

Isla's  
Inscription

Jon Mackley

# 1

It started with a hand on my shoulder. A hand where none should have been. It was supposed to be just me. Me and my mother's corpse.

A thousand thoughts flashed through my mind as I turned: from the idea that I'd overstayed my welcome and was being thrown out, to the idea that even though I was staring at my mother's body, she'd managed to reach round behind me.

Heart pounding. When I turned it took me seconds – spiritless seconds – to process.

A man. Early seventies? Maybe not even that. Traces of blond hair amid the white. Wearing a white shirt and dark blue tie. His eyes were kind and sympathetic, and at the same time, looking horrified that he'd startled me.

And I had no idea who he was. Or why he was in my mother's funeral home.

“Isla?” His voice was sonorous. My heart fluttered at the sound of my name. *How does he know who I am?* I thought I'd spoken out loud, but I realised I'd stammered something unintelligible. He held my hands, like greeting

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an old friend, even though I knew we'd never met before.

"My name is Arthur Edmunds," he said gently. "I'm your grandfather."

My face must have told him what my words could not. A story he already knew. "Did she really tell you nothing about me?" he indicated to my mother. "Nothing about us?"

I shook my head. Swallowed painfully. No thoughts were attaching themselves to my brain.

His face lined with sorrow. "I'm sorry for your loss, Isla. And I won't intrude on your grief." He lifted his hand towards me, and then lowered it giving instead a sad smile – sympathy, empathy, understanding all in the same moment. He turned and walked away. He was at the door to the chapel of rest before a thought crossed my mind: the body – *my* mother. This was *his* daughter. And she had never spoken about him in the twenty-four years of my lifetime.

The words scratched from my mouth before I'd realised what I was saying: "Mr Edmunds? Can we get a coffee somewhere?"

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There was a small café around the corner from the funeral parlour off Harpenden High Street and I think Mr Edmunds had hoped this would be the result of our first meeting. The wind was blowing the leaves around the street in a golden autumn snowstorm and, even though it was a short distance, it was still a relief to get inside. This was a New Age sort of Café with long rustic tables. Even so, professional-looking people worked on laptops while they sipped from bowls of coffee. A place where they could work and relax at the same time.

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Mr Edmunds returned with two similar bowls of coffee and two slabs of marble cake. He sat opposite me, scrutinising me as I was scrutinising him. Looking for resemblance. His hair was thinning; his glasses had discreet golden rims, but thick lenses. Age had cut into his face, although he didn't look ancient.

Even so, I didn't like the way he was looking at me. He was judging me. Looking at me and seeing *her*. My mother. But he didn't smell of *old people* which was a relief. Actually, more of a designer cologne.

"First, I need to give you some proof of who I am," he said. He produced a driving licence with his name on it. Arthur Alfred Edmunds. I was about to wave it away, but Mum's voice was loud in my head: *Don't be naïve. Don't take anything for granted.* So, I looked more closely. The photo looked a bit like him. He then unfolded a piece of paper. "This is your mother's birth certificate," he explained. And there was my mother's date and place of birth: 40 years ago in Hoxne, Suffolk. And her name: Rachael Leah Edmunds, girl. And in the next column, father's name: Arthur Alfred Edmunds, followed by mother's name: Susannah Carol Edmunds.

"Isla Megan Royle," he said, as if saying my name would make me more real. Tasting it like a fine wine.

"My mother never mentioned you."

Mr Edmunds looked pained. "Well, she wouldn't." He lowered his head. "There was an argument. We had a falling out. Never resolved." He sighed. "And now it's too late." He looked down into his coffee, brought the bowl to his face and sipped. "What happened?"

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How to answer that? How to tell him that a routine visit to the doctors had revealed a lump; and that further tests had shown the malignancy and the ferocity of the disease. How, aged just forty, she was stripped of her humanity, stripped her of her identity. And it stripped her of her ability to function within social constraints. There were some times – not often – towards the end when she was salient. But the rest of the time, the *other one* came forward. I know she wasn't my mother. I keep telling myself that it wasn't her. But you can't ignore the hurtful things that someone says and wonder if that was what they really thought all along. I was fat, ugly, stupid. And I would never find a man unless he was fat, ugly and stupid too. And she used one of her last, rasping breaths to spit at me. How had she found the strength? The phlegm hitting me beneath the eye. And she'd used such hateful words. And then she was fighting for breath. Such a wheezing effort as she gasped. The look of accusation in her eyes. Her hand raised, like a claw reaching out. Bony, skeletal fingers like the Grim Reaper summoning. And as I'd reached forward, to give her comfort in the last moments of her life, she'd managed, in that last breath, to let out a single word – *Don't!* – like a curse.

How to tell him any of this? I managed *Cancer* with the energy of a deflating paper bag.

Mr Edmunds nodded. He reached out. Placed a hand over mine. "This must be so awkward for you. I can call you 'Isla' and I can call you 'granddaughter' without discomfort because I have always known of your existence. On the other hand, I must forbid you from

calling me Mr Edmunds,” he said this with a slight glint in his eyes. “It makes me feel positively ancient. But neither do I feel you’re ready to call me grandfather as this is a completely new concept for you.”

“What would you suggest?”

There was a pause. His jaw tensed. “I really don’t know. You could just try Arthur.”

I winced. “Not sure that’s right either.”

Mr Edmunds cocked his head. “We’ll work something out.”

Yes, we would have to work something out. But, forbidden from calling him Mr Edmunds, and unwilling, unable to call him something more familiar, then, for the moment “Arthur Edmunds” would have to do.

I tried to drink my coffee but really couldn’t face it. Nor the cake. I was still trying to process that I had a living relative. Someone who wasn’t my mother ... who I didn’t have any more ...

“You must have so many questions?”

Yes, a thousand thousand questions. So many things I wanted to say. So many of them clamouring forward demanding to be heard. Trying to vocalise the most pressing.

“You came, but ... not my grandmother?”

He shook his head slowly. “We lost your grandmother. More than 20 years ago. That was cancer too.” He looked away and there was a wistful look at the back of his eyes. A happy memory. “Susannah was my sunrise and sunset all rolled into one.”

I took a sip of the coffee. Just the right temperature.

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When I drank, it eased the sandpaper of grief in my throat. I hesitated for my next question, not wanting to ask it, but needing to know the answer, so asking it anyway. "You said there was an argument. Between you and my mother. What was it about?"

"You," Arthur Edmunds said curtly.

I looked at him. Realised he was deadly serious. Blood rushed to my face. I had a sick taste in my mouth. I needed to know why.

"It's so outdated in the twenty-first century, and maybe I was outdated when you were conceived." He laced his fingers together and leaned forward. "I have, or perhaps *had*, values that were outdated even then." My confusion must have been obvious. And Arthur Edmunds didn't seem to understand why. When he spoke, it was like he was trying to explain to an infant. "A child born out of wedlock, Isla. At the time it filled me with such righteous anger. And I swore I would never speak to your mother again." He carried on talking. Something about how he'd meant it at the time but hadn't truly realised *what* he'd meant. That, looking back, he would have given anything to have been a part of my growing up. And then he stopped. Colour drained from his face.

"You didn't know," he breathed as he unfolded a second piece of paper. And there was my date of birth, 24 years ago. And my name. But *not* my name. Isla Megan Edmunds. Mother: Rachael Leah Edmunds. Father: unknown. John Royle – the man I'd called Dad until his death 16 years ago. He wasn't my father.

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Ok. Too much to take in. Mum was an only child (she'd told me). Her parents died long before I was born (she'd told me) my *father* (she'd told me), he'd been killed in a car accident sixteen years ago (she'd told me). Did it seem too freaking weird that I got slightly unglued when I was told that *none* of this was true? And there were now all these questions I wanted to ask my mother now that it was too late ...

To be fair to Arthur Edmunds, he tried to calm me down. But I was trying to process too much. And he placed one of his hands over mine. When he spoke, his voice was kind and gentle. "Isla, you're having the week from hell. We need to get you through the funeral. And then I want you to be my guest at my house in Suffolk. You can stay for a day. You can stay for a week. As long as you like. As long as you need. And I think you'll enjoy meeting your aunts and cousins."

He hadn't meant to do it, but that was like the third bombshell he'd delivered within half an hour. Aunts? Cousins? I was the only child of an only child.

My mother had lied to me.

A part of me insisted that she must have had a reason.

The rest of me didn't listen and I let him lead me away.

## ***ISLA'S INSCRIPTION***

When her mother died, Isla Royle believed she was alone in the world – the only child of an only child. These certainties are turned upside down at the Funeral Home when Isla meets Arthur Edmunds who claims to be her grandfather.

Edmunds offers her respite from her grief by inviting her to his manorial home in Suffolk where her ancestry is apparently linked to local legend. Here she is offered a life of affluence and comfort – a life which her mother abandoned.

But overwhelmed by grief and new experiences, Isla's mind begins to play tricks on her putting herself and her new family in terrible danger.