THE WONDROUS PRUNE

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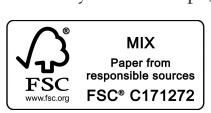
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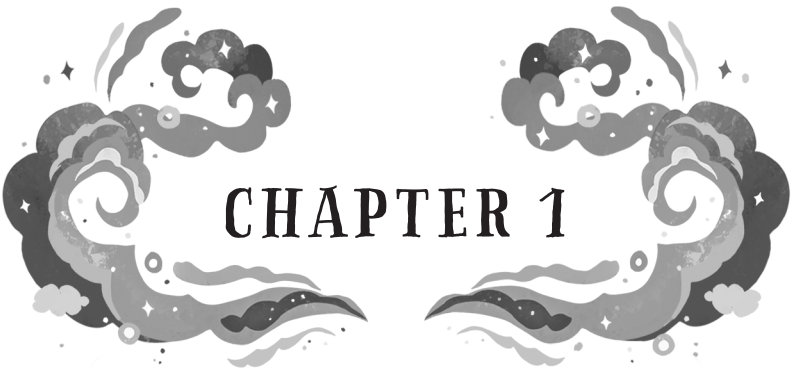
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For Mum
You'll forever be in my heart



CHAPTER 1

Has something completely astounding and spectacular but also totally surprising ever happened to you? My name is Prune Melinda Robinson. I'm eleven years old, and something like that has just happened to me. Something so extraordinary, so out of this world, I'm still amazed by it now! And I bet you will be too.

I'll never forget the day my life changed forever …

It all started one Sunday. It was a perfectly ordinary day, well, so I thought: I ate my lunch as usual and went back upstairs to my room. But then, as I went and sat down on my bed, I was suddenly surrounded by the most amazing colours all bunched together like clouds.

Magenta, coral, teal, lavender, and so many shades of yellow – the colour of sweet lemonade, sunflowers and

cheese on toast – plus reds, which were redder than the tastiest strawberries and my mama's favourite lipstick. Not only that, but amongst the colour clouds were the greenest greens and the brownest browns, the pinkest pinks and blues the colour of lagoons, and not forgetting my favourite colour of all, orange, which shone as beautiful as a sunrise.

I pinched myself and rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't dreaming because it was as if I'd been transported to the most magnificent and enchanting place, my bedroom feeling like a forest of endless bloom. Though, when I reached out to touch the colours, I couldn't feel a thing.

The colours were all so bright – brighter than the sky and even brighter than the moon when it gets all big and fat and sits outside your window like it wants to move in.

They were even brighter than my grandpa's smile, and no one had a smile quite as bright as Poppa B. Well, no one except Grandma Jean. Her smile was more brilliant than the ruby earrings she liked to wear, a gift from Poppa after they got married. She wore them to his funeral – her earrings and her smile the only things that were cheerful on that bleak November day.

Some people didn't get why my grandma looked so happy when they were crying and wailing, even those that didn't know my poppa but had only turned up because they'd heard Mama was making her famous

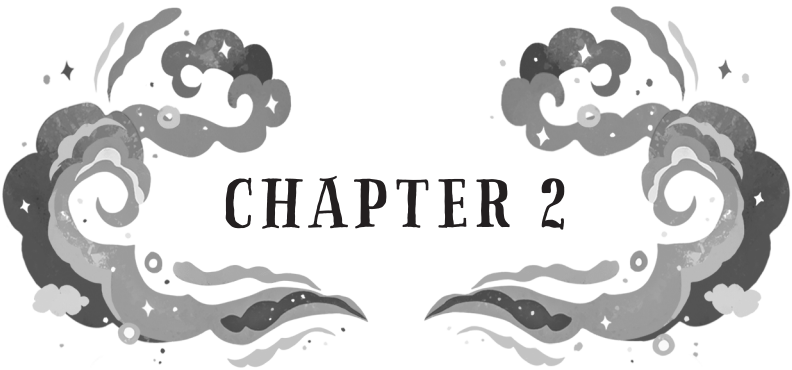
potato salad for the wake. That's what my brother Jesse told me anyway.

But Grandma Jean said she had already cried all the tears she had when Poppa first got sick, and when the cancer began to make him weaker and smaller until it finally took away that beautiful bright smile of his. So when he died, Grandma made sure smiling was all she did because even though she was sad, most of all she was just grateful that Poppa wasn't suffering any more.

And now Grandma's gone too. She died two and a half months ago and I've been missing her heaps. Sometimes I get so sad that it feels like I have a shattered plate where my heart should be that no amount of superglue can put back together.

There was so much already that had changed in my life before the bizarre events of that day, and trying to get used to a world without Grandma had been the biggest change of all. To add to all this, I was about to start a new school the next day, *and* we'd just moved to a new house. Well, it was actually the house that had belonged to Grandma and Poppa B in a town called Delmere. A place where people say nothing interesting ever happens.

That was until that Sunday, when *everything* changed.



CHAPTER 2

'Prune!' my brother called from his bedroom, which is adjacent to mine. 'I've got a present for you. Prune!'

At the sound of his voice, the colours started to fade, shrinking like dots until there were just a few hanging above my head like a sparkly crown.

'What present?' I called back curiously, forgetting my worries about starting my new school the next morning and how strange it felt to be in this house without Grandma Jean.

'Come and take a look!' he said.

I went into Jesse's room to find him standing on his bed, replacing a picture of a meadow with a poster of his favourite basketball player, Titus Reid. He'd not long started unpacking his boxes, whereas I'd unpacked all my

things when we moved in two days earlier. Although Jesse's room is bigger than mine, it most definitely isn't as nice. Everything is grey. Grey wallpaper, grey rug, grey curtains.

My room might be the smallest, but to me, it's the best room in the house. It used to be Grandma and Poppa's guest room, and it has these sweet little ornaments that include a set of dancing ballerinas and a lamp that's shaped like a tortoise. I could've put them in the cellar where we'd put most of Grandma Jean's things, but they were all so lovely I decided to keep them. Before we moved, Jesse and I used to share a room, so it was great to finally have a bedroom all to myself, especially as Jesse has a habit of farting *a lot*.

A long time ago, Jesse's room belonged to Mama. On the wall, it still has the tiny marks she drew to track her height when she was a young girl. The lines only go up a little way because Mama is quite short. I am already nearly as tall as her, and she thinks I'll soon grow past her just like Jesse has. He's fifteen and is close to six feet, but I'd never want to grow that tall. I'd just like to be medium-sized – a height that's halfway between Mama and Jesse.

'Here's your present,' said Jesse, handing me the picture of the meadow. 'I was going to put it with Grandma's stuff, but then I thought you might like it.'

'Thanks.' I smiled, taking a closer look at the picture.

It was actually quite pretty and had been painted

with watercolours. I knew this because art is one of my favourite things in the whole world, and you'll never catch me without my sketchbook. I love drawing just as much as I love superhero films, mint-scented bath bombs, red velvet cupcakes, chocolate ice cream and my butterfly hair clips that look like real butterflies.

I'm actually an award-winning artist, having come second place at my old school's annual art competition a few months back. It was for my picture of a dolphin doing an aerial somersault. Plus I came third in a big inter-school competition with my picture of Spider-Man web-swinging through New York City. My favourite picture ever is a portrait I did of Grandma, even though I didn't win an award for it. I was only seven when I drew it, and my drawing has improved a lot since then, but I still feel so proud because I know how much Grandma loved it.

It still amazes me how I got her to sit still for a whole hour and she didn't fidget once; not like Jesse when I tried to do his portrait. He could barely sit still for two minutes, let alone an hour. Hopefully, when I grow up and become a famous artist, I'll get to draw lots of people's portraits, including my favourite singer, Keirra Grace.

As I looked at the painting Jesse gave me, I knew I still had a long way to go before my pictures would be anywhere near as good. I'd love to live near a meadow. As far as I know, there aren't any meadows in Delmere, and

there certainly weren't any meadows where we used to live – a neighbouring town called Ocean View. But it didn't exactly have an ocean either, or a lake or a river, and the only views I ever got were of the bins at the back of our old tower block. We did have Shellwood Park though, which had a basketball court and a playground, only Mama didn't like us going there because some local boys, or 'hooligans' as she preferred to call them, saw the park as theirs. Sometimes they'd even try and charge people to go in. One boy wanted Mama to pay him a pound when we went to have a picnic there one Saturday.

Mama told him, 'I don't know what you think you're doing, but you need to get out of my way right now, young man. And if you think you're getting a single penny out of me, you can think again!'

She tried to push open the gate, but the boy pushed it back, stopping us from going in. So, in the end, we had our picnic at home on the living room carpet.

'At least when we move, I won't have to keep fretting about you hanging around those hooligans,' Mama said to Jesse while we ate. 'And nor will I have to worry that you'll end up in some young offenders institution,' she added.

But Jesse just laughed and told Mama that she was overreacting.

'My friends aren't hooligans, Mama. And why worry? Nothing bad is going to happen to me.'

But his response made Mama extra cross.

'I worry because you're my son, Jesse,' she said, her voice as firm as it gets. 'And I'll never stop worrying, even when you're a man in his fifties, and please stop laughing because none of this is funny.'

But that's just my brother. He never takes things seriously and thinks he's so smart when he still can't even solve my Rubik's cube. I've been solving it since I was eight! But there are some things Jesse's good at. He makes the most brilliant strawberry milkshakes and I suppose he's not half bad at telling a funny joke or two. Yet the problem with Jesse is that he just can't seem to understand that it's not smart to bunk off school, which he's done *a lot*.

You'd think he'd also know that if you're going to steal something from a shop, you'd better be prepared to get caught. But no, not Jesse. Not even after he got caught red-handed trying to steal chocolate from Thorne's Express. That's when I decided my brother must have his brain missing – why else would he be so stupid?

It wasn't the first time Jesse had stolen something either. He was really lucky the shop's owner, Mr Thorne, didn't call the police. But he did call Mama, who was furious, and it was only when she threatened to call the police on Jesse herself that my brother admitted that his friend Bryce had dared him to do it.

'So if Bryce Mackenzie dared you to jump off a bridge, would you do that too?' asked Mama when he returned home.

But Jesse just kept his head bowed, saying nothing.

'That's why Bryce and the rest of those *so-called friends* of yours aren't really your friends at all – not when they're busy trying to get you into trouble,' said Mama. 'And that had better be the last time I hear you've stolen something. You've got me feeling so ashamed, Jesse!'

Then she started to cry and I stared at Jesse long and hard as I hated seeing Mama cry.

But as I looked at him across the living room, I wondered if he had a heart missing too, because it was like he just didn't care. Not one bit.

'Stop staring, Pugface!' He scowled at me.

Pugface is a name Jesse calls me when he wants to be horrible. But it's only because he knows his name isn't as sweet as mine.

'But why would anyone want a dozy name like *Prune*?' he once said when I told him he was jealous. 'And Mama's just as dozy naming you after some ugly bugly fruit that makes people want to do number twos!'

Not that Jesse would dare say that to Mama's face. But anyway, I don't care what he thinks of my name because I love it, hugely. Plus I happen to think prunes are super delicious.

Jesse's been friends with Bryce since he was eleven, ever since Bryce beat up a boy who was picking on him. After that he became my brother's hero, replacing Poppa B, who'd been a hero to us both. Bryce used to go to Jesse's old school – well, that was until he got permanently excluded for constantly bunking off. But for some reason, Jesse still looks up to Bryce, or at least acts as though he owes him something. I reckon it's because he thinks Bryce is somehow living some ultra-cool life just because he's seventeen and has his own car and got his dad to convert their garage into a gym. His family have lots of money, but Bryce likes to steal and walks around acting like he's as hard as Iron Man. I only wish Jesse could see that Bryce isn't someone worth getting into trouble for.

'Earth to Prune, hello!' Jesse droned through a rolled-up poster, snapping me out of my thoughts. 'You've got the picture, so you can go now.'

'Jesse, can you see these colours?' I said, pointing above my head where the dots had been.

'Huh? What colours?'

I looked up and then went over to his mirror to double-check. The colours had now completely vanished. But just where had they come from? Or had it simply been my eyes playing tricks on me?