

WENDY MASS & REBECCA STEAD

BOB



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CHAPTER ONE

LIVY

I feel bad that I can't remember anything about Gran Nicholas's house. On the table in her kitchen Gran has lined up three things I do not remember:

1. A green stuffed elephant in overalls.
2. A net bag full of black chess pieces.
3. A clunky old tape recorder.

"You loved these things when you were here before," Gran Nicholas tells me.

But I don't remember any of it.

"Not the horses?" Gran Nicholas says, pointing out the window to a dusty yard. Maybe there were horses there once?

"Not the pigs?" Gran Nicholas says, pointing out the back door. If I squint I can make out some pigs behind a fence. But I don't remember them.

"Not *this*?" she says, holding up the green stuffed elephant. "When you were here before, you wouldn't let go of it. You carried it everywhere. You wouldn't let anyone get near it!"

But it's like I've never laid eyes on that green stuffed elephant in my life. It could have been anyone's green stuffed elephant, and I would not have minded.

Mom looks nervous. She wants me to remember. But it's her fault I don't—she brought me here for a month when I was five and didn't bring me back again until now, when I am practically eleven.

Ten and a half.

Almost.

Of course, I do remember Gran herself, because we talk on the phone every week, and we write each other postcards. Gran tells me the news of Australia and I tell her the news of Massachusetts. She came to visit us once, for two weeks. But I don't remember one thing about her house.

Actually, maybe I *do* remember one thing.

I think I remember a wrong chicken.

I remember chickens, and one chicken that was different. One chicken was not like the other chickens, is what I remember. But standing here in the kitchen with everyone looking at me, I don't know how to ask Gran about that.

I pick up the elephant. It's soft and floppy. I still don't remember it.

Gran Nicholas sighs. She doesn't say what I know she wants to say, which is that we should have come back sooner.

On the other hand, Australia is very far away from Massachusetts.

If you want to get from our house to Gran Nicholas's house, this is what you have to do:

1. Drive from Massachusetts to New York City for four hours.
2. Park the car and wait for a bus to the airport.
3. Take a plane for seven hours to California.
4. Get off that plane.
5. Take another plane for nineteen hours to Melbourne, Australia.
6. Get off that plane.
7. Wait in three different lines while official people look at your bags and your papers.

8. Wait in the rental car line.
9. Drive the car for two hours in Australia.
10. Get to Gran's house.

Now Mom's going to leave me here again while she goes to visit all her friends from growing up. The baby is too young to stay with Gran Nicholas, so she's going with Mom.

I wonder what it's like here at night.

I look at the chess pieces. Does Gran have the white ones? I open my mouth to ask, but instead I hear myself say:

"Are there . . . chickens?"

"Yes!" She gets excited, and Mom looks happy. Gran grabs my hand and runs me out to the yard, where some chickens are pecking in the dirt. I look them over but they all look regular.

"Are these the same chickens?" I ask Gran Nicholas.

She says they are different chickens. But the *idea* of chickens is right.

I don't exactly know how to ask the next question. "Did you used to have one that was . . . weird?"

"Weird?" she asks.

Maybe there wasn't a weird one. Or maybe they don't say *weird* in Australia.

"Never mind," I say. I realize I'm squeezing something in the hand that Gran is not holding. I open it and see one of the black chess pieces. A pawn.

Then, coming back into the house with Gran, I see Gran's back stairs. They have carpet on them, and I suddenly know that I have bumped down those stairs.

"Did I ever bump down those stairs?" I ask Gran, pointing.

"Yes!" she says. "You loved bumping down those stairs. You had a name for it."

"A name for the stairs?"

“No, for bumping down them. You called it something. . . .”

I think she is right. I think I did call it something. But neither of us can remember what it was.

Now that I’ve remembered the chickens and the stairs, Mom looks happier, like maybe Gran won’t think we stayed away too long after all. The baby starts doing some pre-crying in her baby seat. Dad and I invented the word *pre-crying*, which means the crying that comes right before the really loud crying. Mom isn’t fussing with her because she wants me to know that this trip is about me having special time with Gran Nicholas, and not just for Gran to finally see the baby in real life. I heard Mom talking to Dad about it the day we left home. Mom said, “I want Olivia to know that this trip is about her having special time with Gran. Not just about the baby.”

And Dad said, “I know, hon. You told me yesterday. And this morning.”

Dad didn't come to Australia with us. He's at home, building a new room for the baby. He says it'll be ready when we get back.

Then I sort of remember another thing. It's something about the second floor, but I'm not sure exactly *what* about the second floor it is. I'm still squeezing that black pawn. It feels good in my hand.

"Is there something about the second floor?" I ask.

"Yes!" Gran says. "The second floor is where your room is. And your four-poster bed!"

But what I remember about the second floor is not a big bed with a canopy. I still don't know what it is, but it is not that.

It's . . .

It's . . .

"May I be excused?" I ask, already turning toward the stairs.

"I'll come up with you," Mom says. "Your

room used to be my room when I was a little girl, remember?”

I stop, one hand on the railing of the carpeted stairs that I used to bump down. For some reason, I think I’m supposed to go up alone. I glance at Beth Ann, who is still wiggling in her seat. Our eyes meet. As if she knows what I’m thinking, she quits her pre-crying and makes her *someone feed me* whimper. Mom turns toward her, torn between the two of us. I zoom up the stairs.

The doors along the upstairs hallway are open. I peek into what must be Gran’s room, where a patchwork quilt is pulled over the bed. I pass the bathroom, where soaps in the shapes of ducks and chicks pretend to march along the counter toward the sink. By the time I reach the last room—*my* room—I’m almost running. I’m not sure why.

Then I see the closet. I still don’t remember the bed, or the bright pink curtains. But I

remember this closet. It's small—the door seems like only half a door, and there can't be much room on the other side.

I think I left something inside. Something really, really important.

My hand reaches for the doorknob. I know exactly where the light cord is, and I watch my hand reach out and pull it. The light flickers on.

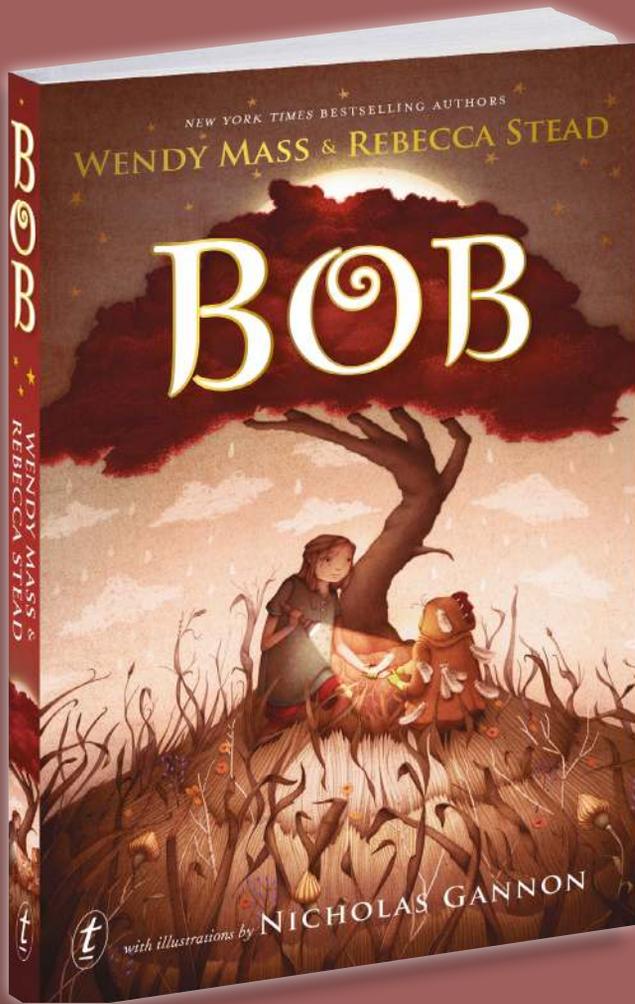
Here is what I see:

1. A high shelf, jammed with shoeboxes and falling-down stacks of old comic books.
2. Below that, clothes on hangers dangle from a bar. There's a tutu with sequins and a few summer dresses for someone a lot smaller than me. Maybe Gran is keeping them for Beth Ann in a long, long time. Right now, Beth Ann is so small she can barely keep a shirt on. One

shoulder is always falling out of the neck hole. If I try to fix it, she cries.

3. On the floor, under the little dresses, a Lego pirate ship sits on the brown carpet. It has four sails and a mast and a lookout tower and even a swimming pool. It must have taken a long time to build.
4. Next to the pirate ship is a thick, old dictionary.
5. And standing on top of the dictionary is a small zombie wearing a chicken suit. He's rubbing his eyes, a Lego pirate clutched in one green hand. When his eyes adjust to the light, he uses them to look me up and down.

Then he says, "You're back. Took you long enough."



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