

chapter one

THE LAST CHAPTER



WILL POPPY PEERED THROUGH the window at a figure in a long black coat and purple boots marching up the front walk of their brick block of flats. She was carrying a white square box.

“Oh, no!” he said. “It’s Aunt Mauve.”

“Not today,” whispered his mother, Adrienna. She was sitting at a wobbly round table covered with papers. “I can’t bear it today.”

The old elevator wheezed and thumped in the hallway.

“I’ll make her go!” said Will.

“No,” said Adrienna. “After all, she is our only living relative. Family is family, William.”

“But we’re writing, Mum. She can’t come when we’re writing.”

The doorbell rang.

Will opened the door and gaped at Aunt Mauve. A dozen sleek brown heads dangled from a fur cape around her neck, and a dozen pairs of black glass eyes glinted at him. The cape smelled like mothballs, and worn patches poked through the scruffy fur.

“They’re squirrels.” Aunt Mauve thrust the white box at Will. “A cake for your tea.” She twirled on her purple boots.

“How thoughtful,” murmured Adrienna.

Will rolled his eyes. He lifted the edge of the lid. Inside was a tiny round cake the colour of canned peas. He jabbed it with his finger. Hard as a rock. Another of Aunt Mauve’s bargains. Aunt Mauve was as poor as Will and his mother.

Why was she trying to be nice all of a sudden?

Aunt Mauve sidled over to the table. Her sharp brown eyes peered over Adrienna’s shoulder. “You must be feeling better. You’re working on your book.”

“I’ve had a good day,” said Adrienna. “My breathing is better. I’m sure it was just some kind of flu bug.”

“What do you want?” said Will. He looked longingly at his writing book on the couch. He’d been working on a battle scene between the Knights of Valour and the Knights of Death.

“I don’t want anything,” said Aunt Mauve. “That’s a fine thank you for bringing you the cake.”

She turned to Adrienna. “How many chapters left to go?”

“One,” said Adrienna.

“And your publisher, Mr. Barnaby, believes it will make you rich?” Aunt Mauve’s eyes glinted.

“Oh, Mauve, not rich! Maybe a little money to help us out. But that’s not why I write. I write because I love it. Will’s writing a book, too. He’s a born writer.”

Aunt Mauve snorted. “Children don’t write. Well, ta-ta, then. I’m off to a party.”

Will didn’t believe her for one second. Who would invite someone as awful as Aunt Mauve to a party? As soon as the elevator started its groaning descent, he said, “I hate her! And why is she hanging around us now? She

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never bothered with us until you started writing your book.”

“You should try to like her,” said Adrienna. “After all...”

Will sighed. “She’s our only living relative.”

He checked out the window to see if Aunt Mauve had really gone. His aunt was sailing down the walk, her squirrels swinging wildly. A little man in a tidy grey suit squeezed past her. “Mr. Barnaby’s here,” said Will.

“Goodness, this is our day for visitors,” said Adrienna. “Maybe he’s bringing good news!”



Oliver Barnaby was the owner of Barnaby Book Publishers Inc. on Oxford Street in London. He perched on the couch beside Adrienna and held her thin hand. “My dear Adrienna, do I dare ask?”

Adrienna smiled faintly. “I’m writing the last chapter tonight.”

“Excellent, excellent. I’ve been waiting for it. We’re almost ready to go to the printer.” Mr. Barnaby rubbed his hands through his snowy hair.

“William dear,” said Adrienna. “Make Mr. Barnaby some tea.”

Will boiled the kettle in the kitchen and put out the teapot and three chipped cups. Bits of conversation drifted from the other room.

“You’re looking rather pale, my dear. Are you taking care of yourself?”

“I’m fine,” said Adrienna. “Perhaps I’m not sleeping as well as I should. It must be excitement over the book.”

“I see the lift’s been fixed. That must be a relief.”

“Oh, yes. Climbing five flights of stairs was too much

for me. I got quite winded.”

The kettle whistled, and Will missed the rest. When he carried in the tea tray, Adrienna said, “Mr. Barnaby was just telling me how much interest there is in my book.”

“I predict a runaway bestseller,” said Mr. Barnaby. “The fantasy market is huge.”

“You’re an optimist, Oliver,” said Adrienna.

Mr. Barnaby flushed. “Nevertheless, it will give you some income.”

“Of course, we’ll give some of the money to Aunt Mauve,” said Adrienna.

Will groaned.

“She is your father’s sister, Will.”

Mr. Barnaby leaned closer to Adrienna. “Have you settled on the title?”

“The Magical Night.”

“Yes! Yes! Perfect.”

Adrienna Poppy and Will had great faith in Mr. Barnaby. Teacups clinked.



Adrienna settled herself at the round table with ten sheets of clean lined paper and her box of pencils. The box was royal blue with the words *100 PENCILS* in maroon block letters across the top. She had bought it in a cluttered little stationery shop called *Abracadabra* on Knight Street. The pencils were purple and were covered with tiny sparkling stars. Adrienna called them her magic pencils.

One thousand pages, one hundred chapters, a chapter each week...and one pencil for every chapter. As the manuscript grew, the pencils disappeared until there was only

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one left in the box. Adrienna took it out now. "My Muse is calling me," she said.

Adrienna's Muse inspired her to write. The Muse was from Ancient Greece. She wore a long white dress and a wreath of green leaves in her hair, and only Adrienna could see her.

"Hey, my Muse is calling me too!" said Will. He remembered how amazing it had been the first time he'd seen his Muse. He'd been writing a poem at school (he'd been stuck on the words and sweat had broken out on his forehead), and then a knight had clanked up the aisle and stood right beside him. The knight removed a visor and Will stared into the green eyes of a girl with cascading hair. None of the other kids had noticed a thing, but Will had figured it out right away. He'd been waiting for his Muse for a long time. The last verse of the poem was a breeze to write.

The Muses didn't always come when Adrienna and Will wrote. Most of the time they had to struggle on their own. But now both Muses were here. Will sat on the sofa with his writing book propped open against his knees. His novel had grown to a satisfying forty pages. It was the fifth novel he had started, and this one he vowed to finish. Beginnings were easy. He had hundreds of ideas. Finishing was the hard part.

He and his mother wrote and wrote. When the sky outside grew dark, Will tiptoed to the kitchen, warmed up some chicken soup and crept off to bed.

At midnight, Adrienna put down the pencil. The next morning, she was asleep when Will got up. There was a brown envelope with Mr. Barnaby's name on the front lying on the table. Will peeked inside. Chapter One

Hundred of *The Magical Night*.

Clutching the envelope, he raced along the cold deserted streets to the office of Barnaby Book Publishers Inc. and banged on the narrow black door. Mr. Barnaby wasn't there. He waited for ten minutes and then pushed the envelope through the brass post slot.

He ran the rest of the way to school.



When Will got home from school, Mrs. Ginny, who lived in the flat below them, was waiting on the walk. Tears streamed down her cheeks. "She's gone, Will. Your mother's gone."

"Gone where?" asked Will.

"Oh, Will...she's dead, luv."

"She...she...can't be!" Will stammered. "She wasn't even sick." He thought about his mother struggling up the stairs. "Well, maybe a little sick. But she was getting better. She told me so!"

"My poor wee lad." Mrs. Ginny folded Will in her arms.

She tucked Will into the bed in her spare room with a hot water bottle and a cup of hot tea, because he was freezing all over.

That night, Will cried himself to sleep.



On a cold wet morning in early April, a handful of mourners huddled under huge black umbrellas at the cemetery – Aunt Mauve, looking like a crow in her black coat, Father Jim from the church, a very pale Mr. Barnaby, Mrs. Ginny and Mr. Manley from the corner shop.

Will stood beside Aunt Mauve. "I hope you're not

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going to blubber,” she hissed. “You’re twelve years old. Not a baby!”

That was only the second thing Aunt Mauve had said to him at the cemetery. The first was, “Did your mother finish the book?”

Will held his eyes wide open and forced back his tears. He had already cried so hard he felt like a scraped out pumpkin. And he had no intention of giving his aunt the satisfaction of seeing him cry now. He glanced around and spotted a woman wearing a long white dress and a wreath of green leaves and a knight in shiny armour, standing beside a tree. The Muses! He had never seen his mother’s Muse before, but he knew right away that it was her. He stared hard and then, when he blinked, they were gone.

By the time Father Jim had finished reading from the book of services, the drizzle had turned to steady rain. Aunt Mauve’s lips turned blue as she looked up the street.

A black taxi pulled over to the side of the road and Aunt Mauve grabbed Will’s arm. “Pick up your feet! No dawdling! You’re coming with me!”

Will tried to twist out of her grasp. He had felt numb throughout the whole service and he hadn’t said a word to anyone. “I have to talk to Mr. Barnaby!” he cried.

Aunt Mauve’s nails tightened like claws.

“But Mr. Barnaby said –” The next thing Will knew, he was inside the taxi with the door slammed shut.

He stared dully out the rain-streaked window while the taxi glided over the dark wet streets. He thought about Mr. Barnaby and *The Magical Night*. Had he read the last chapter? Would he still publish the book, now that Adrienna had died? Mr. Barnaby was his last link to his mother and he desperately needed to talk to him.

The taxi dropped them in front of Will's building. He had a sudden terrifying vision of being dumped in a foster home. He'd stayed with Mrs. Ginny for the past week. She'd been so kind, not forcing him to talk about his mother like the social worker who'd come to visit, but he was sure she wouldn't want a kid around all the time.

"You're an orphan now," said Aunt Mauve. "The social worker and I discussed the situation. You belong to me. You and your mon..."

Aunt Mauve snapped her mouth shut.

"What?" said Will. "Me and my what?"

But Aunt Mauve had sealed her lips.

An orphan! Will had read lots of books with orphans in them, but he didn't think that was a word people still used in real life.

"You can wash dishes and scrub floors," said Aunt Mauve.

She ordered Will to pack his trunk. He put in his most prized possessions first – his stack of writing books filled with the beginnings to his novels, his mother's empty pencil box, a thesaurus full of amazing words and a brand-new writing book with an emerald cover. His mother had bought it for him at *Abracadabra*, and he had been saving it.

He opened the thesaurus and looked up the word *orphan*. He read the words that followed: *foundling*, *urchin*, *gamin*, *waif*, *stray*. They jumped around like ping-pong balls in his stomach.

That night, with an aching heart, he moved into Aunt Mauve's cramped dark house on the other side of the city.