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CHAPTER 1

Burning Down the House

I was twelve years old when our house burned down.

We lived at the bottom of a hill in deepest, darkest West Wales, but most days it felt as if the four of us – me, my mum, my stepfather Ben and my younger brother Malcy – had fallen off the edge of the world completely. I'd only ever lived in small villages before we'd moved to Wales, and had never been to a large town, let alone seen the bright lights. Each night I would lie in bed in my flannel nightie praying that something – anything – would happen. But this wasn't what I'd had in mind.

I woke up in a bedroom filled with suffocating black smoke. Through the haze, I could just make out the figure of Ben frantically hammering on the wooden window frame, yelling, 'Jo, Jo, wake up, the house is on fire!' Considering his usual form of communication was a grunt, I sensed that it must be something serious.

From that moment on, I felt like I was playing a part in a film. One minute I was choking and spluttering as Ben lifted me through the window and put me down

with a bump on the cold damp earth outside. The next, he was shouting, ‘Don’t worry, Mum and Malcy are safe, stay here!’ as he sprinted off to the red phone box at the bottom of the hill to dial 999. Fifteen minutes later, amid the sort of flashing lights I’d only ever seen on *Star Wars*, two bright red fire engines pulled up outside. From within emerged a group of rugged strangers carrying hoses and ladders who set about extinguishing the blaze with grim determination. I sat transfixed. Who were these silent superheroes?

When the blaze was finally extinguished, I sat with my mum as she stared at the smouldering remains. Her prized collection of Elvis records had melted away – all that was left was the charred sleeve of ‘GI Blues’, scattered in the debris. ‘Don’t worry, Jo-Jo, everything will be all right,’ she said, as the smoke cleared and we were drawn together in one of those moments you never forget. I didn’t cry when I realized that my own few meagre possessions were now part of the glowing embers. Deep down, though, I knew that something inside me had changed.

My mum Marian was a fiery Scorpio – light the fuse and stand well back. Her Titian red hair, ivory complexion and hourglass figure could literally stop the traffic. One day when we were out in Narberth, the sight of her walking along in her skin-tight purple jumpsuit caused a motorist to drive straight into a lamppost.

Six feet tall with black hair and blue eyes, my dad Michael looked like he’d stepped out of a Brylcreem ad. His good looks and easy smile disguised a hair-trigger temper, but

love is blind and this myopic pair stumbled up the aisle at Albury Town Hall in Hertfordshire in March 1963. She was seventeen and he was twenty-one. I came along two years later, arriving at 1 p.m. on Mother's Day, 28 March 1965, which makes me an Aries – a fire sign.

My parents' local pub was called The Catherine Wheel, but most of the fireworks took place at our house. Anything could spark a display, but most of the friction revolved around the car. Dad was a mechanic at Laurie Newton's, the local garage, and when Mum returned home from work in her grey Morris 1000, he would inspect the car for damage. Even the tiniest scratch could send him into a rage, and if she was five minutes late, an interrogation worthy of the Spanish Inquisition would start. Mum could be every bit as jealous and aggressive herself, and usually gave as good as she got.

The highlight of our weekend would be Saturday afternoon, when we would visit our grandparents' house for tea. Me and Malcy would sit on the sofa watching the wrestling, staring agog as Big Daddy tackled bad guys like Kendo Nagasaki and Mick McManus. This would act as a cue for wrestling bouts of our own, rolling around on the living-room floor until one of us signalled for the other to stop.

Unfortunately, there were no such rules for the fights at home. One evening I watched from the top of the stairs as Mum and Dad had another screaming fight just as Grandad Reynolds – who was shell-shocked from the First World War – had a panic attack. *The Waltons* it was not. Thankfully I wasn't alone in this madhouse, and my