PRAISE FOR THE
HOUSE IN THE OLIVE GROVE

'I adored The House in the Olive Grove. It is a hymn to friendship and love, and is utterly perfect.'
LIZ FENWICK

Emma Cowell lives in Cornwall with her husband, Tony, and their fur baby, a Russian Blue called Papoushka Gerald Cowell. A former actress and BBC presenter, Emma is currently Head of Philanthropy for national charity Together for Short Lives. Outside of work, Emma is a keen angler and held a Cornish record for over ten years until her crown was toppled. She is yet to get over it but tries to keep calm by practising yoga. Also a keen linguist, Emma is attempting to learn Greek to maintain her love affair with the country where she has set her first two novels. She is yet to achieve a level of proficiency outside of tavernas and bakeries. *The House in the Olive Grove* is Emma's second novel.

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By the same author:

One Last Letter from Greece

The House in the Olive Grove

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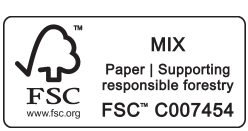
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For my Tony

Prologue

Maria

New York, ten years ago

When I was a child, everyone thought I was a witch. I stuck out for the wrong reasons and it's why I longed to leave Greece as soon as I could. There, it felt like I faced life alone . . . most of the time. I created a fantasy world of my own making amongst the wild flowers, bees and sun-kissed meadows. Now, as an adult in New York, I've once again fashioned a space that's entirely mine. But it's real, it's my kitchen.

I grab my keys from the hall console, shouting a goodbye to my husband upstairs. There is no reply. Lucky him, languishing in the luxury of sleep.

As I turn to head out, the hallway slowly fills with gossamer strands of silver. They hover and shimmer in the sunlight until they eventually take the shape of *Yiayiá*, my

beloved grandmother. Her tiny frame appears in the doorway, blocking my way, but her usual cheerful expression is grave. Her beady eyes fix on to mine, urging me to understand something I can't interpret. Her gaze causes my neck to prickle, followed by a series of jumbled snapshots pinging across the backs of my eyes: a stove, a pan, the acrid stench of sizzling oil.

I frown as the vision evaporates, along with *Yiayiá*.

I've been able to see the dead for as long as I can remember. The gift of premonition – extrasensory perception, or witchcraft, call it what you will. A gentle mist descends with a tingle, running the length of my spine. But today feels different.

As I move through the space where the apparition appeared and out of the front door, I shiver. I should warn my team to be careful in the kitchen today. It seems someone might get hurt.

The sharp autumn chill sucks the breath from my lungs as I jog down Hudson and Bank. Running to work is my meditation. Jumping through the steam floating up from the grates in the sidewalk, I feel invincible. Adrenaline pumps through my veins as the subway rumbles underfoot. I note the change in the light, hinting at a new season. The leaves on the trees shine russet and gold.

I reach Maria's Kitchen, my beautiful restaurant in Soho, and mutter my daily words of thanks as I stare up at the cobalt sign.

As I step into the kitchen, the familiar shivers creep up my back once more, and my *yiayiá*'s voice inside my head echoes a warning to beware. Puzzled, I stare around the empty space. All is as it should be. I shrug and feel a

tingle of excitement about the day. I count my blessings. I am lucky. I have love and I am living my dream. Nothing can stop me.

I head over to the stove and reach for a pan.

* * *

Alessandra

Rome, one year ago

Closing the clasp on the finished necklace, Alessandra returns the pliers to her workbench. She holds it up to the light. The green malachite glints, some stones richer in colour than others. It is weighty, pleasing, and she knows she won't sell it. She will wear it later today; it deserves an expedition. The cool rocks take on her body temperature as she fastens it around her neck.

As she walks across the grass from her little workshop into the house, the early morning air sends a chill through her cotton nightgown. Alessandra couldn't sleep last night and chose espresso and creativity instead, labouring over the necklace through the early hours until dawn. She is rarely able to settle when there's a man in her bed who isn't her husband.

Later that morning, as she stands in front of the mirror brushing her long hair, which she dyes a rich golden blonde, she tries to seek out the root of her malaise. Her graceful body retains its tone and dancer's physique, though it has been decades since she last performed. Her limbs still respond to a diligent exercise regime with an athlete's muscle

memory, remaining willowy and strong. But something has changed – she doesn't understand her body anymore.

The stranger is gone from her bed, awkward and red-faced. Unable to navigate the yielding of midnight passion to morning mundanity, he disappeared with an embarrassed '*Ciao*' when she returned from her workshop. Perhaps he only just realised she may be in her sixties, the heady haze of last night's jazz club masking age and rational judgement. For him, at least. Alessandra shrugs. She does not care; she didn't even ask his name.

She chooses her outfit carefully – one of her husband Phillipo's favourites. It will complement her new creation hanging around her neck; the opposing purple-coloured dress will encourage the green stones to gleam. Phillipo will be home soon. She smiles at the thought.

The plop of letters on the doormat brings her out of her musings and she glides to collect the post. Her heartbeat quickens as she sees the stamp on the top of an envelope addressed to her. Shredding the seal, she unfolds the paper with trembling hands and devours the words with her eyes. She hugs it to her heart, trying to absorb the meaning, then rereads the text to ensure she didn't dream it. Leaning back on the wall, she knows she must tell Phillipo. They've never hidden anything from each other, no matter how painful the news is to share. This is an unexpected journey neither of them could have predicted they would go on.

Their first unwelcome adventure, and it will change everything.

* * *

Kayla

London, one week ago

The slick concrete pavement glistens with oil and grime. Umbrellas unfurl, as if the street were a giant flowerbed revealing its multicoloured petals. Shoulders hunched, footsteps splashing in muddy puddles as shadows huddle in doorways.

Kayla sees them driving towards her, discussing the cross words she'd exchanged with them some ten minutes ago. Oblivious to any peril, they near the traffic lights, because why would they think the worst? But why wouldn't they? Kayla's father indicates left. In the distance, she sees the other car making its illegal move. Weaving wildly along the bus lane, spraying water. Frozen to the spot, Kayla is unable to tear her eyes away as a blur of blue hurtles past.

As the car nears the junction, the world suddenly stops, suspended in motion. She can't work out how to prevent what she knows will follow. She is powerless as the scene restarts, wincing as she hears a sickening crunch, the loudest smash that alters everything, metal on metal, screeching and scraping. Cars crumple like screwed-up balls of paper. Kayla's mouth opens to scream, but another voice replaces hers.

'Mummy, Mummy, help me! There's a lion biting my toes!'

Untangling from the bedsheets, Kayla automatically looks at the empty space her husband Daniel used to

occupy, before dashing to their daughter's room, blood rushing in her ears as she hears desperate cries.

'Rosie, you scared me,' she gasps. Clutching her chest, she tries to calm down from her own dream. 'There aren't any lions, and I can see all of your toes, little one.'

Wrapping Rosie in her arms, Kayla smooths sticky tendrils of titian curls from her daughter's forehead, willing her own thudding adrenaline to dispel. The reoccurring nightmare for five-year-old Rosie is a new phenomenon, the imaginary toe-gnawing lions making an almost daily appearance, and they were all suffering from sleep deprivation. 'They' in reality meant Kayla. Daniel sleeps like the dead, whether consigned to the spare room or not. Cradling Rosie's little body and rocking her gently, Kayla hopes her daughter returns to a dream-free sleep. She wishes the same for herself, but it rarely happens. The imagined horror of how her parents' deaths played out plagues most of her nights. Bad dreams are something she and her daughter have in common, along with their glossy red hair.

She gently tucks Rosie back in and kisses her brow. Kayla tiptoes out of the room, suppressing the urge to sit with Rosie until daylight.

In the hallway, Daniel's coat is flung over the bannisters. Kayla didn't hear him come in last night, such are his working hours. His all-consuming job, leading a murder squad in West London, is in stark contrast to Kayla's world of celebrity food writing, television shows and glamorous forced jollity. She doesn't know how he compartmentalises the daily horror he deals with, but he rarely opens up about the mental toll it must take. And therein lies their problem – they don't talk anymore, existing like acquaint-

ances or roommates rather than lovers. He speaks to her assistant more than he talks to her.

Kayla picks up his jacket. Being a mother along with her demanding career has tipped life's balance, and the marriage part seems to have suffered, possibly beyond repair. Although Kayla harbours hope they can rebuild what is crumbling.

She takes Daniel's coat downstairs to hang in the nook under the stairs. As she's about to close the cupboard door, a whiff of a perfume she can't place permeates the air. Her heart starts to thud. Grabbing Daniel's jacket from the hanger, she holds it to her nose, trying to absorb the scented clue and attach it to something familiar. But she can't. Frantically emptying his pockets, rooting around for receipts, she finds evidence of a dinner last night. But he told her he was working. She scans the receipt in her trembling hand. The bill is for two from an upmarket restaurant in Mayfair. Overpriced and overly pretentious. He was out to impress.

Walking slowly back up the stairs, she feels tears prick her eyes harder with each step, and her breath is short and sharp. The painful realisation that it may finally be over washes through her body. She trudges across the landing, places her shaking hand on the spare bedroom doorframe and peers in through the gap. Surely he wouldn't start something else before he'd finished their marriage, out of respect for her and Rosie. Kayla watches her sleeping husband and her head feels light with nausea.

Because all Kayla can smell in the spare bedroom is a stranger's perfume.