

1

‘My mum was killed by the Magpie Man.’

The guy nods and I wait for him to reply.

When he doesn’t, I say, ‘Fifty-one seconds from home she was strangled to death and left to be rained on all night.’

They say to start with a bang and that’s the biggest one I’ve got.

The man types words I can’t see while the woman stares at me.

‘I was seven,’ I say.

I’m seventeen now.

The man clears his throat and asks, ‘Do you think you’re the only applicant to have lost a parent?’

I shrug.

‘You’re not. But you *are* the only applicant whose mother was the victim of a serial killer.’

The woman writes something on a notepad and pushes it towards him.

He nods and says, ‘We’ll be in touch.’

2

My name is Jessica Simmons and I'm not your average internet star. But then I guess this isn't your average internet show.

The adverts say it's something different – a real look inside the lives of real people. No scripts, no airbrushing, no scenes set up for your entertainment; just you and a camera crew and whatever you want to show.

If this was halfway through the story, rather than the start, I guess you'd call it a twist, because I'm not the kind of person to stream their life on YouTube. You'll have to take my word for it that this is out of character for me.

Mum was thirty-two when she died, the first victim of a man they still haven't caught. Number one on a list that now stretches to thirteen.

So, if you ask why I want to be one of the five people to star in a new online show about them and only them, it's pretty simple.

I want to catch the Magpie Man and this is how I'm going to do it.

3

It's been so long since Mum died that sometimes I doubt my own memories, even if the house is full of her pictures and her echoes live in the cracks on Dad's face.

It was Dad who gave the murderer his name. He said the Magpie Man liked shiny things and Mum was the shiniest of all. He said she'd been borrowed.

'Like a library book?' I'd asked, and he'd said sort of, but without a date to bring her back.

Now I realize it was for his benefit as much as mine: when a husband loses his wife, the last thing he needs is a kid asking questions.

When you're seven, you don't think your dad's full of shit, because he's the person who hugs you and kisses you and keeps you safe – why would he lie?

He should have said that was our little secret. But he didn't, so I told everyone at school that the pretty mums would all be taken eventually, and Dad got called in for that.

Then I'm eleven, getting the bus home from school for the first time, and we pass the shop where Mum used to work. It's twelve minutes and twenty-nine seconds from getting on to getting off and fifteen steps to the alley.

I dared myself to walk through but bottled it every time.
When I finally did, I counted one minute and forty-two seconds from one end to the other . . . from short cut to home.

She was less than a minute from safety.

4

There are no rules for mourning.

When Mum died, the house felt grey and haunted and Dad didn't look like himself any more.

One day all her pictures disappeared, gone as suddenly as she had.

It was Dad's way of preparing me for a truth he couldn't speak.

People told him to move, that it was crazy to live near the alley where your wife was murdered. But he ignored them.

I heard him on the phone once, saying he had already lost so much of her, why would he sell his remaining memories? And that night the photos returned, filling every surface.

She was everywhere and nowhere all at once.

I cried but they weren't real tears. I was copying the sadness of others rather than feeling my own.

I believed Mum would come back, convinced she would be the next knock at the door, the next phone call, the next hug from the line of strangers whose touch felt so different from hers.

People told Dad to send me to a counsellor, but again he ignored them. Grief makes what you have more precious and by then I was all he had left. So he held me tight through his refusal to make our loss any bigger than it had to be.

It was Nan who changed that. She got tired of Dad's stories and cried if I asked when we could visit Mum in the museum for shiny things. She said I would find out eventually, and the sooner the better, so she told me Mum was gone forever.

I called her a liar. I hated her. And then I cried the sharpest, heaviest, most unbearable tears of my life.

Your grief journey changes when you aren't looking. It moves in fractions: black shifting through a thousand shades of grey. Eventually, it transforms into something else: a dull ache; a numbness that becomes the norm.

Websites told me to write a note and put it in a balloon and release it to heaven. Or make a memory quilt and fall asleep wrapped in Mum's best bits. Or make a wish list of all the things to do before *I* died.

I took pictures and hoarded the ones my parents had taken. I drew and painted and wrote shitty poetry and started a Feelings Journal. None of it worked but I tried.

When I was fourteen, I got angry and took it out on a dad who refused to fight back.

Seven years after Mum was murdered and he was still a body carrying around a shattered soul like the newspaper you wrap broken glass in. But it was more than that. He let himself be my punching bag. I treated him terribly and he

took it, because he loved me and because he knew that, when the anger comes, it is vicious and all-consuming.

He hid it because he had to. I couldn't because I didn't know how.

When I googled 'the Magpie Man', I got hundreds of articles but no answers, just the names of all the people he murdered and comments from frustrated detectives.

He's still out there somewhere, still killing – the monster that took my mother.

And that is why the cameras can't start rolling soon enough.

5

My phone rings with a number I don't recognize and when I answer a man says, 'Miss Simmons? It's Adrian . . . from *The Eye*. We've reviewed your application and, although the competition was fierce, we'd like you to be Monday.'

This means that on the first day of every week for a month I will be live online from the moment I wake up until midnight. If I'm not a complete flop, one month will become three.

The show is about real lives with unique twists – that's what the application form said. It claimed audiences have had enough of the same old formats.

I don't know if that's true, but I need to give it my best shot.

I see myself smiling in the mirror and stop, because this isn't supposed to be a happy moment. It's just the beginning.

'When do I start?' I ask.

Adrian says, 'Three weeks. We have a few briefing sessions for you to attend where you'll get to meet the others.' He sounds like he's reading off a sheet.

I don't particularly want to see them, but what choice do I have? I'm guessing they want to be famous rather than

get justice, but I'll go and smile and do whatever has to be done to get my story across.

Anyone can put themselves online these days, but most get lost in the crowd. The trick is to find a stage big enough to be remembered, and this show offers that.

'We need to meet your father,' Adrian says. 'There are some things for him to sign.'

That's what I'm afraid of, because Dad doesn't know I've applied. He thought my interview was a shopping trip.

'You'll have to come here,' I say. 'He doesn't like leaving the house in the daytime.'

This isn't a lie. Dad prefers it when it's quiet outside. He shops when the supermarket is empty. He doesn't like crowds or conversations. Three times a week he works night shifts in a factory, not because he has to, but because we all need to escape sometimes.

I hope YouTube people are too busy to visit normal people's houses just to get a signature. I hope they send the paperwork and I can forge Dad's scribble and have more time to wear him down.

But, without a pause, Adrian says, 'No problem. We'll see you tomorrow.'

Shit.

Before he hangs up, he says, 'We have high hopes for you, Jessica.'

I'm glad someone does.

6

Some broken people look fine from the outside, but not my dad. He wears his heartbreak like a second skin, his eyes grey and heavy, his grief shouting over everything else.

‘Hey,’ I say.

He nods and puts his lips together in his best attempt at a smile.

‘I have something to ask.’

He reaches for the remote and mutes the TV.

I take a deep breath, almost chicken out, then say, ‘I’ve applied for a show. It’s called *The Eye*.’

He sighs and says, ‘OK.’

‘It’s on YouTube. I’ll be filming my life and they need your permission.’

He stares me out, because there’s only so long I can look into his eyes before I want to cry.

‘You’ll be filming your life?’

I nod.

‘And who will be watching?’

‘I don’t know – whoever wants to.’

‘No.’

He unmutes the TV and the sound makes me jump, drowning out the reply I'm planning in my head.

But I say it anyway, a shortened version, a three-word battle cry. 'It's for Mum.'

He stares at me and this time I don't look away.

I don't care if I cry. I don't care if, when I look long enough, I see the dad he used to be, mixed with the sadness he fights so hard to contain. I stare until my eyes are burning and I see Dad's 'No' crumble in his mouth.

He turns off the TV, breathes deeply and says, 'Tell me more.'

7

If I concentrate, I can still hear Mum's laughter and, if I close my eyes, I can picture Dad's smile, the real one, the one that could win an argument with a single flash. If I really focus, I can go back to certain moments, ones that didn't feel special at the time, but are now all I have.

Mum would leave notes around the house for Dad to find: tiny reminders of how much she loved him. Once a slip of paper fell into my breakfast bowl along with my cereal, and when I asked Mum what it said she whispered, 'Your dad can read it to you when he finds it.'

Then she dropped it back into the box and, when he came downstairs, we watched him find the note and smile.

The message was just one word: *Always*.

They wore their love like some people wear designer brands. They advertised it with every look, every whisper, every secret smile. People used to say they were made for each other and Mum would grin and say they were made for me.

The bottom falls out of my world every time I think that.

Sometimes I imagine my life if Mum was the one left behind, and I feel guilty because I know things would be different.

She wouldn't have broken down like Dad did. She would have fought through her pain and lived on.

8

When they arrive, I lead Adrian and his colleague into the lounge and pray that Dad hasn't changed his mind.

'Mr Simmons,' Adrian says, holding out his hand.

Dad takes it like a robot, does the same with the girl and then looks at me.

'So,' I say, 'where do we sign?'

Adrian laughs. 'Someone's keen!' Then he says, 'You're very brave for doing this.'

I'm not sure who he's talking to, so I smile and Dad does his best impression of happy and Adrian says, 'This is a wonderful setting.'

He's walking round the lounge, going over to touch things, then stopping at the last minute, nodding to himself and pointing at random places.

The girl must know why, because, whenever he points, she writes something on her iPad.

'This is my assistant, Lauren,' Adrian says.

She looks about my age and, when she rolls her eyes, I smile and imagine her being Adrian's boss one day.

He has a slap-worthy grin on his face and he's treating

our lounge like a film set, but that's a small sacrifice if it means finding the Magpie Man.

When we sit down, I grip my hands together in my lap, hoping no one sees them shaking.

'We're here to explain the process,' Adrian says, 'and to ensure you're fully aware of the . . . all-encompassing nature of the show.'

'This is about five young adults who have experienced something extraordinary. People with stories to tell. It's the first reality show of its kind truly for the online generation. The camera crew will start filming before Jessica wakes up. At least that's what the audience will think. We'll stage that part. Unless you're a heavy sleeper. There will also be a highlights package, available any time from the following day. We'll edit Jessica's best bits and post sixty-minute videos on her channel every Tuesday morning.'

Dad looks at me and says, 'You agreed to this?'

I nod and think back to our conversation last night. He heard me out. He sat in silence as I explained why this could help us find answers.

'If I reach enough people, I might actually find a witness, or a clue, or something,' I'd said. 'We can do this. All we need is a platform.'

He didn't reply for a long time and, when he did, it wasn't what I wanted to hear.

'I'll talk to them,' he'd said. 'But no promises.'

Seeing Dad's concern, Adrian stands up and holds his arms out. 'This is powerful . . . an inside look at the life of

a grieving family that refuses to be broken. A girl fighting back . . . seeking justice for her mother.'

I catch him sneak a glance at my parents' wedding photo above the fireplace and imagine how many times that will be shown on screen.

Adrian can't contain his excitement and I realize I was always going to be chosen. My patched-up family and its missing piece are gold dust and I suddenly feel better, because, if that's how he feels, maybe the audience will, too.

I'm sure Adrian thinks this is just about me telling my story; that wanting to catch my mother's killer is a great hook. But he doesn't know how serious I am . . . or what I'm prepared to do.

Dad is slowly reading the contract, taking in every word. He stops every few pages and asks a question, rarely looking pleased with the answer, but carrying on regardless.

'Would you let your daughter do this?' he asks.

Adrian doesn't reply for a while, like he's drafting the answer in his head, then he says, 'If I had one, I'd be wary, too.'

'Then why should I say yes?'

'Because this is a chance to tell her story. Something good might come out of it. Mr Simmons, this show might even help people.'

Dad glances at me and I wonder if he sees through Adrian the way I can.

Finally, he lays the contract on the table and says, 'We're going to need some time.'

Adrian smiles but it wobbles at the edges. ‘We don’t have much of that.’

Ignoring him, looking straight at me, Dad says, ‘There are some things we need to discuss.’

Adrian and Lauren exchange a look, then stand.

‘There’s a get-together on Saturday,’ Adrian says. ‘It’s a chance to meet the other stars.’

He calls them that, not me.

Adrian looks at my dad and says, ‘I understand this is difficult. But we wouldn’t have picked Jessica if we didn’t think she’d be a hit.’

Dad stares at him and I see a flicker of his fight.

‘I said we need some time.’

9

When they're gone, I stand in the doorway, watching Dad holding the photograph of Mum he keeps within reaching distance.

It was taken before I was born, my mother looking at something off camera, her lips slightly parted. She looks stunning, blissful, safe.

I remember her in a million different ways, depending on how I feel or who's telling the story or who took the picture. This is Dad's memory, but, like all the others, I've adapted it and made it my own.

I wonder what he thinks as he stares at it: if he feels sad that she's not around to make these decisions for him; if he blames her absence for my actions. Perhaps it soothes him, because he hates having strangers in the house. Or maybe it's just habit; the face he turns to whenever he's alone.

I clear my throat and he slides the photo down the side of his chair and looks up.

'They'll watch you sleep?' he asks.

'It's faked. We let them in and I pretend to wake up. It's not as bad as it sounds. And the cameras stop filming at midnight. I'll be in control.'

Dad shakes his head but I keep going.

‘I have a chance to do something. We have a shot at justice.’

Dad’s shoulders sag and he breathes deeply. ‘There’s no such thing as justice.’

He reaches for the remote, but before he can end this conversation I say, ‘No! I’m not letting you ruin this.’

He looks at me with genuine shock, because this isn’t how we speak to each other any more. We don’t shout. We don’t disagree. We used to, when he soaked up my anger like a sponge. But over the last few years we’ve learned to live in a quiet kind of turmoil.

Dad doesn’t deserve my drama, but today is different. If he doesn’t sign the contract, another parent for another applicant will and I’ll lose my chance.

‘There *is* such a thing as justice,’ I say. ‘We’ve never seen it but it exists. And this show might be our only chance. It’s been ten years and he’s still out there . . . He’s still killing . . . and he won’t stop unless something changes.’

‘Remember what Mum used to say, about making yourself the hero of your story? This is our story and we need to try.’

I see the tears forming in Dad’s eyes and I could stop, but I’m done stopping.

‘We could have three months to remind everyone what happened to us. We can put our story everywhere, talk about it every single week and ensure it stays newsworthy. And we could do what the police couldn’t. There are clues out there, Dad. Someone knows something.’

I go to him and pull the photograph from the chair cushion and hold it up.

‘She wants justice,’ I say. ‘She *needs* it. We all do. Please.’

I let the last word hang there, begging to be rescued, until finally Dad takes the photo from me, stares at his favourite memory and says, ‘OK.’

10

You have to murder at least three people to be called a serial killer. The Magpie Man got there when I was nine.

The police hired profilers to paint a picture, to make clues when there were none, and I read every word. I became an expert in the one thing I truly hated.

They say he's aged between twenty-five and fifty, with a job that allows him to travel. This was long after he added Sophie Cresswell and Georgina Carson to his list. The list that started with my mum.

They think he could be married, with a partner who is easily manipulated or away a lot. They say he's likely to be ambivalent when the murders are reported and that he may make strange comments in a bid to secretly claim them as his own.

He's a 'charmer' who may coerce his victims into situations they cannot escape. Although that wasn't the case with Mum.

That alley was her short cut. She didn't follow someone in. They followed her.

Most serial killers have below-average IQs, but not the Magpie Man. The profilers think he is smart, methodical, desperate not to be caught.

His first three murders were in Doveton, Chester and Glasgow. He didn't leave a single clue. Just a body and a number carved into their skin. That's all he ever leaves, no matter how closely the police look; no matter how many CCTV cameras they check and witness appeals they have.

His crimes are usually nine months apart and the most recent, the thirteenth, was in September. She was called Lucy Halpern and they found her in a park. That was five months ago.

Some people online think he's done now, because of the number. They think monsters finish when they reach a point made famous by horror stories. But I don't believe that, because, when you've killed that many people, you don't stop.

It is only a matter of time before he kills again.

11

‘Are you excited?’ Adrian asks, and I fake the biggest smile I can manage.

‘More than you know.’

It’s Saturday. We’re in a posh restaurant in London and I’m the first to arrive.

I hand Adrian the paperwork and he smiles, checks every dotted line has been signed, then passes it to Lauren.

When you’re a kid, London is the place they put all the biggest surprises. But now, alone, it reminds me I’m not that kid any more.

I didn’t sleep last night, worrying about who the other ‘stars’ are and if their hooks are better than mine.

Lauren taps on her iPad while Adrian does a terrible job trying to keep me calm.

‘You’re probably really stoked to meet the others,’ he says, and I wonder where he gets his words from.

‘I guess,’ I say, even though I’m shitting myself, because this is not exactly my comfort zone. But then neither is having my life streamed online, so I suppose I should get used to feeling permanently anxious on top of everything else.

‘I think it’s great what you’re doing,’ he says. ‘Trying to find him when no one else could.’

‘Do you think I will?’ I ask, and he smiles.

‘Well . . . let’s hope so.’

Adrian stays quiet after that, and I know he isn’t taking me seriously. He’s making a mistake underestimating me. But this isn’t a fight worth picking.

Eventually, the others arrive: two girls and two boys.

‘Welcome,’ Adrian says, ushering everyone into their seats.

I sneak quick glances at each of them, catching one girl’s eye and blushing.

The silence is already awkward when Adrian says, ‘Let’s introduce ourselves.’

‘OK,’ says a boy with hair that covers his ears and what looks like a scar creeping out from between the curls. ‘My name’s Lucas Newman. I’m sixteen and I used to be on TV.’

‘You’re the little kid, from that comedy,’ one of the girls says, and Lucas nods.

Everyone recognizes him except me, because ten years ago Dad and I didn’t do what normal people did.

When no one goes next, Adrian says, ‘Ella . . . how about you?’

The girl who caught my eye says, ‘Well . . . I’m Ella and I’m seventeen. I’m pregnant . . . except . . . I’ve never had sex. My dad thinks it’s an immaculate conception. It was his idea for me to do this.’

I stare at her, waiting for the punchline. But she looks deadly serious and I wonder if she has an angle like I do or if she actually believes what she’s saying.

Ella sees me staring and smiles, but she doesn't look happy. She looks like my nan when no one's watching.

When Adrian asks the other boy to speak, he sighs and says, 'My name's Ryan. I'm nineteen and my brother did something terrible.'

We all look at each other, suddenly connected by our curiosity, until Ryan says, 'He was one of the men who went into the museum. He shot everyone, then blew himself up.'

I remember that day, the rolling news, the hashtags, but it surprises me when Ryan says it was three years ago.

'I'm sorry,' he says, and Ella reaches out to touch his hand, but he pulls it away.

'I'm Jess,' I say. 'My mother was killed by the Magpie Man.'

Ryan looks up at me and nods, and I feel it: a moment of shared tragedy.

He reminds me of my dad: the way sorrow clings to his face, pulling on his lips and hanging heaviest in his eyes.

'And finally . . .' Adrian says, smiling at the other girl.

'I'm Sonia,' she says.

That's it. Just a name and a shrug of the shoulders. I look at Adrian, expecting him to push her for more, but he grins and explains that I'm Monday, Ryan is Tuesday, Ella is Wednesday, Lucas is Thursday and Sonia is Friday.

'What if no one watches?' Ella asks.

We all look at Adrian, because secretly we've all thought it, and he smiles and says, 'They'll watch.'

‘How can you be sure?’ I ask.

He says, ‘Wouldn’t you?’

I guess he’s right. I suppose to start with everyone will try it and it’s up to us to keep things interesting.

I’ve watched enough vloggers and reality shows to know that interesting means different things to different people. We watch hours of strangers doing nothing, talking shit, breaking up and making up, conversations we all have that are somehow so much better when someone else is having them.

‘People will have their favourites,’ Adrian says. ‘Just be yourselves. That’s why we picked you.’

And then, calm as you like, he pulls out the twist.

‘We haven’t been completely honest with you,’ he says, and I’m terrified this is all a joke, that there is no show and, more importantly, no chance for justice. Or maybe it’s already started. Maybe we’re being filmed and this is some sort of challenge.

‘There will be five shows . . . initially. But only one of you will be kept on.’

We look at each other, realizing for the first time that we’re in competition.

Lucas probably thinks he has an advantage because he used to be famous, but who remembers what was on TV years ago? And there’s something about Sonia I don’t trust, because the rest of us have stories, so why would they pick her if she doesn’t?

‘How long do we have?’ Ryan asks.

‘A month, as promised,’ Adrian replies. ‘But the three-month run is not guaranteed just because your viewing figures are high. They have to be the highest.’

I thought I would get the extension, no problem, but, if it’s only reserved for one of us, I don’t have any time to waste.

12

Whenever I'm late home, I wish for something that will never happen. I want Mum to be standing there with a scowl on her face and a lecture coming to the boil. I want her to yell at me, asking where the hell I've been.

I want tea to be silent and horrible, because she's annoyed at me and I'm annoyed at her for being so angry. And I want Dad to make everything OK with a silly comment that makes us laugh, our apologies coming through the giggles we can't contain.

But that doesn't happen. It never has. Mum was murdered before I was old enough to truly piss her off. She left my life with holes I fill with made-up memories and I hate it.

I wish we'd had the raging rows you see on TV, the stupid arguments about nothing. I wish I didn't have quite so many missing pieces – the conversations we never had, the feelings we never shared.

What hurts most is her absence, the complete lack of her touch and her voice and her smell. That's what they don't tell you when you lose someone, that they're gone in more ways than you can count.

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I get home from the meeting with the others and go straight to my room, where I've been writing the script for my first episode.

I know it's supposed to be spontaneous, but I can't risk that.

There's a plan and I need to stick to it, which means saying certain things early on to set it in motion.

The quicker I go viral, the sooner people are talking about me, the better chance we have of finding him.

How will the others prepare? Will they change their plans after Adrian pitted us against each other? Ryan and Ella might, Lucas probably thinks he doesn't have to, and I have no idea about Sonia.

When Dad knocks on the door, I jump and he mumbles an apology and says, 'How was your day?' He's trying to care even though he hates that I'm doing this.

'OK,' I say.

I could give him more. I could tell him about the others, about the competition, about the food we ate at the restaurant and how we didn't pay a penny.

But I stick with 'OK' because I need to focus. Then, as he turns to leave: 'Dad . . .'

He smiles his broken smile, and I say, 'Thanks for saying yes.'

He nods, glances quickly round my room, then leaves.

I have a month, hopefully three, to catch a serial killer, but no one will watch if they hate me. I need to be likeable, watchable, someone the audience can connect with.

I need to be the perfect reality star, which, thankfully, is nothing like being the perfect person.

13

I live in Doveton, a village only famous for the town next door. People only stop here to ask how close they are to Harmony. They only come in to go out the other side.

Harmony has a beach and restaurants and hotels. It has sand sculptors and galleries and a six-screen cinema. Doveton has a Tesco Express.

Before Mum's murder it was safe, boring, un-newsworthy. The day before she died, a man committed suicide in the graveyard – all the town's tragedy wrapped up in a single week – and in the years since it has gone back to its old routine.

I go to school at St Anthony's. He's the patron saint of lost things, which is kind of appropriate.

I have friends, even if it sounds like I've spent the last ten years moping in my room. I've known Hanna and Emily since Year Seven and no matter who else has come and gone we've always stuck together. They're my second go at BFFs. My first, Bernie and Aisha, fell apart in the aftermath of Mum's murder.

In the middle of your grief, when it's too raw for most people to handle, they disappear, slowly stepping back until you turn round one day and they're gone.

Bernie lived next door to me when we were kids. Aisha lived two roads over. But they faded away long before we outgrew each other. I have higher hopes for Emily and Hanna.

They don't know about the show yet and I'm not sure how they'll react when I tell them. Hanna will probably be disappointed in me, and Emily will be jealous. But when she realizes how much she's going to be on camera she'll be fine.

Hanna thinks she'll live in Doveton forever. If you want to piss her off, ask why there's no second 'h'. She saves her dirtiest look for people who question her parents' spelling.

They own the ice-cream parlour in Harmony, running it with a mixture of passion and exasperation. I love watching them work: Hanna's dad yelling in Hungarian and her mum grumbling in Hindi.

Emily can't wait to leave. Her mum's a teaching assistant who cries all the time because her husband divorced her and Emily says it's no fun living at home any more. While my mum died, her dad just moved out, but the way her mum looks you would think it was the other way round.

There are things you never say to a grieving person, like, 'Keep your chin up,' or, 'I know how you feel.' And what you never, ever say is, 'Pull yourself together.' But secretly that's what I want to say to Emily's mum. Then I feel guilty because everyone has their own shit to deal with.

They are going to be my co-stars – my two best friends – and their parents will be extras if they want to be. I haven't asked them yet. I haven't asked anyone. I might be surrounded by blurry faces.

But, knowing how desperate people are to be famous these days, I doubt it.