

*One for sorrow
Two for joy
Three for a girl
Four for a boy
Five for silver
Six for gold
Seven for a secret
Never to be told*

29th November, 1994

The magpies are back. It's strange to think how much I used to hate them, when I first came to the house. I remember coming up the drive in the taxi from the station, seeing them lined up along the garden wall like that, preening their feathers.

Today there was one perched on the frost-rimed branch of yew right outside my window, and I remembered what my mother used to say when I was little and whispered "Hello, Mr. Magpie" under my breath, to turn away the bad luck.

I counted them as I dressed, shivering next to the window. One on the yew tree. A second on the weathervane of the folly. A third on the wall of the kitchen garden. Three for a girl.

It seemed like an omen, and for a moment I shivered. Wishing, wondering, waiting . . .

But no, there were more on the frozen lawn. Four, five . . . six . . . and one hopping across the flags of the terrace, pecking at the ice on the covers over the table and chairs.

Seven. Seven for a secret, never to be told. Well, the secret part may be right, but the rest is wide of the mark. I'll have to tell, soon enough. There'll be no choice.

I had almost finished dressing when there was a rustle in the leaves of the rhododendrons in the shrubbery. For a minute I could not see the cause, but then the branches parted, and a fox slunk quietly across the leaf-strewn lawn, its red-gold fur startlingly bright against the frost-muted winter colours.

At my parents' house they were quite common, but it's rare to see one in daylight around here, let alone one bold enough to cross the huge exposed stretch of lawns in front of the house. I've seen slaughtered rabbits, and split bags of rubbish left from their scavenging, but they are almost never this bold. This one must have been very brave, or very desperate, to stalk in full sight in front of the house. Looking more closely, I thought perhaps it was the latter, for he was young, and terribly thin.

At first the magpies didn't notice, but then the one on the terrace, more observant than the others, registered the shape of the predator easing its way towards them, and it flew up from the icy flags like a rocket, chak-chakking its alarm, the warning loud and clear in the morning quiet. The fox had no hope after that. The other birds took to the sky, one by one, until at last only one was left, sitting on the yew, safely out of the fox's reach, and like a stream of molten gold, it slunk back over the grass, low to the ground, leaving the solitary magpie on the branch, crowing out its triumph.

One. One for sorrow. But that's impossible. I will never feel sad again, in spite of everything, in spite of the storm that I know is coming. As I sit here in the drawing room, writing this, I can feel it—my secret—burning me up from the inside with a joy so fierce that I think it must sometimes be visible through my skin.

I'll change that rhyme. One for joy. One for love. One for the future.

CHAPTER 1

The girl leaned, rather than walked, into the wind, clutching the damp package of fish and chips grimly under one arm even as the gale plucked at the paper, trying to unravel the parcel and send the contents skittering away down the seafront for the seagulls to claim.

As she crossed the road her hand closed over the crumpled note in her pocket, and she glanced over her shoulder, checking the long dark stretch of pavement behind her for a shadowy figure, but there was no one there. No one she could see, anyway.

It was rare for the seafront to be completely deserted. The bars and clubs were open long into the night, spilling drunk locals and tourists onto the pebbled beach right through until dawn. But tonight, even the most hardened partygoers had decided against venturing out, and now, at 9:55 p.m. on a wet Tuesday, Hal had the promenade to herself, the flashing lights of the pier the only sign of life, apart from the gulls wheeling and crying over the dark restless waters of the channel.

Hal's short black hair blew in her eyes, her glasses were misted, and her lips were chapped with salt from the sea wind. But she hitched

the parcel tighter under her arm and turned off the seafront into one of the narrow residential streets of tall white houses, where the wind dropped with a suddenness that made her stagger and almost trip. The rain didn't let up. In fact, away from the wind it seemed to drizzle more steadily, if anything, as she turned again into Marine View Villas.

The name was a lie. There were no villas, only a slightly shabby little row of terraced houses, their paint peeling from constant exposure to the salty air. And there was no view—not of the sea or anywhere else. Maybe there had been once, when the houses were built. But since then taller, grander buildings had gone up, closer to the sea, and any view the windows of Marine View Villas might once have had was reduced to brick walls and slate roofs, even from Hal's attic flat. Now the only benefit to living up three flights of narrow, rickety stairs was not having to listen to neighbors stomping about above your head.

Tonight, though, the neighbors seemed to be out—and had been for some time, judging by the way the door stuck on the clump of junk mail in the hall. Hal had to shove hard, until it gave and she stumbled into the chilly darkness, groping for the automatic timer switch that governed the lights. Nothing happened. Either a fuse had blown, or the bulb had burned out.

She scooped up the junk mail, doing her best in the dim light filtering in from the street to pick out the letters for the other tenants, and then began the climb up to her own attic flat.

There were no windows on the stairwell, and once she was past the first flight, it was almost pitch-black. But Hal knew the steps by heart, from the broken board on the landing to the loose piece of carpet that had come untacked on the last flight, and she plodded wearily upwards, thinking about supper and bed. She wasn't even sure if she was hungry anymore, but the fish and chips had cost £5.50, and judging by the number of bills she was carrying, that was £5.50 she couldn't afford to waste.

On the top landing she ducked her head to avoid the drip from the skylight, opened the door, and then at last, she was home.

The flat was small, just a bedroom opening off a kind of wide hallway that did duty as both kitchen and living room, and everything else. It was also shabby, with peeling paint and worn carpet, and wooden windows that groaned and rattled when the wind came off the sea. But it had been Hal's home for all of her twenty-one years, and no matter how cold and tired she was, her heart never failed to lift, just a little bit, when she walked through the door.

In the doorway, she paused to wipe the salt spray off her glasses, polishing them on the ragged knee of her jeans, before dropping the paper of fish and chips on the coffee table.

It was very cold, and she shivered as she knelt in front of the gas fire, clicking the knob until it flared, and the warmth began to come back into her raw red hands. Then she unrolled the damp, rain-spattered paper packet, inhaling as the sharp smell of salt and vinegar filled the little room.

Spearing a limp, warm chip with the wooden fork, she began to sort through the mail, sifting out takeout fliers for recycling and putting the bills into a pile. The chips were salty and sharp and the battered fish still hot, but Hal found a slightly sick feeling was growing in the pit of her stomach as the stack of bills grew higher. It wasn't so much the size of the pile but the number marked *FINAL DEMAND* that worried her, and she pushed the fish aside, feeling suddenly nauseated.

She *had* to pay the rent—that was nonnegotiable. And the electricity was high on the list too. Without a fridge or lights, the little flat was barely habitable. The gas . . . well it was November. Life without heating would be uncomfortable, but she'd survive.

But the one that really made her stomach turn over was different from the official bills. It was a cheap envelope, obviously hand-delivered, and all it said on the front, in ballpoint letters, was "Harriet Westerway, top flat."

There was no sender's address, but Hal didn't need one. She had a horrible feeling that she knew who it was from.

Hal swallowed a chip that seemed to be stuck in her throat, and she pushed the envelope to the bottom of the pile of bills, giving way to the overwhelming impulse to bury her head in the sand. She wished passionately that she could hand the whole problem over to someone older and wiser and stronger to deal with.

But there was no one. Not anymore. And besides, there was a tough, stubborn core of courage in Hal. Small, skinny, pale, and young she might be—but she was not the child people routinely assumed. She had not been that child for more than three years.

It was that core that made her pick the envelope back up and, biting her lip, tear through the flap.

Inside there was just one sheet of paper, with only a couple of sentences typed on it.

Sorry to have missed you. We would like to discuss you're financial situation. We will call again.

Hal's stomach flipped and she felt in her pocket for the piece of paper that had turned up at her work this afternoon. They were identical, save for the crumples and a splash of tea that she had spilled over the first one when she opened it.

The message on them was not news to Hal. She had been ignoring calls and texts to that effect for months.

It was the message *behind* the notes that made her hands shake as she placed them carefully on the coffee table, side by side.

Hal was used to reading between the lines, deciphering the importance of what people *didn't* say, as much as what they did. It was her job, in a way. But the unspoken words here required no decoding at all.

They said, *We know where you work.*

We know where you live.

And we will come back.

. . .

THE REST OF THE MAIL was just junk and Hal dumped it into the recycling before sitting wearily on the sofa. For a moment she let her head rest in her hands—trying not to think about her precarious bank balance, hearing her mother’s voice in her ear as if she were standing behind her, lecturing her about her A-level revision. *Hal, I know you’re stressed, but you’ve got to eat something! You’re too skinny!*

I know, she answered, inside her head. It was always that way when she was worried or anxious—her appetite was the first thing to go. But she couldn’t afford to get ill. If she couldn’t work, she wouldn’t get paid. And more to the point, she could not afford to waste a meal, even one that was damp around the edges, and getting cold.

Ignoring the ache in her throat, she forced herself to pick up another chip. But it was only halfway to her mouth when something in the recycling bin caught her eye. Something that should not have been there. A letter in a stiff white envelope, addressed by hand, and stuffed into the bin along with the takeout menus.

Hal put the chip in her mouth, licked the salt off her fingers, and then leaned across to the bin to pick it out of the mess of old papers and soup tins.

Miss Harriet Westaway, it said. *Flat 3c, Marine View Villas, Brighton*. The address was only slightly stained with the grease from Hal’s fingers and the mess from the bin.

She must have shoved it in there by mistake with the empty envelopes. Well, at least this one couldn’t be a bill. It looked more like a wedding invitation—though that seemed unlikely. Hal couldn’t think of anyone who would be getting married.

She shoved her thumb in the gap at the side of the envelope and ripped it open.

The piece of paper she pulled out wasn’t an invitation. It was a letter, written on heavy, expensive paper, with the name of a solicitor’s firm at the top. For a minute Hal’s stomach seemed to fall away, as a landscape of terrifying possibilities opened up before her. Was someone suing her for something she’d said in a reading? Or—oh

God—the tenancy on the flat. Mr. Khan, the landlord, was in his seventies and had sold all of the other flats in the house, one by one. He had held on to Hal's mainly out of pity for her and affection for her mother, she was fairly sure, but that stay of execution could not last forever. One day he would need the money for a care home, or his diabetes would get the better of him and his children would have to sell. It didn't matter that the walls were peeling with damp, and the electrics shorted if you ran a hair dryer at the same time as the toaster. It was home—the only home she'd ever known. And if he kicked her out, the chances of finding another place at this rate were not just slim, they were nil.

Or was it . . . but no. There was no way *he* would have gone to a solicitor.

Her fingers were trembling as she unfolded the page, but when her eyes flicked to the contact details beneath the signature, she realized, with a surge of relief, that it wasn't a Brighton firm. The address was in Penzance, in Cornwall.

Nothing to do with the flat—thank God. And vanishingly unlikely to be a disgruntled client, so far from home. In fact, she didn't know anyone in Penzance at all.

Swallowing another chip, she spread the letter out on the coffee table, pushed her glasses up her nose, and began to read.

Dear Miss Westaway,

*I am writing at the instruction of my client, your grandmother,
Hester Mary Westaway of Trepassen House, St Piran.*

*Mrs Westaway passed away on 22nd November, at her
home. I appreciate that this news may well come as a shock
to you; please accept my sincere condolences on your loss.*

*As Mrs Westaway's solicitor and executor, it is my duty
to contact beneficiaries under her will. Because of the
substantial size of the estate, probate will need to be applied
for and the estate assessed for inheritance tax liabilities, and*

the process of disbursement cannot begin until this has taken place. However if, in the meantime, you could provide me with copies of two documents confirming your identity and address (a list of acceptable forms of ID is attached), that will enable me to begin the necessary paperwork.

In accordance with the wishes of your late grandmother, I am also instructed to inform beneficiaries of the details of her funeral. This is being held at 4 p.m. on 1st December at St Piran's Church, St Piran. As local accommodation is very limited, family members are invited to stay at Trepassen House, where a wake will also be held.

Please write to your late grandmother's housekeeper Mrs Ada Warren if you would like to avail yourself of the offer of accommodation, and she will ensure a room is opened up for you.

Please accept once again my condolences, and the assurance of my very best attentions in this matter.

Yours truly,

Robert Treswick

Treswick, Nantes and Dean

Penzance

A chip fell from Hal's fingers onto her lap, but she did not stir. She only sat, reading and rereading the short letter, and then turning to the accepted-forms-of-identification document, as if that would elucidate matters.

Substantial estate . . . beneficiaries of the will . . . Hal's stomach rumbled, and she picked up the chip and ate it almost absently, trying to make sense of the words in front of her.

Because it *didn't* make sense. Not one bit. Hal's grandparents had been dead for more than twenty years.

CHAPTER 2

Hal wasn't sure how long she sat there, puzzling over the letter, her eyes flicking between the folded white sheet and the search page of her phone. But when she looked up, the clock on the microwave said five to midnight, and she stretched, realizing with a pang of anxiety that the gas fire had been burning the whole time. She stood and turned it off, listening to the cooling click of the elements, mentally adding on another fifty pence to the gas bill already lying there, and as she did, her gaze fell on the photograph on the mantelpiece.

It had been there almost as long as Hal could remember—ten years at least—but now she picked it up, looking at it afresh. It showed a girl, maybe nine or ten years of age, and a woman, standing on Brighton beach. They were laughing, with their eyes screwed up against a gusting wind that blew their long dark hair into identical comic upsweeps. The woman had her arm around the girl, and there was a look of such freedom, such trust between them that Hal felt her heart clench with a pain that she had almost grown used to over the last three years, but which never seemed to fade.

The girl was Hal—and yet she wasn't. She wasn't the girl who stood in front of the fire now, her hair cropped short as a boy's, her

ears pierced, the tattoos on her back just peeping out from the neck of her threadbare T-shirt.

The girl in the photograph had no need to mark her skin with remembrances because everything she wanted to remember was right beside her. She didn't dress in black, because she had nothing to mourn. She didn't keep her head down and her collar up when she walked home, because she had nothing to hide from. She was warm, and well-fed, and most of all she was loved.

The fish and chips had grown cold, and Hal bundled them up in the paper and pushed them into the bin in the corner of the room. Her mouth was dry with salt, and her throat ached with grief, and the thought of a hot mug of tea before bed was suddenly comforting. She would make the tea, and fill a hot-water bottle with the rest of the kettle, something to take the chill off the sheets, help her to sleep.

As the kettle began to hum, Hal rummaged in the cupboard above it for the box of tea bags. But almost as if it were what she had really been looking for, her hand found something else. Not the light-weight cardboard box, but a glass bottle, half-full. She didn't need to get it out to know what it was, but she took it down anyway, weighing it in her hand, feeling the liquid slosh greasily inside. Vodka.

She only rarely drank these days—she didn't really like the person she became with a glass in her hand—but then her eye caught on the two notes lying across the coffee table, and with a quick movement she twisted off the cap and poured a generous measure into the cup she had been intending for the tea.

The kettle bubbled as she lifted the cup to her lips, smelling the acrid, slightly petrolly smell, watching the meniscus tremble in the dim light coming in from the streetlamp. For a moment the imagined taste was sharp in her mouth—the fiery burn, followed by that little addictive buzz. But then something inside her stomach seemed to turn, and she poured it down the sink, swilled out the cup, and made the tea instead.

As she carried it through to the bedroom, she realized with a kind of weariness that she had forgotten the hot-water bottle. But it didn't matter. She was too tired to care, and the tea was hot and good. Hal curled up in bed, fully clothed, sipping the tea and staring at the bright screen of her phone.

On the screen was Google images, and it showed a hand-tinted postcard, from perhaps 1930, featuring a country house. It had a long frontage of cream-colored stone with Georgian-style windows, covered in ivy. Chimneys poked up from a slate-tiled roof, a dozen or more, all in different styles. To the rear was more of the house, which seemed to be redbrick and built in a different style. A lawn spread out in front of the building, falling away, and a scrawled inscription across the picture read, *We had a very good tea at Trepassen House before driving on to Penzance.*

That was Trepassen House. *That* was Trepassen House. Not a modest little bungalow, or a Victorian terrace with a pretentious name. But a bona fide country seat.

A share, however small, of a place like that could do more than pay off her bills. It could give her back the security she had lost when her mother died. Even a few hundred pounds would give her more breathing room than she could remember for months.

The clock at the top of the screen showed half past midnight, and Hal knew she should sleep, but she did not close down her phone.

Instead she sat there in bed, with the steam from the tea misting her glasses, searching, scrolling, and feeling a strange mix of emotions spreading through her, warming her more than the tea.

Excitement? Yes.

Trepidation too, a good deal of it.

But most of all something she hadn't dared to feel in many years. Hope.

CHAPTER 3

Hal woke late the next morning. The sun was already up, slanting through the bedroom curtains, and she lay still, feeling the mingled excitement and dread in the pit of her stomach, and trying to remember the source.

Recollection came like a twin punch to the gut.

The dread was the pile of bills on the coffee table—and, worse than bills, those two typed notes, hand-delivered. . . .

But the excitement . . .

She had spent all last night trying to talk herself out of it. Just because it was where Hester Westaway had lived, there was no guarantee that she had actually owned that huge rambling place on the postcard. People just didn't have houses that size these days. The fact that she'd died there didn't mean she owned it. In all likelihood, it was a retirement home now.

But the housekeeper, whispered a voice in the back of her head. And that line about opening up a room for you. They wouldn't say that about a retirement home, would they?

"It doesn't matter," Hal said aloud, startling herself with the sound of her own voice in the silent flat.

She stood, smoothing down her rumpled clothes, and picked up her glasses. Settling them on her nose, she gave herself a stern look in the mirror.

It didn't matter whether Hester Westaway owned a room, or a wing, or a cottage in the grounds, or the whole damn place. There had clearly been some sort of mistake. She was not Hal's grandmother. The money belonged to someone else, and that was all there was to it.

Tomorrow she would write back and tell Mr. Treswick that.

But today . . . Hal looked at her watch, and shook her head. Today she had barely time for a shower. It was 11:20 and she was very nearly late for work.

SHE WAS IN THE SHOWER, the hot water drumming on her skull, driving out all other thoughts, when the voice whispered again, beneath the roar of the water.

But what if it's true? They wrote to you, didn't they? They have your name and address.

It wasn't true, though, that was the long and the short of it. Hal's only grandparents had died years ago, long before she was born. And her grandmother hadn't been called Hester, she had been called . . . Marion?

Maybe Marion was a middle name. People do that, right? They use one name for everyday, and have a different one on their papers. What if—

Shut up, Hal said inwardly. Just shut up. You know it's not true. You're persuading yourself because you want it to be true.

Still, the voice niggled away in the back of her head, and at last, more in an effort to convince herself than anything else, Hal turned off the shower, wrapped a towel around her shoulders, and made her way back into the bedroom. Beneath the bed was a heavy wooden box, and she dragged it out, wincing at the screech of castors on the wooden floor, and hoping that the downstairs neighbors weren't treating themselves to a lie-in.

Inside was a rat's nest of important papers—insurance documents, the rental contract on the flat, bills, her passport. . . . Hal sifted through the layers, feeling like an archaeologist of her own history. Past the insurance schedule, past the bill for the time a pipe had burst in the attic, and then down to a stratum that was nothing but pain—her mother's death certificate, the copy of her will, the police report, her faded driver's license, never used again. Beneath them all was a veil, folded into a neat square—fine black gauze, edged with droplets of jet.

There was a lump in Hal's throat as she put it aside, hurrying past the bitter memories to the older stuff underneath—papers her mother had chosen to keep, more neatly filed than Hal's haphazard shoving. There was an envelope with her own exam certificates, a program for a school play she had been in, a photograph of herself looking sheepish with a long-gone boyfriend.

And then at last a plastic folder marked *Important—birth certs* in her mother's neat hand, and inside, two red-and-cream certificates, handwritten, and topped with the extravagantly ornate crown emblem. *Certified copy of an entry*, read the top of the page. First Hal's: *Harriet Margarida Westaway, born 15th May 1995. Mother: Margarida Westaway, occupation: student.*

The space for "father" was left blank, a line drawn firmly through the box, as though to stop anyone from adding their own theories.

And then, beneath it, another certificate, older and more creased—*Margarida Westaway*. Her mother. Hal's eyes skipped to the "parents" column—*Father: William Howard Rainer Westaway, occupation: accountant* and beneath that *Mother: Marion Elizabeth Westaway, maiden name: Brown*. No occupation was given for her grandmother.

Well, that was that then.

She didn't realize how much she had been hoping against hope until the sense of deflation set in, tentative thoughts of debt repayment and security collapsing like a pricked balloon.

Substantial estate . . . whispered the voice in her ear, seductively. *Beneficiaries of the will . . . family members . . .*

There's always your father, whispered the voice again, as she dressed. *You have another grandmother, you know.* Hal shook her head bitterly at that. If your subconscious could betray you, Hal's just had.

For years she had fantasized about her father, spinning increasingly elaborate tales to the girls at school to cover her own ignorance and her anger at her mother for telling her so little. He was a pilot who had gone down in a crash in the sea. He was an undercover policeman who had been forced to return to his real life by his superiors. He was a celebrity, whose name couldn't be revealed, or they would be hounded by the tabloids, and her father's life would be ruined.

At last, when the rumors had reached the ears of the teachers, someone had had a quiet word and Hal's mother had taken her aside and gently told her the truth.

Hal's father had been a one-night stand—a student her mother had met in a nightclub in Brighton and had slept with for the first and last time on the night they met. He had a Spanish accent, and that was all Hal's mother knew.

"You didn't even find out his *name*?" Hal had asked incredulously, and her mother had bitten her lip and shaken her head. Her cheeks were scarlet, and she looked more uncomfortable than Hal could ever remember.

She was very sorry, she said. She hadn't wanted Hal to find out this way, but Hal *had* to stop spinning these . . . Her mother had stopped there, too kind to say the word she had been thinking; but even at seven, Hal was good at reading people, and perceptive enough to understand what it was her mother hadn't said.

These lies.

The truth was, her father was no one special. Who he was, where he lived now, she had no idea, and would probably never know. He had likely gone back to Spain or Mexico or wherever he had come

from in the first place. But one thing she did know for sure—he was most certainly not a Westaway.

Wherever the mistake had come from, it wasn't there. But a mistake it was. Somewhere, wires had been crossed. Maybe there was some other Harriet Westaway in another city, rightfully entitled to this money. Or maybe it was like one of those heir-hunter programs, where someone had died without legitimate heirs, and the money would go to waste if the executors didn't track down some relative, however distant, to scoop the pot.

Whatever the truth was, the money wasn't hers, and she couldn't claim it. And the voice inside her head had no answer to that.

Hurrying now, Hal shoved the papers back underneath the bed and dressed. Her hairbrush seemed to have gone missing, but she combed her hair as well as she could with her fingers, and checked herself in the mirror by the front door. Her face looked even paler and more pinched than usual, the forlorn wet spikes of black hair making her look like an extra from *Oliver Twist*. Makeup would have helped, but it wasn't really Hal's style.

But as she pulled on her coat, still damp from the night before, the voice piped up with one last remark. *You could claim this money, you know. Not many people could, but if anyone can pull this off, it's you.*

Shut up, Hal said inwardly, gritting her teeth. Shut. Up.

But she didn't say it because she didn't believe it.

She said it because it was true.