

Memories

The clunk of our post-box sounds from outside my window, and I peer through the glass as the post-man chugs away. I slam my book down, dog-earring the page even though Dad tells me not to, and run downstairs. Dad is in the kitchen, bent over the stove with a curious smell emitting from the saucepan. Dad's a librarian, and not a cook. Believe me, he's tried.

I unlock the door and slip outside, taking a deep breath of fresh air. I slide my fingers through the gap in the post-box and pull out three slips of paper. One is a newspaper, the other is a formal-looking letter addressed to Dad, and the third is...for me. It's plain, with a neatly handwritten address. And my name, carefully curled letters-Ava Merrett. No sender name. Heart beating fast, I tuck the letter into my jeans pocket and shut the post-box, running inside.

Dad has his back turned at the kitchen bench, and his shoulders are hunched. It's not until I take a step closer that I realise he's crying.

"Dad, what's wrong?" I run forwards, putting a tentative hand on his shoulder. He looks like he wants to pull away, but he doesn't. A very burnt-looking bowl of mac-and-cheese sits before him.

"It's just...I can't cook, Ava. I can't do it, and she...she used to make it so well..." I feel a sharp pang somewhere deep inside of me when I hear the catch in his voice.

"You mean...Mum?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper. He nods, but flinches and pulls away from me. It hasn't even been a year since Mum died. The pain is still raw.

"Dad, I-I can help you make it, we can look at her old recipes-we can-" My voice raises, excited by the prospect of it. Remembering Mum. But Dad rubs his eyes and shakes his head.

"No, Ava. It doesn't matter. Do you hear me? It doesn't matter!" he yells, a crazed look in his eyes. "I can't do it. I can't..." he drifts off. I take a step back, wary. He runs a hand through his hair.

"Sorry, sweetie. I...never mind. I'm working late tomorrow, so I'll just...go get some study done." And then he is gone. I watch him walk off down the hallway, and then I stare at the closed bedroom door. Sighing, I lay the newspaper and letter on the bench, before scraping the mac and cheese into the compost and cleaning the bowl.

He's been doing this a lot lately. But I don't know how to get back the dad I used to know, the dad who used to joke around and come home from work at normal times and play basketball with me. But I get the feeling that that dad is buried deep, and it's going to take some digging to get him back.

I am sitting cross-legged on my bed when I remember the letter. Pulling it out of my pocket, I smooth any creases and stare at the seal. For some reason, I feel scared to open it. *Come on, Ava, it's just a letter.* My curiosity wins and I rip the paper. As I open the letter, a ticket falls out. My breath catches. It's a circus ticket.

In huge, gold, swirly lettering, it reads: The Exquisite Circus. The circus Mum used to perform at. The circus Mum ended up in hospital for. The circus that everyone-her parents, Dad, her friends-disapproved her working at. The circus that brings back memories. Haunting memories. Hands trembling, I shove the letter into the bottom drawer of my desk, piling clothes on top of it until I can't see it at all. Breathing out slowly, I flop onto my bed. Who could have sent that letter? How did they know about Mum? And most importantly-why did they send it?

I try to push the thoughts out of my head and focus on something else. I pick up my phone, knowing that we're probably not going to eat dinner tonight if I don't order something, and stare at the little loading symbol in the corner of the screen as I open up our favourite pizza app.

Later, after scoffing a very cheesy pizza and leaving Dad's dinner outside his office door, I change into my pyjamas and jump into bed, wrapping the covers around me until I'm a cocoon of worry. The ticket lingers at the back of my mind as I remember it, stuffed underneath layers of t-shirts in my drawer. Nope. We're not going there. I am *not* going to think about that ticket anymore. And with that decided, I slowly drift into the world of sleep.

The next day at school, I can't focus. I get scolded by three of my teachers for not paying attention, and Mr Adams, my humanities teacher, makes me stay in at lunch.

"Your father will be hearing about this," he noted, glaring at me. *No, he won't*, I think to myself. *He'll be too busy moping around and shutting himself out to notice anything about me*, I finish bitterly. But then I stop. What am I even saying? Why am I giving up? Why am I letting my dad's emotions consume him, why am I letting him stray away from the topic of Mum? Is this how I want my life to be? *No, of course not*, says a little voice in the back of my mind.

"No, of course not!" I say aloud, then cover my mouth. Mr Adams raises an eyebrow.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to say that." I apologise, my thoughts swirling. An idea pops into the back of my mind, and I immediately silence it. It's too risky. But...*what other choice do I have?* whispers the voice. The image of the circus ticket floats temptingly in my mind, clouding all my thoughts. Well...I guess...what other choice *do* I have?

After about ten minutes of sitting in front of my chest of drawers after getting home from school, I finally pluck up the courage to fish out the ticket from underneath the

mountain of clothes. Fingering it in my hands, like it's a piece of delicate porcelain, I slide it into my pocket and head downstairs. I knock on Dad's office door, and when he doesn't come out, I barge in. He asks questions, he struggles in my grip, but I'm not backing down now. Not when I've finally found a way to solve this problem. We walk down the street, towards the bus stop, and he finally wrenches away from me and stumbles backwards.

"Ava, what on earth are you doing?!" he yells, staring at me expectantly. I lock eyes with him.

"Dad. Please. Just trust me." I'm pleading now.

"How am I supposed to trust you when I don't know where we're going?" he asks. I hear a sigh.

"Fine. But this had better not be a mistake."

Fifteen minutes later, I lead him through the weaving crowds. He rubs his temples, like he's got a headache. Being in big crowds isn't his thing. Especially not since Mum died.

But when I pull him towards the circus tent, the huge red and white stripes cause fear to flash across his face.

"Ava," he says calmly. "Ava, no."

Relentlessly, I pull him forwards. His face is pale, and for a split second, I wonder if I've made the wrong decision. But he doesn't resist as I thought he would when we walk through the flaps of the tent.

We're surrounded in glowing lights, a hubbub of people and laughter and talking and *life*. A feeling of warmth fills the air and wraps around me like the best hug ever. It's something I haven't felt in a long time.

We walk to our seats, taking our time because this is a moment that we both know to treasure. And when the show starts, I watch in awe at the tricks and jumps and leaps and daring feats that leave the audience begging for more. I listen to the rhythm of the music, and I find myself immersed in the thrum.

The magic of the circus. That's what the ticket was all about. Whoever sent me that letter, and I'm sure I'll never find out who, clearly knew I needed this. That we needed this.

I glance over at Dad and he is just as starstruck as I am, and that's when I notice the tears in his eyes. But they are good tears. Happy tears. I reach for his hand, and he squeezes mine tight. But I think, after much digging, I've finally reached the bottom of the hole and scooped the true Dad out. And maybe, just maybe, we can start to remember Mum too. Together. I settle back into my seat and watch as the show goes on.

