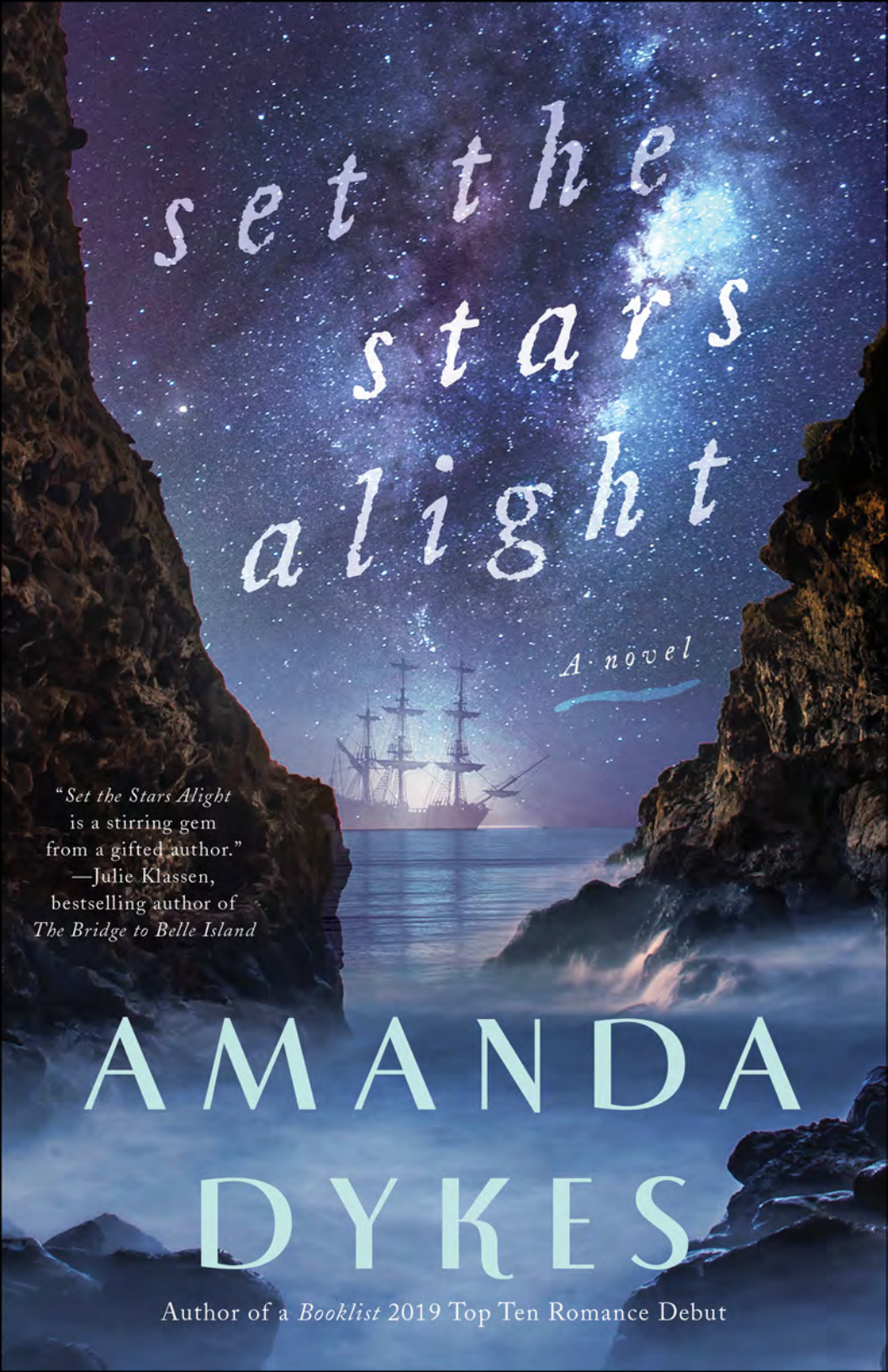
set the stars aligh
A novel
"Set the Stars Alight is a stirring gem from a gifted author."
—Julie Klassen, bestselling author of The Bridge to Belle Island
AMANDA DYKES
Author of a Booklist 2019 Top Ten Romance Debut

set the stars alight

AMANDA DYKES

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For our kids.
Wonder-filled adventurers,
what a gift you are!
The Maker of the stars is
the Maker of your hearts,
and oh! how He loves you.
May this truth set the stars alight,
all your days and every night.

And for you, dear reader.
Wonder is a mighty thing,
a weighty thing,
a truth-filled thing,
a lifting thing.
Given to buoy our hearts
and hopes and spirits.
Hang on to it, brave ones.
And more—hang on to the Giver of it.
Though darkness may fall and times grow hard,
hold fast to this given light.

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

James 1:17 NIV

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
We were the first that ever burst
Into that silent sea.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
from *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

prologue

London, England
May 1987

The smell of cinders permanently etched the abandoned Bessette Match Factory into the minds of all who passed. If asked about the factory, people rarely remembered the details of the brick towers, iron gates, and black-painted sign with carved letters, their gilded edges now gone . . . but they inevitably recalled the general specter of smoke and soot—a vestige of industrial revolutions and factory strikes and all manner of Victorian lore.

The towering roofline dwarfed the homes and shops that, over time, had popped up near the vacant building in old London Town. Yet not so long ago, for over a century, the Bessette Match Factory, Purveyors of Pure Light, had produced the metal hum of industry, issuing a steady stream of wooden sticks from its depths. Those sticks were then sent to the glass house. Not a house of glass, but a brick outbuilding whose walls housed the glass-grinding quarters. There the sticks were treated, their tips dipped in powdered glass, glass born of fire—and to fire they were destined to return.

Once they were cloaked in chemicals, the strike-anywhere matches were bundled and sent off to Market Street and Covent Garden and

on to the Lake District and the dales and the seaports circling the green island nation, until parlor fires and hearth fires and cooking fires and fires of camps all owed their warmth to that match factory.

But time swept through, as time does. Two world wars embedded themselves into the souls of the land, and with war came new innovations promised to cast out darkness. Great Britain learned to twist light bulbs into sockets and fill hand torches with batteries, until that steady stream of matches from the factory slowed to a trickle and then . . . to a stop. The Bessette Match Factory, Purveyors of Pure Light, gaped empty for a year . . . then two . . . then three decades.

Until one drizzly May morning in 1987, when Gerald W. Bessette, reluctant inheritor of "The Fossil," as the family had come to call the factory, visited the place with a land agent to see what could be done about selling.

Blinking into the darkness as they entered, he kicked something that caused him to stumble. He retrieved the culprit: a hand torch, the very thing that had led to the factory's demise. He flicked it on and by its tired beam saw blankets and boxes spread everywhere—evidence that people had moved into the old factory, set up camp on the lower levels.

Torch in hand, he had what he would later call his "light-bulb moment." If people were already living here, why not capitalize on that? Gerald W. Bessette left the factory that day with a vision of pounds paving his every step and set to transforming the place with the help of his family's coffers. A few dozen well-placed walls inside the expansive complex, bricks scrubbed clean of soot until they shone red against the grey sky, and clever wording to make the lofty ceilings sound like echoes of palace living instead of a thoroughfare of chilly drafts, and the Bessette Match Factory became Candlewick Commons: Fine Flats at Fulham.

Toward the end of the project he hired a local watchmaker, one Simon Claremont, to repair the broken tower clock that looked out over the concrete courtyard from above the arched entrance. And finally, on an unremarkable Tuesday afternoon almost a year

after Gerald started the reconstruction, the two men stood on the roof, waiting for the clock to strike three and prove itself repaired.

"This marks the end of an era," Gerald W. Bessette said, clapping the watchmaker on the back as if they were old school chums. "Workers once tuned their ears to this very tower to keep watch over the beginning and end of their toiling each day. And now"—the man spread his arms wide, as if unrolling the horizon of the whole city—"it marks the beginning of a new epoch. A time of . . ." He furrowed his brow, apparently having used up all his words to capture his grandiose swell of feeling. "A time of something really, really good."

With a nod, Simon walked to the clock, tightened a gear in his pensive way, and stood back, waiting. Seconds ticked on . . . and the clock struck three o'clock right on cue, limping its slightly off-kilter song into the world in between Big Ben's own declarations pealing down alleys and avenues across the Thames.

"Ha!" Gerald W. Bessette pumped his hands into the air in victory. "New life, my friend." He surveyed the brick building beneath them, its wings that cloistered three sides of a courtyard, and the small cottage standing squat and humble at the far corner of the land, beneath the property's lone tree.

"That'll be the caretaker's quarters," he said, pointing. "Glass grinder's cottage, it was. But now it'll be hearth and home to some lucky soul who'll keep this place hale and hearty."

Simon narrowed his eyes, his gaze landing upon the sleepy cottage with its dripping glass windows, squat brick walls, and arched black door. "A thing of beauty, that is."

And Gerald, whether swept up in the grandeur of his kingdom or recognizing a visionary and able man all wrapped up in one package, shrewdly offered the position of caretaker to his new friend, insisting that he could still keep his shop on Cecil Court, only a few minutes' walk away.

And so it happened that Simon Claremont, watchmaker, story keeper, last of a dying breed, came home to Candlewick Commons with his wife, Penny. And a little over a year later, as they

each neared forty, they added the surprise and joy of their lives: a wee bundle of a daughter.

"Lucy," he said, as they stood over her bassinet by the light of the fire on their first night home from hospital. "Her name is Lucy." He placed her in her cradle in the glass house, naming her *light* itself. For her life, they were sure, would mean something.

one

Candlewick Commons
London, England
2000

To step inside the watchmaker's cottage was to step outside of time. Lucy grew there, a waif of a thing and a solitary soul. Her mind was full of wonderings and wanderings. She spent her days at school, and her afternoons circling Candlewick's round courtyard fountain as she studied maps or read books.

Her evenings, however, were magic. Each day, as the sun began to set over Candlewick's towers and the stars began to appear, and flats across the courtyard were coming to life with the blue glow of tellies, she returned to the glass house and felt the rush of the city drop away. The cottage was a place where tales spun inside every dusty shaft of golden-hour sunlight. Where each evening, stories and riddles were told around flickering flames—crackling hearth fire in winter months, pirouetting candlelight in the summer.

They had no telly. She sometimes burned with embarrassment when she couldn't join in the conversations at school, but in the moment, in the warm glow of their cottage home, she did not mind. The mellowed wooden floors creaked with the rush of her feet, racing to turn off the lamps and leap into the embrace of the old stuffed armchair in the corner. Her young fingers wrapped around chipped mugs of chamomile or, on Sundays, sipping chocolate. "Monday is upon us," her mum would say with a conspiratorial wink. "We must prepare. Chocolate all 'round."

The watchmaker would invariably dust off his hands after laying

the fire, plant a kiss on his wife's rosy cheek, and look his daughter in the eye. "Make a friend today, Lucy?"

He asked every day. Sometimes it bothered her. She did not mind being alone. "Just wait," he always said. "The best of friends come in the unlikeliest ways." He always winked at Mum when he said it, and she'd swat him playfully with whatever she had in her hand—usually a dirt-smudged towel. She always seemed to be loosening the roots of her lilac plants.

They had met when she'd been up a tree—literally—at Kew Gardens, obtaining a sample of lichen for a study. She'd dropped the bit of green moss, and it had landed on Father's hat below, where he'd been studying a sundial. And the rest, as they said, was history.

But Lucy did not climb trees or study sundials. She did not have a "thing," as most people seemed to. She kept waiting to find it, looking out over the Thames, or over the sea when they were on rare holiday, wondering who she would be. Sometimes she searched in books, pulling them one at a time from the shelves of Candlewick's reading room.

One day, after returning from school, Lucy ran into the reading room, pulled out a book, and walked through the tunnel that led to Candlewick Commons' front doors. She always shivered as she passed through. Not so much from cold, as from the distinct impression that the tunnel was a portal to a dragon's lair, and its many windows reached story upon story into the sky.

Passing through the massive front doors, she entered the garden courtyard, where she liked to read while circling the fountain. "'All the world is a stage,'" Lucy read aloud, trying to keep from chucking the book into the fountain. Chopped up in strange lengths of lines, it made no sense to her. Whoever had given a pen to this man Shakespeare had made a massive mistake.

"All the world is *not* a stage," she argued right back at the book. And with her nose buried in the offending pages, she collided with something and only had time to think one thing on her way down—that something was *tall*.

Not having far to fall, she hit the ground before her counterpart, and when a boy landed next to her, all limbs and glasses, they looked at each other wide-eyed for a moment. When her haze lifted, Lucy made to speak, but the boy—dark-haired, brown-eyed, a year or two older than her ten years—beat her to it.

"Sorry," he said.

American. His *R*s dug deep into the word, mouth as wide as his eyes when he spoke it. She attributed it to his accent but would later come to learn it was just him. Wide-eyed, wide-worded, wide-hearted.

"Sorry," she echoed.

He stood, reaching first for her book, which had fallen near the fountain and was catching stray water droplets on its aged pages. He pushed his black-rimmed glasses up as he read the title. "*As You Like It*. What's that mean?"

Lucy shrugged. "I *don't* like it."

He seemed to remember her presence then, nearly tripping over his lanky legs all over again as he reached a hand to pull her up—the first instance of many times in their lives.

"Why are you reading it if you don't like it?"

Lucy blinked, embarrassed to admit she had just liked the way the gold words shone against its old blue spine on the shelf. And more than that, it had been on the upper shelf, meaning she had an excuse to climb the rolling ladder. All her schoolmates had swing sets in their gardens or nearby parks. She . . . she had a fountain in place of a merry-go-round and a rolling ladder instead of monkey bars.

But she was full of rebellion against Shakespeare's words and refused to play a part by giving some more logical excuse as to why she was reading this old play. So out of sheer defiance against the bard, she said to the boy, "I'll show you."

He followed her through the "dragon's lair," up the corridor to the north wing, and into the tower that had been made into a quiet gathering place for the community, complete with two wingback chairs and an oversized fireplace. She showed him the ladder and

the high row of Shakespeare volumes lined up like royal sailors in their navy blue and gold. She climbed dark rungs to replace the book, then came down and gestured for him to take a turn.

Pulling out the fourth volume, he tossed it down to her and pulled out another for himself. Planting themselves in the old wingback chairs facing the cold fireplace, they took turns reading random lines and allowing the other to spout off a retort.

"'You speak an infinite deal of nothing,'" the boy read.

"Yes, you do, Mr. Shakespeare," Lucy said. The boy grinned.

Lucy read, "'What's past is prologue.'"

"I think you mean anti-log," the boy said, and they dissolved into snickers over their own cleverness, neither knowing what a prologue was. This continued—one of them vaulting a line into the air, the other taking a crack at it like a cricket player—until the tall windows let in less and less light, the night calling them each home.

"Hey," the boy said, as he stopped at what she assumed was the long hallway to his flat. "What's your name?"

"Lucy."

"I'm Dashel," he said. "Dash." He walked away in exactly the opposite speed of his name, slow and thoughtful, looking over his shoulder and offering a clumsy wave.

The next night, when Lucy and her parents sat on the porch of their little brick home, eating cinnamon toast and reading from *Peter Pan* as the crickets began to sing, she saw that same thoughtful walk in silhouette, going round about the fountain.

"Sometimes stories are more real than you think," Father said, gesturing at the book in Mother's lap. "Take the lost boys, for instance." He tipped his head toward the fountain. "And take that boy. I thought he might just come 'round."

"You know him?" Lucy narrowed her eyes, looking between the boy and her father's laughing eyes.

"Who do you think told him he should go to the fountain yesterday?"

"But . . . you were at the watch shop then."

"Yes, but you weren't." He had a glimmer in his eyes, one that turned to compassion as he looked again at the boy who was casting furtive glances their way. "He spends every night alone in that flat. Lives there with an aunt . . ." He looked ready to say more, but a cloud crossed his face and he simply said, "She's not there much. So I may have told him in passing when to happen upon the fountain."

Lucy's heart beat quicker. "What exactly did you say he'd find, Dad?"

Her father shrugged mischievously. "A shooting star."

"Dad!" Her eyes grew wide in embarrassment.

"What? It's what you are, Lucy—light on the move. What else would you call that?"

Lucy groaned, dropping her face to her hands. Her father . . . Would he never tire of writing a fairy tale with his every word?

Mum tipped her head toward the fountain. "Why not go and invite him over, Lucy?" She had the prettiest hair—golden and wavy, where Lucy's was black and straight around her freckled face. Cruel irony for a girl named after light. The only thing they shared were wide eyes, "bluer than blue," Dad liked to say.

And so she invited the lost boy into their circle. That night, and the next, and the next—until it was just expected that Dash would be there for dinner each night. The brother she'd never had. The friend she hadn't known she'd needed.

two

London
2002

"Hey, Matchstick Girl," Dash said one night. He had learned that her bedroom was once the place where sticks became matches, and the name had stuck. "Did you hear about the supernova?" He was always asking about some astronomical wonder or another.

She gave him a sideways glance and a half smile, which she knew he would take to mean "no" as well as "please tell me everything you know about the supernova," and he proceeded to fill her head with scientific jargon she hardly understood until he finished rambling, out of breath and red in the face with excitement.

Pausing in the dragon's lair she tilted her head quizzically. "And now . . . for us mere mortals, if you please?" Dash was brilliant. And she suspected he had no idea at all.

"Lucy." He shook his head back and forth in mock disappointment, but she knew he relished this part most of all. "A supernova is a gigantic burst of light like you've never *seen* before."

"You haven't seen one, either."

"No, but I will, one day."

Once inside the cottage, Lucy's mother placed a mug of chocolate in Dash's one hand, and her father a screwdriver in the other, and they set to work building the telescope Lucy's father was coaching them through. As they worked, Simon the watchmaker told his riddles, and Penny the gardener propagated lilacs and schemed great schemes for fountains, follies, and all manner of courtyard beauty. For many years ago, Gerald W. Bessette had seen her green thumb, dubbed her the resident gardener, and increased their stipend.

At precisely seven o'clock, the watchmaker packed away his tools and opened a palm toward Lucy as if to give her the floor. She stifled a smile, put on her serious face, and pulled the watch on its long chain from her pocket. With a quick snap, she held it out for all to see and uttered her favorite words in all the world: "Let the story . . . begin."

And with that, the walls fell away from their narrow cottage and imagination swept them to far-off lands, the world around them transformed in Father's rugged cadence. The growl of the Underground beneath them tumbled straight into their tale as the sound of the waking dragon. Or the roll of a storm-tossed ship. Or once, even, the dwellers of an underground city.

"Pay attention now." When Dad said things like "Pay attention," he made it sound like an invitation.

Mum chimed in. "Pay attention. From the Latin *ad tendere*." She loved her Latin. She pronounced the scientific names of her plants as if they were magnificent treasures, not just clumps of soil and plucky seedlings clinging to her knuckles.

"What's that mean?" Lucy asked.

"It means *to stretch toward*." Mum slid a plate of lavender shortbread beneath their noses. "Pay attention to those cookies, too, will you?" She winked.

Dad cleared his throat. "As I was saying . . ."

"Oh, hush. Time enough for biscuits, too." Mum placed one in his hand.

He ate it in one giant bite and returned to his story. "Now, picture it, children." He ran his hand around a yellowing globe. "Here we are, this tiny island nation. Green and lush, surrounded by ocean. And here"—he slid his finger across the ocean, down, down, until he tapped the desert stretches of Australia—"nearly the bottom of the world, is another island nation. Forget the trees and grass of England. Imagine sand and rock the colour of rust. The only trees in sight are those made from metal, by man, for shade. The outback stretching as far as the eye can see."

Lucy felt parched, envisioning it.

"Here," Dad said, "light is born."

A myth, then. A legend of the sun's birth, or fire's origin, or . . .

"Coober Pedy," he said, leaning forward. "The underground city."

"Like Poseidon's palace?" Lucy remembered his story of jeweled iron and coral, twisting together into a fortress under the sea. She inched forward. "Or the Shadowlands, or the Deep Realm, or Bism!" Mum had finished reading them *The Silver Chair* only last week.

"Or the Dwarf Cities," Dash said, reaching for *The Fellowship of the Ring* and leafing through it. "The realm of the Longbeards. What was it called? Doom . . . Kad-doom . . .

"*Khazad-dûm*. Beneath the Misty Mountains. Yes, like all of those . . . but real."

Lucy felt reality push back against his claims. "But you said light was born there. We know that can't be real."

"Have a listen. There at the bottom of the world, you might go travelling across the desert. You might see signs of life. A lemonade stand sitting empty upon the stretching desert plains. Trucks abandoned, no driver in sight. A cross aboveground—but no church to be seen. Heat scorching the earth, dust storms tearing across the land with a mighty *roar*!"

Dash jerked his head up as Dad hollered the last word.

"Where are all the people?" Dad asked, palms up.

"Beneath ground," Dash said. "But why?"

"You are a scholar of the highest pedigree, Dashel Greene. They live there—they have their doors in the hillside and have dug homes for themselves right out of the earth. Hollowed bookshelves out of the limestone walls, vaulted intricate carved ceilings in their church to rival the artistry of the Sistine Chapel. Rooms and reaches and swimming pools and everything you can imagine, all there underground. But why, you ask?"

He waited. His watch tick-tocked, spinning a spell.

"Water runs down into the earth there. Seeks out all the cracks and chasms, the broken places, and sinks deep, bringing with it

mineral deposits. It lands in voids—empty places caused by faults, the shaking of the earth. Or places fossils once lay. The water does its good work, depositing something called silica, then just"—he raised his hands and wiggled his fingers, as if performing a magic trick—"vanishes."

"You mean evaporates," Lucy said. "The water evaporates."

"Isn't that what I said?" Father winked, his dark bushy brows scrunching. "And what do you suppose it leaves behind?"

"Mineral deposits," the girl said. "You told us."

"Yes, Lucy. But don't you miss the wonder, all covered up in the big words. Peel them back and see what lies beneath."

"Beneath the mineral deposits?" Dash furrowed his brow. "You said it yourself. Darkness and emptiness."

"Indeed there would be, if not for the miracle. The darkness is filled . . ."

Dad reached out his arm, beckoning his wife's hand. She laced her fingers into his, smiling and keeping his secret. She had heard this before.

He held her hand out toward them as Lucy held her breath, heart beating.

"With light," he whispered. He turned Mum's hand this way and that, letting the pale light from the room's solitary window skim over the gem on her finger. It lit into an explosion of colour beneath its cloudy surface.

"They are mining opals, there in Coober Pedy," he said. "Just think. In the dark, beneath the scorching heat and sandstorms above, they live cooled by the earth, and pull colour and light from its belly."

Mum laughed. "You make it sound so fantastical."

"Ah, but it is. You remember that, children. You mine for the colour and light in the dark, in the harshest terrain. Because these truths . . . as dazzling to the mind as they are . . . are only echoes."

"Echoes of what?" Lucy was always anxious to cut right to the heart of the matter.

"The truest story of all."

And so it went, night after night, story after story stitching Dash into the fabric of their family.

It seemed things would stay that way forever. That they would always be together like this. But something changed for Dash as time ticked by.

"Why do you study the stars, Dash?" Lucy had asked one day in the reading room when she was thirteen and he fifteen. They were sitting sideways on their chairs, legs draped over the wingbacks' arms, feet almost touching. And yet even so close, she felt the distance growing between them, attributed it to the galaxies holding so much more than she could.

He shrugged.

And she waited.

He turned a page.

She cleared her throat.

At last he swung his legs over the edge of the chair to sit properly. "I don't know," he said, looking at her, then out the window. "I guess . . . my relatives, they bounced me around so much when I was a kid after Mom and Dad . . ."

Here, Lucy sat up properly, crossing her legs in the chair, giving him her full attention. He never mentioned his parents.

"Wherever I moved after that, everything was different. Time zones. Weather. Buildings. Food. Music. All the things that tell a person what home is. It changed every time." He dropped his gaze then, staring at his black Converse shoes. "Except the stars."

Lucy ached for him. Wished he would have a home with them forever, that he wouldn't always have to wait to enroll for school each year until the last second, unsure of whether his aunt would continue to be based out of London or move on, as she often spoke of doing, to New Jersey.

"The stars are your home," Lucy said quietly, wanting him to know she recognized this truth he had shared and would hold it carefully. Maybe she was younger than him, but she could still understand. And her heart was for him.

He shrugged again. "Yeah," he said. "I guess."

He returned to his study of black holes, and she lifted her book to read again, too, but watched wide-eyed as the years continued on and Dash drifted farther from her still.

His teachers saw special things at work in his mind. Words like *genius*, *prodigy*, and *untapped potential* floated around. Lucy's mum had gone to parent-teacher meetings in his aunt's stead, for she traveled away from home more and more for business. Lucy attributed his intelligence to all that time alone spent in books, with entire universes as his constant companions.

They moved him up, made provision for him to begin university classes at sixteen—one of them being a class on Shakespeare.

One night, Lucy vaulted a Shakespeare quote at him—something about the stars—but instead of taking a crack at it in their usual fashion, he had just looked up at the stars and quoted one back.

"'I am constant as the northern star, of whose true-fixed and resting quality there is no fellow in the firmament.'"

His eyes were sad, then, as he turned to her. Her chest ached, and her hand wanted to reach out and take his—to squeeze away the loneliness of his pain-filled life. To banish the heartbreak of a father who had left him, as she'd eventually learned, of a mother who'd given herself to a substance that had taken her from him, and of the aunt who did not care to even know the nephew who had dwelled beneath her roof for a quarter of his life.

Something changed in that moment. Many things changed, actually, knocking into one another like the swirling lines of dominoes they had once filled the courtyard with. The breath went from Lucy's lungs as she saw before her not the lost boy, but the young man, whose gaze no longer lingered on his oversized feet through thick glasses but lifted to the horizon, to the sky above, searching.

And as he lifted his gaze to these new horizons, he was looking right over her. Past her.

She felt for the first time the irony of a love that had been there, subterranean, for longer than she'd known. Love that was already beyond her grasp.

She was too late in realizing, too young to do anything about it.

And too dim to compete with the stars that had captured his mind. As his professors put it, his bright future was limitless. Meanwhile, her teachers said things of her like "her time will come" and "still waters run deep" and "she will find her place."

The sadness in him gathered something fierce up inside of her. "Dash," she said.

"Hmm?" He didn't look at her. Only out the reading room window, past the city lights.

She didn't know what she should say. What could she offer him? "That Shakespeare quote . . . Do you mean you are constant? Because you are. There's nothing you can't do if you set your mind to it. I believe that, Dash. You can do anything."

It broke her young heart to say it, for she knew that in all likelihood, his limitless potential would take him far from her. Probably for good.

"No," he said. "It's just . . . alone. The star, I mean. In that quote."

"That's not true." She stood, her book thudding to the ground. "It's surrounded by lots of stars. You're surrounded. I mean . . . by us. I mean, you . . . and us." This was not going well. *Stop flopping over your words like a fish out of water.* She took a breath. "You're not alone, Dash. You're ours."

He did not look at her for a long while. And when he did, it was from a far-off place. "You have a good life, Lucy."

"*We* do, Dash. It's yours, too."

He shuffled his foot, his height no longer lanky but sure.

"You . . . live in a fairy tale."

The words slammed into her. "No I don't," she said, defensive for her, and for him. Fairy tales did not feel like this.

"It's not a bad thing," Dash said. "It's just, not many people live in a family like yours, Lucy. Stories by the fire and dinner under stars and all that. It's good. I mean, it's amazing. Hang on to it."

His eyes pleaded with her, and her ribs ached in silent reply.

"I-I will," she said, her voice small, with a sense that she'd been uninvited to some very deep place inside of Dash.

She wanted to knock him on the head, get him to understand that her family was his, that this life was his, too. But he had shadows in his past, and there was a part of him he did not want to let her into, judging by his abrupt jump to his feet and quiet stride away.

Their meetings changed after this. He studied the stars, then their galaxies. She fought the dreadful anchored feeling of being left behind, throwing her heart and mind the other direction—into the deep, deep depths of the sea. She pulled books of maritime history, shipwrecked mystery, ocean currents from the shelves and always, always the mystery of the lost ship HMS *Jubilee*, which had made an appearance in several of her father's stories, and whose disappearance gripped her imagination.

She hated the new distance between them, and hoped that somehow, someday he might let her back in.