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grief, this is a warm, witty and moving novel'*

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*'McInerney's bewitching multigenerational saga lavishly and
lovingly explores the resiliency and fragility of family bonds'*

BOOKLIST



Also by Monica McInerney

A Taste for It

Upside Down Inside Out

Spin the Bottle

The Alphabet Sisters

Family Baggage

Those Faraday Girls

All Together Now

At Home with the Templetons

Lola's Secret

The House of Memories

Hello from the Gillespies

The Trip of a Lifetime



The
Godmothers
Monica
McInerney



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*For John Neville of St Patrick's Road
and Limerick, with love and thanks.*







CHAPTER ONE

By the time Eliza Maxine Olivia Miller was eleven, she had lived in eight different country towns. Her mother liked to move a lot.

It was a hot November afternoon. Eliza and her mother Jeannie were currently living in Morwell, two hours from Melbourne. Eliza's class was rehearsing Christmas carols for the end-of-year concert. She was thrilled to have been picked to stand near the front, holding up a tinfoil star. Tall for her age, she was usually asked to keep to the back of school groups.

After the rehearsal, her classmates talked about who'd be coming to watch their performance. Eliza just listened, still not quite part of the class. She often arrived at new schools in the middle of term, when most of the friendships were already formed.

One girl was the youngest of six, born and bred in the town. She announced that her whole family and all four grandparents



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were coming. They'd fill an entire row of seats. One boy had invited all nine of his cousins.

'What about you, Eliza?' another girl eventually asked.

'Just my mum,' she said, trying not to blush at the rare attention.

'Your dad can't make it?'

Eliza shook her head.

One of the other girls asked Eliza where her father was. Eliza told her she didn't know.

'But you must know,' the girl said. 'Everyone knows where their father is.'

Eliza went red, wishing the bell would ring, hoping the girl wouldn't ask for her father's name. She didn't know that either.

'You do actually have a father, Eliza, I promise,' her mother had said once, smiling. 'I'm not making him up. He just doesn't live with us.'

'Can I please meet him one day?' She regularly asked that.

'I hope so. One day.' Her mother always gave that answer.

'Why not now?'

'Because he doesn't live in Australia at the moment.'

'Where does he live?'

Her mum leaned forward and whispered. 'On the moon.'

Eliza's mother had once told her that her father lived in a pyramid in Egypt. Another time she told her he was a spy for the Russians, working undercover – 'that means in secret' – and it would be dangerous for them to contact him. Once, she said he was a stunt double for a famous actor in Hollywood.





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‘When will you tell me the truth?’ Eliza often asked.

‘The day you turn eighteen,’ her mother would say. ‘As I’ve promised you many times.’

After school that day, Eliza followed her usual routine, walking home alone and using a key hanging on a ribbon around her neck to let herself in. She hung up her schoolbag and changed into what her mum called her ‘casually casual’ clothes: brightly coloured, all from op shops. She took a shop-bought chicken pie out of the freezer and set the table for two. Her mum wouldn’t be home from her job at the supermarket until eight p.m., so it didn’t need to go in the oven yet. She washed out her mother’s wineglass and put the two empty bottles with the others by the back door. Then she found the latest list her mother had left her and started to work her way through it.

Lists were one of her favourite things. Her mum loved them too. They often wrote to each other in list form.

Hello

Mum

How

Are

You?

Very

Well

Thank

You

Eliza.



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Her mum always used lists when she gave Eliza tasks to do around the house. Those lists didn't just keep Eliza busy. They kept her company, in a funny way. The nights waiting for her mum to come home from her shelf-stacking job were sometimes lonely. Jeannie often worked weekend shifts too. She had explained that they needed money to pay for their rent, food and clothes. So while her having to work made their life harder in some ways, it made it easier in others. Her mum was always good at explaining what she called 'both sides of the story'.

That afternoon after school, she did all her mum had asked.

Do me one of your lovely paintings. (Possible subjects – my pot plants? The green vase?)

Sweep the kitchen floor.

Watch two cartoons.

Eliza added other things herself. She played her favourite song on the recorder, trying to ignore the screeched notes. She went out to the verandah and filled up the bird feeder. She picked up her book and curled up on the worn couch to read. She must have fallen asleep. She woke when she felt the weight of her mother sitting beside her, felt her hand gently stroke her dark hair, heard her whisper.

'Eliza? Sweetheart?'

She sat upright. Oh no, the pie! It needed to go in the oven!

Her mother soothed her. 'I've done it, don't worry. It won't take long.'

As it warmed up, her mother asked her how her day had



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been. It was mostly good, Eliza said. Except in the last lesson one of the boys in her class had pinched her. It had hurt.

‘Do you want me to come to your school tomorrow and kill that boy?’

It was such a naughty thing to say that Eliza found herself giggling. She shook her head.

‘Could I hurt him badly?’ her mum said. ‘Blind him? Break his pencils in two? Set his books on fire?’

Another giggle, another shake of her head.

‘Spoilsport.’ Her mother smoothed her hair back in the way Eliza loved and kissed her again.

After dinner, they did the dishes together. Eliza was on the way to her bedroom to change into her pyjamas when the phone rang. She heard her mum talking and laughing. She guessed it was one of her two godmothers.

Eliza loved Maxie and Olivia. She only got to see them once or twice a year, with Maxie being so busy acting in her TV show in Sydney, and Olivia now living in a hotel filled with art in Edinburgh with her new husband and stepsons, but it was always great fun when they came to stay. Her mother was always so happy to see them too.

She was in bed reading when she heard her mum finish the phone call. Jeannie appeared at her bedroom door shortly after, with a glass of wine in her hand, a big smile on her face.

‘Eliza Maxine Olivia, I have major news.’

Eliza liked it when her mother made these kinds of announcements.



She came over and sat on the edge of the bed. ‘Tomorrow I will be phoning your school. I will say it is in regard to the forthcoming school concert. I will be asking the relevant person to reserve three tickets for me.’

‘Three?’

‘One for me. And one for each of your godmothers.’

Eliza’s eyes widened. ‘Both of them are coming? At the same time?’

‘Both. Alive and dangerous,’ her mother said.

That concert was one of Eliza’s happiest childhood memories.

The school hall was packed by six p.m., every seat filled, people lining the walls too. Eliza kept peeking out from behind the stage curtains. She started to worry that they’d be late, or not get there at all. Something made her look just before the concert began. The back door of the hall opened. Her mother came in first, so pretty in a red dress, smiling widely, her black curls so shiny. Somehow, she spotted Eliza and blew her a kiss. Olivia was next, tall and slender with wavy brown hair. Then Maxie, curvy, with dyed-red hair. They were wearing colourful dresses too.

They looked so amazing that the photographer from the local paper came up afterwards and took a photo of them with Eliza. It appeared on the front page the following week. Of course, the headline was about Maxine Hill, the famous soap actress, being in town, but Eliza was still named, and so were her mum and Olivia.

In the photo, Eliza was standing in front, beaming, her long black hair in two plaits, dark against her white angel costume.



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Right behind, her arms wrapped around Eliza, was her mother, smiling too. They were almost the same height. To Eliza's left, Maxie; to her right, Olivia. They were like two guardian angels.

Her godmothers stayed for three nights. Eliza went to bed each evening to the sound of the three of them talking and laughing, of corks regularly being taken out of bottles. It felt different to Eliza, much better, to hear the cork noise when there were others with her mother.

At some stage over that weekend, the godmothers' holiday plan was hatched.

'We made a solemn promise about it,' her mum told her the morning they left. 'I wanted to seal it in blood but we shook hands instead.'

Every year from now on, she explained, Maxie and Olivia would take Eliza away for a week or so each. It would mean she'd have two holidays a year. She'd get to know her godmothers, and they'd get to know her. It would also give her mum a break.

'Not that I need a break from you, sweetpea. But they said I was being selfish keeping you to myself.'

The first year, both holidays were in Australia. Maxie still lived in Sydney. Olivia was based in Scotland but had come back to see her family. But as the years went by, with Maxie moving to the UK for her work too, the destinations became more exotic and interesting. By the time Eliza was seventeen, she'd visited Edinburgh, London, Paris, Singapore, Hong Kong and Hanoi.

Eliza never knew beforehand where she was going. A month before each holiday, she'd receive a letter or, in later years, an



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email, telling her the departure date and what to pack. On the chosen day, her mum would drive her to the airport or train station. Only then would she learn the destination. Her mum would kiss her goodbye and stay waving for as long as she could see her. When Eliza came home, full of stories, her mum was always waiting for her, eager to hear everything, see photos, exclaim with delight over the gifts Eliza would bring back for her.

The year she was seventeen, she'd been staying with Maxie in New Zealand. It had been a magical, action-packed week, visiting glaciers, lakes and movie sets. She'd rung her mum from their hotel the night before she flew home, as always, to confirm her arrival time.

'Thank God. I'm missing you desperately,' her mum said from their small house in Heathcote, a town one hundred kilometres north of Melbourne. 'Tell the pilot to put his or her foot down. I want all speed records broken.'

'I've got so much to tell you. Today we went to —'

'No, no, don't tell me. I want to hear it face-to-face. Every single juicy detail. Don't forget anything.'

Her mum sent her an email the next morning too, written in their favourite list form.

*Safe
and
happy
travels
my
dearest*



The Godmothers

darling
daughter.
I
Can't
Wait
To
Hear
EVERYTHING.
Love
You
To
Pieces.
Mum
X
X

It was a turbulent flight from Auckland to Melbourne, but knowing her mum would be at the airport made it bearable. Sometimes Jeannie prepared a sign that she'd wave as Eliza appeared through the doors. WELCOME HOME TO THE BEST DAUGHTER IN THE WORLD, the last one had read.

'Too bad if it's embarrassing,' she'd said to a mortified Eliza. 'It's true.'

It was after eight p.m. when Eliza stepped into Arrivals, smiling, gazing out at the crowd, searching for the beautiful familiar face. An hour later she was still waiting. Their home phone went unanswered. So did her neighbours'. She finally remembered they were visiting their son in Sydney.



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Eliza had no choice but to go to the taxi rank and negotiate a fare – far more than she could usually afford. Thankfully Maxie had slipped two hundred dollars into her bag as she left. Several times on the journey to Heathcote she thought about asking the driver to stop at a public phone box so she could ring Maxie, or Olivia. Each time she talked herself out of it. Everything was all right. Maybe her mum had been called into work. Or was having trouble with the car.

The lights were on in the house as the taxi dropped her off. Her mother's second-hand Honda was parked in its usual place. Eliza could hear music. Her heart started thumping as she reached for her keys.

She stepped into the kitchen. There was an empty bottle of wine on the table. More empty bottles by the rubbish bin. The music was coming from the bathroom. Cheerful music. A jazz station, an announcer telling his listeners that coming up was a trio of classics. Eliza kept moving, down the hall, towards the bathroom. The door was wide open.

Sarah Vaughan's smoky voice was playing loudly as Eliza ran forward and frantically tried to pull her mother's lifeless body out of the half-filled bath.



CHAPTER TWO

Thirteen years later

Eliza's working week began as it usually did. She woke at six in her tidy rented apartment on the fourteenth floor of a building near Melbourne's Southbank. It was only a one-bedroom, but all she needed. The living room window looked out across the city, giving her a bird's-eye view of the ever-changing weather. Blue skies in the morning that often turned into wild storms by the afternoon.

She'd selected a week's worth of outfits the night before, as always, to make her morning routine more efficient. Corporate suits in neutral colours, low-heeled shoes. At five foot ten, she didn't need any extra height. She pulled her long black hair into the usual low bun. After a breakfast of cereal and fruit, she left the apartment at exactly 7.15 a.m. It was late March, allegedly autumn, but with thirty-six degrees forecast, it still felt like summer.

It took her twenty-five minutes to walk to her office on the third floor of a building on Exhibition Street. From the



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air-conditioned café downstairs, she ordered two cups of black coffee, one for her, one for her boss, Gillian, and one tea (white, two sugars) and a croissant (ham and cheese) for Hector, the old homeless man who slept in the alley around the corner. As usual, he interrupted his swearing at the world to shout at her. ‘What’s the weather like up there, Lofty?’

She was first into her office, as always. She’d already answered her work emails at home. After checking the stationery supplies, thermostat and water level in the cooler, she settled at her desk and began to review all her current projects.

She’d worked for Gillian Webster Enterprises for nearly nine years. Almost a third of her life. After finishing her business degree at the University of Melbourne, she’d sent her CV to ten companies advertising for graduates. Gillian was the first to reply.

‘High distinctions in all subjects,’ she said. ‘You’re my type of person.’

During their meeting that same day – ‘I don’t mess around. How soon can you come in?’ – Gillian did more talking than Eliza. She described herself as ‘an entrepreneur, a can-do dynamic ideas person’. Gillian’s original business was a successful recruitment agency. She’d recently expanded into the conference industry.

‘What I need is a right-hand woman, someone to keep an eye on all aspects of the conferences. The delegates, the finances, casual staff, travel arrangements. Detail, detail, detail. Twenty-four seven.’



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Eliza pictured lengthy to-do lists needing constant management. Long hours. Weekend work. Exactly what she was looking for. When she got a word in, she asked Gillian plenty of questions, taking notes. Gillian was impressed. Eliza's part-time job as an art gallery attendant during her university years also met with her approval. Eliza's godmother Olivia had helped her find that position, calling on one of her many contacts in the art world.

'I'm an art lover myself,' Gillian said. 'I'll get your advice on the most collectable artists.'

She remarked on the entry in Eliza's CV regarding her volunteer work with the uni's drama society. That had been her other godmother's idea. Maxie had started her successful international acting career at uni in Sydney.

'Never tempted to tread the boards yourself?' Gillian asked.

'No,' Eliza said, feeling her cheeks redden even at the thought of it.

'Good. What I want is a backroom person. I'm the face of the company and that's how I like it. The job's yours if you want it.' She named a reasonable salary. 'Give me your answer by nine tomorrow.'

Overnight, Eliza thought about it. There were three people she could ask for advice – her two godmothers and Rose, her best friend from university – but she needed to decide for herself. She said yes the next day. She was at her new desk the following Monday. In the nine years since, she'd regularly worked more than fifty hours a week and rarely taken holidays. When she did



have time off, she was often called back in. She'd had only two small pay rises, both given begrudgingly.

Rose couldn't understand why Eliza was still working there. 'Your business card should say slave, not executive assistant.'

Maxie was equally puzzled. 'But you're artistic, not corporate, Eliza!' she'd said once. 'You should be surrounded by paints and canvases, not spreadsheets and contracts.'

Olivia was more astonished that Eliza could actually work with Gillian. 'That woman would drive me nuts,' she said after meeting her in the office during one of her visits to Melbourne. 'I've never met anyone who talked about herself so much.'

That Monday morning, as usual, Eliza heard her boss arrive before she saw her. Gillian spent ninety per cent of her working day on the phone. Eliza handed her the coffee as she appeared, receiving a brisk nod in return. Gillian was perfectly groomed, as ever. Eliza had learned how to dress in corporate style by observation. Rose often teased her about Gillian's influence. 'You were practically a hippy when we met. Now you're so sleek I'm scared of you. Come back, Old Eliza!'

It wasn't a matter of Old or New Eliza. It was Necessary Eliza. If she wanted the safe routine and security of a good job, she had to play by the rules. Look the part. Gillian had insisted.

'Neutral colours, thank you, Eliza. Classic suits. Hair back. Dress smart, think smart, be smart.'

She listened now as Gillian paced around the open-plan office, finishing her call. Her boss had a separate glass-walled cubicle, but was rarely in it. She'd told Eliza she preferred to keep her staff of



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ten on their toes. Eliza gathered that Gillian was negotiating a fee for a popular speaker, presumably for the conference they were organising for a science firm in Brisbane the following March.

After reaching a deal, Gillian put down the phone.

‘Morning, Eliza,’ she said. ‘Good weekend?’ She didn’t wait for an answer. Instead, she put her hands on her hips and leaned back, making her heavily pregnant belly appear even rounder. She was expecting twin girls. When the babies arrived in two months’ time, Gillian and Kevin, her lawyer husband, would have four children under the age of six.

Eliza never wondered how Gillian ‘did it all’. She saw it in action every day. Gillian was constantly on the move, networking with clients and suppliers, firing instructions via email to Eliza at every step. She also knew how Gillian and her husband managed at home: day and night nannies. Eliza had sat in on many of those interviews. Gillian went through a lot of nannies.

Eliza and Gillian always started each day with their coffee and a ten-minute meeting. Eliza had established the routine, as well as streamlining their other office processes. Gillian called Eliza the Queen of Lists. ‘All bow to our meticulous majesty,’ she’d said once to the staff at a company meeting. They’d laughed obediently. But it was true. Eliza was obsessively organised. She loved lists. They’d been special to her as a child. They kept her life running smoothly now.

That day, however, instead of sticking to Eliza’s printed agenda, Gillian pushed it to one side.

‘I have news, Eliza.’



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Eliza felt a prickle of alarm. 'Is it the babies?'

'The babies are great. It's work news.'

Eliza picked up her notebook.

'You won't need that.'

Eliza put it down. 'Good news, I hope?'

'Wonderful news.' Gillian smiled. 'I've sold the company.'

Eliza blinked.

'It was an offer I couldn't refuse,' Gillian said. 'A takeover. All my clients. All my existing contracts. All my current and future conferences.'

Eliza felt a jolt at the emphatic 'my'. She'd worked on every detail of those conferences. She'd fine-tuned the contracts, liaised with every client, delegate and venue. 'Sold to who?'

Gillian named the buyer. An international operation, based in Singapore. There'd long been speculation in the industry about their possible direct move into Australia.

Still, Eliza was shocked. 'Just like that? Out of the blue?'

'No. We've been negotiating for six months. I've been legally constrained from saying anything to anyone until today.'

'To anyone? Even me?'

Gillian mimed zipping her lips. 'I had to obey.'

Obedient was the last word Eliza would use for Gillian. 'But when? How?'

'I was approached when I was in Sydney last year. Just after I'd found out I was pregnant. Do you remember that huge medical conference I organised in Sydney? The one with a thousand delegates?'



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Eliza had organised that huge medical conference. The delegates' flights, the hotel rooms, the speakers' schedules. Gillian was on the ground as the face of the company, but throughout the week Eliza was back in Melbourne working fifteen-hour days, staying one step ahead, double-checking running orders, speakers' needs, even the catering arrangements.

When had Gillian had time for any extra appointments?

It was as if Gillian read her mind. 'It was all done in person. The managing director flew from Singapore especially. I met with him and his lawyer. We've been in touch via my personal email ever since. My husband handled my legal advice, of course. Keep it in the family and all that.' She gave a laugh that sounded fake.

'You couldn't tell me? After working together for nine years?'

Eliza couldn't disguise her hurt.

An edge came into Gillian's voice. 'It was my company, Eliza. My decision. I'm going to take six months off, spend quality time with the children. After that, the world's my oyster. I have some brilliant ideas already, of course. But I'm stepping away from company life. It's time to fly solo again.'

Eliza forced herself to ask it. 'Where does that leave me?'

'Sadly, your job is now obsolete.' Gillian didn't look sad. 'They've bought my company in name and intellectual property only. They'll bring in their own team.'

Eliza could hear the *buzz-buzz-buzz* of incoming calls on Gillian's phone. If she wanted more answers, she'd need to be quick.

'How long have I got?'



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Gillian laughed. 'It's not a diagnosis, Eliza. Or a death sentence. I'm legally bound to give you a fortnight's notice. I'll be telling the others when they come in this morning.'

'Two weeks? For everyone to find another job?' Eliza named her colleagues. It seemed important to remind Gillian of the personal impact of her decision.

Gillian's voice grew steely. 'They'll be fine. They'll have my company name on their CVs. As will you. There's also a severance package, obviously. You didn't think I'd leave you in the lurch, did you?'

Eliza didn't know what she thought.

Gillian reached over and unexpectedly took Eliza's hands. It didn't feel affectionate.

'I know this must come as a shock, Eliza, but remember, one door closes, another opens. I'm doing you a favour, if you ask me. Let's face facts – you're stuck in a rut. What have you done with your life so far? It's time you stepped outside your comfort zone. I'm a risk-taker by nature, so it's easy for me to say this, but in my opinion it will do you good to try something new, spread your wings. Once you get over that silly fear of flying, of course!' She laughed again.

Eliza was suddenly glad she'd never explained what had triggered her fear of flying, why she hadn't flown since she was seventeen years old.

Gillian handed Eliza a copy of her severance agreement. 'You can get legal advice at your own expense, but I assure you it's watertight.'



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‘Thank you,’ Eliza said, taking it.

‘That’s it? “Thank you”?’ Gillian’s expression hardened. ‘I have to say your response is, frankly, disappointing. After everything I’ve done for you. I took a chance on you as a graduate. You have my name on your CV. This deal is also wonderful news for me as a woman. Yet you haven’t even said congratulations. I thought we were friends. Now I’m not sure.’

Eliza watched silently as her boss stalked off. Alone at her desk, she read the five-page document. She’d negotiated enough contracts to realise there was no point disputing it.

Her colleagues arrived before nine a.m. They were cheerful, talking about their weekends. All in their twenties, hardworking, enthusiastic. At nine-ten, Gillian called them together.

There was shock, even tears, from the younger ones. Gillian had their severance agreements ready too. It was wonderful news, she insisted. She kept giving the fake laugh Eliza was starting to hate.

At ten a.m., Gillian called her in. She’d drafted an email announcing the takeover. She instructed Eliza to send it to all their contacts: clients, venue managers, speakers’ agencies, business media. It was upbeat, announcing a wonderful success story, a small Australian company sought after by an international leader in the field. It glossed over the redundancies. Only Gillian was named and quoted. ‘I am very proud of my achievements and so excited for what the future may hold for me.’

The calls flooded in as soon as the email was sent. Mostly from clients who already had conference contracts with them,



concerned about their future. Eliza transferred them all to Gillian. Twice, Gillian called her in, crossly saying that surely Eliza could handle ‘the minor ones’.

Eliza knew what she wanted to say. ‘But it’s you they want to speak to. It’s your company. Your big news.’ She didn’t, of course. It wasn’t her way. She preferred to stay quiet. Hide her feelings.

She left the office at six, one hour earlier than normal. Gillian had left at five, as usual. Eliza would have followed, but one of her younger colleagues came to her, upset, asking for help to update her CV. Afterwards, she gave Eliza a hug. ‘You’re the one we’ll all miss. We hope she falls apart without you.’

The heat outside was still fierce, but Eliza barely noticed it on the walk to her apartment. In the foyer, she picked up her mail. Three advertising circulars and an envelope with her name typed on the front.

She opened it as she went up the stairs. There was a lift, but the hundreds of steps each day were her regular exercise. She stopped on the third landing, trying to take in the letter’s contents.

Dear Ms Miller,

I am writing to advise you that your landlord is returning from overseas and wishes to take occupancy of her apartment. As per your tenancy agreement, I’m henceforth giving you three months’ notice to vacate. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your excellent tenancy over the past eight years.



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Inside her apartment, she sat down on her sofa, still holding the letter. She could feel the sting of tears, but she did her best to blink them away. She stared out the window at the flurry of dark clouds now buffeting across the sky.

For the hundredth, perhaps the thousandth, time in her life, she thought it.

I want my mum.

I want to talk to my mum.

It wasn't possible.

She needed to talk to someone. She took out her phone, going to her most frequent contacts.

Top of the list was Rose, but Eliza never liked to ring her at this time of day. After graduating, Rose had married her childhood sweetheart Harry and gone back to live in her home town of Colac, two hours west of Melbourne. She was now busy with their three young kids and their stock supplies business. Eliza had stayed with them often enough to picture the scene: a cacophony of background noise, the kids having baths, the table being set, piano practice, Harry in the kitchen making elaborate meals and lots of mess. Rose always preferred long leisurely phone conversations late at night, enjoyed over a glass of wine.

Eliza scrolled down to the next two names. They were in alphabetical order. Maxie and Olivia. She was calculating the time difference, trying to decide who to call first, when the land-line phone rang beside her. The caller's name flashed up on the small screen.

Olivia.



It happened so often. One of her godmothers there just when she needed them, in person or on the phone. On the day of Eliza's university graduation, Olivia had stood clapping and cheering when Eliza's name was called and she stepped onto the stage. Maxie sent a big bunch of flowers when Eliza emailed them about getting the job with Gillian. Olivia sent her a department store voucher to buy a 'work wardrobe'. Maxie surprised her with a visit on her twenty-first birthday, flying across the world to spend a long weekend with her. Olivia did the same for her thirtieth birthday.

Maxie had been the first to arrive at the hospital that night thirteen years ago, followed as quickly as possible by Olivia. The night Eliza had flown home after a wonderful holiday and —

No. She couldn't think of that now.

She answered, forcing a smile into her voice. 'Olivia, hi!'

'Drat,' Olivia said. 'I wanted your voicemail. That's why I rang your home phone. Are you sick?'

'No, I finished early.' About to explain, she stopped. 'Why did you want to get my voicemail?'

'Because Maxie's dropped some bombshell news. I was in London with her on the weekend. She's sworn me to secrecy but I'm disobeying her. She and Hazel are getting married! Not just anywhere, either. In Gretna Green. They're practically eloping!'

Eliza had never heard Olivia sound so excited.

'I begged her to let me be one of their witnesses. Of course,



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she said. Then this morning I had a brilliant idea to surprise Maxie. I'm ringing to make you an offer I hope you can't and won't refuse.'

'Olivia, I —'

'Please, Eliza, at least listen before you say no. My plan was to leave a long message to give you time to think about it. And then I wanted you to ring me tomorrow and say yes.'

'Where are you? Still at Maxie's?'

'No, back in Edinburgh,' Olivia said. 'I got the sleeper train last night. Except I didn't sleep. I was too busy coming up with my ingenious plan. Are you sitting comfortably?'

At first, Eliza listened closely. Out of habit, she even took notes. Then, as her godmother kept talking, she put down her pen and gazed around her apartment, noticing every detail as if for the first time.

She'd lived here for eight years but had barely made her mark on it. She had few belongings. In the bedroom was a tidy rack of clothes. In the living room, her books and a box of painting materials. On a shelf, the tall green vase and three coloured bowls her mother had loved. There was a postcard of her mother's favourite painting on the fridge. On the wall, the framed enlarged photograph of her eleven-year-old self with her mum and godmothers, taken after the school concert. Everything else – the furniture, crockery, even the cutlery – belonged to her landlord.

Her entire home life could be dismantled in less than an hour if she wanted. As quickly as her work life had collapsed today.



'I'm doing you a favour, if you ask me. Let's face facts – you're stuck in a rut.'

Olivia was still talking. 'I'm not putting pressure on you, Eliza, though of course that's exactly what I'm doing. Please think about it. I know it's short notice. And yes, of course I know how you feel about flying. But we'll deal with that, even if it takes a wheelbarrow of drugs. I know you'll say you're too busy at work, but you're owed weeks of holidays. I also know Gillian still pays you a pittance, so I'll cover your costs. Let's call it an extra thirtieth birthday present. An early fortieth present. Please say yes. It would make Maxie's day. Mine too. The three of us haven't been in the same place together for —'

'Yes,' Eliza said.

There was a brief silence. 'What did you say?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

'Just like that?'

'Yes.'


'Without any excuses about busy schedules, or Gillian's demands, or needing to be in Melbourne to make sure there's a glass of water for the keynote speaker at a conference in three months' time?'

Once, Eliza might have taken offence. Today, she almost laughed. 'None.'

There was a pause. 'Eliza, have you started drinking?'

'No.'

'Let me get this straight. I've asked you out of the blue to do



The Godmothers

something completely unexpected, on the spur of the moment,
and —’

‘I’ve said yes.’

Eliza held the phone away from her ear as Olivia uncharacteristically whooped down the line.