

A GIRL CALLED JOY



JENNY VALENTINE

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SIMON & SCHUSTER

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For optimists everywhere





1

There is absolutely no storybook magic in our family. We don't have a grandad who can fly, or an uncle who is busy somewhere building a time machine, or parents who are world-famous wizards-in-hiding. Our grandad walks with a stick, we have zero uncles, and our mum and dad have out-of-the-blue started saying things like, 'Put that back where it came from,' and, 'Where's your school uniform?' and,

'Please hoover your room immediately.'

According to my big sister, Claude, this makes us extremely ordinary. But we have never been ordinary. And I don't think we should be ready to start now.

I'm not pretending there haven't been some big changes. Things are feeling very pedestrian around here, that's for sure. Extremely squidged in. And it goes without saying that nobody has a wand to get us out of trouble, or their own super-helpful pack of wolves, or a lump of rock that can speak in whole sentences. There are no parallel universes under our sinks, or other worlds in our wardrobes, or perfect tiny humans between our walls. There are cleaning products, and clothes, and possibly mice. I don't have shoes that rush about all over the place with a mind of their own. I have one pair

of trainers that are at least one size too small, and I am not ready to throw them away yet because they have been with me everywhere, on so many adventures. The washing machine won't get the grass stains out of Claude's precious new jeans, and right now, Dad can't get rid of the coffee he spilled on Grandad's carpet. So I am pretty sure that none of us can make stuff disappear.

But the thing is, there is more than one kind of magic. It shouldn't have to mean the same as *impossible*, and only be allowed to happen in stories. That just doesn't seem right to me. Claude says our definitions of magic are different, and that I am always marvelling at something or other for no good reason because I am way too easily impressed. I am twenty-four seven on the lookout for some everyday,

actually real-life magic because that's the kind I believe in, and, to be honest, I think we could do with some.

When I say so, Claude does one of her semi-professional eye-rolls and says, 'Oh, yeah? Well. Good luck with that.'

When you don't have storybook magic, your problems are less fancy and not as much fun to fix. For example, Dad has stuck a big heavy book about trees over the coffee stain, in a hurry, and now it is lurking there in the middle of the room where it doesn't belong, like a suitcase in a canal. Any minute, somebody, most likely Grandad, is going to bump into it and find out the truth. Claude says it's not going to be pretty when he does, and it is only a matter of time. Even with my talent for positive thinking, I am starting to

think she might have got that one right.

I am ten, and Claude is thirteen.

She smells like cherries and wears black make-up all over her eyes. She has the straightest, whitest teeth and the shiniest toothpaste smile I have ever seen. When she is happy, she looks like an advert for the dentist, but at the moment that isn't very often. Dad says Claude's toothpaste smile has become a bit like a meteor shower, because it might only happen once or twice a year, and if you blink you'll miss it.

We saw a meteor shower in California, when I was six and Claude was nine. The sky rained stars for hours and hours, and I fell asleep before it was finished. You would have to do a long old blink to miss that.

Claude is short for Claudia Eloise, and

rhymes with bored, which these days is just about right. Ever since we got back to the UK and moved into Grandad's house, she is always complaining that nothing is worth doing and there is less than nothing to do. Mum and Dad have started calling her *the brick wall*, but not so she can hear them. They whisper it behind their hands, but I'm not sure they need to bother. As far as I can tell, she has pretty much completely stopped listening to anything they have to say.

Mum and Dad's names are Rina and Dan, short for Marina Jane Blake and Daniel Samson Applebloom. They have been hyper-distracted and crazy-busy since we arrived, doing out-of-character and mind-bendingly ordinary things like applying for jobs that involve zero travel, signing up at the doctor's, and shoe-horning

us into schools. These are not activities we are used to our parents being busy at. In fact, they are the total opposite of what we have spent our whole lives being taught to expect. It is very unsettling. Claude reckons Mum and Dad had radical personality transplants, like, overnight, when we weren't looking. She says they might not actually be our original parents any more, and we need to stay alert, because absolutely anything could be about to happen.

I say, 'Are you sure they're the only ones?' because right now I would bet money on the fact she's had the personality transplant too. She definitely isn't acting like my original sister. She isn't nearly as much fun as she used to be.

I haven't had anything transplanted. I am exactly the same as ever, even though

everything else has changed. My name can't be shortened and I don't have a middle one. It is what it is, and everyone just calls me Joy.



2

The here that we have got to is Grandad's house.

His name is Thomas Blake, and he is Mum's dad, although sometimes I find it hard to believe they are even related. I would never *ever* pick them out of a line-up of fathers and daughters, unless I knew. Not in a million. Grandad is sort of faint and blurry, like someone drew him with a soft pencil, and Mum is marker-pen dark. Mum is loud and