

*wishful
thinking*

A NOVEL BY ALEXANDRA BULLEN

Point

The morning that Hazel Snow turned eighteen began like any other morning.
Which is to say, it sucked.

For a late-December baby, this was pretty much par for the course. While the rest of the world slept off their holiday hangovers, just in time to settle on plans for New Year's Eve, Hazel was used to quietly welcoming another year on her own. For Hazel, "welcoming" typically involved trying not to give the day much thought, and working up just enough enthusiasm to hope that the coming year would be any less miserable than the one that had just passed.

This year was no different. After snoozing through her alarm three times, Hazel finally dragged herself up from the crooked futon she'd been sleeping on for the past few months and arched her long, slender arms overhead.

The futon was supposed to be temporary. That's what Roy, Hazel's sort-of stepdad, had said when he'd brought her home

from the city. Roy was always calling things temporary, as if his life was full of phases and any day now, this, too, would pass.

But the futon, an old flea-market find missing half its fake-wooden slats, was still there. And so was Hazel. She'd made a deal with Roy to finish high school in San Rafael, the sleepy northern California town where he'd been renting a basement apartment, as long as she could save up to get a place of her own after graduation. With less than a semester to go, and a constant crick in her neck from the lumpy mattress, graduation couldn't come soon enough.

Hazel drew back the green-and-white checkered curtains to let in the gray morning light. An old radiator in the corner clicked and hissed as she slid into her favorite faded black jeans, still soggy at the hems from trudging through yesterday's puddles. She couldn't remember the last time she hadn't woken up to rain.

After brushing her teeth and pinning back a few of the front pieces of her shoulder-length blond hair, she glanced at her reflection. Her reddish roots were growing out and she made a mental note to swipe another box of Nice 'n Easy the next time she stocked the hair-care aisle at the pharmacy where she worked. So far, she'd spent every day of winter break there, which might have been disappointing if she'd had anywhere else to be.

And that's when she remembered.

Wasn't eighteen supposed to feel like *something*?

Hazel's gaze traveled up to the corner of the square mirror. Tucked against the glass was a washed-out Polaroid of a woman in a yellow apron, a chubby-faced baby clinging to one

hip. It was the only picture Hazel had of herself with Wendy, the chef who had adopted Hazel as a newborn and died soon after, when her restaurant burned to the ground. Hazel was not even one at the time, and didn't remember anything about her adoptive mother. But she knew, somehow, that eighteen would feel different if Wendy were still around.

Downstairs, Roy was watching basketball highlights, and he turned down the volume as she shuffled past on her way to the kitchen. This, she assumed, was probably supposed to be some sort of present.

"Morning," he grunted, scratching at the edges of his scruffy, rust-colored beard. He'd been trying to grow it out since the beginning of fall and kept asking what she thought. It was almost—but not actually—funny, how interested he was in her opinion these days. All of the times she'd lived with him before, she could have walked around the house with a tambourine taped to each hand and a neon sign flashing across her forehead, and he probably wouldn't have given more than a sideways glance from his permanent slouch on the sofa.

"Morning," Hazel muttered back, wedging a bowl out of the wire dish rack and using one moth-bitten sleeve to wipe it dry. She poured herself a bowl of Cheerios and ate, as she always did, standing at the kitchen sink, staring out the window.

"I can drive you to work, if you want," Roy offered from the couch, his spoon scraping at the last bit of milk, puddled in one corner of the bowl.

"No, thanks," Hazel replied automatically, turning on the tap and filling a Dixie cup with water. She swallowed it down in one gulp, praying the whole ride-discussion was over. Roy

claimed he'd been sober for a year before he asked Hazel to come back, and she hadn't so much as seen him in the same room with a bottle of cough syrup since. But that didn't mean she was ready to drive with him again.

"All righty."

Roy said "all righty" when he didn't know what else to say. Which meant he said it a lot. She heard the squeak of the couch springs as Roy got up, and felt him pattering around the kitchen behind her.

"Here," Roy said suddenly. She turned to find him laying a brown envelope on the kitchen table. He shuffled to the door, pulling his Giants hat down over his head. Tufts of dark, curly hair pushed out over the tops of his ears, like leafy ferns stretching toward the sun.

"Happy birthday, Hazel," he said to the doorknob as he pulled it toward him. A burst of wet, cool air settled on the kitchen like a mood, and before Hazel could say anything—if she'd even had anything to say—Roy was gone.

Hazel stared at the envelope, as if expecting it to talk, or walk away. She couldn't think of the last time Roy had even remembered her birthday, let alone marked it with any kind of sentimental gesture.

Hazel dropped her bowl in the sink and sat down at the table, turning the envelope over in her hands. It was bigger than a regular envelope, and didn't have any markings on it. No Hallmark seal or cheesy cartoon like the ones they sold at the pharmacy. She ran her finger under the fold, her breath catching in the back of her throat. A part of her wanted to just throw the envelope away, maybe even toss it on top of the trash so Roy could see it there, unopened. He'd left her, not

once, not twice, but *three* times, with perfect strangers. Eight different schools, from Santa Cruz to Santa Rosa. Seven good-byes to friends she didn't even bother making anymore.

What card could possibly make up for all that?

But the not-knowing was too much. She flicked her finger up at one edge and tore back the thin paper, ripping the envelope in half and pulling out what was inside.

Not a card but a white piece of paper, folded twice.

Of course Roy hadn't bought her a card. Hazel rolled her eyes at her own idiotic imagination. A square yellow sticky note fluttered to the table, and Hazel leaned over to read it. Her stomach clenched into a knot as she recognized what could only be Wendy's curlicue script.

Give to Hazel on her 18th birthday.

A distant ringing filled Hazel's ears as she ran her hand over the smooth paper, carefully unfolding it.

It was an official-looking document, with small, boxy type and underscored lines. BIRTH CERTIFICATE was scrolled in fancy script at the top. The date: eighteen years ago, today. The hospital: St. Mary's, San Francisco. The rest of the words blurred like a foreign language, her eyes scanning to the bottom of the page.

Two words, the question she'd lived with every day and every night, long after she'd stopped asking it out loud:

Birth. Mother.

And the next two words, the answer:

ROSANNA SCOTT.



Three Months Later

“We’re closed.”

Hazel stood on the inside of a heavy glass door, squinting in the musty dark of what appeared to be an abandoned dry cleaner’s shop. She had a funny feeling about this seamstress situation. First of all, a seamstress? She’d heard of tailors and designers, but a *seamstress*? The word made her think of a plump old lady with full skirts and a mouthful of needles. But this seamstress, the one hidden in the back of a grimy storefront, lounging on an old, ratty sofa and reading a glossy paperback, was neither old nor plump. No, she was young, though it wasn’t immediately clear how young—maybe Hazel’s age, maybe a youngish-looking thirty—and she looked to be in dire need of a cheeseburger.

Second, there was the issue of the business card.

It had been three months since Hazel discovered the name of her birth mother, and almost exactly as long since the Google search that changed her life. Because, according

to the Internet, not only did “Rosanna Scott” still live in San Francisco, but she was an active member of an elite group of artists/philanthropists, and just happened to be hosting a fundraising event at a restaurant in the Ferry Building, on Sunday, March 26, at seven o’clock in the evening.

This, Hazel knew, was where she would meet her mother. As if the decision had already been made for her, she knew she would have to go. And just as clearly, she knew what she would wear.

It wasn’t like she had a closet full of options. Hazel owned one dress, and it was a fluke that she even had it. She’d found the dress over a year before, in a thrift store attached to a fancy private school in the Haight. She had been, at the time, living with a foster family on Oak Street, an older Swiss couple that ran a bed-and-breakfast for aging-hippie artist-types. On her walk home from her own boring public school, she would pass Golden Gate Prep, and often stare in through the gates at the fashionable students, each toting a personalized laptop and climbing in and out of expensive-looking cars.

One spring day, she noticed the school’s thrift store. She hadn’t even gone in looking to buy anything. But the dress found her, from under a pile of broken shoes in the bargain bin. It was definitely brighter than anything else she owned (mostly because everything else she owned was black), and she wasn’t even sure it would fit. But something about that dress just wouldn’t let her leave it behind.

So she bought it, brought it home, hung it up at the back of her closet, and promptly forgot about its very existence. When Roy brought her back to San Rafael, she’d almost left it hanging there, but again something told her to pack the dress. She

couldn't imagine ever having an excuse to wear such a sleek, fancy, and all-around non-Hazel article of clothing, but it had started to mean something to her. And so she tossed it at the top of her bag, lugged it to Roy's, and found a new closet in which to tuck it deep inside.

When she decided she would be going to Rosanna's event, she dug the dress out and hung it outside the closet door, where she could see it. Because now she knew it was more than a dress. It was a symbol.

Pretty much everything in Hazel's life had stayed the same since the day she learned her birth mother's name: She went to school, she went to work, she avoided Roy, she took the bus. But inside, something major had changed. She was different. And the dress was the only thing she could see that reminded her of the changes. Changes only she could feel.

The dress was beautiful—short but not too short, with bright, loud circles and a silky neckline that gave her goose bumps when she tried it on—but it wasn't perfect. She'd known about the torn seam when she brought it home; it was the reason the dress was so cheap. But it wasn't until that morning, the very morning of the event at the Ferry Building, when Hazel realized that unless she wanted to meet her mother with six inches of torso hanging out, she would need to have the dress fixed.

When she'd first seen the business card hanging from a thread and safety-pinned to the tag, she'd assumed it was just the name of the dress designer: MARIPOSA OF THE MISSION. But standing in front of her closet that morning, she'd looked closer. There, under the address, was a single word: SEAMSTRESS.

And that's how she ended up in the Mission on a Sunday

afternoon, standing in a dusty shop that smelled like mothballs, crowded with sewing machines and headless dress dummies, and which was, apparently . . .

“Closed,” the girl on the couch said again. “Sorry.”

But she didn’t sound sorry. She sounded annoyed. Which was about when Hazel decided that her “funny feeling” had been right. She’d taken four buses to get there, and would in a matter of hours be meeting the one person she’d been dreaming of meeting her entire life. She owned only one dress, a dress with a skin-baring rip up one side, a dress in desperate need of mending. And in front of her, this *seamstress*, sitting surrounded by sewing machines, in a shop dedicated to fixing dresses, was telling her the store was closed?

Hazel wanted to scream. Of course something would go wrong. Learning her mother’s name may have changed every fiber of who Hazel was on the inside, but in the outside world, exactly nothing was different.

“Great,” Hazel huffed, settling her plain black canvas tote closer to one shoulder. She took one last look at the strange and empty shop. Business didn’t appear to be booming. “You know,” she started, angry words backing up in her throat. “Keeping regular business hours might go a long way. I mean, if you ever find yourself interested in any actual customers.”

Hazel spun on her heel and started to push through the door, but one of her bag’s thick straps caught on a brass hook and tugged her back into the room. The dress spilled out of her tote, the satiny circles bright and cheerful against the dusty, muted floorboards.

Hazel’s cheeks flushed red. *Perfect*, she thought as she bent down to stuff the dress back into her bag. *Just perfect*.

“Wait.” Two clunky clogs were suddenly making their way to where Hazel was crouched by the door. “That dress,” the girl said, pointing one long, spindly finger at Hazel’s tote. “May I see it?”

Hazel slowly held the dress out toward the girl’s open hand.

“Where did you get it?” the girl asked, spreading the material and holding it out to one side.

“In the Haight,” Hazel offered. “A thrift store. I think it’s part of a school or something. I guess I just liked the colors. . . .” Hazel shuffled her feet and let her voice trail off. Why was she defending her fashion sense to a grumpy girl with weird bangs who, until recently, was primarily interested in getting her to leave?

The girl was staring at her with eyes that looked more feline than human: small, piercing, and almost golden. “What do you need it for?” she asked slowly.

“I’m going to a fund-raiser,” Hazel said. “It’s at this restaurant in the Ferry Building. The Slanted Door?” She took another full breath, before adding, “I’m meeting my mother tonight.”

It was the first time Hazel had said it—any of it—out loud, and the words felt like sharp explosions in her mouth. She looked at the tops of her checkered, slip-on sneakers.

The girl was quiet, and Hazel could tell she was still staring at her. Finally the girl turned, her heavy clogs scraping the floor, and walked slowly back to the couch. She took the dress with her. “Can you come back in two hours?”

Hazel stared at the girl’s small back, the arch of her spine curving beneath her thin sweater as she laid the dress over the arm of the love seat. “Two hours?” she repeated. “Yeah—I

mean, yes. Sure. Are you sure?” Hazel waited for the girl to turn back around, to say something more. When she didn’t, Hazel put her hand on the doorknob, afraid that another word would make the girl change her mind.

“Hey,” she heard from behind her. The girl was still standing over the couch, her back to Hazel as she spoke. “What’s your name?”

“Oh, sorry.” Hazel blushed. “I’m Hazel.”

“Nice to meet you, Hazel,” the girl said, landing heavily on each word like she was sharing a secret. “I’m Posey. See you at three.”

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