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# ABSENTEE AUNTS

Four months later – 2 October

‘I don’t have an aunt.’

Denizen Hardwick stared down sceptically at the note in his hand. That was the way he looked at most things and he had a face built for it – thin cheeks, a long nose, eyes the colour and sharpness of a nail.

The note, left on his bed in Dormitory 4E that morning, was the object of a special amount of scepticism, so much so that he was surprised it hadn’t started to char at the edges.

**YOUR AUNT HAS BEEN IN CONTACT. SHE IS  
TAKING YOU AWAY FOR A FEW DAYS. YOU WILL  
BE COLLECTED AT 6 P.M. PACK A BAG.  
DIRECTOR ACKERBY**

‘I don’t have an aunt,’ Denizen said again. It didn’t sound any less stupid the second time round.

‘Well, that’s not exactly true,’ said his best friend, Simon Hayes, also staring at the note. ‘You just don’t have any aunts you’re aware of.’

Dormitory 4E was a long room with a high ceiling built

for spiderwebs. Massive windows invited the weak October sunlight in to die, their frames rattling occasionally with the wind.

There were twelve beds, and this particular lunchtime ten of them were empty. Most of Crosscaper's orphans were outside because sunlight in October was a rare gift and they hadn't been given a mysterious note to stare at.

Denizen ran a hand through his shaggy red hair. He was small for his age and, barring a late growth spurt, he would be small for every other age as well. The freckles that swarmed his cheeks and nose in summer had now faded in winter to lost and lonely things, all but the one on his lip.

He hadn't been aware you could have a freckle on your lip. Maybe Denizen was the only person a lip freckle had ever happened to. Maybe it was a mark of destiny, singling him out for great things . . . but he doubted it. Denizen Hardwick wasn't the kind of person to believe in special circumstances – in distinguishing freckles or meaningful birthmarks or fortuitous aunts.

Denizen Hardwick was a sceptic.

'I don't have a – Look, if I do have an aunt, where has she been for the last eleven years?'

'Can you get any clues from the paper?' Simon asked. The new library had a collection of detective novels, and Simon was very interested in what one could learn from the smallest details.

Gamely, Denizen inspected the note. Unfortunately, all he could see was that it was on yellow paper, which meant it had come straight from the director's desk and was

therefore not to be argued with, in the same way you didn't argue with gravity. Apart from that, it was inconsiderately devoid of clues.

'No,' he said. 'Sorry.'

Simon's and Denizen's beds were beside each other and had been since they had both been three years old in Dormitory 1A downstairs. That had started their friendship. Furtive book trades at night, an inquisitive nature in common and a shared dislike of sports had continued it.

There were a lot of things Denizen liked about Simon, but first and foremost was how he radiated calm the way the sun radiated heat. It was impossible to be annoyed at Simon. It was impossible to be annoyed *around* Simon. A conversation with Simon had the soothing effect of the cool side of the pillow.

Through either blind luck or best-friend osmosis, Simon had snagged all the height Denizen lacked. His giant winter coat did little to bulk out his slender frame and, splayed as he was across his bed, he looked like a crow in a scarf.

'But why now?' Denizen said. 'Why is she getting in contact now?'

'Maybe it took her ages to find you,' Simon said. 'Or she was waiting for you to be older?' He thought for a moment. 'Maybe she travels a lot and you have to be old enough to travel with her. Or to be left on your own in her giant house.'

'Giant house?'

'You never know.'

'I doubt she has a giant house.'

'It's not impossible. She could be a super-rich spy. It

would explain where she's been all this time. Or maybe she's a chocolatier.'

Denizen rolled his eyes.

'A spy-chocolatier,' Simon insisted, grinning. 'Solving international crises through the subtle application of nougat.'

Part of Denizen knew that he should probably be more excited. A relative appearing out of nowhere to take him away? Most of the other children and teenagers in Crosscaper had spent their entire lives dreaming of something like this.

That was what worried Denizen. Dreams were tricky things. He'd only ever really had the one, at least until the past couple of months.

Since the summer, his sleep had been haunted by Crosscaper's dark corridors, a figure in white drifting down them like a moth made of glass. In the dream, the figure had lingered, its milk-skinned hands caressing the door of each dormitory in turn before finding his and slipping in . . .

He shook his head. Definitely not a dream he wanted spilling over into real life.

Maybe Simon was right. Maybe his aunt was a chocolate-spy. Maybe Denizen's life was about to change. Less scepticism. More weaponized hazelnut creams.

His bed creaked as he sat down heavily on it. Like everything in Crosscaper, it was falling apart. The orphans relied on cast-offs and donations, and since neither Simon nor Denizen fell into the realm of average height they had the worst of it – more hold-me-togethers than hand-me-downs, skewered with a fortune of safety pins so that when the boys moved they clicked like ants.

The creaking of his bed didn't worry Denizen – there were too many books underneath it to let him fall.

One of Simon's fictional detectives had commented that you could tell a lot about a person from the contents of his bookshelf, but an inspection of Denizen's collection would simply tell you he loved words. *Love on the High Seas* sat next to *The Politics of Renaissance Italy*. (Crosscaper's books were all donations and it had bothered Denizen for years, wondering who donated books on ancient politics to an orphanage.) And, while some volumes were more well-thumbed than others, each one had been read until the covers frayed.

*My aunt might have books*, Denizen thought, and immediately quashed the idea before it had a chance to grow.

He was not going to a new family. He was not going to a new life. He was being brought out so a stranger could have a look at him. If afterwards this mysterious aunt decided she wanted to meet him again, fine, but he was not getting his hopes up just to be disappointed.

And the first thing she was going to do was answer his questions.

Simon hadn't brought it up. He hadn't needed to – he knew Denizen too well. Denizen was one of only a few children in Crosscaper who didn't know anything about their parents. Oh, he knew their last name. He knew that they were . . . Well, he knew he was in an orphanage for a reason, but he had no idea what that reason was.

Simon did. His parents had been killed in a car crash. Mr Colford, their English teacher, drove Simon to their

grave on the anniversary of their deaths every year. Michael Flannigan, two beds down from Simon on the left, had lost his parents in a fire. Samantha Hastings's mum had died of . . . Well, she wouldn't say, and the unspoken rule of Crosscaper was that, if you didn't want to share, nobody had a right to pry.

But Denizen simply didn't know.

It was the only other dream he'd ever had. A woman – small like him, though it was hard to tell because he was looking up at her. Her arms were round him. She smelled of strawberries. Her song . . . something about the dark . . .

Denizen didn't remember his father at all.

Simon flashed him a faint, sympathetic smile. He knew exactly where Denizen's thoughts were.

'Listen,' he said as the bell announced the end of lunch, 'I should get down to class. I'll tell Ms Hynes you can't make it because you have to pack.'

'That'll take like ten minutes. I don't need to –'

'You're right,' Simon said. 'I'll tell her you'll be along shortly. Maybe you could ask for some extra homework to take with you.'

'Ah,' Denizen said, grinning. 'Cool.'

They stared at each other awkwardly.

'It's just a day or two,' Denizen said. 'I'll probably be home tomorrow.'

'Sure,' Simon said. 'Yeah. Look. Enjoy yourself, all right? Have a chat with her. Try not to overthink things. Let her spoil you if she feels guilty about not being around. See what you can find – yeah? Best of luck.'

Denizen loved words, but that didn't mean he could always find the ones he needed. Instead, he wrapped his arms round Simon in a tight, quick hug.

And then he was alone, note crumpled in his hand.

Outside, the courtyard quieted. Denizen sighed. As nice as it was to take a few hours off class – he wouldn't have been able to concentrate anyway, the phrase *absentee aunt* bouncing round his skull like a bee in a jar – he wouldn't have minded some company. Now he was alone with his thoughts, and he couldn't help but turn them over and over in his head.

Denizen Hardwick had an aunt. So where had she been all this time?

Maybe she hadn't known he existed. Families fell out all the time – that had been the main theme in both *Love on the High Seas* and *The Politics of Renaissance Italy* – so maybe she was only tracking him down now. Was she his mother's sister or his father's? What had happened that had made them lose touch?

His stomach knotted. There was so much he wanted to ask her. Would she cry? He wasn't going to cry – that would be terrible. But she might. Were there going to be hugs? Would that be weird?

Denizen tried to imagine what it would be like. The woman would be . . . small, he supposed, maybe with his eyes and hair. His imagination had very little to go on. A hazy image formed in his mind of a chubby woman with red hair, her features a strange mix of his and those of Crosscaper's cook, Mrs Mollins – the most auntish woman he knew.

In his imagination, the hybrid Mollins-aunt fell to her knees and started sobbing when she saw him. Denizen squirmed. That image just made him uncomfortable. Then again, if awkward aunt-hugging led to answers about his past . . .

As far as Denizen was concerned, 6 p.m. couldn't come quick enough.