

Chapter 1

Lillian

Lillian Hogarth searched for almost half an hour before she found the old-fashioned brass key in the back corner of her sock drawer, between the plaster handprint her son Jamie had made in Year 1 and the clear plastic box containing her long-abandoned rosary beads. She picked the key up by the loop of green velvet ribbon she had threaded through its eye so it wouldn't get lost. 'I hid you too well,' she said as she returned with it to the dining room.

She'd had to start locking the Tudor-style sideboard when her daughter, Kate, had turned fifteen and hit the inevitable phase of rebellion which, Lillian thought ruefully, was now in its sixteenth year. It had stayed locked because by the time Kate moved out of home, Jamie was old enough to go looking for alcohol to sneak into his backpack on a Friday night. Though Lillian had never really worried about him getting into the cognac and whisky.

As she knelt in front of the dark wooden doors, Lillian's chest tightened, and she had a fleeting sensation of not being able to get enough air into her lungs. She hesitated, key in hand, wishing she could somehow freeze time and enjoy life as it was a little longer. She had been counting down to this day all year, and while she was

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relieved they had made it to the milestone unscathed, she feared what was coming next.

To fend off her negative thoughts, she lay her hand against the coarse grain of the antique. *Touch wood.* Set in the old oak was a brass keyhole embellished with a vine pattern that had inspired Jamie, at age five, to christen it the Narnia door. He'd just seen *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and had become obsessed with finding a portal to the magical world in his own home. Lillian would hold his warm little hand that was as soft as the Play-Doh he so loved, as they went from room to room opening every cupboard in the house to inspect it for fauns and ice queens.

They'd been performing this routine for a week when Jamie, looking across the breakfast table at the sideboard, spotted something he'd missed. His bright, analytical eyes locked on the keyhole ringed by leaves, and his face lit up with the promise of magic. He hopped off his chair and raced over to check inside, pausing to look up at his mother, and make sure she was watching.

'You don't think it's too small?' she asked.

'Maybe it's just for little people,' he said, pulling on the brass handle.

The door's aged hinges didn't give straight away, and he had to tug it with two hands to get it open. When he saw that it contained only whisky and peach schnapps, Jamie was discouraged but not defeated, and stuck his head into the cabinet and quietly called, 'Hello?'

Lillian smiled at the memory. Today, all she wanted from behind the Narnia door was the bottle of champagne she had purchased nearly thirteen years ago, after she'd dropped Jamie off for his first day of school. It had been a tough morning and she had been unprepared for how hard it would be to let him go. Kate's first day hadn't been difficult at all. Even as a five-year-old, Kate had a self-sufficient toughness about her that made Lillian feel like her daughter could get along quite happily on her own.

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But Jamie had always needed her and surrendering him to the spiked iron gates of St Nick's had stirred up all the past terror that had churned inside her during the endless days and nights she'd spent by his cot in the bleakest, most desperate place on earth—the paediatric cancer wing. Lillian had watched the other students in their identical blazers and crested caps saying goodbye to their mothers and fathers and hoped they'd all be kind to her son.

'Be good for your teacher,' she'd said, and hugged him until the softly spoken Ms Giordano bent down next to her and gently said, 'Hello, Jamie. Do you like building things with blocks?'

Jamie had nodded vigorously and followed the woman with the curly dark hair and silver ballet flats through the school gates as Lillian watched and waved, trying to suppress the emotions bubbling up inside of her. Once he was gone, she hurried back to her car, managing to slam the door shut just before she burst into tears. She sat there crying until a woman in a dress the colour of daffodils knocked on the window and mouthed, 'Are you alright?'

Mortified, Lillian nodded and wound down her window.

'Yes, I'm fine. God, you must think I'm an idiot.' She pressed the pads of her fingers into her eyelids.

The woman smiled knowingly. 'You must be a kindergarten mother.' She pulled some tissues from her handbag. 'I'm Caroline. I packed these just in case. My little boy started today too.'

'Thank you. I don't usually cry like this.' Lillian wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

'It can be scary to let go. My son's quite shy. I worry he'll be easily led. His name is Jeremy, but we call him Jez.'

Lillian nodded. 'Jamie was very sick when he was little. He's alright now, but there was a time when we weren't sure he'd make it. And then out of the blue . . .' Tears started to leak from her eyes again, but she had control of them now. 'It was a miracle,' she said, dabbing at

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her puffy eyes. 'It's just hit me. I can't protect him in there. I know it's a good thing that he's able to leave me, but it's an adjustment. These are happy tears, really.'

'I can't imagine what you've been through,' Caroline said. 'I hope you do something special for yourself today.'

Lillian exhaled, ridding herself of the last of her sadness. 'Yes,' she said, smiling. 'Thank you.'

She drove home warming to the idea of marking Jamie's first day of school with a celebration. The Hatton Road cellars came into view, so she parked the car and went in. She took a bottle of Veuve off the shelf and was just about to pay for it when her eyes landed on a bottle of Dom Pérignon. The hand-drawn grapevines of its label conjured up thoughts of provincial vineyards and blue summer skies. She decided that, after everything her family had endured, they deserved a bottle of something extra special.

Soon she was back at the house, channelling her apprehension into preparing a celebratory meal. She baked Jamie's favourite chocolate cake and made a niçoise salad, letting each task soothe and calm her. She was thinking she would even let Kate have a glass of champagne. Kate had just started her final year of school, also at St Nick's, which was a co-ed K-12, and she had suffered as much as anybody when Jamie's diagnosis blew up their lives. Lillian was marinating a chicken, her hands glistening with lemon juice and olive oil, when the landline rang. She glanced up at the caller ID to see 'St Nick's'. Her tranquillity shattered, she snatched the receiver off the wall.

'Hello! Ms Avery? Is it Jamie? Is everything alright?'

'Hello, Mrs Hogarth. Sorry to give you a scare. Yes, Jamie's fine.'

The receptionist explained that she was ringing about Kate, who had forged a note from her father to say she had an orthodontist's appointment, only for the Year 12 coordinator to discover she was

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among a group of students who had skipped school to attend the climate rally in Hyde Park.

'The news is saying the protest is getting out of hand.'

'Oh, thank God,' Lillian said. 'I mean, I'll be there right away.'

Jamie was due to finish his first day at two o'clock, so Lillian called John and asked him to fetch their son. Then she drove to the city in search of their daughter. She realised this was a futile plan when she saw the hordes of protesters milling around. There were city workers carrying placards, grandparents with slogans on their T-shirts and toddlers on their shoulders, and undergraduates dressed up as koalas. The crowd seemed orderly and invigorated by the strong turnout. She wasn't worried. People were beginning to disperse, and Kate would almost certainly be sitting in a booth with her friends somewhere eating hot chips. Still, Lillian decided she'd park the car and check some of the places she knew Kate liked, when Ms Avery called again to say the students had turned up at the school. It was now after three, so Lillian changed course for St Nick's.

'What were you thinking?' she asked when she was alone with her daughter in the car.

'Like you would have even noticed if something had happened to me,' Kate replied tartly.

Lillian could see traces of green face paint behind her daughter's ear and around her hairline. She held back her retort, in part because she was proud of Kate's activism, and in part because she feared anything she said would be misinterpreted. These days it was like she and Kate spoke different dialects of English, and each interpreted what the other said as rude and combative. She would raise it later when Kate wasn't so worked up.

When they got home Jamie was at the dining room table, eating sugary cereal next to his father, who was working on his laptop. The uncooked chicken was still sitting in its pot on the bench.

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'I hear you skipped school to save the world Katey-Kate?' John teased.

'Trigonometry's no use to me on a dead planet,' she replied, grabbing a mandarin from the fruit bowl then heading for her room.

Turning to her son, Lillian kissed the top of his head and asked, 'How was your first day of school?'

'I cut my finger!' Jamie said, presenting a digit wrapped in a Mickey Mouse bandaid. Lillian kissed that too and tried to stop the images of classroom scissors and Stanley knives from penetrating her thoughts.

'Why don't you show me how you can change out of your uniform all by yourself,' she said. After Jamie scurried off to fulfil this challenge she dropped the spoiled chicken, whole, into the rubbish bin. 'I'd wanted tonight to be special,' she said to John. 'I got so upset letting him go, after everything.'

John stood and kissed his wife, then picked up the bottle of Dom, which had been left on the bench.

'We can drink it another time,' he said, appraising the label. 'It will age nicely. Jamie can't have this anyway, so why don't we save it? Instead of drinking it on his first day of school, we could drink it on his last day. Together.'

'That could be nice,' Lillian said, only half convinced.

John put the French champagne into the sideboard and they ordered pizzas from the place with the real woodfire oven and a bottle of Fanta. After the kids had gone to bed, Lillian said, 'When I dropped him at the gate I couldn't stop thinking, what if something happens to him? I know he's healthy now, but he still seems so fragile. I just want to wrap him in cotton wool.'

'You'll get used to it,' John said, snaking his arms around his wife's waist. 'One day down, three thousand-odd to go.'

'How will I survive it?' Lillian sighed.

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But she had, and more importantly so had Jamie. Thirteen years had passed and there had been mercifully few emergencies. No broken bones, and only one rugby-field collision that had resulted in a possible concussion. By then, Lillian had come to accept that her teenage son was not the vulnerable baby she'd once fretted over. He would be eighteen in nine days and, while that brought fresh concerns, she reminded herself that the relapse she'd worried about had never come. Nobody had picked on him for being small and he'd grown into a healthy and popular young man. Her fears had been unfounded, and that was another reason to celebrate. Today was his last official day of school, and they were going to eat a family meal together and finally drink the Dom Pérignon she'd bought with so much hope and optimism all those years ago.

Lillian slipped the key into the Narnia door's lock and turned it until she heard it click.

They had made it.