Chapter One

Death is a funny thing. Not *funny* funny, obviously, and really not funny at all, but strange. By rights, it should come with a bang, announcing its cataclysmic blow with machine gun harbingers of doom; instead it sneaks up like a thief, waiting for a too-eager foot stepping out into a traffic light or that single rebellious cell in our bodies that suddenly decides to start its devastating multiplication. Death always watches, biding its time until it strikes, and when it does, nothing will ever be the same.

Given the disproportionate awfulness of death, I don't remember much at all about the day my mother was hit by a lorry. Disjointed little bits, maybe, like the absurd amount of glass the lorry had showered across Gower Street and my father's pinched face as we waited for the taxi that would take us to her body; my sister Venetia arguing with the policewoman who, surely, had made a mistake, and was no one doing their jobs properly anymore?

The one thing I do remember, very clearly, was the moment I was told about it, because it was in this moment – I was standing in front of the dairy fridge holding sixty-five eggs for the day's meringues – that all the tears I might have cried vanished, and my eyes suddenly and inexplicably dried up. And dry they remained, through weeks filled with coroner's statements and my mother's favourite Countess roses on her coffin and making sure my father got up each morning over at the big, now-empty house on Rose Hill Road; all throughout, I never once shed a tear.

Some people simply don't cry very much, so this in itself was perhaps not a true measure of one's grieving abilities, but I had never been one of those people. On the contrary, I used to be particularly good at crying, in fact, it was one of the things I excelled at. When I was little, I cried so often and so readily that my mother claimed my body had to be made up of two-thirds salt water. My very own vale of

tears, she said. I cried over molars accidentally flushed down the sink and white spots at the back of my throat, I worried about what lurked in my wardrobe and under my bed and at the bottom of the swimming pool. I followed stray cats and collected baby birds that had fallen out of their nests and wrestled with their fates for days.

For heaven's sake, Addie, my mother would say and push a handkerchief my way, twitching impatiently when my eyes got big and shiny and my throat was working to swallow back those sobs that were so weak and futile when one should be strong, square one's shoulders, get on with things. *Buck up, darling. Look at Venetia, four years younger and you don't see* her *cry.* I must have been an immensely exasperating child, because so many things about me brought forth that twitch on my mother's face, a sort of lifting of one cheek and compressing of her lips into small, white folds, that I'd started hiding when I saw it coming, mostly in the downstairs loo, which was always warm and smelled of Mrs Baxter's lavender cleaner and was rarely visited by anyone. Years later, after I'd moved out and bought my own apartment, one of the things I loved most about it was the absence of a downstairs loo.

And now, when my old nemesis, my private vale of tears, actually had a chance to shine, in a perverse twist of fate, it had gone and the most I was able to procure was a choked sobbing, swallowing convulsively to dislodge a strange lump that seemed to have got itself permanently stuck, like a fat little troll, at the bottom of my throat. It wasn't that I didn't miss her. Of course, I did. Who in this sad world doesn't miss their mother when she's gone? But the more Venetia mourned, as a golden child does, by losing weight and turning wan and shadowy, the more mutinously dry my own insides became. This worried me a great deal, until it occurred to me that maybe I was actually doing exactly what my mother had always wanted me to, being strong and squaring my shoulders. Were my eyes staying heroically dry from some deeply ingrained impulse to ward off the white-lip mouth-twitch, nurtured through forty fractious years with my mother? Was somewhere deep inside me a little girl smiling, because all the way into the grave, her mother would finally be pleased?

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Venetia, who expected me to pay appropriate homage to our mother, was inevitably disappointed by what I produced instead. Newly pregnant and dangerously volatile, she swanned in and out of Rose Hill Road with homeopathic remedies, shop-bought chicken soup and lots of unnecessary advice. I tried to stay out of her way as much as I could, because while she held centre stage with her pregnancy and her bereavement counsellor, my father had gone very quiet in the side wing.

The one time he broke down, about two weeks after the funeral, was completely unspectacular in that he simply didn't get out of bed. Finally, on day four, when his bedroom door was still closed at five in the afternoon, my brother Jas and I took him to the doctor and then the hospital, from where he emerged a week later almost eerily calm. With some relief, my siblings went back to their own grief and respective careers and impending families, but I lingered, unnerved by the look in my dad's eyes. It was hard to believe that this was the same person who'd taught me chess when I was ten, who'd re-enacted the Allied landing with a stapler, two pencils and a hole punch when I needed help with my history homework and who was always game to get a flashlight and study those white spots at the back of my throat. *It's not a tumour, Adele, I'm sure of it. It's germs fighting a battle with your body and, open wider, just a bit wider, yes, I think your antibodies are currently in the lead. Here, maybe a Polo mint will help.*

Now, more often than not, we exchanged polite news of our week over tea or stared out silently at my mother's garden wilting in the back, and the chessboard hadn't seen the light of day for ages. Sometimes, I had to resist the urge to pinch him, very hard, just to make sure that he hadn't also died and left his body behind to get up and go to work and return for cups of tea, the cold dregs of which he left all around the house to be collected by Mrs Baxter, who came in four mornings a week to keep an eye on things. Still, I was hoping that maybe one day soon he'd be waiting for me, holding two cups of tea, throat-scaldingly hot, the way we both liked it, his face creased in a smile. *Addie! There you are. How about a game of chess with your old father?* So I continued coming to see him, making my way across North London after work, at first through too-bright summer dusks and

then autumn evenings and eventually sharp and wintry nights that turned once more into a beautiful London spring, ticking off the twelve months after my mother's death by the way the bark changed on the trees on Hampstead Heath and the shadows of the little supermarket outside the Tube station had lengthened when I rounded the corner towards my parents' house.

Long before Venetia had started throwing about ideas for how to mark The Day of her Death, I'd started to dread it. But the calendar that hung in the patisserie kitchen had a big red splat on the corner of 15 May, raspberry sauce I think, which seemed to grow in size whenever I looked up from decorating Mrs Saunders' birthday cake with seventy-five pale pink fondant roses, forcing down the swallows that rose up my oesophagus like sluggish bubbles on a pond.

Venetia had wanted to get some of the family together – Jas and Mrs Baxter, my father's brother Fred, and a variety of other family flotsam who lived in the vicinity, to 'draw solace from each other's company', and 'let this day go by amongst close family', which, according to her bereavement counsellor, would be an important step towards Stage Five in the grieving process. Rather over-optimistic, in my opinion, because my father had barely progressed past 'Denial' yet and even though I generally tended to go along with things, especially where Venetia was concerned, this time I did try to argue. Being in our big, bright kitchen where my mother was so conspicuously absent was not remotely the way I wanted to spend the day, and I was fairly certain my father didn't either. Venetia overrode all objections, however, made me swap shifts, ordered an indecently large box of pastries from the patisserie and made sure I left on time to deliver it to Rose Hill Road.

And now I was here. The door gave its usual soft groan as I stepped into the front hall and involuntarily I held my breath. But it was very quiet, the grandfather clock ticking in the corner as it always did, and it smelled the way it always had, like books and dust and Mrs Baxter's lavender cleaner, even though this time last year my mother had died. To my right, jackets hung on the ancient coat stand in the corner and several umbrellas dripped onto the stone

floor tiles, indicating that the family had come together only a short while ago.

Silently, I crept across the front hall, eyeing the light that spilled through the door to the downstairs kitchen. A subdued mumble floated up, then a laugh, quickly stifled into a discreet cough. Uncle Fred, I thought, my father's brother, who lived in Cambridge with his three dogs and a collection of rusty cars he was forever fixing up. I strained my ears hopefully for answering sounds from my dad, but his deep, slightly hoarse voice couldn't be made out amidst the low thrum of conversation. He'd been working more than ever lately, and from what I could tell, his heartburn had got a lot worse. I hoped he'd gone to the doctor yesterday like he was supposed to. There was another mumbled question. Jas, probably, who must have come straight from the hospital in his rush to do Venetia's bidding.

I dug my toes into the sisal matting at the thought of them all draped around the big kitchen table. Venetia's bereavement counsellor had said to leave our mother's chair empty, as a sign of respect. I hated the bereavement counsellor, who was a cadaverous-looking man called Hamish McGree, and I hated the thought of that resolutely empty chair, with its curved armrests and straight back and the jauntily chequered wedge that my mother had stuck under the lining to help her bad back. I tried to remember when I last saw her sitting there, looking at her garden, her expression faraway in contemplation of the day's to-dos or frowning as she scanned the newspaper headlines. But I couldn't. Her face remained blurry and unfocussed, and all I could see were little bits of her: her hands, long-fingered and slightly tapered like mine, or the strands of her hair falling forward as she bent to blow on her coffee, which she had liked tepid, almost white with milk. It'd been like this all through the year. As people around me recalled funny moments and entire conversations and whole afternoons spent in her company, I was still working on simply remembering her face, the way she'd put on her lipstick in the morning, the twitch of her mouth when she was impatient and the tight set of her shoulders at night when she was cold and looking around for her scarf. It was a shrapnel rain of memory fragments that my mind seemed to be expecting me to put together when my ability to

remember her was stuck in the same barren place that my tears had disappeared to, a dried-up riverbed of disabled grief, where memories were barrelling along like tumbleweed, never connecting, never whole and, somehow, rarely good.

More subdued laughter, turned discreetly into a cough, and, just like that, I realised that there was no way I was going to walk down those stairs, to that empty chair and the blurry echo of my mother's face. Backing away from the kitchen stairs, I dumped the cake box onto the hall table with a squishy thud and shot, sodden jacket, bag and all, through a door on the right where I sagged against the wall and, for a long moment, simply stood, savouring the cool darkness against my pupils after a long day staring at the raspberry splotch on 15 May. The ticking of the grandfather clock was louder here, because its back was against the wall, but it thudded in a comforting sort of way, like a heartbeat, and finally I exhaled and opened my eyes, pushing down a twinge of fear at my own daring. Venetia would be livid.

My mother's study. I hadn't been in here for a long time, not since Venetia and I had come and gingerly poked through the desk for her address book to do the death announcement cards, practically exiting at a run. Every now and then, Mrs Baxter would suggest having a clear-out, but every time Venetia dismissed the idea out of hand, so the room had remained exactly the same as the morning my mother had left to teach her popular seminar on 'Emerging Creative Outlets for Women Writers' for the last time. Books and folders and papers were lined up neatly along the shelves, post-its daring only occasionally to stick up here and there, pens stood ramrod straight in an old mug that was too good to throw away, as if they were waiting for my mother, who liked her pencils straight and sharp and ready to go. There was her telephone, the old mustard-coloured kind that still used a rotary dial, and her roll-top desk hulking against the wall, with drawers and cubby-holes and gadgets we'd made her for Christmases and birthdays because we knew that she liked things orderly and put away.

She'd been in here every evening, a sliver of her visible through the half-open door as she worked on lecture notes, student essays or

manuscripts or, more mundanely, read the newspaper. She read that paper with an almost religious fervour, every single night, whether we were asleep or awake, in bed with chickenpox or out on the town. Sometimes, watching her unfold it to cover the entire desk, I wished that she'd look at me, or at the very least at the burglar in my wardrobe, with half the focussed attention she gave the small advertisements in the back and the obituaries and the robber held at a police station in Leeds. But things between my mother and me had been difficult. It was mainly my fault, really, because I was too soft, always had been. I didn't put myself into life's driver's seat, I didn't square my shoulders enough. My mother wasn't soft and she wasn't weak, she was like a hard, shiny gem, and however much we both tried, my soft, desperate-to-please self and her brilliant one could not but rub each other the wrong way, all the time, relentlessly, like stroking a cat against the grain, like golden vanilla custard splitting into a curdled mess. That's how things had been, between my mother and me.

I'm not sure how long I stood there, on the threshold of her space, breathing in the faint echo of books and determination that had been the very essence of my mother, waiting for tears and wishing for at least one small good memory of her, because today, of all days, I should remember her face, I should remember *her*, properly and whole.

Obviously, something had to happen, and something did.

The phone rang.