

don't
forget
me



VICTORIA STEVENS

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Forced to leave her mother, who has early-onset Alzheimer's, in a nursing home in England and move to Australia to live with the father she has never met, seventeen-year-old Hazel Clarke struggles to build a new life for herself until she is befriended by Red and his quiet, grieving twin brother, Luca, who help her learn to love her new home and realize the importance of honesty and family.

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*For my Nana,
who always believed I could
And for Lilly
(no more excuses)*

“Don’t forget me,” you said,
and I laughed softly—
because that
(more than anything in this entire, endless universe)
would be impossible.

—J. E. STARLING, “REMEMBERING YOU”

PROLOGUE

AT NIGHT, THE SCREAMS WERE WORSE.

Maybe it was the way they echoed around the apartment, bouncing off the walls; maybe it was because they startled Hazel awake and she was still bleary with sleep as she made her way down the hall to her mother's bedside.

She knew her way through the darkness, one hand trailing along the faded walls to guide her. Past the kitchenette, past the living room. Past the bathroom. Her mother's door was always propped open, just in case she needed Hazel. The nightmares often left her mother's forehead damp with sweat, hair sticking to her skin in dark strands. Hazel knew how to calm her, how to place her hands gently on her mother's cheeks until she stopped writhing, until she stilled.

"It's okay," Hazel would promise, voice even and calm, a lie that came too easily. "It's all right. You're going to be all right."

Her mother would turn to her with wild eyes, gripping Hazel's arms with cold fingers as if her daughter were the only solid thing left she could still hold on to. "Don't go," she would beg. "Please don't leave me."

Her mother never seemed to realize that it wasn't her being left behind.

At some point in the last few hours that Hazel and Graham had been driving, the sky outside the window had faded from dusky blue to starry black, sinking them into complete darkness. Only the faint moonlight allowed Hazel glimpses of her surroundings, submerged almost entirely in shadows.

Her legs were stiff from so many hours of traveling, the side of her face cool from being pressed against the window. The soft music from the radio and the gentle hum of the car were making it hard to keep her eyes open. The dashboard read 12:06.

She stole a glance at the man in the driver's seat, who she'd first met just forty-eight hours ago in the lawyer's office back in London. *Graham Anthony Bell*.

Her father. The man who'd waited seventeen years before making contact with his only daughter. The man whose name she'd had to find out from Social Services when he was already on the plane over.

His focus was on the road, eyebrows knitted together as his fingers tapped out a soundless rhythm on the steering wheel. He had two days' worth of stubble dusting his jawline, and even

in the half-light of the car he looked weary. His dark hair was flecked with gray, and he had fine lines around his green eyes—Hazel hoped they were from laughter and not just from time in the Australian sun.

“We’re almost there,” he said without taking his eyes off the road. It was the first time he’d spoken since they left the airport and started driving toward Port Sheridan.

Hazel nodded, fixing her attention back out the window, and a few minutes later Graham pulled into the driveway of a huge white country farmhouse with a wide wraparound porch.

He killed the engine, and they sat there for a moment, the quiet stretching out between them.

“Well,” he said eventually, “this is it. This is home.”

Your home. Not mine. Hazel looked up at the house with a tightness in her chest that wouldn’t shift and said nothing. Graham ran a hand through his hair as if this was as difficult for him as it was for her.

“Shall we go in?” he said, and she nodded like she had a choice.

Hazel wondered as she stood in the oversize entrance hall if the house always felt this empty. This unwelcoming. Graham led her wordlessly up the stairs to a room at the far end of the hallway, placing each of her suitcases beside the bed.

He cleared his throat. “You must be exhausted, so I’ll let you get some rest. I can give you the tour in the morning.”

Hazel turned to look at him. He was watching her with the pity she’d grown used to.

“Thank you,” she managed to say.

“It’s no problem, Hazel,” he said softly, and shut the door behind him.

Hazel dropped her purse on the floor by the desk and sat on the end of the double bed. She drew her phone from her pocket, dialing the usual number.

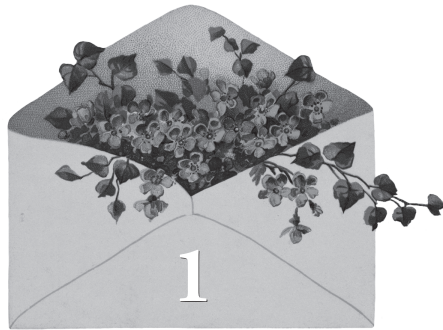
You’ve reached Isabella Clarke. I can’t take your call right now, but leave a message after the tone and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.

Hazel waited until she heard the beep, and then she hung up. She curled up on top of the bed and redialed, lying perfectly still as she listened to the sound of her mother’s voice.

You’ve reached Isabella Clarke. I can’t take your call right now, but leave a message after the tone and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can.

This time when the beep sounded, Hazel didn’t hang up right away. Instead, she curled into herself even tighter and listened to the silence as it stretched out endlessly.

part one



HAZEL WOKE AT NOON TO THE SUN streaming through cotton curtains, flooding the room with bright light. She stared at the unfamiliar ceiling as memory settled heavily in. She wasn't in her apartment anymore; she was in Australia, more than sixteen thousand kilometers from London.

From home.

She buried her head in the pillow. *You have ten seconds to wallow in your self-pity, she told herself firmly, and then you're going to act like everything is totally fine. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Nine and a half. Nine and three-quarters . . .*

She took a deep, steadying breath and kicked back the covers.

... *Ten.*

Hazel climbed out of bed and surveyed her surroundings. The room was tastefully—albeit minimally—decorated, and everything from ceiling to carpet was a crisp, spotless white. The walls were bare, with no photos or anything else to show they were part of someone’s home and not a hotel.

She crossed the room to draw back the curtains. Behind them was a sliding glass door that opened onto a balcony, and down below was a well-kept garden ending in a row of palm trees. Beyond that, on the horizon, lay the vast open sea; it was close enough that she could count the waves as they crawled up the empty stretch of sand. A rush of longing for the busy, familiar streets of London hit her and she yanked the curtains shut again.

Hazel showered and changed quickly and let herself out of the bedroom and into the hallway. She could hear music from a radio downstairs. She followed the sound and found Graham sitting at the kitchen table, surrounded by piles of paperwork, a mug of coffee in his hand.

At the sound of her footsteps, he looked up and said, “Good morning! Did you sleep well? Are you hungry? If you’d like to go out for brunch, I own this place in town . . .”

“You own a restaurant?”

“Yep, the Anchor—they’re not expecting me back until Monday, but I can call and get us a table. If you want.”

Graham seemed so much more relaxed and comfortable

here in his own domain, yesterday's guarded awkwardness all but gone. She envied him.

"That sounds great."

"How are you holding up?" he asked then, studying her closely.

I'm surviving. That was the only word for what she was doing, wasn't it? Getting up each day, putting one foot in front of the other? But she said nothing, not trusting herself not to cry.

"Well," Graham said, clearing his throat, "I'm ready to leave when you are."

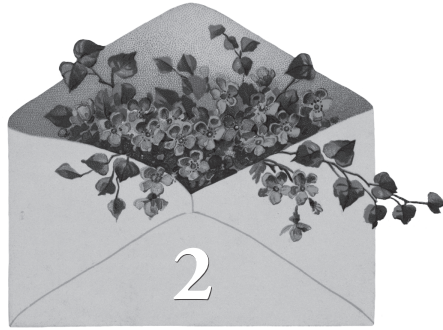
"I'll get my things," Hazel said, turning on her heels and leaving the room.

Graham hardly paused for breath the entire ten-minute journey into town, his low voice filling the silences with trivial chatter. As Hazel listened to him talk, she took in her surroundings through the open window. The sky was a bright, clear blue and the sides of the road were lined with the occasional yellow-leafed poplar or wisp of shrubbery. On her left, running alongside the highway, was the glittering sea. Port Sheridan was so different from what she was used to and she knew it was going to take some time to adjust to everything—like this balmy weather, which was typical here despite the fact that it was the middle of August and Australia's winter.

When they arrived at the Anchor, they were greeted enthusiastically by the staff and led to a table with an amazing view of the sea. When a waitress came over, Hazel ordered grilled barramundi and Graham ordered a steak. While they waited for their food she listened to him talk about the area and the local hangouts and her new school; she was to start at Finchwood High on Monday, where Graham had been a student himself some thirty years ago.

After brunch, they left the Anchor and walked along the beach toward a bustling promenade of shops. Graham pointed out each one as they passed, telling Hazel all about who worked there and what they sold and if it was overpriced. She tried to keep up, but he spoke so fast that most of it went completely over her head—not that he seemed to mind. They stopped to pick up her uniform and some other bits and pieces for school, and then for a midafternoon snack of ice cream and coffee, after which Graham finally suggested they go home so she could settle in and unpack. It wasn't until they were in the car that he quieted. Hazel, completely exhausted, was grateful for the silence.

Back at the house, Graham left her to organize the contents of her oversize suitcases, which was easier said than done—hanging her clothes in the closet and arranging her things on the desk felt far too real and not nearly temporary enough. In the end, she just collapsed onto the bed, falling immediately into a deep, dreamless sleep.



IT WAS CLOSE TO MIDNIGHT WHEN HAZEL woke, and moonlight was streaming into the room through the glass doors; she'd been asleep for hours.

Wondering if Graham had been in to check on her, she eased open the bedroom door to see if he was still awake. The hallway was dark, but on the carpet in front of her was a tray with a chocolate muffin and some orange juice. Taped to the glass was a handwritten note, which Hazel crouched down to read:

*Thought the jet lag might have caught up
with you. Didn't want to wake you.*

Sleep well, Hazel.

Hazel read the note twice and then folded it in quarters and tucked it into her pocket, ignoring the sudden lump in her throat. She carried the tray into the room and shut the door quietly behind her, setting the food down on her desk.

She thought about going back to bed, but she felt too awake, too wired. The room was stuffy, as if someone had sucked out all the air. She went over to the balcony door, and though the cold glass felt good beneath her palms, it wasn't enough. She needed to be outside where it was cool.

She let herself out the back door in the kitchen and into the garden, edging her way through a gap in the undergrowth at the end and onto the beach beyond.

Oh my God. The moonlight, the sea, the endless curve of the beach—it was so beautiful. Hazel walked right up to the water's edge, where the waves moved smoothly toward the shore and then crept back again in an even, calming rhythm.

It was a few minutes before she realized that she wasn't alone. There was a figure standing a little way down the beach, half-hidden in the shadows and facing her direction. As she watched, it began to make its way across the sand toward her. Hazel froze.

"Hello?" the person called when he was close enough. It was a boy, with a deep, lilting voice.

Hazel licked her lips nervously before answering. "Hello?"

He came to a stop in front of her. He was tall, a good foot

taller than her, and around her age. He had dark hair and dark eyes, and pale skin. A camera hung from a strap around his neck. “Who are you, then?”

“Who’s asking?” she said, and the boy let out a bark of surprised laughter.

“You’re a Pom, huh?”

“Pom?”

He smiled. “English.”

“Oh. Half.”

“Sweet,” he said. “I’m Red. Red Cawley.”

“Like the color?”

“Yep. Short for Redleigh. Yourself, Pom?”

“Hazel.”

“No kidding,” he said. “Like a color too—guess we match!”

“Guess we do.”

“We should sit,” he decided suddenly, dropping down to the ground and stretching his legs out across the sand. He patted the spot next to him. “Come on. I don’t bite.”

Hazel sank down beside him, crickets chirping in the undergrowth behind them. She fixed her eyes on the horizon, at the faint line where the black of the sky met the indigo of the sea. Above them, the sky was full of stars. There were no clouds or any of London’s orange nighttime glow obscuring them, so she could make out entire constellations.

“It’s pretty, huh?” Red said.

She murmured her agreement.

“Okay, Hazel-from-England,” he said then. “I have to ask because it’s driving me crazy—what are you doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“I couldn’t sleep,” Hazel admitted.

“Jet lag?”

“How did you know?”

“You’ve got that look about you,” he said. “When did you land?”

“Last night.”

“Nice! Welcome to Australia! How do you like it so far?”

“Well, it’s—”

“Amazing?” he offered. “Beautiful?”

“*Different,*” she said.

“I’ll bet! Don’t worry; you’ll fall in love with it soon enough. Everyone does.”

Hazel nodded—because that was easier than explaining how much she’d lost by coming to Australia, or how she’d only come because she’d lost so much. This stranger didn’t need to know that.

“It was nice to meet you,” she said instead. “But I should be getting back . . .”

“Sure, yeah!” Red jumped to his feet, offering her a hand. She grabbed it and straightened up, meeting his eyes. He was smiling warmly at her. “I guess I’ll see you around then, huh?”

“Maybe,” she said.

“Hopefully,” he corrected. “Good night, Hazel-from-England.”

She stood on the sand and watched him walk away, keeping her eyes on him until the shadows swallowed him whole and she was alone again.

When Hazel got back to her room, she found a sheet of paper and a pen, and sat down at her desk to write.

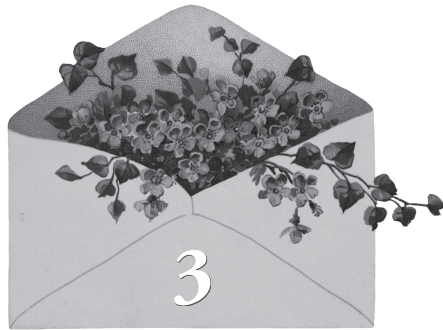
Dear Mum,

I remember the time we went to the zoo for my birthday. We saw every animal there, and then when my feet started to hurt, you put me on your shoulders so we could walk around again. I got my picture taken with a parrot, and you bought a copy for my bedroom wall. I wonder where that photo is now.

I miss you, Mum, but I remember.

*Love,
Hazel*

She read the letter over twice and then sealed it in an envelope and put it away in her desk drawer.



IN THE CAR ON THE WAY TO SCHOOL MONDAY morning, Hazel couldn't decide whether she was more scared or nervous. At least nobody here knew what she'd gone through; she was so tired of people looking at her differently because of what had happened with her mum.

Graham parked the car and turned in his seat to face her. "You sure you want to do this so soon?"

She glanced out the window. The school was a collection of modern, single-story buildings surrounded by palm trees and open space. Students were arriving, milling around the parking lot, sitting on walls and benches, grouped in small huddles. Was one of them Red? She hoped so.

"Yes," she said, tugging at the hem of her uniform.

Graham studied her face for a moment and then reached

across the car to give her shoulder a squeeze. “All right,” he said cheerfully, opening his door. “Let’s get you enrolled, then.”

Finchwood High was a coed school for students between the ages of eleven and eighteen. It was home to over seven hundred pupils and had a staff dedicated to providing an enriching and unique experience for each student—or at least that’s what the principal, a balding man named Mr. Lynch, told them proudly as he ushered them into his office.

He was completely different from the sharp, suited principal at her school back in London; Mr. Lynch wore tan trousers and a polo shirt, and his eyes were kind as he chatted to Hazel.

“So, welcome to Finchwood!” he said.

“It’s just temporary,” Hazel said immediately, and looked over at Graham, who had his lips pressed tightly together. She swallowed and turned to Mr. Lynch. “I’m hoping to be back in England by Christmas.”

“Well,” Mr. Lynch said with a broad smile, “rest assured we’ll do everything we can to make this transition smooth for you, even though the school year is well under way. Shall we get you to your homeroom, then?”

Hazel looked at Graham again, and he raised an eyebrow as if to say, *It’s not too late to change your mind*. She just nodded.

Mr. Lynch led them out of his office and into a crowded hallway filled with students hanging around in groups or

getting their things out of their lockers. Once they reached the end of the hallway, Graham said a brief goodbye and Mr. Lynch took Hazel to her classroom. Outside, he introduced her to a redhead named Ashley who was to show her around for the rest of the week and make sure she settled in okay. He handed Hazel a map of the school printed in bright colors, and then wished her good luck before returning to his office.

Ashley took one look at Hazel, eyes dragging up and down her body in a way that made Hazel feel incredibly self-conscious, and sighed.

“So he asked me to do this because we have the same schedule,” she said, arms folded across her chest.

“Thank you,” said Hazel. “I appreciate it.”

Ashley let out a laugh. “Oh, don’t thank me! There’s no way I’m going to spend the week babysitting you. It’s not a big place; you’ll find your way. Right?”

Hazel blinked at her. “Well, I—”

“Right?” Ashley pressed again, and Hazel nodded hastily. Ashley broke into a dazzling smile, flipped her hair over her shoulder, and stalked into the classroom, leaving Hazel alone in the busy hallway.

Most of the desks in the room were already occupied, so Hazel made her way to a seat somewhere between the middle and the back, where she figured she could avoid any unwanted attention.

She settled into her chair, slumping down to make herself as small as possible.

The teacher arrived a few minutes later, and the loud chatter in the classroom died down to a murmur. Hazel got up to hand the teacher the enrollment slip Mr. Lynch had given her, desperately praying that she wouldn't make her introduce herself to the rest of the class. But the teacher just welcomed Hazel, said her name was Mrs. Baxter, and sent her back to her desk. Even so, Hazel could feel the students watching her as she took her seat again. She thought how unusual it must be for a student to join Finchwood halfway through the year—the school year in Australia began in January and ran through to December.

Hazel spent the rest of the morning trailing after Ashley from one class to the next with just enough distance between them that she was sure the other girl wouldn't notice she was being followed. She thought she'd done a good job of it until the lunch bell rang and Ashley disappeared from the classroom before Hazel had a chance to gather her things. She packed her bag hastily, throwing it over her shoulder as she rushed from the room to catch up, and ran straight into someone.

“Oh God, I'm so sorry, I didn't . . .”

Hazel trailed off, raising her eyes to meet Ashley's. Ashley was standing with two friends, one hand on her hip as she glowered at Hazel.

“You,” Ashley said accusingly, stepping toward her, and

Hazel took a step back, wishing the ground would swallow her up.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. New girl. Whatever your name is. Would you quit *following* me?”

“Sorry?”

“You’ve spent the morning trailing after me like a lost puppy.”

“Because Mr. Lynch told me that—”

“I don’t care what Lynch said, having a constant shadow is getting on my nerves!”

“I don’t want any trouble,” Hazel said, hands held up in surrender, and *oh God*, this was not the first day she’d had planned. She was supposed to lay low, blend in. “I just need to know where the cafeteria is.”

“Use the freaking map, then,” Ashley hissed. “I saw Lynch give you one. Or do they not teach you how to use those in England?”

“They . . . um. They do.”

“God, I know, it was rhetorical. What’s wrong with you?”

“Just leave it, Ash,” one of her friends said. “I’m starving.”

Ashley held Hazel’s gaze for a few seconds before finally saying, “You’re right. Let’s go.”

The three of them headed off down the hallway, in what Hazel assumed was the direction of the cafeteria. She took a moment to collect herself, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly before heading in the same direction. When she found

the cafeteria, she bought a sandwich with the money Graham had given her and sat at an empty table in the far corner.

The tables around her started to fill up with loud, chattering students until every table was full except for hers. A wave of loneliness washed over her, and Hazel fought back tears. She willed the moment to pass—which, as always, it eventually did.

It's okay, she told herself, like if she thought it enough times, it might make it true. *You're going to be okay.*

Graham was waiting for her outside the school entrance at three o'clock as promised. Hazel climbed into the passenger seat beside him, overwhelmed by how relieved she was to see a familiar face.

“Hey!” he said. “How was it? Did you have a good day?”

Hazel nodded as she buckled her seat belt, fixing her eyes on the dashboard because she wasn't sure she'd be able to meet his eyes without welling up again. It had been a long day. The afternoon hadn't been any better than the morning, and she'd turned up ten minutes late to the first class after lunch—Psychology—because she couldn't find her way to the right room and she was too afraid of Ashley even to attempt to follow her. She hadn't seen Red around, and she was starting to think Graham was right—maybe it *was* too soon for her to start at a new school. She knew she could explain it to him, but she didn't want to burden him with anything else. Not when her entire existence was a burden already.

He was quiet for a moment. "I know moving is hard," he said finally. "Fitting in is hard. Especially in the middle of the school year."

She waited for the *but*, for him to elaborate or offer advice, but he didn't; he just started the car and drove them out of the parking lot.

Moving is hard, fitting in is hard. You just have to deal with it.

After Graham and Hazel ate a dinner of Indian takeout together in the living room in front of the television, Graham excused himself to finish some paperwork in his office, and Hazel headed upstairs to her bedroom to start her homework. She got most of it done, but when her vision began to blur from staring at math equations, she gave up for the night. She pulled her desk chair across the room and out onto the balcony so she could watch the waves. The moonlight was casting long shadows across the sand and painting silver lines across the water.

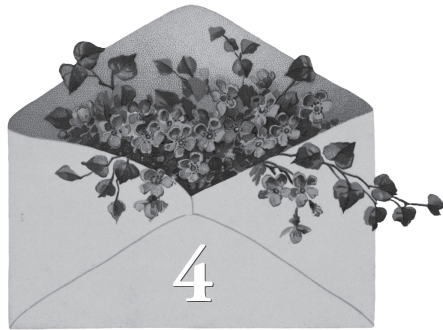
Hazel wondered if Red would turn up again; theirs was the first conversation she'd had since she arrived in Australia that hadn't made her feel uneasy. From where she sat, she should be able to see anyone walking along the beach. What would she do if she *did* see him? Would she go down to meet him on the beach again? Was she already that lonely?

Yes.

She kept her eyes on the shoreline and focused on the quiet

sound of the waves, refusing to let her mind turn to England or her mother or the big white house that was a poor substitute for a home or the stranger she was now living in it with. She waited to see if Red would show, with his easy smile and bright eyes.

At midnight she finally gave up, dragging the chair back inside and closing the door behind her.



HAZEL CAUGHT THE SCHOOL BUS THE NEXT morning instead of getting a ride because Graham had to go to work early. She didn't mind; she'd known she'd have to make the journey alone eventually.

Tuesday mornings she had Modern History, followed by a free period, which she spent in the library finishing her Math homework, followed by Spanish. Still wary of the wrath of Ashley, Hazel struggled to find her classrooms, and when she did finally arrive, it was usually a few minutes after the final bell—which gave the students already there another reason to stare at her as she settled into a chair.

Rather than sit on her own in the cafeteria again at lunch, she bought a sandwich and found a bench in a quiet corner

outside where she could watch people go by. Tuesday afternoon included a double session of Health/PE, which meant Hazel changed into the gym clothes Graham had bought her and took part in a game of cricket—a match that mainly involved her classmates goofing off and having fun around her.

Graham arrived back at the house that afternoon just after she did. For dinner, he ordered in Thai food and they ate in the living room again with the sound of the television drowning out the silence that settled over them once Graham realized she wasn't going to engage in his cheerful attempts at a conversation. When they said good night and headed their separate ways, Hazel went straight out to her balcony and waited for Red to appear.

Once again, no matter how hard she willed otherwise, he didn't show.

The rest of the week, Hazel rode the bus to and from school alone, sat in her classes alone, and ate her lunch on her bench alone. Evenings were a little better, because even though she and Graham didn't have much to say to each other, he was at least there in the room with her, which she appreciated more than she knew how to vocalize. She continued to spend her nights out on her balcony looking for Red, putting off the inevitable moment she had to go to sleep.

By Friday, people had stopped staring at her so openly. She was still a mystery to them, if the occasional sideways glances

were anything to go by, but she'd almost returned to her usual invisible self.

On Monday, the girl sitting at the desk in front of hers in home-room struck up a conversation while they waited for the teacher to arrive.

"Hey!" she said as soon as Hazel sat down. "You transferred recently, right? What's your name?"

"Hazel."

"All the way from England!" the girl said. "Awesome accent! I'm Madison, but everyone except my mum calls me Maddie. Maddie Wynter. Like the season but with a *y*. How are you finding it?"

"It is a lot," Hazel admitted.

"Didn't Lynch assign you a settling-in buddy? He usually does that."

"He did. Ashley. But she wasn't . . . interested."

Maddie glanced in Ashley's direction before looking back at Hazel. "I'm not surprised. She doesn't really care about anyone but herself."

Hazel shrugged. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. If I hadn't been out sick, he might've assigned you to me—but you should definitely stick with me from now on. I won't abandon you."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure!" Maddie said. "School sucks at the best

of times, let alone when you're on your own. You can meet Hunter, too, when he turns up."

Just then a tall, curly-haired boy slid into the seat beside Maddie. "Who's this, then?"

"This is Hazel," Maddie said. "She's from England, and she's *nice*, Hunter, so don't even try it."

"Try what?" he said innocently.

"He flirts with everything that moves," she explained to Hazel.

"I do not!" he said. "I don't, Hazel, I promise. She's just jealous I never try it with her."

"Right." Maddie snorted. "That's exactly it. I'm so, so in love with you, Hunter Emery. You are the light of my life, my sun, my moon, etcetera."

Hunter reached over to pat her sympathetically on the arm. "I know I am, babe. I'm the light of everyone's life."

Hazel hid her smile behind her bag. They seemed so nice—maybe being invisible wasn't what she needed after all.

After homeroom, the three of them went their separate ways for class, but they arranged to meet for lunch behind the main building at Hunter and Maddie's usual shady spot on the lawn beneath a blue gum tree. Then, at the end of the day, they both got on Hazel's bus home, even though it meant a longer walk to their houses. They didn't seem to mind that Hazel didn't say much, content to bicker back and forth between themselves.

Hazel thought there must've been people like Maddie and Hunter back in England, relaxed and easygoing, but if there were she'd never met them.

Then again, there hadn't been time to make friends.

When Hazel got home Graham was still at work, so the house was empty. She let herself in with the spare key from under the doormat, which felt weird—almost *wrong*, like she was breaking into someone else's home. She supposed she was, in a way. How long would it take for her to feel as if she wasn't trespassing on Graham's life? To adjust to their awkward, one-sided conversations. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, overwhelmed by homesickness.

Temporary, she reminded herself. *This is only temporary.*

When Graham called to check in, Hazel was on the sofa reading the book her English teacher had assigned.

"Hazel, it's me," he said. "I'm sorry I didn't call sooner; work's been a nightmare. Two of our waitresses called in sick. Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine."

"Are you hungry? I'm going to be here for a while, but I think there's a pizza in the freezer. Or the numbers for takeout are on the fridge if you prefer; just give them my name and I'll sort the money out later." He paused. "Is that okay?"

"It's fine," she assured him.

"I'll be home as soon as I can."

Hazel wanted to tell him not to rush back on her account, that she was used to being alone and was more than capable of

looking after herself, but instead she hung up the phone and went searching for the pizza. Graham's fridge was surprisingly empty for someone who was a chef. There were just some cans of beer and a bottle of barbecue sauce—and a lone pizza in the bottom drawer of the freezer. Hazel shook her head in amusement, unwrapped it, and threw it in the oven.

It was past nine by the time Graham got home. He came upstairs and knocked on her door. "Hey," he said. "Good day at school?"

She thought he looked tired, even more so than usual. "Yes, thanks."

"The television's on downstairs if you want to join me."

"I think I'll have an early night, if that's okay."

"Sure."

He hovered in the doorway, half-in and half-out. "You're doing really well, Hazel. She would be so proud."

Hazel said nothing, her throat suddenly tight. She wished he would leave without saying another word.

"I just . . . It will get *easier*, you know?" he continued. "It really will. One morning you'll wake up and it won't be the first thing you think about."

Graham left the room, shutting the door behind him. *One morning you'll wake up and it won't be the first thing you think about.* Hazel didn't know whether that thought was comforting or terrifying.



IT HAD BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE MEALTIMES in Red Cawley's household had resembled something conventional. It was hard to maintain the façade of normalcy when it was just Red and his mum, Claire, sitting around the kitchen table, the empty chairs a reminder of the family they'd once been—four down to two.

Conversations with his mum were always nice enough, but Red knew both of them were secretly relieved when the dishes were loaded into the dishwasher, and Claire could disappear into her office and Red into his bedroom for the rest of the evening. Sometimes, though, shutting himself away wasn't enough and he had to get out of the house; on those evenings, he climbed out his bedroom window and went down to the garden, ducked through a hole in the hedge at the bottom and

out onto the beach beyond. On nights like tonight, when the tide was low enough, he could walk along the entire stretch of beach without ever getting his feet wet, using a flashlight to guide the way.

At just after ten, Red grabbed his drawstring bag and made his way barefoot across the sand, his camera around his neck. The sky was clear and full of bright stars. It was the first thing he had noticed the first night they spent in their new house back in February, that the stars were so much brighter here than in Sydney, and it wasn't a consolation, exactly, for being uprooted from his old life, but he definitely clung to it when the nights were long and the house was lonely.

It had been over a week since he'd ventured this far up the shore. He'd meant to come sooner, hoping to see Hazel again, but he'd been busy with schoolwork. Red arrived at the stretch of beach where he'd met her the last time, and crouched down to clear a space just at the edge of the undergrowth. He settled cross-legged on the sand, and emptied his drawstring bag out onto the ground, using his flashlight to illuminate the contents: colored and graphite pencils, his trusty sketch pad, and a banana for emergency sustenance.

He buried the flashlight in the sand so its beam lit up his page, and then chewed absentmindedly on the end of one of the pencils as he studied his most recent drawing. It was only half-finished, a sketch of the beach at sunset. He hunched over the paper, shading in the skyline and adding texture to the rolling waves.

Red was almost done when the soft thud of footsteps on the sand made him look up, his eyes settling on Hazel making her way toward him. He put his sketch pad back in his bag and said, “Hey, stranger!”

“Don’t you have a house of your own to sit outside of?” she said when she got close.

“The view of the sea isn’t as good from the other end of the beach.”

“Doesn’t it look the same wherever you stand?”

“Spoken like a true amateur! What are *you* doing out here, anyway? It’s late.”

Hazel lowered herself to the ground beside him. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“Well, it can’t be jet lag this time. What is it? Insomnia?”

She shrugged and dug her hands into the sand in front of her. “What about you?” she asked without looking up.

“Me? I’m just enjoying the night air. How have you been, Hazel-from-England?”

“Homework is keeping me busy.”

“Lucky you. Which school are you going to?”

“Finchwood?”

“Awesome!” he said. “It’s a good place; I know a bunch of people who go there.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Red was about to explain why but thought better of it. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Well, it’s *school*, so . . .”

Red let out a burst of laughter, and she ducked her head. He could just about see the pleased pink flush on her cheeks through the near-darkness.

“What about you?” she asked then. “Where do you go to school? I was . . . hoping we’d end up at the same place.”

“I go to West,” Red said. “It’s an art school for the gifted and talented.”

“Gifted and talented?”

“Yeah,” he said, grinning. “God knows how I got a place.”

“You’re an artist then?”

“Trying to be.”

“Is that why you carry that camera everywhere?”

Red glanced down at it. It was nothing special or high-tech, but he loved it. “Yep. You never know when you might need to capture a moment. Hey, maybe I’ll show you some of my stuff one day.”

“I’d like that.”

“I know how hard it can be, moving to a new place and leaving everything you know behind,” he said then. “Back in February, I was the new kid in town too.”

“You were?”

“Yep. We moved here from Sydney.” Red paused and studied her face. “It can be tough, going to a new school, meeting new people. Starting over again. But you’ll get there. You’ll settle in.”

“I don’t need to settle in,” Hazel said, brow furrowed. “I won’t be here long. This is temporary.”

“Really? Where are you staying?”

“With my dad. His name’s Graham Bell?” She gestured toward the houses behind the undergrowth. “His house is the one with the porch.”

“Yeah, I know it!” Red said. “And I know him too, kind of—my mum works in his restaurant. Have you been there yet? The Anchor?”

“We went on my first day.”

“Mum says it’s the best place she’s ever worked. Hey, you should come over for dinner tomorrow and meet her!”

“Really?”

“Definitely. She’ll love it—I know she’s secretly disappointed that I’ll never bring a girl home for real.”

Hazel raised an eyebrow in question, and Red winced slightly. He hadn’t meant to say that, not really. There was just something about her that made him feel comfortable. Too comfortable.

“It’s because I’m not into girls,” he explained carefully, watching her expression to see how she’d react. “Not in that way. Not romantically, I mean. Or sexually. Shit. It isn’t . . . It’s not a big deal.”

“No,” Hazel agreed quickly. “It’s not a big deal.”

Red had seldom met anyone who hadn’t completely accepted his sexuality—his family and friends in particular had always been one hundred percent supportive—but he still felt a wave of relief.

“My mum’ll love you. And not just because you’re cool; she

pretty much loves anyone. She's a lot like me in that respect. Superchill about everything. We're both *people* people, you know? And she's the best chef. Everything she cooks is amazing." He paused, stealing a sideward glance at her. "What's your mum like?"

Hazel said nothing.

"Is she like you? Or are you more like your dad?"

"I . . . don't know," she said. "I hardly know him. I only found out that he existed a couple of weeks ago."

Red nodded slowly. He thought briefly about his own dad; he knew a thing or two about absent fathers himself.

"I used to have a mum, though," Hazel added.

"Used to?"

"It's a long story."

"I've got time."

"I don't really like to talk about it. Too many people felt sorry for me in London. I don't want it to be like that here."

"I won't tell anyone," he promised.

Hazel wasn't sure why she believed him, but she did. She took a deep breath, and let it out. "Well, I wasn't very old when she first got sick . . ."

Red listened closely as she told him everything that had happened back in England, about everything she'd lost. He didn't interrupt, didn't say anything at all until Hazel had finished talking—and then he just scooted closer to her and placed an arm around her as she cried into his shoulder.

Dear Mum,

I remember the time we went to the fair. We had chocolate, and popcorn, and lemonade, and fries. You warned me that I shouldn't eat anything else, but I made such a fuss about having cotton candy that you bought me some—then later, on the bumper cars, I got sick. But you weren't angry. You just gave me a hug and won me a stuffed animal from one of the stalls to cheer me up. It was a blue rabbit, with soft fur and floppy ears. I called him Justin.

He was my favorite toy ever.

I miss you, Mum, but I remember.

Love,
Hazel