Hope

This book is for anyone who has ever been in hospital and needed a bit of hope.

And to all the teenage girls out there; you're braver than you know and stronger than you think.

Hope

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"Hope" is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops – at all—

And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard—
And sore must be the storm—
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm—

I've heard it in the chillest land—
And on the strangest Sea—
Yet – never – in Extremity,
It asked a crumb – of me.

Emily Dickinson

May

I climb up and lean over the ferry rail, looking down into the grim, grey sea. *I've ruined everything.*

'Want a smoke?' someone asks behind me – a he someone. I shut my eyes tight and pray he'll walk away. I smell tobacco, strong but sweet, and try not to breathe in. I keep my eyes closed – if I can't see him he can't see me. But he leans against the railing I'm standing on and it shakes.

'I won't say "It can't be that bad" cos clearly it is, right? Life's shite. Not all the time, just sometimes.' His accent is very strong – Irish.

I open my eyes a little. Snot is dripping onto my top lip.

'Want to talk?' he asks. He's heard me. He's been watching me. But I don't know *what* he's seen or heard.

'Just piss off!'

He takes a final drag and grinds his fag into the deck with his boot. As he pushes away from the railing it

shudders violently. My feet slip. He grabs my denim jacket. He holds on so tightly that I can't breathe. When he lets me go, I drop back hard onto the deck. I'm winded.

'Want to tell me what all the shouting and swearing's about?' he says, pulling me up. I try to push him away but I can't stand up straight. I end up leaning against him despite myself; he's warm and smells funny, slightly sweet. Oh, I get it, not quite cigarettes.

'No.' I spit the word out.

No, I don't want to tell this strange boy I've failed my drama college audition. I definitely don't want to tell him why this latest failure is worse than the others. Because of Dad.

When I was twelve, Dad borrowed an old camper van from someone else in the music department and took Mum and me on holiday to Dublin to show me his old haunts – the flat above the newsagents, Grafton Street where he busked, and Abbey Theatre, where he and Mum first met. Dad kept saying we'd go back again, showing me photos of Mum and me playing on St Stephen's Green and one of Mum and Dad in Temple Bar looking worse for wear. Dad was so happy when I told him I was thinking of applying to Dublin. He said they'd buy a camper van and come to see me every school holiday. Mum just rolled her eyes. Maybe she thought the idea of me going to Dublin to study Drama at sixteen was even more delusional than Dad's crazy camper van idea. I was too embarrassed to ask.

No one else in our group had thought of Ireland until I told them all about the course there. Even Mr Davis didn't know about it. Dublin's not far from us, just across the water really. When they heard the words 'Young RADA' almost everyone applied, even those who'd already got conditional offers elsewhere, which felt a bit excessive. Maybe I should have kept it to myself. I remember the day I got the letter through with the dates for the second auditions. I was so proud. Mr Davis told us that being recalled for second auditions meant they were taking you seriously. And I believed him, especially about the singing audition. 'No one else will stand a chance when they hear you, Hope,' he said and I trusted him. *Fool*.

'I'll guess then?'

The boy pulls me into an alcove tucked out of the way of the rain. He wraps his leather jacket round my shoulders. It stinks of smoke. I shrug it off. He puts it back. I give up.

'I'm only after keeping you dry and warm. The state of you, you're shaking.'

He lights up another not-cigarette and takes a long drag, flickering it to life. He offers it to me. I take it – I've no idea why – and hold it, letting the heat sear into my skin. I consider throwing it into the sea but don't have the energy. I give it back to him.

'Alright then, let me guess… You've split up with your fella?'

A noise comes out of me, like a snort and a laugh – a snarf. I hope it conveys what an arse I think he is. This has nothing to do with boys. There's no point trying to tell him what it is about because even *I* don't understand.

'Ah, hang on, you've not run away from home, have you? Seriously? *Shite*!' He leans forward, looking properly worried, taking in my damp clothes and messy hair. He looks around as if expecting to see the police or something. 'C'mon now, out with it, are you after running away?'

I shake my head but he won't stop staring at me with that look, concern for the crazy girl, and I don't want to see it anymore. I try to glance inside through the steamy windows, but my glasses are messed up. I pull my t-shirt out from under my other layers and wipe them clean. With them back on, I can just make out the shapes of the navy-blue headrests. My friends are in there with my teacher, laughing, drinking and celebrating. I should be in there, with Callie and my friends, instead of out here with this random boy.

'Ah, here, sorry. I didn't mean to be a dick. I was just trying to distract you, to cheer you up like.' He finishes his joint and flicks it away from us. The wind sends it rolling over the deck and into the sea. 'Lookit, I'm Riley. Riley Santiago. I wasn't stalking you, I'm scarlet you'd think that. I only came out here for a cheeky smoke but then I heard you wailing and whining and I could hardly walk away?'

He turns me round slowly, gently. I take him in, this

Riley Santiago. His eyes are brown and hooded under heavy lids. His lips are thick and bouncy looking, like a ripe peach. His skin is dark, rich with beauty spots and moles chucked across his nose and cheeks, as if someone has decorated him with paint but he's been too busy to clean it off. He looks like the kind of boy who should come with a warning, just to give you a fighting chance.

'I'm fine,' I lie, as I shrug off his jacket.

'Is there someone I can get for you? Who are you on the ferry with?' He looks around, past me into the restaurant.

'*No*! *No*! I don't need anyone!'

The last thing I need is him finding Mr Davis or Callie. I don't want them to see me like this.

'Alright, well, if you won't let me get someone then I want your phone number.'

He holds out his hand.

I ignore him.

He walks to the door with a threatening look on his face.

I reach into my jacket pocket and pull out my phone. He comes back over to me and takes it.

'I'm going to put my number in your phone and I want you to call me, or text, whatever. That's the deal. I can't just let you go, the state you're in.'

Even though he's sort of making a joke there's something serious there, and it's nice. He means well, I think, but what would I know? I wonder if I can grab my phone back and bolt.

He stays far too close to me, taking his sweet time typing in numbers and letters. He smiles as he puts my phone back in my top pocket, before pulling me back into him by the edges of my jacket. I don't move away. He's deciding what to do next. I'm trying to second-guess what he'll do. I wait for the words.

'I won't go in there and find your parents or whatever – you nearly died when I suggested that – but I want a text from you later to say *I'm alive* or I can't let you go, and we'll be stuck together forever like this. Is that what you want?'

He locks both his arms tightly around my back and smiles at me again and, for a stupid second, I think he's going to kiss me. It makes me feel nervous.

'Okay! Whatever it takes to get rid of you. I was fine until you came along!' I push him away.

He laughs as if this is funny. But he does let go of me.

He zips the neck of his jacket up and pats me on the shoulder in a matey way and the tension is broken, the almost-moment evaporates. He takes a melodramatic comedy step away from me and then starts talking again.

'Now, I won't lie and promise it's all going to be fine. But I have a feeling about you, a wee feeling but a good one, *nameless girl.*' He opens the door, lifting his feet carefully so he doesn't trip.

'Hope!' I shout, just before the door closes. 'My name's Hope,' I add, in case he thinks I'm just shouting words at him.

He raises his hand, to say goodbye – or *I heard*, or *Whatever* – and walks into the steamy restaurant. The ferry sounds its loud horn as it approaches the docks. Home.

The journey home to Shrewsbury from Holyhead in the minibus with Mr Davis and the rest of them is torture. My face says it all when Mum finally turns up. Her *sorry* falls flat onto the pavement and I don't have the heart to hug her back as she wraps her arms around me. I just hang there, limp, letting her *never mind* slide off me like the rain.

I see the concentration scratched across her face as she drives out of the car park. An oncoming lorry honks at her and she mutters something then catches my eye. She searches for something to say to break the stale layers of silence in the car, then turns the radio up.

I know she thinks I'm a failure, even though she won't say it. She'd told everyone at work: I know because I saw it all over Facebook one night when she'd left her page open on her mobile. 'So proud of my girl being recalled to audition in Dublin, knew she'd get through to the 2nd stage for Young RADA!'

And other status updates with more smiley faces. I didn't want her putting my news on Facebook, but at the same time it made me feel good that she was proud of me. Now what does she have to be proud of?

'So how did Callie and Aisha get on? Sounds tough. Did you know some drama schools accept less than one per cent of the applicants,' Mum tells me, sounding like she's swallowed a prospectus, or she's been reading *How to Talk to Your Teen*. I appreciate the effort, I really do, but I want her to stop trying to make things better. I know she's building up to asking me what went wrong. But I can't tell her or Mr Davis or even Callie. Because I can't remember.

'Niall got through to the workshop day. Aisha didn't get in either but she's got a conditional offer from Liverpool Sixth Form at LIPA which is great,' I choke out, not meaning a single word. 'Callie was rejected but she's probably going to get a call-back from the Birmingham Theatre School.' I hear the sourness in my voice. Niall now has offers from Young Actors' Studio at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and Italia Conti. He'll probably get Young RADA too, he's spoilt for choice.

'I'm sorry, I know how much you wanted this.' She accelerates as if getting me home is the answer. I bet the first thing she does when we get in is offer me a cup of tea or suggest I take Scout out for a walk to clear my head.

'Thanks, Mum.' I close my eyes and hope she gets the message. I lean back against the headrest, picturing the

twists and turns in the road as we get closer to home. The last place I want to be.

'Hope, I'm taking Scout for a walk… Want to come?' Mum calls up to me.

I ignore her. I fling my bag on my bed, shut the door and sit on the floor.

'Hope? I'm going then.'

I wait until I hear the back door click shut then I get back up again. I don't know what to do with myself. I don't want to be here, in my room, but I don't know where to go either. I prowl my bedroom, but there isn't much space so I put some music on. I lie on my bed and notice my poster of *Macbeth* with Judi Dench as Lady M is peeling off the wall a bit. I try to stick it back but the Blu-tack's gone dry. I don't want Dame Judi to look at me the way she is – judging me. So I rip it right off the wall, bunching it up in my hand so that the edges cut my skin. I rip up the prospectus for Young RADA, which is difficult. I can't tolerate the smiling student faces shining out from every page. I tear down every photo from the pinboard: me playing Meg Long from *Our Country's Good* and Shen Te in *The Good Person of Szechwan*. I rip up the picture of me in my favourite role as Christina in *Dancing at Lughnasa* and shove them all into my new wastepaper bin, letting the pins stab my hand. The bin is too full. I shove and squeeze and then I hit it. I hit the bin with the palm of my hand.

I hit it with my fist.

I kick it.

I hit it again. Hard.

It shatters down the middle like it has been struck by lightning.

I feel shame in my stomach. I've smashed the lid of my brand new bin and there's a massive crack running down the side of it. I try to push the edges back together so the damage isn't quite so obvious but it doesn't work. I know I hit it, but it didn't feel that hard, not enough to split it in two. I couldn't have broken it so easily, could I?

Time passes; I don't know how much. I sit on the floor panting, looking around at the mess I've made. My clothes have been flung with force from my overnight bag. My desk chair is upended, the wheels spinning uselessly, and one of my snow globes has smashed, leaving a little pool on my desk, shards of glass swimming in the remains.

I think there's something wrong with me.

Before we left for Dublin I made an arrogant promise to Mum that if I didn't make this audition I'd give up on trying to get into drama college. Mum worked out that she'd spent almost £60 on each audition, plus the travel costs to get there and back, the youth hostel we stayed in for Dublin, the B&B in Cardiff and the others, *all* the others. She'd agreed to let me apply for five drama colleges and no more. I went for it thinking I wouldn't need more

than three but better to be safe than sorry: Liverpool, Cardiff, London, Manchester and then the fifth and final audition in Dublin.

But I only said it because I never thought I'd fail. Up till now it's all come so easy. I've had all the parts I've wanted. I've had it all planned out since I was little – pantomimes, concerts, youth opera group, school plays, drama club, youth theatre, singing in the chorus for touring musicals, stage school in the summer holidays when Mum and Dad could afford it, GCSE Drama and then drama college before auditioning for drama school. What am I supposed to do now? Mum keeps talking about Plan B but Plan Bs are for people who fail.

I just never,

not once,

not even for a tiny moment, thought that I would need one.

'Hope! Are you coming to eat your tea or not? Scout's eyeing it up!' Mum shouts over my music. I hear the oven door slamming, the clattering of cutlery and an impatient bark from Scout, always on the lookout for food. I switch my music off, reply to another text from Callie, reassuring her that I'm fine. No one who says 'I'm fine!' really means it and Callie and I both know this. I shove my phone in my back pocket and go downstairs.

I sit at the table while Mum remains standing. I forgot she was out tonight. I look down at my plate. Jacket potato and beans is cop-out cooking. There's a cup of tea going cold next to my plate. I can't stand cold tea but I sip it so as not to hurt her feelings. She didn't have to cook for me tonight, not when it's book-club night. 'Thanks, Mum, this looks great.' I try to sound like I mean it.

'It's pay day tomorrow. We could get some nice food

for the weekend, maybe even a meal deal? And we could go into town. I'd like to get you some new clothes for starting work, until we can get your top ordered in. I'm sure there's a few sales on. New start next month, once you've finished your exams,' she chatters, gathering up her car keys with a smile as she heads to the back door.

'Don't remind me,' I mutter.

She stops near the door. I watch her shoulders rise with tension and then drop with an effort. I know she's trying, but I can't meet her halfway, not tonight.

'Hope, we've talked about this. You agreed. I *know* you don't want to spend the summer with me at work but we made a deal.'

I don't want to work with her. I want to stay here in the house on my own and just…

'You are not going to waste the summer hanging around the house! Moping about won't make anything better.' She comes back to the table and pulls out a chair. 'It'll just make you feel worse, trust me.'

I want her to go and take her well-meant assumptions about my feelings with her. She's doing her 'I'm your parent not your best friend' thing and tonight it's making my skin crawl. She thinks I can just work through the summer and go to Shrewsbury Sixth-Form College, as if that's all I've ever dreamed of.

'You're not the only one, are you? Callie and Aisha didn't get in either. I guess the timing doesn't help?' She pauses.

'You're probably feeling worse about it all because you're hormonal at the moment.'

Hormonal is the understatement of the year. I'm getting angrier each month, more aggressive and less in control. And it's scaring me, really scaring me. Sometimes I've not been able to keep it in, even at school. I can hear what I'm saying, can imagine my face contorting as the spiteful words come out of my mouth and I don't want to be like this. I don't want to be constantly apologising for whatever's just come out of my mouth.

I tried managing myself with fake days off each month, but Mum cottoned on and forced me out of bed. It isn't that my periods are that painful. Then I'd take some tablets, grab a hot water bottle and eat some chocolate, just like the other girls do. But my mood swings are not like everyone else's.

'We can talk about things when I get back from the Bird's Nest book club. Or come with me, if you want?' She puts her copy of the new Kate Atkinson on the table as an offering.

'I'll be fine. I've got loads of stuff to do. You *go*!' I pull up the corners of my mouth with force, even though I know my eyes won't match. 'Have a good time!'

She nods at my fake smile, kisses the top of my head and rushes out. Her long hair smells of coconut and I just manage to stop myself grabbing hold of it and wrapping it around my neck like a noose so that she can't leave me.

I don't want to scare her with this, I'm not ready. Neither of us are.

I listen to the house once she's gone. Scout barks at someone daring to walk past, something clangs in the washing machine, there's a whirring or a pulse coming from the walls as if the house is alive, breathing, waiting for my next move.

I don't know what to do once I've eaten. I can't even think about revising, there's no way any of it would go in. I stupidly presumed we'd be out celebrating. I slump over to the sofa. I don't reach for the TV remote. I don't glance at the shiny magazines Mum's brought home from work. I just sit and feel blank. Scout gives me the eye but I don't feel like taking her for a walk right now. She's far too happy and bouncy. I close my eyes and fall into a sleep that's filled with falling off cliffs and tripping over curbs.

The text makes me jump. It vibrates in the back pocket of my jeans, insistent. It's probably Callie, she's not going to give up tonight. It might be easier to go out with her.

It vibrates again. I shove my glasses up my nose as the third text announces its arrival. I swipe the screen to unlock it. It's not Callie. It's him – him from the ferry, him – Riley Santiago.

How r y? Grand?

Come on now, you know the deal, you're supposed to tell me you're alright so I don't have to alert the guards!

Checked your email lately? Got your attention now haven't I! ;)

What does he mean check my email? He hasn't got my email address.

I fling my phone onto the sofa. Scout barks at me in excitement as I run upstairs. My laptop hums into life when I open it. The screen says it is starting 1 of 3 updates and not to shut it down. I run back downstairs to read his texts again, trying to decode them. Scout paces back and forth, looking hopefully at the back door. Has Riley sent me an email? Has he hacked my email? Does he know something I don't?

Maybe… Maybe I've got a second chance, another audition? But how could he know that, unless he was at Dublin, too? He looked like an actor; his name is definitely showy enough, unlike mine, Hope Baldi.

'Riley Santiago.' I try the sound of his name out loud. Definitely an actor. I bet he has an Equity card. He could be a talent scout! Maybe he saw something in me? Maybe he was at the audition and disagreed with the others? It happens, you hear about it all the time. *All the time.*

I run back up the stairs. My homepage is loading. I click on the envelope icon and wait. I have one new mail. I hit the key and it opens.

Just checking in to make sure you aren't scaring any more gulls with your screeching, banshee girl. Car's got a flat battery. Telly's shite. What r u doing?

So no. He isn't anyone. He doesn't have anything to tell me. He's talking about telly and cars and he can't even type. He's doing text talk on his email as if these are interchangeable. How did he get my email? I fire back frustration and disappointment:

Stalker! How did you get my email?

There's no reply. I click the refresh button. Nothing. I thought he said he was bored.

I put some music on to drown out my own voice. I go to the bathroom and check the spots on my forehead as a distraction – it doesn't work. I come back and there's an email sat there waiting. I ought to delete it but I can't.

Sent myself an email from yr phone on the ferry. Insurance policy in case you ignored my texts. And guess what… you did. Want to skype?

He's clearly a flake. He thinks we have some kind of connection. He thinks we're what… *friends*? Skype? He sounds at least three beers into his evening. I'm not skyping him. I've got to shut this down before it gets out of hand. I need to get rid of him.

No, I don't want to Skype – don't even know you. Delete me from your phone.

I wait for his reply but there's no response.