I think it's about time I restocked the coronation chicken.

CHAPTER TWO

ZOE

‘Thank you so much for coming, so good to see you!’

I tip another plate of half-eaten sausage rolls into a black bin bag and eye my uncle sceptically. He’s been standing by the door of the village hall for the past half an hour saying his good-byes, while Mum, Harriet and I have scurried around sweeping and wiping and unsuccessfully closing various trestle tables. One kicked me in the shins so violently that I nearly gave Mum a stroke with the curse I yelled across the room. I had to promise I’d never say the word again to stop her having a go at me. It wasn’t even that bad! All I said was ‘pissflaps’.

While all of this has been going on, my uncle has been doing what he does best. Ignoring his responsibilities and smarming up to everyone around him.

I bundle the bin bag into the kitchen and take a deep breath. All day my heart has felt like it’s full of lead.

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I knew today would be hard, but I also know that this is what Grandma wanted, not that that makes it any easier. It just feels so wrong that this is how we said goodbye to someone so full of life – in a shitty village hall, with rain pummelling the roof. We should have said goodbye to her in Italy, on a mountain somewhere, watching the sunrise. Not like this.

I cringe as my uncle booms his final goodbye: ‘Let’s not leave it so long next time! Have a safe journey home. God bless.’

He holds his hand up in a wave and then pushes a cigarette in his mouth, pulling the door closed behind him as he steps outside. I look up and see Harriet brandishing a dustpan and brush.

‘I think that’s everything,’ she says, ‘but I’ve got to run. My shift starts in . . . er . . .’ she glances up at the clock, ‘eight minutes.’

I take the dustpan and brush off her. ‘Go!’ I say. ‘Oh my God, go. You didn’t have to help clear up, but thank you.’

She wraps her arms around me and gives me a firm hug. ‘I’m going to call you later, okay?’

I nod, feeling a lump in my throat. I’ve managed to avoid hugs all day.

‘I couldn’t find your mum,’ she says as she lets me go, ‘but tell her I said goodbye.’

‘I will.’

I look through the hatch of the kitchen, glancing around for Mum, who slipped away the moment people started leaving, mumbling something about sandwiches. We all know she just wanted to get out of saying goodbye.

Uncle Reggie reappears from outside, bringing in a trail of cigarette smoke with him. He flashes his veneers at the empty room, whilst pulling off a pair of sunglasses, even though it’s

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currently raining outside and we haven't seen the sun in three days. His oily hair is slicked over his balding scalp, and he loosens the black tie around his neck, smacking his hands together.

'Right, Ange. Where are ya?'

I step out of the kitchen, dustpan and brush still in hand.

The problem with my uncle is that unfortunately he is incredibly difficult to like.

Well, he has no problem on the dating scene, and was married to my Aunt Fanny for ten years before she left him. He works in property, jetting all over the world selling houses to the rich and pompous (think *Selling Sunset* with more Lynx Africa), and he's very good at charming people into buying luxury homes. So maybe what I should say is: *I find him impossible to like.* He's smarmy and rude and makes no effort to hide how highly he regards himself versus everybody else, but in particular my mum. In his world, he's sitting on top of Everest whilst Mum is in the cereal aisle of Londis.

'That's that all done then,' he says, grinning at me. 'Where's your mum, eh? Ange?' He yells her name across the empty hall, and I bristle.

'I'm sure she's coming,' I mutter, trying my best not to glare at him.

'Ange!'

'Don't shout at her,' I say. 'This is a really hard day. She's not coping well.' My voice catches. I can't bear seeing my mum like this, floating around like a ghost.

'Right,' he says, pulling out his phone. 'Ah. There she is.'

When Mum reappears, she somehow looks even smaller than she did this morning. Much like Grandma, she is a petite woman. She stands at just over five foot, and has thin, mousy

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hair, which usually covers half her face. Her glasses have square frames, and they're constantly in her hand, being cleaned by the sleeve of whatever cardigan she's wearing. She is soft, with round edges and a quiet, tinkly laugh. She spends her entire life looking after everybody else, but she won't let anyone look after her. She didn't used to be this bad. I remember her laughing when I was a child, going out with friends and dancing round the room with me whenever *Strictly* was on. But fourteen years ago, my aunt – my mum's closest friend – left and our lives were turned upside down, and it's like all Mum's confidence was taken too.

'Sorry,' she says, going straight to one of the few standing trestle tables with a damp cloth, 'I was just sorting out the recycling.'

'Right,' Uncle Reggie says, barely listening, 'great. So I have to run, I'm working in France for the rest of the week. My taxi will be here any second.'

I blink at him. 'Are you not going to help clear up?'

Mum flushes under her fringe, but he doesn't even flinch.

'Well, you've done it all, haven't you? Maybe save me a picture of Mum,' he adds as an afterthought.

Mum glances round at the many photos of Grandma around the hall. 'Which one?'

'Oh, any.'

'Right.'

'Before I go, just a quick update on the will.'

My stomach turns over. I hate talking about all of this. It seems so formal and final. An entire life packed up neatly in a little box, like she wasn't a living, breathing person for ninety years.

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‘So, we all know that Mum wanted to auction off her artwork and any of her belongings. Her furniture and jewellery and so on.’

Mum nods. ‘For charity.’

‘And for us,’ Uncle Reggie says pointedly. ‘Split down the middle.’

Mum continues wiping. No trestle table has ever been so clean.

‘I’ve arranged for the auction to be next week,’ he says, not taking his eyes off his phone. ‘I’ll let you know how it all goes.’

I feel like my heart has dropped through my body. ‘Next week?’ I repeat. ‘That’s so fast.’

‘Well, no point putting it off, is there?’

‘But I wanted to go,’ I say, walking over to Mum. ‘I was thinking, this doesn’t feel like the right way to say goodbye to Grandma. We should do something in Italy too, near her home.’

I try to look at Mum but she’s still scrubbing, avoiding my eye.

‘You can still do that!’ Uncle Reggie says, waving a hand at me. ‘Her house will still be there, just without her things.’

‘It won’t be the same without her things!’ I protest. I take a deep breath. ‘What about her ring?’

‘What about it?’ His voice carries an air of impatience.

‘Grandma always said it would be mine.’

‘I didn’t see that in the will.’

His words sting, and for a moment, every word I know falls out of my mind.

‘Come on, Reg. You know she promised it to Zoe.’ Mum’s small voice creeps across the hall.

A car horn beeps outside, and he looks over his shoulder. ‘Fine,’ he retorts. ‘I’ll keep a ring aside for you.’

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‘Not just *a* ring,’ I say, my heart thumping. ‘Her *engagement* ring. The one she never took off.’

I need that ring. It carries her magic. I always knew that one day I’d be wearing it – it’s what she always said. I don’t want to leave it up to him to keep it aside for me. I don’t trust him.

‘Why don’t we all go?’ I blurt the question, panic rising in my voice. ‘We could help with the auction and say goodbye properly.’

A shadow passes across Uncle Reggie’s face. ‘There really is no need.’

‘Mum,’ I turn to face her, pleading with my eyes, ‘what do you think?’

‘Oh, I—’

‘Zoe, stop it.’ I flinch as Uncle Reggie’s voice cracks through me like a whip. ‘You’re upsetting your mum. There is no need for you to come to Italy. I’ve got it all sorted.’

The car horn honks again, and he places a patronising hand on my arm. ‘You just stay here and take care of your mum, okay?’

Heat prickles up my body as he kisses Mum and picks up his bag. ‘I’ll be in touch!’ he calls over his shoulder. The door slams, and seconds later we hear the taxi skid out of the car park.

For a moment we both stay where we are, silent, then I walk over to Mum and place my hand on top of hers, releasing the cloth and halting her frantic scrubbing.

‘It’s clean, Mum.’

CHAPTER THREE

HARRIET

I drum my fingers on the reception desk and start counting again.

I have been sitting behind this desk for four hours. Or two hundred and forty minutes. Or twelve full-length fantasies where I slam my hand on the desk, demand to see my manager, then swan off into the sunset with my winning lottery ticket in hand. One of those fantasies involves a dog, and one features Chris Hemsworth, but they all involve Zoe. Well, except the Chris Hemsworth one. Thor trumps girl code. Sorry, Zoe.

I know pretty much everyone hates their job, but I *really* hate mine. And I hate that I hate it. But no matter how many meditations or sun salutations I do, the rage reappears and bubbles under my skin the second a plumped-up pompous old fart swans to the reception desk and asks me to do . . . well, anything.

And yes, to be fair, I can understand why they think that requesting an extra pillow or more biscuits is a normal thing to

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ask a hotel receptionist. It's hardly their fault that they only have to convert oxygen into carbon dioxide before I'm beginning to plot their murder. But I don't want to be here. I categorically *do not* want to be here. I want to be anywhere else but here.

Well, apart from my last job as a waitress. Or that hellish job working in a call centre where my manager timed my toilet breaks. How am I supposed to check Instagram when I'm expected to pee at the speed of light? Who am I, Seabiscuit?

I turn over the scratch card next to my phone and scowl at it. I slammed it down in frustration about an hour ago when it gave me lemon, lemon, *heart*.

My phone lights up as Mum sends through another photo of my baby brother. He's a fat little thing, with cute rolls and a smile that takes up half his face. I send a heart back, even though the update makes my own heart turn over.

I'm not proud of this, but I'm not sure I ever expected my mum to have a life outside of me. And yes, I don't like the light that casts me in, but it's the truth. It's not that I don't want her to be happy; it's more that I thought she *was* happy. The two of us were a team. My dad has never been around, and me and Mum have always been thick as thieves. She's a nurse, so worked a lot of night shifts, which led to lots of sleepovers for me at Zoe's, but other than that, we were always together. I toyed with the idea that she might get a boyfriend one day (not that I'd ever really seen her date), but a *baby* as well? That's a whole new family. A whole new family without me in it.

And out of nowhere, it gave me the blinding, striking feeling that this was what she had always wanted, and that maybe she hadn't been as happy as I thought she'd been for all those years. But now she is . . . and I'm still hanging around.

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I look up as the bell that hangs above the door tinkles and my manager, Sophie, sashays through reception. I jump to attention like I've been zapped and suddenly bang on my keyboard, pretending to look incredibly busy and not like I was imagining a moonlit walk across the beach with Chris Hemsworth. I can see her out of the corner of my eye, peering at me, and I will my cheeks to stay a normal shade of pink and not give me away.

'Hi, Harriet,' she says as she reaches the desk.

I hit a few more keys for good measure. 'Oh, hello, Sophie. How are you?'

'What are you up to?' She cranes her neck ever so slightly in an attempt to view my screen.

'Oh, you know,' I say lightly. 'Just answering some emails.'
(Nobody emails me.)

'Have you been up to room 201 yet?'

'Hmm?' I try and feign ignorance, even though I received a rather terse call from someone about an hour ago demanding a fresh set of towels. I would have gone up sooner, but they didn't say please. Rude people don't deserve nice towels.

'Oh!' I say, as if the memory has just dropped into my mind. 'Yes. No, not yet. I'm just getting to it.'

She pinches her lips together. 'Okay. And what about the function room? Is it cleared from the wedding?'

Urgh, the function room. I was hoping that if I avoided that for long enough, somebody else would do it.

'I don't think so,' I say carefully. 'I've been on reception today.'

This is my answer for everything, and it's the perfect alibi. You have to have a receptionist on the desk at all times. Nobody can argue with that. And is it my fault that I can't split myself in

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half and clean the function room and sit on reception at the same time? Of course it's not. Nobody can get annoyed with me for that.

'And how are you getting on with the filing?'

I glance down at the stack of papers that were plonked on my desk two weeks ago.

Ah. Shit.

'I'm just getting to it now,' I say sweetly, leafing through the top pages.

Sophie sighs. 'Look, Harriet. Can I be honest with you?'

Hmm. Can I say no?

'Of course!'

'I don't really get the impression that you enjoy being a hotel receptionist.'

She pauses, and I try and will my face not to move when all I want to do is scream that *of course I don't enjoy being a hotel receptionist*. I haven't enjoyed a single job I've had since I left university. I know I could quit and get a new one, but what's the point? They're all the same. Everything will be the same until I can finally win the lottery, grab Zoe and run away.

'Of course I do,' I say, mustering up some enthusiasm. 'I'll start on the filing now.'

'Actually,' Sophie holds out a hand, 'would you mind taking the fresh towels up? I'll cover reception.'

I push my chair back.

Win the lottery, grab Zoe and run away.