

CHAPTER 1

Maeve Slade was standing at the kitchen island, guarded by shafts of morning sun that slanted either side, throwing her into shadow. Her lips were tight and her brow furrowed with concentration as the knife hammered on the chopping board like a prisoner beating on a locked door.

Sensing something, she looked up. A smile surfaced, then disappeared as suddenly as it had arrived.

‘Can I help?’ Amie offered.

Maeve straightened up and wiped her brow with her sleeve, brushing aside a wayward lock of hair; then, taking a pineapple by its spiky crown, she positioned the knife and beheaded it with one neat stroke. Pale juice trickled off the board and formed a pool on the worktop. Inside the prickly armour, soft yellow flesh glistened. She reached quickly for the kitchen roll to clean up the mess.

‘Mum?’

‘No need,’ she said, curtly, then, ‘You can go and get ready. Wear something nice.’

Upstairs, the intermittent murmur of football commentary floated out from under Andrew’s closed door. An exclamation, a protest, a whoop of triumph. Amie could

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picture the scene – darkness, blinds drawn, a single console controlling avatars who performed tackles and scored goals to his order.

The commentary reached a crescendo, then, ‘Yesssss . . . Four-one . . .’

She opened her wardrobe. *Wear something nice.* But the array of clothes to choose from filled her with dread. Clothes were like human wrapping paper, the cover by which you judged the book. She picked a floaty dress Nana had bought her for her birthday, and the gladiator sandals Dad used to comment on. *Ready for battle, are we?* She liked the way the straps wound right up the ankles, as if they were holding everything together. That was her job – always holding everything together, always ready for battle.

She made a nest in her pillows, pulled up the duvet around her and scrolled through social media feeds. Snapchat and Instagram. Follow and be followed. Post and count the likes. You could be who you wanted to be on here, edit your photos beyond recognition, make yourself better. It was a new you, facing the rest of the world. You could click on the Search icon and make new friends, create another link in the chain. You could dig right into the heart of somebody, see who they followed, and then who *they* followed. Skinny girls in bikinis followed other skinny girls in bikinis. Then there were the ones who went further, posted photos and videos of themselves doing things that made Amie’s eyes widen in disbelief.

Her finger hovered over the screen. There was one story she wanted to see, one person she wanted to be connected

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to, but she couldn't do it. She only wanted to know what he'd been doing over the summer holidays. Nothing wrong with that. But then again there was everything wrong with that.

It was a minute before twelve-thirty when she looked at the time and leapt off the bed, straightening out the duvet as she did so. Mum liked it tidy. She tapped on Andrew's door on the way past but there was no response.

Maeve had changed into a beige tunic dress with a tiny cardigan, a small string of pearls around her neck, hair sprayed into a sculpted chignon. Amie had once called it a bun, but Maeve had corrected her and she never thought of it that way again. She watched Amie come down the stairs, raised her eyebrows at the shoes and looked at her watch with a barely audible sigh. There was a tired look on her face, as if she was running out of batteries. She nodded towards the kitchen and Amie went to collect the fruit salad.

Andrew slouched down the stairs in his socks; the frayed hems of his jeans sagging around his ankles; long hair plastered diagonally across his forehead. Amie watched him force his feet into trainers that were still done up and pull a hoodie off the banister. His stuff was always cluttering up the hallway, while Amie's was tidied away upstairs. He'd be eighteen in three months, but you'd never know it. He seemed to be going backwards in time.

The white Mercedes turned into the drive just as they opened the front door, indicator winking, radiator grille smiling a metallic smile. The driver's door opened and there was a pause, that pause where you gather the energy

for what's coming next, and then Stuart Slade swung himself out and clunked it shut.

He stood there, silhouetted against the brightness, and smiled at his family, who looked back, expectant, hesitant.

'You're late.' Maeve used the nothing voice, the one that jarred with its lack of expression.

'I know. Sorry.'

It was an automatic sorry. Too quick. Defensive. His hands went up as he said it. He clicked the lock with his key and orange lights blinked in response. He looked from Maeve to Amie to Andrew, seeing who might smile back. Andrew stared at his feet, chewing something. Amie gave a double grin for both of them, a triple one for all three of them. Time to reconcile, to undo the damage, placate, resolve.

'How was Nana? Did she like my card?' she asked, regretting it as he only half responded, his eyes on Maeve, worried. She had spoken too soon. The words weren't warm enough to cut through the ice. She held her breath in case it might disturb the air, reverse the beginnings of a thaw.

'Nana . . . was fine.'

He had a habit of pausing mid-sentence, which made Amie's mind race to explore all the possible endings: that Nana was sad, that she was dying, that she was dead.

'She sends her love.' He regained his concentration. 'And there's a new carer there she's not too keen on, who keeps sighing when people ask her to repeat things. Nana said they shouldn't work there if they're that impatient.' He was looking at Amie now, the only person listening. 'I mean, it's an old people's home. What does she expect?'

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Amie let her breath out, slowly, carefully. Detail was good. It meant you were telling the truth. If someone asked you what you were doing last night when the crime took place and you said, *I was watching TV*, they would think, Hmmm, that's a bit vague, because if you were innocent, you'd give them more information, like, *The cat was sitting on my lap and the doorbell rang at eight-thirty with the Asda shopping delivery, and I had to change channels at nine because I can't stand that woman on I'm a Celebrity . . .* Then they'd believe you, because nobody could make that up on the spot.

Maeve muttered something under her breath, then, cleared her throat and said, 'I don't know what she thinks she has to complain about, the amount that place is costing.'

And with that she turned and stepped neatly across the front garden on tiptoe, so her heels wouldn't sink into the grass. In a few delicate seconds, she was at the gap in the pine trees which divided the garden from the neighbours like a row of soldiers. Amie picked her way across the lawn in her wake, until a hand on her shoulder made her turn around.

'You OK, Monamie?'

Dad used that name when he wanted her to feel safe. *My friend*. But in French, in code, so nobody knew their secret. Mum had wanted to call her *Amy*, with the normal spelling, but he had campaigned for this one, because *Why not be different? Why not actually mean something?* Mum said people would think they didn't know how to spell a simple name like *Amy*, but he didn't mind taking the risk.

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That day was probably the last time he'd got what he wanted.

'Hello, neighbours!' Colin Morrison had a habit of putting the stress on his words in the wrong places, like a spy with a fatal flaw, or a game show host with a quirky catchphrase. He threw the door open wide and kissed Maeve loudly on the cheek, while she floated past, barely acknowledging him. 'And Andrew, good to see you – finally a man in the house that Max and Jake might actually listen to.' He shook Andrew's hand, clapping his other hand on top as if in a double greeting to make up for Maeve's just walking on past, then held his hands out again in exaggerated delight. 'Stuart, looking more handsome than ever. What's your secret? Midlife crisis? L'Oréal?'

Then it was Amie's turn. He leant down and brushed her cheeks with the faintest kiss and the whiff of something soapy, gave her shoulders a squeeze, and reached out to take the bowl she was holding. 'My goodness, that looks *absolutely* divine.'

Mary, stout and rosy as a peach, ushered Amie and Andrew into the vast games room that stretched from the front of the house to the back in the place of the original garage. A giant screen filled the wall at one end and in front of it, on an enormous sofa, sprawled two teenagers, entranced, too taken up with destroying an alien universe to notice the new arrivals.

'Right, you two, make yourselves comfortable in here and I'll get you some drinks,' Mary twittered. She was another one who had to do double and triple politeness

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to make up for other people. She was open and kind in a world of closedness. While the other neighbours kept themselves to themselves, Mary had tried to start up a residents' association, but nobody wanted to come to the meetings. It was no wonder the Morrisons were leaving.

Andrew lost no time in taking charge of the boys, who handed the controls to him dumbly. On the screen, soldiers leapt over buildings and blew up cities. A timer raced in the corner as unexpected villains descended in their path, each one dismissed with the flick of a joystick.

Amie slipped out of the door and was passing the kitchen when Maeve called her in. 'You can take something to the table outside,' she said, handing her a huge glass bowl full of salad. Mary reached out to intervene, but in vain. 'Let her make herself useful for once,' Maeve muttered.

The dish was heavier than it looked. Amie carried it into the living room, where the brightness of the garden rendered her momentarily sightless. She stopped to let her eyes adjust.

On the terrace a few feet away, a gleaming black barbecue spat and sparked as the coals whitened. Colin and Dad were standing on one side of it, laughing about something. On the other side was Mum's friend Celia, slim and tanned in her white sundress, sunglasses perched on her head, her neat bob even blonder in the harsh light. Her little boy, Alfie, was pushing a truck around their feet. Celia was talking to Jeremy from across the road and watching him pour pink fizz into a forest of glasses. There was a shriek as the

first and second ones both overflowed, sending white foam cascading on to the silver tray.

Then Celia reached out to touch Dad's arm and pointed at Amie and suddenly they were all watching her with anticipation. She looked back down at the bowl. *Concentrate.*

Mary was behind her with more plates, and Amie was the drummer at the front of the procession, the leader of the banquet conga. She walked onwards, dodging arm-chairs and sofas, guided by light and voices towards the outside. As she approached, wordless chatter ballooned into exclamations and whoops of delight at the sight of the food. Colin exclaimed an overenthusiastic, 'Look *at* this!' and Dad slapped him on the back and replaced the steel drum lid, making the fire inside hiss and thick smoke pour out of the vent.

It was just at that moment, as the lid clicked shut, when she had almost reached the open door to the garden, that the shiny surface caught the sun and a searing shaft of light bounced back right into Amie's eyes. She took another step forward blindly and hit something hard.

There was a bang, a crack of glass on glass and a collective, staggered gasp as the bowl fell and smashed on the stone floor.

Amie backed away in shock and sank to the floor. Mary was at her side in a flash. 'Oh, my goodness, you poor darling. Are you OK? I knew Colin shouldn't have cleaned the windows this morning.'

The boys were in the doorway, staring at Amie with a mixture of horror and amusement. Someone had handed

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Andrew a shoebox and he was picking up the broken glass, smirking. 'Did you seriously walk straight into the window?'

Stuart pushed past them and squatted down next to her. 'It's all right, I'm a doctor,' he grinned. Then, to the boys, 'Nothing to see here. As you were, chaps!'

Mary bent down and scooped the salad off the floor with a dustpan as if it was fun, rather than as if she'd spent all morning making it. Then she went off for a cloth, Stuart was summoned back for barbecue duty, and Amie was alone.

It was a moment or two before Maeve appeared, framed in the doorway like a portrait of someone who didn't want to be painted, her mouth downturned, her gaze somewhere far away outside, where the other guests talked quietly, pretending nothing had happened and nobody had just walked straight into a glass door and spoilt everything.

'I don't understand why you're so clumsy, Amie. You certainly don't get it from me.'

She only moved when Mary needed to get past her, which gave Amie the chance to escape. All she could think of was getting away and going back home where there was no one to humiliate her. She made a whispered apology to Mary, who hugged her tightly, then looked her in the eyes, arms outstretched to her shoulders.

'I am so sorry about what happened, Amie. I feel completely responsible.'

'It was my fault. I'm sorry I broke the lovely bowl. But I just need to go home, calm down a bit.'

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‘It wasn’t your fault, but if you’re dead set on going home, I won’t stand in your way.’

Amie smiled and reached for the shoebox of broken glass. ‘Thanks, and let me take this out to the recycling. It’s the least I can do.’

Back next door, Amie realised she had never seen the house so empty. She drifted from room to room, taking in the things she never usually noticed, seeing it all with a stranger’s eyes. The neat row of toothbrushes in the bathroom, air freshener pumping out intermittent wafts of sandalwood. She pushed open the door of her parents’ room – the smell of clean laundry, bedspread folded back at the corner, cushions stacked neatly like columns of square soldiers backing into each other in retreat. The fitted wardrobe was Maeve’s. Stuart’s chest of drawers stood hidden in the corner behind the door like a naughty schoolboy. Today it caught her eye because on top of it was the only thing in the room that was out of place.

An envelope.

Amie recognised her own handwriting on the front and frowned. He must have forgotten to give Nana the card. Perhaps he was too embarrassed to say so before, didn’t want to let her down, didn’t want to make things worse than they already were.

Or perhaps he hadn’t gone there at all.

Perhaps she should find out.