

*Chapter one*  
CROOKED STARS

‘Beatrice, it’s time to get up.’

Bea wakes to her mother’s voice calling through her bedroom door. It’s not curt, exactly, but it’s not warm or what Bea would call motherly either.

Frankly, Bea can’t see the point in getting up. There’s absolutely nothing for her to do. There’s no school for weeks, her parents will be at work

the entire day and her two best friends, Allie and Dean, left yesterday for their holidays away from the bustling town. No-one stays in Willow during tourist season unless your work depends on the tourists or you're Bea and your parents are too busy to migrate south like birds.

There's no point trying to make friends with any of the kids who blow in with their families during the summer because they blow out again too quickly. The longest anyone ever stays is two weeks. Bea's town is quaint and that's why people like it – it's like stepping back in time or into another world – but there isn't enough to make them stay any longer than that. Only Uncle Byron stuck around the whole summer and that's because he had Bea.

'I've left porridge on the stove for you,' her mother's voice continues. 'Make sure you clean it up straight away – you know it turns into glue

if you leave it sitting around and then the pot is impossible to clean.’

Bea doesn’t mention that her mother’s porridge starts as glue.

‘I’ve left some money on the kitchen table so you can treat yourself to something nice in town for lunch. I have to run, sweetheart. Your father has already left. We’ll see you tonight, okay?’

Bea nods from her pillow, her face still buried beneath her doona.

Her mother makes a fast getaway, her court shoes clicking on the old wooden floorboards.

Bea stares at her bedroom ceiling. The glow-in-the-dark stars she and Byron stuck up two summers ago blink down at her, a strange yellowy green now that sunlight is making it impossible for them to glow. She remembers sticking them up so clearly; Bea had suggested they use the ladder her parents kept in the garden shed but Byron had said, ‘Where’s

the fun in that?’ Instead, he insisted, they needed to jump on the bed – as high as they could – and stick them to the ceiling before gravity pulled them back down. Bea was far too short to reach the high ceilings no matter how high she jumped so instead she watched Byron jumping up and flailing wildly, laughing so hard her sides ached. The result was a ceiling of crooked stars. It displeased her mother who likes things neat and in order but Bea likes them that way. It makes her happy every time she sees them.

At least it used to. Seeing them now makes her insides feel hollow and heavy at the same time. She closes her eyes as she throws back her doona and slips out of bed so she doesn’t have to look at them.

This summer was meant to be better than last year’s, which was even better than the one before that. Byron had turned up in bright blue shorts covered in toucans and a t-shirt with a big yellow

pineapple on the front. Bea had laughed when she saw him; she couldn't help it. 'You laugh, Beatrice Penelope Glass,' he'd said. 'But we're going to have a summer as fun as this outfit.'

And, just like every other year, they did.

While Bea's parents worked from the time Bea got up in the morning to the time she went to bed at night, Bea and Byron filled each day with adventure after adventure.

Even though Byron had never lived in the rocky seaside town where Bea had spent her entire life, he knew it so much better than she ever would. He knew that the best sherbet wasn't actually at Ms Maple's lolly shop but at the newsagent on the corner. He knew that if you got up before dawn and hiked through the trees to the top of Magenta Mountain, you'd get the best view of the sun rising above the ocean like a blood orange exploding over a mirror. He knew that if you wiggled your feet

on the shore, you'd find cockles in the sand that you could boil with garlic and tomatoes to eat with crusty bread for dinner or throw back into the sea.

On his very last morning when the summer was nearly over, Bea had sat with Uncle Byron in the breakfast nook in the kitchen eating pastries Byron had got up early to buy in town. The big glass windows behind the table were filled from top to bottom with green from the jungle of overgrown plants behind the courtyard that no-one had time to take care of.

Byron pulled a brown paper bag from the bench beside him and handed it to Bea.

'What's in here?' she asked, her mouth full of croissant and blackberry jam.

'Open it,' he said, his eyes twinkling like he had a secret.

Bea pulled a tattered old book with a faded blue cover from the paper bag. *UNCHARTED*, the cover said. *An Exploration of Places Beyond the Map*.

‘I found it this morning when you were sleeping in, lazybones,’ Byron said. He took the book back and started flipping through the pages as though he was looking for something. ‘Did you know there’s a bookstore behind Mrs Maguire’s cafe?’

‘Really? I had no idea. Is it new?’

‘Old as the town, I believe. Little stone building with a bright red door. Ah, there!’ he said, stopping at a page with a heading that said ‘SOMEWHERE’ in big black letters.

‘Somewhere? What’s that?’

‘An island. A mysterious island that only a few people have ever been to, this author,’ Byron cocked his head to read the author’s name, ‘RJ Melville, being one of them.’ He pushed the book towards

Bea, showing her a black-and-white sketch of an island shaped like a star.

‘Okay,’ Bea said slowly, wondering why he was showing her.

‘It’s meant to be right near here. Four and a half nautical miles, give or take. If my calculations are correct, we could find it in just over an hour depending on the wind and the currents and the speed of the boat.’

Bea felt excitement rising up through her chest. A mysterious island? This would be the best adventure she and Byron had ever had. ‘Can’t you stay a bit longer? School doesn’t start for a week. We could go right now.’

‘Afraid not, kiddo,’ said Byron. ‘I’ve got to get back home and, you know, work.’

Bea tried not to look disappointed. She knew she was lucky that Byron’s job as an art professor at the university in the city meant he had the whole

summer off and could spend it with her, but she was always left with an achy hollow feeling when it came to an end.

‘Plus, it’ll take a lot of planning,’ Byron said. ‘But it’s something for us to look forward to. We’ll plan it properly throughout the year and then next summer we’ll go the second I get here.’

‘Promise?’

‘Promise.’

‘Turtle Promise?’ Bea pressed because this was not a promise to be taken lightly.

‘I absolutely Turtle Promise,’ he said, putting one of his hands on top of the other and spinning his thumbs, turning his hands into a turtle that swum into Bea’s turtle hands to seal the promise as binding and unbreakable.

They spent their last hour poring over the entry in the book Byron had found and planning what they’d do when they got to Somewhere. They

talked about the picnic they'd pack – cheese and pickle sandwiches and honey cakes with homemade strawberry jam and fresh lemonade – and about what they might find on this island no-one ever went to.

‘Real turtles,’ Bea mused. ‘And ancient treasure.’

‘The best view of the sunset anyone has ever seen,’ Byron suggested. ‘And the world’s prettiest plants.’

‘Pirates!’ Bea giggled. ‘And seashells bigger than our faces.’

The more they talked, the more excited Bea became.

Later, she watched as Byron picked up his suitcase from the hall and skipped down the front stairs, the green paint flaked and fading, to the driveway where his taxi was waiting. ‘Next summer,’ he sang as he climbed into the taxi. ‘Next summer we’ll sail to Somewhere!’

Bea watched the taxi wind down the steep street until she couldn't see it any longer. She knew in

that moment that she'd count down every single day until Byron came back. And she did, putting one half of a cross on each day of her calendar in the morning when she woke and the other half right before she climbed into bed. The days dragged onward, getting colder and colder, and then, finally, warmer and warmer once more. And sure enough, summer returned, emptying the town and refilling it with tourists just as it did every year. But that year, though the summer and the tourists came back, Byron did not.

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Downstairs in the kitchen, Bea tries to shut out the conversation playing on a loop in her head. Hearing his voice as clearly as if he were standing in front of her telling her that next summer would be their best one yet, makes her feel a kind of anger she's never felt before.

She scrapes the porridge her mother made straight into the cat's bowl and washes up the pot. She grabs the red floppy sunhat Byron used to tease her about and the money her mother left on the kitchen table, deciding it would be better to buy something for breakfast – surely there's cheese and bread she can eat for lunch – and heads out onto the porch, closing the front door behind her.

From up here, their house on the hill where the warm wind turns Bea's cheeks pink, she can see almost the whole town. The houses and buildings twist and turn down the slopes like a spiral of pale orange bricks and charcoal rooftops and quince trees. Beyond it all is the ocean, glistening in the morning sun and so vast it looks like it might swallow the entire town whole.

Bea steps off the front stairs – the green paint even more faded than the day she waved goodbye to Byron – onto the gravel and makes her way slowly

into town. She wants it to take as long as possible so that the day can be over quickly and so that she doesn't have to spend too much of it in her too-big house alone.

At the kiosk on Newport Street, she buys a bacon sandwich and fresh pear juice. She sits down on the pier to eat, her legs swinging over the shimmering water. The bread is thick and crunches as she bites into it, sending bacon grease and tomato ketchup running down her fingers. She throws the crust at a nearby seagull who caws and suddenly she's surrounded by every seagull in town, squawking loudly like they have more than a story to tell.

'This is the closest thing I'll have to a conversation today,' she tells them. 'So please, carry on.'

When the seagulls have finished fighting over her crust, Bea watches them fight over a cinnamon bun instead, stolen straight out of a tourist's hands. He stands still, gaping at the empty paper bag. Bea

tries not to laugh. Only a local would know the importance of guarding baked treats especially this close to the water.

At the end of the pier, she sees Ray, a retired fisherman who returns on his boat at this time every morning not to be seen again for the rest of the day. He never turned up at town events, was never seen making friends or even watering his front garden. Bea watches him tie up his boat, then he walks straight past her with a brief nod hello.

‘Hello,’ Bea calls after him. He pauses without turning around and then starts walking again, up the hill in his heavy boots and the yellow-gold windcheater he wears every day all year round.

Bea finishes her breakfast, then skips down the shore to kill more time walking slowly across the shiny pebbles. There’s no sand in this part of town, the part that curves in between the headland and the pier. The sandy beach, the one where she and Byron

found cockles and the one from where you can see the sunrise, is on the other side of the headland. Here it's just pebbles, orange and brown and grey, smoothed by the sea. Bea sits at the water's edge, looking for flat stones which she piles into towers, but the towers tumble, lapped by the rocking water.

She heads back up the stairs onto the twisty-turny streets instead, walking past the shops with their swinging signs, and windows that are always coated with salt blown up from the sea no matter how often they're scrubbed.

She doesn't know why she does it, but for some reason Bea finds herself climbing the stairs behind Fishbone, the town's only seafood restaurant. She's never been inside. She sneaks through the back door, past the bins that smell worse than the fishing boats at the pier, and into the tiny kitchen. The chef is hacking away at a fish the size of Bea, completely oblivious to the figure standing behind him.

Bea slips into the office, a small room with timber walls and a blue-and-white-striped buoy hanging on the door. It seems like any other office: a mess of papers strewn on the big wooden desk and a filing cabinet jammed under the window. She's just about to sneak back out when she sees something that makes her heart stop then start hammering in her chest. There, on the timber slatted wall above the desk, is a gold frame holding a larger version of the exact same picture she had stared at every single day until the day she learned Byron wouldn't be coming back. A picture she hasn't seen anywhere else, before or since. A map of an island the shape of a star.

Somewhere.