STARBOARD
First published in Great Britain in 2026 by Starboard

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 444 98288 6
Signed edition ISBN 978 1 444 98689 1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



Starboard
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

The authorised representative in the EEA is Hachette Ireland, 8 Castlecourt Centre, Dublin 15, D15 XTP3, Ireland (email: info@hbgi.ie).

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

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LATE AUGUST

I think this is the bit where I introduce myself
and tell you all about me.
I've never done this before
so you'll need to bear with me
because, well, there's quite a lot to tell.

So here goes:
I'm Alfie,
Alfie Piper.
I'm twelve years old.

I'm sitting at my desk in my bedroom at Dad's house
looking out the window,
watching light battle dark.

I do that a lot.

From here I can see the tops of the hills
change as the seasons spin.
Right now,
the moor grass is scorched amber
and the sun's coming up
like the sky's on fire,
like yesterday is burning
and a whole new world's being created
just for me.

My uniform's hung on the back of my door ready for next week.

But I don't want to talk about starting Year 8.

I've been thinking about talking since it happened.
Trying to find a way to get out what's in my head.
What it is I want to say.
So here I am.
Let's see where we get to.

I can hear my dad, Sam, and his wife, Sophie,
singing to the baby downstairs.
Alice is four weeks old.
She's beautiful.

They'll be trying to get a bottle
down her
in the hope she'll settle for a while
so they can drink coffee,
listen to the radio
and smile at each other,
delighted by what they made.

Eventually Dad'll come upstairs to check in
on me, so I've not got long.

The next bit of what I need to tell you
is pretty hard,

you might need to take a breath.

The day before my sister, Alice, was born,

my mum died.




My mum is dead.

I just need a minute.

Sorry, I said you'd have to bear with me.

If it's OK, I'd like to tell you a little bit about her—?
It might be a jumble of stuff but that's how my head is.

My mum was called Sally Anne Taylor.
She was thirty-nine years old.
No age at all, people tell me.
She was a social worker.
Her whole life was about trying to help people.
She was my favourite person in the world.
She was my mum.

And I loved her . . .

I **love** her

very, very much.

She died of pancreatic cancer.

Two weeks after we found out she had it,
she was gone.

I'd been dead busy at school,
and there was so much to do around
the baby coming

that I never noticed the stuff
people've talked about since then:
how she'd been feeling poorly for a while,
wasn't really eating.
People said her eyes
and skin had started to go yellow,
but she didn't want to believe it
until her friend who used to be a nurse
told her she had to go to hospital.

And she never came out.

That's a lot, right?
Yeah, it is.

And the thing is,
there's more.

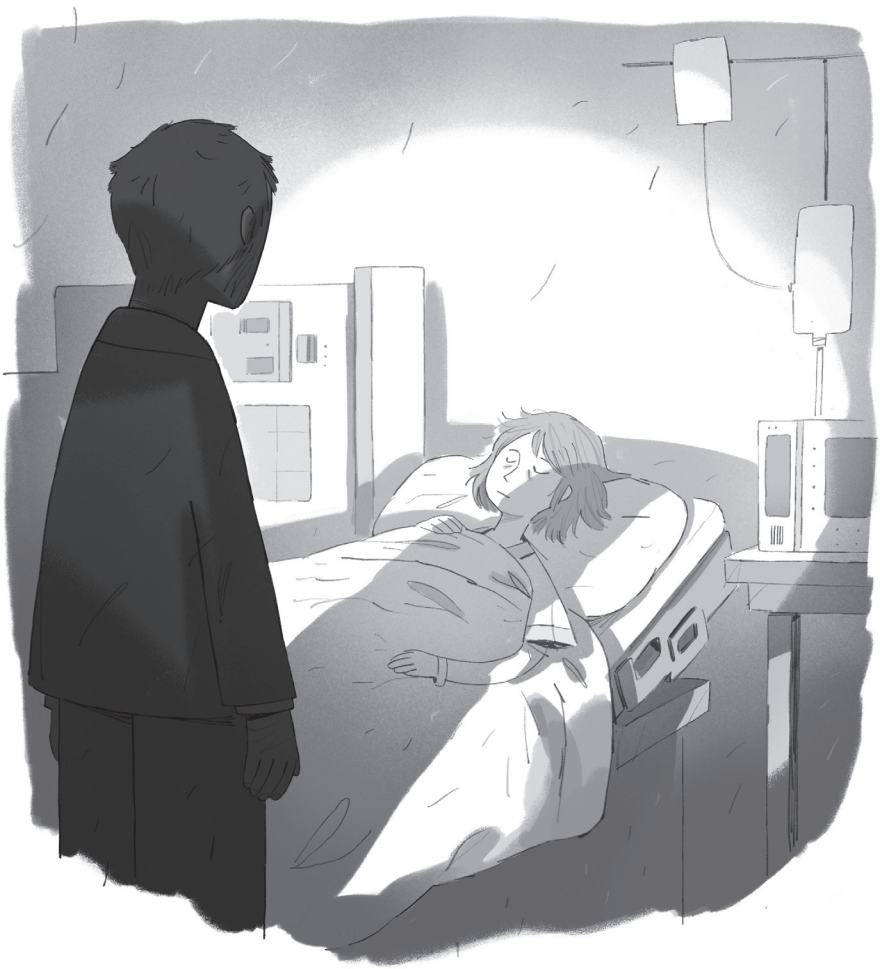
And I'm sorry again if I ramble here
but

I'm lost

without her light.

She died in hospital
in the early hours of the morning,
on the day she was supposed to come home.
She wasn't coming home to get better
but they told us she'd have a few months.
And while I was trying to get my head
round it all,
stomach ulcers burst
and she was so weak that her body,
my mum's body,
couldn't take it.

And **he** was with her.



He is Mum's partner.
Was Mum's partner.

He appeared in my life
when I was nearly three,
the year after Mum and Dad split up.
And I hate **him**.
And **he** hates me.

And **he** was there.

And I wasn't.

I'd been staying at Auntie Lisa's,
Mum's sister,
because Dad and Sophie
knew Alice was arriving any second.

Thinking about it now,
that's the last time I stayed at Lisa's.

There was a knock on the door,
early,
too early for it to be anything
but bad news.
And
I heard them downstairs

and it turns out
Lisa wanted to tell me
it had happened
but **he** said no

it needed to be **him**

and **he** called me downstairs
and I was confused and angry because it was early
and I thought **he** wanted me to go and help **him**
sort the house out for Mum coming home
and **he** was in the kitchen with **his** back to me
and when **he** turned
he just looked at me

and told me.
Then **he** hugged me and cried.
Told me **he** loved her.

And **he** smelt of hospitals

and Mum.

And then Lisa came forward and sort of
got **him** away from me
because she knew how I felt.

And from then on,
it's like I've been in a washing machine,
tumbling about,
trying to find a space in the chaos to breathe,
in places where even the light is dark.

People's faces flashing in front of me
conversations I'm not supposed to hear
funeral cars
flowers
cards
Alice

him.

None of it making any sense.

And I have a couple of questions
which I know you can't answer,
nobody can.

But I need to ask them anyway.

Why did this happen to me?
And what do I do now?

The only thing I do know
is I'll never see Mum again.

And after we spread her ashes
in the valley she loved,

I'll never see **him** again.