

HIS
Name
was
Walter

EMILY RODDA

HIS
Name
WAS
Walter

BY THE SAME AUTHOR



Something Special

Pigs Might Fly

The Best-Kept Secret

The Shop at Hoopers Bend





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Walter
EMILY RODDA



Angus & Robertson

An imprint of HarperCollins Children's Books

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An imprint of HarperCollins *Children's Books*, Australia

First published in Australia in 2018
by HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty Limited
ABN 36 009 913 517
harpercollins.com.au

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HarperCollins Publishers

Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia
Unit D1, 63 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
A 53, Sector 57, Noida, UP, India
1 London Bridge Road, London SE1 9GF, United Kingdom
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195 Broadway, New York NY 10007, USA

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 4607 5618 8 (hardback)
ISBN 978 1 4607 1020 3 (ebook)

Cover illustration and design © Jessica Cruickshank 2018

Internal illustrations © Jessica Cruickshank 2018

Internal design by Hazel Lam, HarperCollins Design Studio

Typeset by Kirby Jones in Sabon LT Std and Old Craftsman

Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

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*To my dear husband Bob,
who inspired me to write the story of Walter.*



For the first time all day, Colin wished he had his phone with him. Not to make a call — the place where they'd been stranded was a mobile dead spot, anyway — but so he could take a photograph. Dark purple clouds were rolling over the vineyards of Storm Valley, heavy with rain and growling with thunder. The light had dimmed to a weird yellow-green, and the river, sliding between bare, muddy banks, looked like the rippling back of a huge grey snake. A photo would have helped him paint the scene when he got home.

Still, artists hadn't had cameras in the old days. And, according to Mrs Fiori — sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, sharp-haircut Mrs Fiori — students had been forbidden to bring their phones ('or any other electronic devices') on this weekend excursion to the 'historic' town of Grolsten because she wanted them to 'immerse' themselves in the past. Mrs Fiori had repeated this on the bus when she'd confiscated Grace Leslie's mobile, craftily hidden inside a magazine. She'd said it yet again when she'd demanded that any other smuggled phones

be handed over, and taken possession of two more, plus a laptop.

It had all sounded very fine, but stuck on a country road with four kids, a broken-down minibus and a storm on the way, Mrs Fiori was at this point probably far less interested in the past than in the immediate future. Colin certainly was. He'd volunteered to stay — he'd felt he had to when no one else offered, though being new he didn't like attracting attention to himself — but he hadn't bargained for this.

He glanced at his watch. It had been his grandfather's, and was a heavy old thing with a cracked leather strap. Colin wasn't used to wearing it, and found it rather irritating, but he hadn't liked the idea of not being able to check the time whenever he liked.

Not that time seemed to mean much out here. It had been hours since the minibus clanked, coughed and died, hours since it had been discovered that they were in a dead spot, and jokey Mr Simon and the rest of the class had left to walk into Grolsten. It had even been a good hour since the road-service guy turned up, looked under the bus's bonnet, poked around a bit and straightened up, shaking his head. He'd promised to tell Mr Simon to get taxis to pick them up, but the only vehicle they'd seen since he left had been the tow truck he'd sent.

Lightning flashed on the horizon, and a few moments later there was a long, deep rumble of thunder. Telling himself that the unearthly light probably wouldn't have

come out in a photo anyway, Colin turned away from the river and paced slowly back to the bus to see how the tow-truck guys were doing.

The frail-looking girl called Tara Berne, the one who'd had the nosebleed just before the breakdown, was sitting on the ground with her back propped against her pack. She was so pale that her skin looked almost transparent, and she was shivering all over. Storms affected some people like that. Some animals, too. It was something to do with air pressure. Or maybe it was the electricity in the air. Anyway, Colin sincerely hoped that the poor girl's nose wasn't going to start bleeding again. Her embarrassment the first time had been pitiful, and Grace Leslie's little screams of disgust hadn't helped.

He glanced at Grace, who'd turned her back on everyone and was using the tip of one of her crutches to swat at the ivy-choked fence that straggled along the roadside. He could almost read her mind as torn ivy leaves flew and scattered. Broken foot. *Whack!* Friends all in Grolsten with Mr Simon. *Whack!* Stuck here with Fiori and a bunch of losers. *Whack!* In the middle of nowhere. *Whack!* Out of contact. *Whack! Whack! Whack!*

Grace suddenly looked over her shoulder and saw Colin watching her. Just for a second she looked embarrassed, then she shrugged, laughed, and limped away from the fence, leaving the evidence of her temper scattered on the grass behind her.

'You and the kids'd better wait up there, love,' the tow-truck driver said to Mrs Fiori, jerking his head at a big old two-storey house perched at the top of the little hill that rose beside the road. 'Your mate in Grolsten hadn't had any luck with taxis when I spoke to him. They don't like coming way out here this time of the day — too much doing in town. I'll let him know where you are. The place is empty but you'll get in all right. Back door's not locked.'

His wiry little helper, who'd been checking the chains that held the minibus in place, glanced quickly at him, then at the five people stranded on the roadside, but didn't say anything.

Mrs Fiori looked flustered. 'Oh, but we can't just—'

'It's okay — it's my dad's place,' said the driver, lifting his chin and raising his voice slightly, as if he were throwing out some sort of challenge. 'Well, Dad owns it, anyhow. The idea is to make a guesthouse out of it, but no one's living in it — yet.'

The wiry man made a small snorting sound. He might have been just clearing his throat, but Colin didn't think so. The Chinese-looking kid Mrs Fiori had ordered to stay behind and whose name Colin couldn't remember, obviously didn't think so, either. He was staring at the driver's mate curiously. It was the first time Colin had seen him looking anything but bored when his eyes weren't glued to a screen.

Lucas! That was the guy's name — Lucas Cheah. Not that it really mattered. Colin had only been at this

school for two weeks, but it had taken him less than two minutes to decide that he and a chilly computer genius like Lucas had nothing in common and were never likely to be friends.

Mrs Fiori hadn't noticed the wiry man's snort or Lucas Cheah's interest. She'd brightened like someone who'd been drowning and had just been thrown a lifeline.

'Oh, thank you! That would be marvellous!' she said. 'And maybe I can get a phone signal from there, too. My colleague did try from the top of the hill when we first broke down. He had no luck, but maybe if I try different places in the house—'

'Nah,' drawled the wiry man. 'No reception round here. They reckoned the new tower'd help, but it hasn't. Cars conk out here, too. Right here. Always on this side of the bridge. All the time. Can't tell you how many cars we've towed—'

'Yeah, well, you'd better get going if you're going, love,' the driver cut in, shooting his mate a dirty look. 'She'll be coming down hard pretty soon. Don't expect much up there. The electricity's on and the toilet works and all that, but it's a bit rough. We're trying to do the place up, but it's hard to keep the tradies at it — they can pick and choose out here.'

Distant lightning flashed. Thunder rumbled, sounding closer. Grace Leslie yelped, then laughed at herself, rocking back on her crutches, the bulbous plastic boot that encased her broken foot dangling, her glossy hair

flying, her teeth very white against her smooth, milk-chocolate skin. Colin suddenly thought he'd like to paint her looking just like that, with the storm clouds behind her. But of course Grace wouldn't want to be painted just like that. She'd care too much about looking glamorous.

'Thank you! We're so grateful!' Suddenly galvanised, Mrs Fiori began to make broad shooing motions with her arms as if she had a whole team of kids to muster instead of only four. 'Come on, all of you! Grace, take it carefully, won't you? You too, Tara. Here, I'll help you with your backpack. Now, stop straight away if you feel ... Lucas and Colin, take Grace's pack between you, will you please? No, Grace, you *can't* manage — don't be silly! Thank you, Colin! Lucas, take the other strap. Lucas, do you *hear* me?'

And so the five people who would remember this day for the rest of their lives straggled through the wide space that gaped between a pair of ivy-swaddled gateposts and began following the rutted wheel tracks that led up to the house on the hill. Soon they began to move faster. Tumbling closer, the storm clouds heaved and grumbled, but no one glanced up. The tow truck started with a roar on the road below, but no one glanced around. They were all looking ahead, at the house with its dark, sealed windows, its high frowning walls, its steeply pitched roof studded with tall chimneys, pointy gables and a little round tower. They all felt the urge to hurry.

Not because of the thunder. Not because of the fear of getting wet — there was no rain falling yet. No, it was something else — something like a silent call that was felt rather than heard.

Some of the five felt the call more strongly than others, but all of them obeyed it. Even Anna Fiori, so conscious of keeping her dignity in front of her students. Even Lucas Cheah, who believed in nothing he couldn't see. Even Grace Leslie, who at this stage of her life had trouble focusing on the things that really mattered because her mind was always so cluttered with things that didn't. They were all gasping for breath by the time they reached the house's long backyard and began dodging round piles of builders' rubble to reach the back door.

Yes, they all felt the call. But at that point, only Tara could hear the whistling.