

S O P H I E
H A N N A H

Did You
See Melody?


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For Lucy Hale, who has supported
and encouraged me from the very beginning

For the longest time, I thought my sister Emory was the lucky one. Sometimes I still feel that way. She died before they could kill her. No life at all is better than a life spent waiting to die.

The hardest thing is when the Kind Smiles promise I'll survive – not just another day or week, but until I'm an adult, maybe even until I'm old. If that's true . . . but it can't already be true if it hasn't happened yet. If it does in the future, I'll have to stop envying the sister I never met and start feeling guilty because I made it and she didn't.

I've got this far, but that means nothing. I can't allow myself to hope. Which I guess means I shouldn't believe the Kind Smiles.

Once the tiniest doubt creeps in, you start to wonder about everything.

When I'm alone, I whisper over and over, 'My name is Melody Chapa, my name is Melody Chapa.' It makes me feel worse – as if the girl trying to convince me must have a different name – though there's no one there but me.

9 October 2017

If I could turn and run, I would. Run back home, however long it took. Six months, probably – and I'd need to be able to sprint across the Atlantic Ocean. My legs twitch with the urge to race back to Patrick, Jess and Olly and pretend none of this ever happened.

Not that anything has really happened yet. So far all I've done is fly and land.

I'm standing outside a café called Lola Coffee in the arrivals hall at Phoenix Sky Harbor airport in Arizona, waiting for the hire-car man. All around me are people in dark suits, brightly coloured T-shirts with underarm sweat stains, crumpled linen dresses, checked shorts with bulging pockets. I spot the man who had the seat across the aisle from me on the second of my two flights. He snored most of the way from Chicago, where I changed planes, to Phoenix, oblivious to the flight attendants tactfully lifting his belly to check his seatbelt was fastened.

One by one, the other passengers stride confidently out of the airport, or else they linger to hug loved ones who have come to meet them. They all sound relieved and happy as they say, 'Let's go home' in a dozen different ways.

No one's saying it to me. As an experiment, I whisper the words to myself. They sound like a threat.

Breathe. Stop thinking crazy thoughts. Be patient. Count away the panic. 1, 2, 3, 4 . . .

The hire-car man is thirty-five minutes late. I try to persuade

myself this might be a good thing. It means I'm off the hook. I can decide not to wait any longer and I won't be letting him down. If I want to book myself on the next flight back to Heathrow, I'm in the perfect place. There's nothing stopping me apart from a decision I made.

The right decision. Just because it's hard doesn't make it wrong.

Where the hell is he? He promised he'd be here. I've paid for the car already. It's 10.05 p.m. Arizona time and just gone six in the morning in England. I've missed a night's sleep, which probably explains why I can feel myself swaying from side to side in my attempt to stand still. Driving on the wrong side of the road for the first time in my life is going to be fun. Assuming I ever get something to drive.

I don't want to think that I've ruined everything before I've got anywhere or achieved anything, but it's a conclusion I have to keep batting away as I wait and wait and still no one appears. I should have hired a car the way most people do, from one of the companies at Phoenix airport, but they were all so expensive and I'd spent bone-chilling amounts of money on this, whatever it is I'm doing, already. So I opted instead for the suspiciously good-value internet advert with the cheesy typeface: 'The best cars, dirt cheap, delivered to wherever you are!'

I pull my phone out of my bag and stare at it. Should I switch it out of flight-safe mode so that I can text the hire-car man?

No. Out of the question. I wouldn't have the willpower to ignore all the texts from Patrick and Jess, Jess especially. She and I are the proficient communicators of the family. She, more than Patrick, would know how to craft a message that would leave me no choice but to reply. Olly won't have sent a text. He'll assume there's nothing he can do, that Patrick and Jess will be saying all that needs to be said.

For some reason it's the thought of Olly doing nothing that

fills my eyes with tears. *Mum's gone. Oh, well. She might come back. I'll wait and see, I suppose.*

I throw my phone back in my bag, hands shaking.

Maybe I should go for a walk to calm myself down. There's a corridor of shops branching off from the main arrivals hall. I can see a bookshop called Hudson and something called Canyon News. I can't imagine summoning the concentration required to read but I might feel differently in a few days, once I've had time to adjust to the idea that I've done the one thing, the only thing, that I would never do.

I should buy a book. Definitely. To read by the pool at the resort. Pools plural – there are several, according to the website. Also, if I want the hire-car man to turn up, I ought to walk away. As soon I move from this spot, he will appear – isn't that the way life works? I'll walk four paces and turn round and there he'll be, holding up a sign with my name on it.

Either that or there are no secret rules governing our interactions with other people, and we'll miss each other. He'll leave and I'll end up taking a cab to the resort, but only after I've wasted another hour waiting for a man who's been and gone.

I sigh and look at my phone again. Surely I could go out of flight mode for the twenty seconds it would take to ring him? If I did that, and didn't allow myself to look at how many texts were waiting for me . . .

Impossible. Once I knew for certain that I had messages, I'd have to read them.

With my thumb, I press the 'Pictures' icon on my phone's screen and scroll through my photos until I find my favourite one of Jess and Olly. They're sitting on the old tractor in the garden of the Greyhound pub, looking so perfectly like themselves. Olly's mouth is open and his arms are in the air, mid-gesture. He's trying to explain to me how best to hit-marker a trick shot. As I took the photo, I said, 'How to what a *what?*'

Jess is sitting in front of Olly: straight-backed, chin tilted upwards. She's grinning at my bewilderment from her position of superiority, as someone who speaks fluent Olly. Seconds after I took the photo, he sighed and slid off the tractor with a resigned, 'Never mind, Mum. You wouldn't understand.' Jess said, 'Of course she wouldn't. Not everyone is a member of the sniping community. In a *game*, Mum – not in real life,' she added, seeing my worried expression. 'Olly's not really a sniper.'

I press my eyes shut. No way for any tears to squeeze out, however hard they try.

Get a grip, Cara.

My own stupid fault for looking at family photos. Jess and Olly will be fine at home with Patrick. Am I seriously going to spend the next fortnight mooning over their pictures as if I'm not going to see them for years? It's only two weeks. Two short insignificant weeks. I'll be back home before we all know it.

I should put my phone away and not think about it again. Instead, I swipe right with my finger until I'm staring – for the three-hundredth time since I set off – at the last photo I took before leaving home. It's an aerial view of the note I left on the kitchen table.

My family won't know that the version they read was my fourth attempt. I tried to explain too much the first three times. In the end, hating everything I'd written, I decided to keep it short and simple. 'Dear Patrick, Jess and Olly, I've gone away for a while. I didn't tell you before I left because I was scared you'd try and stop me. I need time alone to sort a few things out in my head. Please don't be angry. I'll be back on Tuesday, 24 October. I love you all very much. Cara/Mum xxx'

It's comforting to see it again in black and white: the date I'll be home. That's why I keep looking, I think. Thank goodness I took this photo before I set out for Heathrow. I nearly didn't bother. Without concrete evidence in the form of a picture,

I would by now have convinced myself I'd written something terrible that I didn't mean and could never take back. *Dear Patrick, Jess and Olly, You have finally succeeded in driving me away. It will serve you right if you never see me again . . .*

Behind me, I hear a chair leg scrape against a hard surface. I turn and watch a man lower himself into a seat at one of the café's tables. He's young – early to mid-twenties – with dark hair and a wispy beard, baggy terracotta-coloured jeans with turn-ups, sandals with running-shoe soles, and a grey T-shirt that says 'Rock the Hole' next to a picture of a hole on a golf course with a flag protruding from it. On the table in front of him there's a sign with my name on it, though he's spelled my surname wrong: Burroughs instead of Burrows. He's staring straight ahead, avoiding eye contact with me as if the two of us are nothing to do with each other.

For a second, I wonder why he hasn't worked out that the only other person anywhere near Lola Coffee must be the woman he's supposed to be meeting there. Then I get it: his brief doesn't include working anything out. All he's paid to do is turn up at the airport with the car I've hired and a sign with something resembling my name on it. Both of those things he's done; why should he try harder?

Patrick, my husband – whose official title should be 'Patron Saint of the Can't Be Arsed to Do Any More Than the Bare Minimum' – would defend Mr Rock the Hole for sure, using a version of his famous-in-our-family cutlery-divider defence. Shortly after we got married, I tactfully pointed out to him that he might in future return clean forks to the fork section of the cutlery drawer, knives to the knife section, spoons to the spoon area, and so on, instead of throwing them all in haphazardly and letting them land wherever. He sighed and said, 'Cara, I put away a *lot* of cutlery. Mostly things end up where they're supposed to, but if something falls into the wrong bit, I'm not

going to *dig it out and move it to a different section.*' He said it as if doing this would be anyone's definition of insanity. Approximately twelve years later, his perfectionist daughter got sick of reaching into the cutlery drawer for a yoghurt spoon and pulling out a steak knife instead, and gave him a savaging he still hasn't forgotten. Ever since, our forks, knives and spoons have known their places.

I blink back new tears – no more thoughts of home allowed, not tonight – and introduce myself to Rock the Hole, who neither apologises for his lateness nor offers to help carry my luggage.

It's warm outside, verging on hot. I remember from the website that my hire car is supposed to have something called 'climate control', which I'm hoping means air conditioning. It must be the same thing. I know next to nothing about cars, apart from the absolute basics of how to drive them.

The air here smells nothing like the way it does at home. I wonder if this is a specific Arizona smell. Does New York smell different, and Chicago? I've never been to America before so I have no way of knowing.

The car is a Range Rover, black and glossy with three parallel silver stripes on each side. It looks and smells brand new. We sit in the front – me in the driver's seat and Rock the Hole next to me – to do the paperwork. His handwriting is a bit like Patrick's: incomplete circles for 'o's, 'a's and 'e's, like broken links in a chain. I wonder how surprised he'd be if I smiled knowingly and said, 'I can imagine what your cutlery drawer looks like.'

Having covered the basics of how the car works, he starts to describe, in a bored drawl, its unnecessary features: eight different colour options for the interior lighting; retractable sun-roof; memory buttons numbered M1 to M4, so that four driver-seat positions can be stored.

Hasn't he noticed I'm alone? The car might be ready and able to remember four people, but it'll have to make do with only one. It's a shame – Olly would love these lights that are orange one minute and bright green the next.

You can still go home. You can step out of the car, and . . .

'I need you to do me a favour,' I say to Rock before I have a chance to change my mind. Pulling my phone out of my bag, I hand it to him and say, 'Keep this for me. Give it back when I drop the car off in two weeks. I'll pay you an extra hundred dollars – fifty now, fifty when I get my phone back.'

'Okay.' He shrugs, not even a tiny bit curious.

Now that he's agreed, I'm not sure I want to do it. How many decisions made and immediately regretted can a woman be expected to stand by in one week?

Rock holds out his hand. I throw my phone at it harder than I need to. *Take that, doubts.*

It's the only way. If I have it with me, I'll crack in a few hours, or a few days, and read all the texts that are waiting for me. I won't be strong enough to resist the pleas for me to come home. 'Thank you,' I mumble.

'Fifty bucks, lady.' Rock holds out his hand again.

I give him the money, wishing I'd offered an extra ten dollars for the right to say, 'You will look after it properly, won't you?' I didn't, so I keep my mouth shut. I'm going to have to trust him, or stop caring about what happens to my phone – one or the other.

Finally he says, 'Okay, you're all done.' He gets out of the car and slams the passenger door shut without saying goodbye.

I've never felt more alone in my life. Or more awake. A fizzing mix of fear and excitement, combined with the underlying exhaustion, makes me feel dizzy and nauseous. I open my bag, pull out the driving directions I printed last night and unfold them. 'Ready to go,' I say to nobody.

This is truly happening. I, Cara Burrows from Hertford, England, am on my way to the five-star Swallowtail Resort and Spa in the foothills of Camelback Mountain, Arizona. Without my family's knowledge or permission. To most people, I would look like a woman setting off on the holiday of a lifetime, not one escaping from an unbearable situation.

If Patrick and the children are angry when I next see them, if they scream and shout at me, I'll survive. So will they.

That's why I'm here. It's the only reason. I need us to survive. All of us.



It's ten past midnight by the time I arrive at the resort. The SatNav on my hire car is broken, it turns out – and I had to pull over twice to memorise the next stage of my directions. At one point, I took a wrong turn, thinking, 'This is probably going to be wrong. I bet it's wrong.' It was twenty minutes before I could safely turn round and get back on track, and then I promptly got lost again and ended up driving God knows where for another forty minutes. A journey that should have taken me half an hour took nearly two hours.

Now, finally, I'm here, and I hardly dare breathe. I can no longer tell myself I'm on my way somewhere. This is it. I've arrived. Whatever's supposed to happen at the Swallowtail Resort and Spa – the magic, indefinable thing that will make all my problems go away – could and should and, please God, *will* start happening now.

Soon. Not right now as in immediately this second. Setting unrealistic goals is only going to make me feel worse, and I'm pretty sure no life-changing revelation has ever happened in a car park.

I pull into a space, throw open the door, twist my body round

so that my legs are outside the car, and look out at the night. Now that I'm here and the adrenaline rush of handling a strange car on the wrong side of the road in an unknown country has drained away, the tiredness I managed to keep at bay while driving takes hold of me, weighing me down, making patches of my skin ache.

The night sparkles with so many stars it looks staged, like a set in a theatre. I never see any at home. Never have time to look. I stare at the dark outline of what I assume is Camelback Mountain. 'I can't see you yet, but I know you're beautiful,' I whisper, and start to cry.

Cut it out right now, Cara. Get to your room, and then you can do it all: cry, get something to eat, have a relaxing bath, sleep, wish you hadn't given your phone to a rude stranger . . .

Getting to my room might be more of a challenge than I anticipated. The scale of the car park suggests the Swallowtail resort might be the size of a small town. It could be bigger than Hertford, come to think of it. As well as a sign saying 'Main Hotel Building/Reception', I've already seen several suggesting there are lots of different residential areas here: 'Copper Star Villas', 'Monarch Suites', 'Swallowtail Village', 'The Residence', 'Camelback Casitas'.

The sign I saw for reception was quite a way back. I close my eyes, thinking of the effort it will take to wheel my suitcases back to that point – and God alone knows how long a walk it will be from there to my room. I'm not sure I can do it – not tonight at least. I could fall asleep here quite happily, with the car door open to the warm night. Maybe one of the M1 to M4 driver-seat-position buttons contains the memory of how to stretch out flat, like a bed.

The sound of an engine makes me sit up straight. Is it another guest arriving? The noise moves nearer, then stops. No, it wasn't a car. The wrong pitch, and not loud enough. A lawnmower,

maybe – one of those big ones you sit on and drive around if you’ve got a big field to trim. But at this time of night?

I hear footsteps coming closer. A man’s voice says, ‘Ma’am? I’ll bet you’re the lady I’ve been waiting for: Mrs Cara Burrows from Hertford, England. Last guest of the night. Am I right?’

The sound of his voice makes me feel so much better. It’s the opposite of Rock the Hole’s indifferent drone. I think it might be the most reassuring voice I’ve ever heard. Disembodied, in the dark, it makes me smile before I’ve seen the face it’s attached to.

‘Yes, I’m Cara Burrows. Sorry, I’m later than I said I’d be.’

‘No need whatsoever to apologise, ma’am. I’m just real glad you’re here now. Welcome to Arizona, and to the Swallowtail Resort and Spa. You’re gonna have a beautiful stay with us, I can promise you that. All our guests do!’

Of course they do. When you’re paying that much . . . I push away the thought I’ve managed to avoid so far: how much all this is going to cost. A third of the savings it’s taken Patrick and me fifteen years to build up. Oh, God. It’s worse when I think of it like this, worse than the specific sum of money. So irresponsible: a whole third.

I could have chosen somewhere less luxurious to stay and at least five times cheaper, could have booked a week instead of a fortnight. Could have, should have . . .

I didn’t, though. This is what I did. This was my choice. The best place I could find, money no object.

I wouldn’t have thought it was possible to feel proud and ashamed at the same time, but it is. Guilt and defiant pride have been battling it out inside me since I made the booking.

I economised around the edges, not only by choosing a dodgy-looking car-hire firm, but also on the flights – one change in both directions, saving nearly seven hundred pounds – and I regretted it. If I’d had any self-respect I’d have spared myself the three pointless hours at Chicago’s O’Hare airport.

I hear a click. Torchlight turns the night yellow. The man with the best voice in the world leans down and smiles at me. He's fifty-odd, bald, and wearing a blazer with a 'Swallowtail Resort and Spa' badge on it, and five gold stars. Beneath this is another badge that says, 'Diggy'. The skin of his face is craggy-looking in places and pouchy in others, as if it was designed to include distinct hard and soft zones.

'Pleasure to meet you, ma'am. I'm Diggy – that's what everyone calls me. Now, much as I'd be happy to show you round tonight, it's pretty dark, and I'm guessing you're tired and maybe you'd rather leave it till tomorrow? So why don't we get you to reception? I've got a club car here – drive you right there. No need to walk at Swallowtail if you'd rather get a ride! Tomorrow, once you're rested, give the concierge's desk a call, tell them you're ready for Diggy's tour. I'll come pick you up from wherever you're staying, and show you everything you need to see. How does that sound? The Diggy-mobile will be at your service!'

'Brilliant. Thank you.'

I watch, amazed, as he picks up my luggage as if it's weightless and slings it into the back of a sort of golf buggy. It has silver wheels, white leather seats, open sides, and a kind of cream canvas awning on the top. I climb aboard. Diggy switches off his torch and leaps into the driver's seat, saying, 'All aboard the Diggy-mobile!'

I haven't got a watch or my phone so I don't know how long it takes us to trundle along to reception, but it's between five and ten minutes – out of the car park and along a series of winding roads, with little golden-white globes of light behind cobbled borders on both sides to point the way in the dark. We pass low houses – some facing us straight on, some turned to the side – with curved edges, terraces, balconies, neat front gardens behind low walls. I catch a glimpse of moonlight

reflected in water, lean out of the club car and see a small square swimming pool behind one of the villas. All kinds of shrubbery sprouts haphazardly at the side of each curvy street. I wasn't expecting it; I've always thought of Arizona as dry and desert-like. As we pass a cluster of tennis courts on the right, a rotating sprayer shoots a refreshing mist into the club car from the left: a haze of water dust that lands on my face. Sprinklers: that's what makes all this lush greenery possible.

There are cacti too, lots of them – some that look like eruptions of spikes, in large pots; others, twice my height or more, protruding from flat gravelled-over areas, as if they've grown out of the stone. These tall ones stand in clusters. Some have arms that look raised, as if they're waving. Diggy points this out to me at the very moment that I'm thinking it. 'They look like they're saying hello and welcome, don't they? You know how long it takes one of those arms to start growing? Seventy to a hundred years. Seventy minimum.'

We pass a fountain and some wide steps, a row of high palm trees with fairy lights wound around their trunks all the way to the top, glowing pale pink and pale blue. Lower down, I can see the corner of an illuminated rectangle of vivid turquoise that must be one of the resort pools. A few metres further on, when I turn and look the other way, I see two tall cast-iron lamp-posts topped by large shallow bowls that have been set alight. Actual fire is rising from them: orange flames rising to a point, making a glowing triangle on each side of . . . what? It looks like some sort of entrance.

'Wow,' I murmur.

'Yeah, that's our maze,' says Diggy. 'Make sure to get lost in it while you're here – it's one of Swallowtail's most popular features. You only get the flames at night, though. Which doesn't make it any easier to find your way out than in the daytime, I gotta warn you.'

Eventually the club car stops outside a building that's much bigger than any of the individual houses we've passed. Its façade is a half-circle, with two long arm-like wings branching out from it.

'Here we are, ma'am,' says Diggy. 'I'll introduce you to Riyonna. She'll take real good care of you.'

He strolls towards the building with my cases. Watching him, it dawns on me that I need to walk too. My limbs have been asleep and soon start to ache from the shock of having to move again after bobbing along in the club car. I wish the resort had the indoor equivalent, taking guests all the way to their rooms.

I follow Diggy into a spacious lobby area that's all red marble with thin white and black veins in it. I might see it differently in the morning, but tonight it makes me think of the inside of a body. There are tall pot plants positioned in every corner – more like little trees – with rubbery dark green leaves and sturdy brown trunks. They look too alert for the way I feel.

Behind the wooden reception desk there's a wide-shouldered black woman, about my age, with a big smile and the kind of braids that I'm pretty sure are called 'cornrow'. Like Diggy, she has the Swallowtail badge on her jacket, and one that says, 'Riyonna Briggs'. She seems genuinely delighted to see me, and I hope she doesn't say anything too kind or solicitous. I'd burst into tears if she did.

I smile weakly as I hand over my passport and credit card. Each movement is difficult; every impression a blur. I knock something on the desk with my elbow, and it hurts. Looking down, I see it's a tiny bronze Buddha statue, sitting cross-legged beside some kind of weird, messy plant. Is it a cactus? It doesn't look hard-edged or prickly enough; it looks as if someone's cooked a load of green beans and then tipped them haphazardly into a yellow ceramic pot.

The Buddha, facing straight ahead as if determined to ignore

the weird bean-cactus, has a pile of ivory-coloured Swallowtail resort business cards balanced on the upturned palms of his hands as if to say, 'Spend your money here and all the wisdom will be yours.' It's clever marketing, I suppose, but it makes me shudder. Or perhaps it's the exhaustion that's doing that.

Riyonna's eyes are full of curiosity, and for a moment I'm afraid she's going to lean forward and say, 'So what's wrong with you? Life falling apart? Run away from home?'

How do most guests behave who arrive in the middle of the night? I can't imagine they're full of beans and eager to chat.

Luckily, Riyonna keeps it businesslike. I try to look as if I'm listening as she tells me about WiFi codes and breakfast times. I don't need to know. Sleep is the only thing I care about. *Tell me about sleep.*

Diggy takes his leave, after repeating his promise to show me around tomorrow.

No. The day after. Please. I can't promise to wake up in time for tomorrow.

Riyonna folds a piece of cardboard in half and inserts a plastic key card into the slit. I was wrong – she's not my age. More like ten years older: late forties. There are lines around her eyes that she's tried very hard to cover with make-up.

I nod automatically at everything she says, not really listening, and start slightly as she moves out from behind the reception desk, holding my room key in her hand. She's short – shorter than I imagined her to be, even in her high stiletto heels. Strange. Sitting down, she looked taller; it must have been because of her broad shoulders.

'I . . . you don't need to come with me. Really. Thanks,' I manage to say.

'Are you sure? Your room's right here in the main hotel building, so it's not far. We like to check guests are happy with their rooms.'