

Prologue

My head is about to explode into a million pieces. I know it. The pain is so excruciating that I think, with the explosion, bright red blood will be splattered all over the place like in a computer game. I wonder: will it make that splatting noise like when I hit a pig in *Angry Birds*?

I see one now. An Angry Bird.

It's on the helium balloon tied to the foot of my hospital bed.

It's swishing and bobbing, this Angry Bird on the balloon, because I'm being sped down a corridor in a bed. I'm not sure what's wrong. But something must be very, very wrong. The nurses are loudly snapping cryptic orders to each other. Every now and then, I can make out the word "EMERGENCY". Their voices are edgy and their faces look taut and stern. Nurses and doctors cannot panic: it's the rules. But when something is not right, they frown and they

speak a kind of language which no one else can understand.

Whoever is pushing the bed seems to be going faster and faster, the wheels of the bed creak and they're keeping a beat, as if they're saying "urgent", "ur-gent". I can't see who is pushing the bed. I see green and blue uniforms rush past, but I am unable to turn my head.

My mother is keeping up with them though: she would order them to let her if they didn't. She is holding my hand and it's nice. She's called Sarah, my mother, but you have to pronounce that as "Sera" or she won't like it. Her hand is warm and I feel safe, so I say, "Mummy". My voice sounds far, far away. Can she hear me?

I see her mouth move like in slow motion. She says, "It's going to be okay, baby."

There's something odd in her voice. She is not her jolly self. She would normally say, "Okay Jacob, now the doctor is going to do this and that and I want you to be brave and it will all be fine and I'll be waiting right here for you when you come out and then we'll go for a pizza with Dad and Chloe."

Instead, she's breathless. She's only like this after we play chase with Peanut. I miss Peanut.

And his little licks. He'd yap at the people in the corridor to make way if he were here. Maybe Chloe is playing with him right now. Peanut usually ignores me, because I spoil him to bits, but he always obeys my sister's commands: "Sit, Peanut. Stay. Roll over. Good dog. Here's a biscuit, Peanut." That's because my sister has a teacher's voice. A bit like my mother. Even though my mother doesn't have a teacher's voice right now.

My father is here too. He's also running alongside us. He wasn't here this morning. Where did he come from? I can't see him, but I hear my mother say "Sammy". It doesn't sound like the way she usually says "Sammy", which always has a bit of a smile to it. This "Sammy" is a serious one, without any hint of laughter.

My father is calling out my name: "Jacob", "Jacob". Why is it that not even he is telling me where I'm going? Maybe he thinks mum told me before he came.

I hold on to my mother's hand. I want to tell her not to let go, but I cannot make the words come out. Finally I manage to mouth "Mummy" again. She holds my hand tighter, tighter. Then we get to a huge door and my mother's steps halt. A lady in green scrubs is telling her something. There

is a pause. My mother whispers, “Save my baby.” Then my mother unclasps her hand from mine. No! No! Mummy. Mummy.

The bed is pushed through the door. But my parents are not by my side anymore. I’m on my own with lots of other people wearing green scrubs. One of them is holding my hand now, it feels cold. But I can still feel the warmth of my mother’s hands.

The door shuts. The light in this room is really bright. They stop pushing the bed and I can hear a lot of beeping sounds.

The Angry Bird balloon is still bobbing slightly but I can make out the words under the bird: “Get Well Soon”.

Then it’s like someone pressed a button and switched off my brain. Everything goes dark.

Chapter 1

I wake up sweating, nauseous, with severe palpitations. I feel for the light switch, trying to be as noiseless as possible so as not to wake up Sammy, and pour myself a glass of water. Every time, it's the dreaded balloon. My recurring nightmare.

I hate it. In the dream it's very clear: that sanguine Angry Bird against a backdrop of happy clouds and green grass and "Get Well Soon" written on it, and then the empty bed. And even in my sleep, I feel my heart being ripped out and thrown into the abyss. Every night I relive every mother's nightmare.

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A few minutes after Jacob was wheeled inside the theatre, they brought the bed out again. That terrible image of an empty bed, with that balloon still tied to it, will haunt me for the rest of my life.

Even now, as I write, I still feel the anguish of

having to pry my fingers away from the hands of my boy as he was pushed inside the operating theatre. I still hear him croaking “Mummy” as he was wheeled away from me. My heart shattered at that very moment and I never felt so helpless and hopeless in all my life. My son. Would I see him alive again?

As they were rushing him in, I did the only thing I could do: I urgently grabbed the surgeon’s hand—it was cold, tense. I whispered to her, desperately, “Save my baby.”

Half an hour earlier Jasmina Djukic, the neurosurgeon, had told my husband and me, “If we do not operate he may die. But if we operate, he may die.” Sammy and I signed the consent form—fully conscious that we could be signing our son’s life away.

What would you do?

I know what I did: I despaired.

I remember thinking at that very moment: this is what living in hell must be like.

I kept thinking that this was all a nightmare and that I was going to wake up and we’d be at home, and Jacob would be on his computer in his room playing *Angry Birds* and I’d be badgering him to study for his exams.

How can life change so irrevocably in a mere second? I did not even have the will or the strength to shake my fists at the heavens, or stamp my feet at the unfairness of it all. I was broken. I looked at my husband and could see in his eyes the same desperation that I felt, but he was trying to hold it together until ... until what?

The world had tilted on its axis. Just a month earlier we had been celebrating the New Year, toasting to all that it would bring with it. In December we had celebrated Jacob's fifteenth birthday. Fifteen! My baby was growing fast ...

I don't want to think about the empty hospital bed anymore. I want to erase that damned balloon from my memory. I want to think of the other time I was in hospital with Jacob, a much happier time: the first moment I cradled him in my arms when he was born.

Jacob was a ventouse baby. His head had got stuck during birth and he had to be suctioned out. So for the first few months, he had quite a large prominent head compared to his long skinny

body, but I loved him to bits, big head and all, from day one.

He made us laugh so much: as a toddler he could never crawl, and was always struggling—with that funny, determined face of his—to lift his head off the ground, and we'd be in fits. He skipped the crawling stage and went on to walk straight away—that's Jacob for you, he'll long-jump milestones, but all turns out well in the end.

Jacob had been a long-awaited surprise. We had started planning a family five years into our marriage, but we had to wait four more years before I got pregnant with Jacob. I was, by then, 30 and Sammy was 32. We were over the moon when the pregnancy test marked positive. We both love children and we both wanted so much to have a family. Four years later, we had Chloe and we were elated—our family was complete.

Jacob used to love to rub my tummy when I was pregnant with Chloe. I had explained that there was a baby in there and he would talk to my belly and say, “Please be a girl, I want you to be a sister.”

He would come to the ultrasounds with us to see the baby and I still remember his baffled face the day he came to see me in hospital when Chloe

was born. He kept looking at the baby in the cot and then at my belly. Then he scratched his head and with a bewildered look said, “But Mummy where’s your tummy gone?”

Instantly, he took on the role of big brother: he would follow me around with a little boy’s swagger, pretending to be Chloe’s chief protector, and he was always helping me with nappies and what not.

But of course, as they grew up, they were not always best of friends. They have opposite characters, you see. Chloe is very generous, but Jacob is very territorial. They squabbled half the time, however I was amazed at how they teamed up when they needed—and how they looked out for each other when we were not there. The first days of school, for example, they would both overcome their anxiety by spending their breaks together.

We had decided early on that either Sammy or I would be at home when they got back from school, so for that reason we each found jobs that would permit the constant presence of at least one of us in the lives of our children. Sammy works full-time, in the maintenance department at Inspire, a non-profit organisation that provides therapeutic,

education and leisure services to people with disabilities. He sees people with physical challenges day in day out, but he says that that makes him appreciate life so much more.

I work as a receptionist at St James, a private hospital. By nature, I am full of energy, so I like cheering patients up when they come to the hospital, despite their health problems. I think I manage, or, at least they always leave feeling quite reassured—unless they are simply overwhelmed by my ceaseless patter.

I am lucky in that my job gives me flexible hours, so I can work evenings for example, when Sammy is home, and I can be around the children during the day.

I have seen Jacob and Chloe grow from infancy to adolescence; and I treasure each and every special moment. I remember the first time Jacob decided to feed himself. He was about two years old. I sat him down on one of those tiny plastic chairs and started feeding him pasta.

Then the phone rang and I went to the living room, thinking, “*U i va*, I can see Jacob out of the corner of my eye.” It was my mum and as always, we had a nice ten-minute chat on the phone. Every now and then I kept peeking at Jacob and he

appeared to be delightfully digging into his food.

When I got off the phone I gasped. In front of me, I had the most original spaghetti mural in the history of the world—all over the kitchen wall. Jacob kept looking at me and giggling in that cheeky manner of his that always makes me chuckle when, really, I know I'm supposed to look unamused. He's always had a knack of doing that to me—and not only to me, but to family, friends and neighbours.

We live in Zabbar. And because we were among the first residents to move into our street, we have always been very active in the community. We'd always invite new neighbours round, and we'd be the ones to start a petition to tarmac our road, or stuff like that. We believe in karma and you-reap-what-you-sow philosophy. So, whenever someone asks for a hand, we're there for them because today it's you, tomorrow it may be I, kind of thing.

People in Zabbar call me *l-Ingliża* even though I've lived in Malta for more than half my life. My parents are Maltese but had moved to London with my eldest sister in the early sixties. My other five siblings and I were born in the United Kingdom, but we used to come to Malta every couple of years for our summer holidays, to catch up with

uncles, aunts and cousins and for some fun-in-the-sun. Eventually my parents had enough of the dreary British weather and decided to move back.

That's how I met Sammy: at Raffles night club, at the old barracks in St Andrews, the "in" place to be in 1984.

I was 17 years old and to be honest, when I saw him, my first thought was, "Hmm. He's not bad; not worth much." But we struck up a friendship that day, and kept meeting week in, week out. He'd tell me all his problems with girls and I'd tell him my boy-troubles and we'd give each other advice.

Gradually, we realised that we shared a sense of humour, and the same open-mindedness and we were almost telepathic. It's not the first time I'd start a sentence and he'd finish it for me. So, well, it did not take long for us to fall in love.

For the next three years Sammy used to cycle every single day, rain or shine, from Bormla to Fgura to see me. Then one day, he got off his bicycle, all drenched after cycling through a storm, he squelched his way up to the door where I was waiting for him and said, "*Isma'*, are we going to get married or not?"

And that was that. I burst out laughing and said, "Okay, let's do it—let's get married." And